



# CURSED

*at Christmas*

JAX STUART



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To my gryphon and nephilim, thanks for letting me borrow  
your names

# Blurb

**Welcome to Greyhaven, a sanctuary town, where supernaturals of all kinds can find a home and love.**

Riley has lived under a family curse for a decade. Forced to roam, to never call a place his home for more than a month. Frustrated, weary, lonely, he comes to Greyhaven with one goal only: to break the curse and end the warlock that did this to his family. What he finds is that fate has played a terrible joke on him.

Gareth has lived in Greyhaven all his life. He loves his town, even if he is a little lonely. He spends his time teaching magic and healing plants. When he comes to help the mayor, he finds a fated mate that wants nothing to do with him because of what he is.

With time ticking down, Gareth and Riley have to find a way to break the curse and figure out if Riley can ever look past Gareth being a warlock.



*Cursed at Christmas is a prequel to a new series. There is some violence and discussions of previous abuse.*



# Chapter One

## Riley

HAVING CIRCLED THIS ROAD about a million times before, I was pretty sure I hadn't missed the entrance to the town I'd heard stood here.

For the last year, something had repeatedly drawn me back to this spot. I'd spend a few weeks elsewhere, then, when I'd worn out my welcome, I'd check this road before getting frustrated and trying somewhere else.

Rumors said there was a secret town hidden in the mountains. In a valley between the peaks, an entire concealed place teeming with supernaturals was acting like a sanctuary for the needy. Only if you could find it first.

I hadn't based my search just on baseless hearsay. It was easy to feel the magic that surrounded the area. It prickled over my skin. Besides, all the towns nearby were strangely fertile with crops, had low incidence of disease, and a shockingly low crime rate. Then there were the animal sightings and the occasional out-of-place noise I'd heard while

wandering the woods. Those were evidence enough of the supernatural.

No, there was something... off about the area, but all that weirdness could be my salvation. I just hadn't banked on it taking so long to find it.

The curse had me running out of options. There weren't many towns close by that I hadn't briefly called home. My car was making a suspicious noise and needed to be checked out soon, or I'd have to abandon it and my trailer to the mounds of snow at the edge of the road and head off for help in fur. Which was less than ideal, considering that the nearest place I hadn't stayed in was about forty miles away.

No, I had to find the opening today. I couldn't risk a human seeing a bobcat running around with a backpack on, or worse, a bear out of season. I had to avoid attention.

Snow fell in a thick flurry, darkening the late morning sky to the point I needed lights on to see despite my heightened senses. The road was slick and treacherous. I was crawling along, hoping against logic that I would find where I needed to go. I needed help. Surely that meant fate would be kind.

To concentrate better, I turned down the radio, thoroughly sick of Christmas songs and the bubbly host's voice in between. The quieter inside made the rumbling sounds from the engine sound worse. I nearly turned it back up again, but I needed to focus.

Suddenly, my car hit then skidded on a patch of ice, pointing the nose at a path, barely a track, that I had missed on my

many trips down this road. Taking it as a much needed sign and offering up a prayer of thanks to the fates, I turned the car onto it, crawling along as the trees on either side of me hemmed me in. It was almost full dark here with the canopy of ancient firs and thick snow falling.

With my hands gripping the worn steering wheel, and peering into the darkness, I willed the car to just hang on until there was somewhere safe to stop.

I pushed on, fear making my heart hammer in my chest. Praying to whatever deity would listen, I wished for safety and warmth. It wasn't quite December, but it was so cold that the heaters in my car were struggling to keep me warm. If I'd had a form with fur that I could drive in, then I would have shifted. The magic always seemed to keep me warm.

The road seemed to last forever, making me doubt my sanity for following it so far. I was about to attempt to turn around and head back when I felt it.

An intense pressure fell over me when I hit a barrier. Of course the town was warded! I took a deep breath and put my foot down on the gas. With a shudder, the car jolted forward, breaking through and crossing over the threshold into more woodland. Only now the road was wider, the snow wasn't as heavy, and I could see the weak winter sun.

Blinking at the sudden brightness, I stopped the car just to the side of the road, where a small lot lay with markers for hiking trails. The engine stalled and then cut out completely just as I got it and the trailer cleared off the road.

“Fuck!”

I pounded on the steering wheel before I tried turning over the engine again. Nothing. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!” I yelled into the quiet of the car. Even the radio had gone dead. Rationally, I’d known that the car was in danger of doing exactly what it was doing. I’d just hoped to be closer to civilization when it crapped out on me.

With a sigh, I got out and shivered in the freezing air. The snow had, thankfully, slowed to a light dusting. I got my backpack out of the back seat and checked it for everything important. Phone, keys to the trailer, wallet, and some clothes.

After making sure that the trailer and my car were secure, I started down the road towards the sounds and smells of the town below.

Greyhaven seemed to be in a bowl in the middle of the mountains. It was far larger than I’d anticipated. There were a number of large buildings, what could only be schools, a hospital, maybe even a fire station. I guess it made sense that they would be as self sufficient as possible being that they were so isolated.

In my time in the nearby towns and cities, I’d never heard of anyone from this place. Most of it was, “a friend of a friend lived there.” No solid information. No wonder it had taken me so long to find it. Of course, it was pure dumb luck when I had.

I shivered and pulled my coat tighter around me. It felt like the temperature had dropped, so while I was walking I should

have felt a little warmer; I was getting colder with every step.

Taking my backpack off, I adjusted it and set it down to let the familiar feeling of the shift come over me. I went for my bobcat form, grateful for the wide paws on the snowy road, and the thick fur keeping me warm. It was lucky I didn't have to strip to shift. My clothes went with me if I wished them to. I picked up the pack in my teeth and started a jog down the road. I didn't like to shift with my pack on because it made me feel cramped, like it was stretching the magic that held the shift too thin. Instead, I just had to deal with carrying it. It was cumbersome, but more comfortable than shifting with it.

Cautiously, I started walking, my pace slow. It was maybe ten minutes later, and a mile closer to the town, that I heard it. The wafting sound wings made as they flapped. I looked up, my keen hearing in this form picking out the direction it was coming from easily. My sharper eyesight soon spotted it overhead. I had to look twice, sure that I was hallucinating. There was no way. The cold had to be getting to me.

Up above, and quickly coming closer, was an honest to goodness motherfucking dragon!

My tail puffed with fright, my hackles rose. I darted into the woods that lined the trail as the dragon found a spot to land.

No wonder no one knew anyone from this town if this was their welcoming squad. What kind of sanctuary sent a fucking dragon to supernaturals in need of help?

I was regretting all my life's choices as it landed. From my place under a bush, I kept as still as possible. I barely breathed

in the hopes the dragon would take off again.

The beast landed carefully. It was huge, taking up most of both lanes of the road. It was a mix of purples and blues with piercing green eyes. As soon as it was on the ground, its wings tucked in, it shifted into a young man. He was tall, lean, with sleek black hair that kept falling into his face. He pushed it back with an impatient hand. His magic must have been like mine, he was clothed, though in a police uniform with no jacket to fend off the growing chill.

“I can smell you. We mean you no harm,” he called into the dense undergrowth where I stood hiding from sight.

We? That couldn't be good.

Behind the dragon, a vehicle pulled up. The SUV was better prepared for the snow than my beat up truck was. It had snow chains on the tires for a start. Then I noticed it was a police car. Fuck. I was in deep shit. Did they not want me here? I'd hoped I could get some help, but it seemed like this was just another dead end.

Inside, there were two men, both with features similar to the dark-haired dragon. I wondered vaguely if they were related.

The driver's window rolled down. “Any sign?” The driver called to the dragon that was still staring in my direction.

“I can smell a shifter. Their scent is weird. Caught sight of a cat rushing into the undergrowth there.” He pointed unerringly at me.



“Hey,” the driver shouted towards me. “It’s too cold to be out here. Come over, we’ll take you into town so we can all get warmed up.”

“Fucking right,” the passenger said to the driver, my sensitive ears picking up the words. “It’s fucking freezing.”

“My brother’s right. It’s much too cold. You’re safe here.” This time, the dragon spoke again. Brother, he said, so the driver was a dragon too. I’d never heard of multiple dragons in one place. I thought they were solitary creatures.

Staying still was beginning to hurt as the cold leeches all the warmth from me. I shifted to speak but stayed where I was, still partially hidden behind a tree. “I need sanctuary. My car is dead.”

“You can have it,” the first dragon assured me. “I’m Tatsuya, I’m the deputy chief of police.”

“Chief of police, huh? Quite the welcome wagon.” I smirked, though he wouldn’t be able to see. Or at least he couldn’t pick me out in the shadows of the trees.

“Deputy, my sister is the chief.” Tatsuya took a few steps closer, peering into the winter gloom to find me. “I was going to be the quickest and the weather’s been shit, so…” Tatsuya shrugged. “You coming?”

“I’m really safe here? You’ll help me?”

“Dude, Greyhaven works miracles.”



# Chapter Two

## Riley

TATSUYA, STILL IN HIS human form, led me to the SUV and opened the door for me. Unlike a human cop car, it didn't have the metal cage separating the driver from the passengers in the back. It was pretty much like a luxurious car you'd find in an affluent area. Apparently, Greyhaven wasn't hurting for cash if this was what they gave their cops to ride around in. "You mind if I fly back?" he asked me. "I don't get many chances to spread my wings," he explained.

I stared at him, frozen for a second. "Uh, sure. Whatever." I couldn't get to grips with what I was feeling. Finding Greyhaven after searching for so long felt like a dream. Being met with dragons? Well, that left me feeling like I was off balance. All wrong and twitchy.

"Ryuu's my brother," Tatsuya said, breaking me out of my reverie as he pointed to the driver. "He'll drive you to the town hall. All newcomers go there first unless they need medical attention. Do you need medical attention?" He looked me over

and held my eyes until I answered. He was difficult to read. I guess that was important in his line of work.

“Nah,” I answered after a brief pause. He dropped my gaze, sharing a look with his brother. There was no way I was going to get checked out. I hated hospitals and doctors. “All good, here. Just a little cold.” My extremities felt like they were about to fall off, but I wasn’t admitting that.

“Right then, hop in,” Ryuu called. Now that I looked at him, he was similar in features to Tatsuya, though softer and sweeter somehow. I knew then if I needed something, Ryuu would be the one that I would approach. Tatsuya, he felt too guarded to trust. He was too sharp and distant.

“See you at the town hall,” Tatsuya said as I got in and buckled up. He closed the car door behind me and backed away, shifting seamlessly into his dragon form and launching himself into the sky without a backwards glance.

With a sigh and ignoring the other passenger’s muttered curse, Ryuu put the car in drive, did a neat turn and followed the flying dragon into town.

There was another string of curses in a language I didn’t understand. “Ignore Longwei. He’s just butthurt that he can’t fly and has to power the spells to keep the car on the road.” I had noticed that the car was cruising along at a decent speed without concern for the poor road conditions. Magic was useful.

“Rude!” Longwei glared at Ryuu. “Tatsuya could have come with us. I’ve not flown in ages.”

“What my cousin isn’t saying is that he’s on a flying ban and it’s making his dragon mad.” Ryuu smiled into the rearview mirror, showing a neat line of pearly white teeth that wouldn’t look amiss in a toothpaste commercial.

“Why?” I blurted out. It wasn’t really any of my business, but I needed to get the lay of the land here. Plus, I was curious. I’d made it a habit to study people. Learn everything about them, including their tells.

“You roll mid-air and crash into one building—“

“It was the theater! And they were in the middle of a play! People thought it was going to crash down around them.” Ryuu’s expression was complicated. There was exasperation and fondness there for his cousin.

“Gareth fixed it up.” Longwei waved his cousin’s concern off.

“Magic doesn’t fix everything.” Ryuu thumped his fist into Longwei’s shoulder. “You’ve just got to apologize to the mayor and do your hours—“

“Hours?” I asked.

“He means community service.” Longwei looked over his shoulder at me. “That’s why I’m here, right? Part of the Greyhaven welcome wagon. Using my magic to protect the community.” He used a weird sort of announcer’s voice that he pointed towards Ryuu, who shrugged him off. “Hey, maybe with this guy—“ he turned in his seat, “sorry, I don’t know your name.”

“Riley,” I answered thickly. This was always the worst part of starting somewhere new. The introductions, repeating my name for everyone until I stopped being the new guy and just became Riley, the withdrawn shifter. Then, eventually, I was just a memory. I didn’t give him my last name. It didn’t matter if I wouldn’t be here long. I just had to wait and see if they could help me.

“Right, then Riley. Nice to meet ya.” Longwei winked at me. The change from moody to sunshine in a matter of seconds was startling. “So, I was thinking that Riley could say how bad it was out here, how much magic I used. Then I’ll say how sorry I am, and bam! ban lifted!”

Ryuu laughed so loudly even my lips lifted into a smile. “You act like the mayor won’t know exactly how bad it is out here, or how much magic you’ve used.” I could see Ryuu roll his eyes in the mirror. “I’ve never seen anyone lie to the mayor and get away with it.”

Right, so the mayor went onto the list of people to be careful around. Along with Tatsuya. He seemed too aware of everything around him. His sister as well, just for being the police chief. It worried me that a family was in charge of the police department. What kind of place was Greyhaven? Though, when I weighed up the punishment that Longwei had received for his stunt, then I wondered if maybe they had it right. Damage that could be easily repaired with magic shouldn’t have a hefty punishment, right? No harm, no foul.

The car whisked us through the quiet streets of Greyhaven. It was late afternoon now and nearly full dark. The odd person dashed around, getting last-minute things, or closing up their stores for the day, fighting against another flurry of snow and the biting wind.

I took in the sights as we got closer to a regal-looking town hall. It was Grecian in style, with columns set in a uniform order, each set proportionally from their neighbor. Just the sight of the orderly building was soothing. It had an aura that I just couldn't explain.

Ryuu pulled up in front into a clearly marked space. Turning in his seat, he spoke to me. "Look, the mayor... well, she can be a lot." He and Longwei shared a look. "Just, whatever you do, just don't lie. If you don't want to answer something, just tell her that. She would rather have you avoid answering than make shit up."

"Right! He's so right on that. Just tell the Lady Mayor the truth, or as much as you are comfortable with, okay?"

Longwei added.

After another silent conversation with his cousin, Ryuu looked at me again. "Whatever happens, you've got sanctuary here. You literally cannot enter the town's borders with bad intentions. We just need to know if you're bringing trouble with you."

A prickling feeling ran up the nape of my neck. I literally had no clue if I was about to call shit down on Greyhaven by being here. The entire point of getting here was to find a way

to break this fucking curse. Then I could go kill Boyce myself. Fuck what Daxton said. I'd save Mom alone.

The dragons got out of the car, Longwei opened my door for me and they waited expectantly for me to get out and join them on the sidewalk. With a deep breath, I stepped out, the sudden chill making me shiver. They escorted me as far as the lobby, leaving me with a short woman with close-cropped brown hair of an indistinguishable age. I barely noticed their goodbyes, too busy trying to work out what the woman was. She gave me a sunny smile while I noticed a plaque on the desk said Debra, Mayor's Executive Assistant.

"Hello, I'm Debra. You are?" she asked politely, her blue eyes twinkling.

"I'm Riley. I, uh, I'm here to see the mayor?" It came out as a question. Her scent was making my nose tickle. I felt a sneeze coming on.

Debra held out a tissue. "Here. You shifter types are always so sensitive to brownie magic."

I grabbed it just in time, sneezing three or four times into it while she watched with a rueful grin. "Thanks," I managed. She pointed at a waste bin next to the wide desk. "Appreciate it."

"Well, at least you've got manners. Lemme see those hands." I frowned but did as I was bid.

With a flourish, Debra worked some glittering magic over me and dropped into her chair with a pleased sigh. "Cleansed



your hands and basically inoculated you against brownie dust.”

“Um, thanks, I think.”

“Oh, you’re welcome, hun. You’re a nice boy.” Was she slurring? She leaned forward to peer at me. “You want me to help you with anything else?” Debra really was slurring. What the fuck was going on?

“That won’t be necessary, thank you, Debra.” A being of immense power rounded the corner. I hesitated to call her a woman, though the form they were in was female. Their aura was oppressive. So much of Greyhaven made sense now. “Please go and get yourself a coffee while I speak to Riley here.”

“Of course, Madam Mayor.” Debra hustled off, looking a tad unsteady.

“Sorry about that, Riley. Debra cannot resist her brownie nature and the inoculation always does that to her.”

“Oh, it’s, um, it’s fine.” I paused. “Is she going to be okay?”

“She’ll be right as rain shortly. Come through to my office and we can chat.”

I followed the ancient being into a classically decorated office. It fitted the Grecian theme they had going on. They sat behind the desk and motioned for me to take one of the plush armchairs nearby so we could talk.

“Tell me why you came to Greyhaven, Riley.”

Without preamble, I just let the words out that I'd been keeping in these last few years, all while I searched for someone to help me with no success.

“My family is cursed, and I came here to find someone to break it.”

“And what will you do once this curse is broken?” The way they looked at me left me feeling like I was being flayed open. My every thought and emotion on show.

I let the truth pour out of me. “Revenge first. Then heal. See how much of my Mom is left after—“ My voice broke. Tears welled in my eyes unbidden. I refused to cry in front of her. Seemed I had no choice when the tears rolled down my cheeks.

Debra appeared by my side with another damn tissue. I took it with a broken word of thanks, earning myself a smile from both the mayor and their assistant.

“I believe that someone here can help you. Unfortunately, that person is not me. I guard this place, my home, but I cannot interfere in this. The way is blocked for a goddess such as myself.”

“A goddess?” The words slipped unbidden from my mouth. I'd sensed the power but had doubted just how deep it went.

“Yes, I'm sorry,” she actually blushed! “I always forget to introduce myself. I'm the goddess, Hestia.”

I was dumbfounded for a moment. “Like the goddess of the hearth?”

“Hearth, home, and family, yes. That’s what Greyhaven is to me, my home. I made this place as somewhere for supernatural beings to be safe from the outside world.”

My mind was spinning. I was speaking to an honest to goodness goddess! “But you said you can’t undo the curse?”

“No, I’m sorry, but we have many magical beings, Witches, Druids, Warlocks—“

“No Warlocks!” My shout was loud in the quiet room.

Hestia assessed me for a minute, leaving me squirming in my chair. “Not all Warlocks are the same, young metamorph.”

Fuck!

Panic flared and I spoke without thinking of the consequences. “You can’t! You—“

“Fear not, your secret is safe with me, and Debra of course.”

“Lips zipped!” I heard Debra call.

Hestia looked out of the window, a slight frown on her face. “It’s getting late. You must be hungry. We can set you up in a cabin nearby and we can discuss our options in the morning.”

“But—“

“No,” she said firmly. “After food and rest. We start anew tomorrow.”



# Chapter Three

## Gareth

LAUGHTER FILTERED DOWN THE aisle of the greenhouse where I worked to bring a rather stubborn plant back to life with my magic. The other witches and warlocks were either in the covered fields, or other polytunnels where we grew most of our produce. The druids of Greyhaven also worked their magic day in day out, but something was eating at this apple tree so it needed my particular care.

I sent my magic deep into the root system of the plant, and there, I found the cause of the problem. With a little healing, I repaired the splintered main root and duplicated it, making a sturdy base for the tree to grow from. It shouldn't need my help again. Every plant that I could save gave me such a feeling of satisfaction. I loved my job, but helping here was great therapy. Just knowing I'd saved the plant brought a smile to my face.

Backing away from the plant, I rose from kneeling with a groan. Clearly, I'd stayed in one position too long while I fixed the problem. I stretched out my back and legs before dusting

off my grubby hands on my chinos. At this point, they were more stains and weird marks I couldn't remember getting than the smartly tailored pants I should have been wearing to work. I was just grateful that my classes at Greyhaven college were pretty relaxed over the dress code. They were used to me teaching in whatever I'd been wearing while I fixed things around the town. In fact, if I turned up freshly manicured in a pressed, clean shirt, someone would send for a healer.

“All done here,” I called to True, the druid in charge of this particular greenhouse as I grinned down at my handy work.

“Thanks, Gareth. You're a lifesaver! Oh! Could you check in with Dawn on your way out? I think she wanted you to check over some of her herbs.”

Nodding, I headed deeper into the complex set-up of greenhouses, polytunnels and high raised beds to find our resident witch. As True had said, it was another plant in crisis. Each and every plant we could get through a winter season was vital to prevent us from needing to travel to the outlying towns and cities for food. We were working year upon year to become even more self-sufficient, as the outside world relied more and more on technology that could out us before we were ready, or before the humans were.

Greyhaven wasn't just our home. It was a sanctuary for many that couldn't live out in the outside world safely. Either they didn't blend in right, or struggled with their powers. I had neither problem, but I'd always been in Greyhaven. I never

planned on leaving, not after the stories I'd been told from some of our residents.

People called out goodbyes to me as I wandered back towards the school building and my office. I was just in the door, about to take a seat, when Cian, my TA and assistant, burst through the door. "Gareth! There's a newcomer! Hestia wants to see you."

I sighed, as much as I wanted to help, I was also tired after using so much magic. "When did they arrive?"

"Yesterday!" He was almost bouncing like a puppy. A strange look on the withered looking old man. Cian was a Bodach and, as such, was unable to be out in the outside world freely. His appearance could be terrifying to those unacquainted with his personality. Cian, despite his trickster nature, was the sweetest soul.

I frowned at the news. "Why wasn't I called yesterday?"

"Um, maybe because it was nearly evening? You work long hours, Gareth. Hestia values you too much to overwork you."

"Hmm, you've been gossiping with Debra again." He and the brownie had a bit of a thing. "What do I need to know about this newcomer?" I couldn't help but be curious despite my fatigue.

Cian filled me in on the shifter's appearance in Greyhaven as I collected my things to brave the snow outside. I bundled myself up in my thick coat, a scarf and heavy duty gloves before heading out. It was a far longer walk than the one from

the greenhouses to the college, since some students gained credits by learning farming.

I pulled up short when I opened the massive doors to find a police car waiting outside. “Hey, Gareth, thought I’d give you a ride to city hall.” Tatsuya’s grin was wide, making the dragon’s eyes spark. This was a side of the usually more stoic dragon that most people didn’t get to see.

Gratitude for my friend swelled up inside me. I sagged with relief at not having to walk all the way across town to see the mayor in this weather. Snow clung to every surface, and the walkways were slick with ice. Someone had been sleeping on their salting duties.

“Man, am I glad to see you,” I said as I got into the empty front passenger seat. After taking off my gloves and unwinding my scarf, I hugged him. “How you been?”

“The usual, you know how it is. The mayor said she wanted you to consult on this newcomer, so I thought I’d give you a ride,” he trailed off with a shrug. Something was off about the situation, setting me on guard.

“What’s going on?” I asked warily. Tatsuya wasn’t usually this reticent with me.

“Hmm, nothing.” He pulled away from the curb with confidence. The roads were pretty clear for this time in the afternoon.

“Tatsuya,” I dropped a hint of warning into my voice and let my power spark through me.



“Fine, fine,” he sighed. “The dude is weird. Panicked and withdrawn, like a lot of people are before you bite my head off! But it’s more than that.” My best friend was frowning as he wove the car through the streets. We only had a couple of minutes at most before we were there.

“What is it? You know I trust your judgment, right?”

He blew out a breath. “This is between us, okay?”

I nodded.

“He smells wrong,” Tatsuya admitted bluntly. My friend was usually more diplomatic than that, especially on the rare occasions that we had new people arrive. Each new person was treasured, Tatsuya valued his job welcoming newbies, so this was... odd.

While most people would have laughed at his words, likely not getting it, I took them to heart. This was bothering him.

“Wrong, how? What kind of supernatural is he?”

Tatsuya looked gratefully at me. “He claims to be a shifter, and we saw him in his bobcat form—“

“So?”

“I know what feline shifters smell like, Gar.”

He really did. It wasn’t that he had a good nose, he did, like most dragons. His magic was just more in tune with his dragon self. That made it harder to fool him. It was likely that this new guy didn’t smell any different to anyone else, it was just that Tatsuya’s inner dragon was telling him something was off and representing that with scent.

“Right. So you think he’s lying? Maybe used magic to glamor himself into a cat?” The idea had me on guard. This person shouldn’t have been able to get through the wards if they were here to cause trouble, but no spell was infallible. Our wards had failed before.

A tiny smile lifted his lips. “I have no fucking clue. Just be on your guard around him. He’s not what he seems.”



Parting from Tatsuya, I made a promise that I’d be careful around this guy. Riley, he had said. Just the name alone sent a shiver down my spine. I couldn’t decide if I was afraid to meet him, or excited.

Debra greeted me at reception with a warm cup of tea. “I put honey in it, as you like it.” I laid my outer clothes on a side desk for Debra to put away and picked up the cup and saucer. Debra was very particular about using the correct tea cups.

“Thank you. May I go through?”

She wasn’t listening to me, already rushing about and tending to my things. I cleared my throat.

“Oh! Yes. Go right ahead. They are waiting for you.”

Carefully, I used both hands to secure my tea as I walked into the mayor’s office. The door, thankfully, had been left ajar. Hestia was sitting behind her desk, frowning at something that the man opposite her must have said. From the back, all I could see was messy dark hair and olive-toned skin.

Awareness shot through me of something monumental about to happen.

“Ah, Gareth, come sit down.” Hestia waved a hand towards the vacant seat next to the man.

Setting the cup on a waiting coaster on her desk, I took the offered seat and turned to look at the man that had Greyhaven abuzz. An exaggeration perhaps, but when my eyes met his dark orbs, the breath felt like it had been punched from my lungs. I saw his fingers tighten on his chair as we both realized what we were to each other.

Sitting next to me was my fated mate. The one person that I never thought I was going to meet. I mean, what were the chances of him turning up in Greyhaven? It wasn't like I was venturing out to find him. Greyhaven was safe and comfortable. I didn't need a life of adventure even if that meant maybe finding the one soul meant to complete mine.

“Everything alright?” Hestia asked with a knowing smile. Sneaky goddess!

The man broke first and turned away from me, settling back in his seat. “Everything is fine.” His body language screamed that he was uncomfortable. He looked ready to flee at any moment. Was there something wrong with me? Was he straight? Shifters were usually pansexual according to the books and the few residents that I knew. My heart began to beat faster with my anxiety, a cold sweat broke over my skin.

Hestia looked at me with a quirked eyebrow. “I'm not sure,” I answered honestly, trying to hide my worry. “I don't know

why I was summoned here.”

“Well,” Hestia began, “let us start with introductions. Gareth, this is Riley. He arrived in Greyhaven and requires our help in breaking a curse.” I sat forward, ready and anxious to hear the details. I wanted to help my mate if I could. Unwinding curses was a rare treat. I loved testing my magic like that. “Riley, Gareth is our head of magic studies at the Greyhaven college and a powerful mage.”

I blushed at the compliment. “I’m not that powerful, my dad —“

“Is a fine man. I hope he and your mother are enjoying their studies abroad. Here, right now, you are the most powerful warlock we have.” Hestia raised an eyebrow at me, daring me to disagree with her.

Riley stood then, his flight or fight response nearly triggering a shift. One moment he had claws, the next, his eyes flitted between yellow and their normal deep, earthy brown. “This... this is a mistake.” He was in full panic mode. I wanted to do something, anything, to soothe him.

Hestia stood. At her full height, she was smaller than us, but her godly powers made her all the more imposing. I knew straight away that she had made a mistake. He was looking around wildly when she spoke to him. “Riley, I did say yesterday that I would get in touch with a warlock.” Her tone was more gentle, placating, than I’d ever heard it.

“I can’t!” He looked at me with pleading eyes. They begged forgiveness even as he struck me deeply. “Not a warlock, no!”

With a last cry of frustration, Riley shifted into a bobcat and ran from the room.

“Oh dear.”

Understatement. Shock and horror filled me. Tears pricked at my eyes and I struggled to breathe for a moment.

The mere knowledge that I was a warlock had my fated mate running away from me, despite apparently needing my help. What was I going to do?



# Chapter Four

## Riley

I COULD NOT HAVE a Warlock for a fated mate! No. No way! Fate couldn't possibly be so unkind to me, after everything that I'd gone through. All he had put us through. No! My soul raged at the unfairness of it all.

Mind spinning, the shift rolled over me without thought, thankfully picking my last form, the only form that I could take in this place to stay hidden. Letting me be, neither Hestia nor Debra stopped me from leaving, though I was sure that their magic could.

Gareth.

The look on my mate's face had been one of horror as I'd fled from him. Not that I really could blame him. He'd just met his fated mate and been rejected. He knew we couldn't happen, right? That had to be clear. There was no way I could accept a warlock as my mate.

It wasn't him. I was sure that he was perfectly nice and all. Fuck, he was handsome. He had beautiful eyes. His hands! I

had a thing for clever looking hands with long fingers. I'd even noticed the dirt under his fingernails that suggested he wasn't just an academic.

No. I had too much history with warlocks. It couldn't happen with Gareth, no matter how appealing he was to me. My walls were too high for a normal mate, another shifter, even.

No, it was best he understood now, so he didn't get any false hope.

My time in Greyhaven was done. There was no way they would help me after what I'd just done. Running out of there was a huge sign of disrespect. If I'd been in any sort of pack, the alpha would be on my heels to inflict my punishment right now. Warlocks were to be revered, maybe not as much as dragons and gods, but they were up there in the hierarchy. You never, ever, crossed one like I just had.

I hoped that they would just let me go. Let me leave with my tail between my legs, my hopes dashed and facing a hopeless future. It wasn't like they could keep me for long. No jail cell could beat the curse.

Hestia was better than that. She knew all about the curse and my circumstances. I was sure she would forgive me for my outburst, but my trust in her was done. I'd said no warlocks and she had ignored me, going to the one person that I just couldn't deal with.

Very few people were in the streets and no one blinked an eye as I rushed past. I headed for my car, forgetting for a second that it was a pile of shit and wasn't working. It didn't



matter. I'd sleep in my trailer for the night and get my wits about me. In the morning, I'd apologize to the mayor, get my car fixed, and get the hell out of dodge.

For miles I ran. It hadn't occurred to me that city hall was so far from where I'd abandoned my car and where I'd been picked up. Once outside of the more heavily populated areas, I shifted again, taking on the form of a raven and taking to the skies.

It was a relief to change forms and stretch my wings. If anyone was searching for me, they'd be looking for a bobcat. I was too conspicuous in that form.

Flying over Greyhaven, it was easy to appreciate the beauty of the place. It was clean, organized, but still had touches of wildness in the forests and around the lake. I followed the path I'd taken just the day before and came upon where Ryuu and Tatsuya had picked me up. Shifting again, I took the form of a German Shepherd, my favorite breed, and ran back to the place where I'd left my car and trailer.

Only, it wasn't there.

I shifted back into human form to curse up a storm by the side of the road.

It had snowed overnight, so there was no trail, no clue for me to follow and tell me what had happened to my things. Unlike my brother, I kept all the vital things on me. I'd had a trailer before, stacked with all I could grab from my old life, and I'd lost it when the curse had hit me. All gone. Now my

trailer was just somewhere somewhat warm and dry to sleep between jobs and between towns.

For a moment, I considered just abandoning everything that I'd brought, just letting Greyhaven have all my shit, and getting away. They would have no use for some clothes and trinkets I'd picked up in the last couple of years of wandering. Maybe the trailer could be useful to someone passing through, though the cabin they had set me up in was pretty sweet.

I don't know how long I stood there trying to decide what to do. The cold was seeping into my bones, but I couldn't find it in myself to care. I felt hopeless. It didn't matter to me that Hestia had warned me about getting a Warlock to help. She could have eased me into it more gently. It was like putting a bite victim in with a bunch of dogs and not expecting them to freak out.

A car pulled to a stop next to me. I'd zoned out so completely that I hadn't even heard or felt its approach. "Hey Riley!" Longwei shouted from the driver's seat. "Get your icicle ass in the car." I turned to him, and really thought about shifting again and running off into the woods. Maybe I just needed a couple of days to really process all the shit that had happened in the last twenty-four hours.

"Don't even, man. I'm not chasing kitties through the woods."

Considering myself warned, I walked around the car and got in next to him. "Hey," I muttered, rubbing my numb hands.

“Here, Debra sent me with these.” He held out a couple of flat stones and a thermos. At my look, he explained, “hot rocks and some cocoa to warm you up properly. She was worried. We all were.” I could see that he was genuinely concerned.

I repressed my huff, doubtful that a goddess felt bad at all. Not after what she had done. Maybe, though, my reaction had told her how deep this went with me. Either way, I needed to thank the brownie, even if her boss had overstepped, it wasn't Debra's fault.

“Thanks for coming out here. Though I'm surprised they sent you. I thought they'd send Ryuu to check up on me for his brother.” No matter what had happened in that office, Longwei hadn't been a part of it. All he had done was be nice to me. In another world, maybe we could have been friends.

“Well... Ryuu is busy. His kid is sick and his wife is too pregnant to cope with it. I offered to come. Really. I was worried about you.”

“That's um... thank you.”

“No worries. All counts towards the hours,” Longwei joked.

“I just needed to get away. I—“ The adrenaline crash was coming. My hands shook around the thermos of cocoa. The hot stones warmed my lap. I felt detached from everything and so very tired all of a sudden.

“Nah, I get it. Hestia is a great mayor. She's done so much good for my people, but sometimes she's so removed from things, she doesn't see other people's feelings, y'know?”

I gave a slow nod. That was exactly the problem. “Yeah, I can see that. It’s just, I warned her I didn’t want a Warlock—“

“He’s a Warlock. I can’t trust them,” I said firmly.



We spent the rest of the journey in silence. Longwei didn’t try to convince me to give the Warlock a chance. For that, I was grateful. I wasn’t in a place to be reasonable and listen to any platitudes. No, what I needed was to take the night to formulate a plan and then get away from here.

Instead of taking me back to city hall to face Hestia and what I’d done by running away, Longwei took me to a diner and made sure I ate dinner. We talked about inconsequential things. Sports, the weather, not Christmas, because that meant family and that was too personal. He introduced me to people that he knew, telling me about their supernatural species in an undertone. There were many stories of dragons. Tatsuya and Ryuu weren’t actually his cousins. Dragonkin called everyone not related by blood a dragon cousin. They tended to mate outside of their species, Ryuu was married to a druid. Usually at least one dragon was born to that pairing, the dragon blood being stronger.

Greyhaven was home to more than I could even comprehend. I hadn’t thought about species that couldn’t blend. Hadn’t thought they were anything other than myths since I’d never seen a Bodach before. Didn’t know that they

had a female version that was harmless. This sanctuary had a sibling pair of them and one, the male, worked with Gareth.

It was easier to think of my mate by his name and not his species. Not that it really helped matters. Could I even be in the same room as him without my fight or flight instinct kicking in? I couldn't fully separate the two, his species, and who he was to me, in my heart like I could in my brain. Not now, anyway, and I had so little time here. I wasn't sure if there was any point in trying to talk to him. What could I give him if I couldn't break this curse?

“Are you going to be okay?” Longwei asked when he dropped me off at my cabin. I noticed my trailer was parked up beside it. He caught me looking. “Your car is getting fixed up. The magic caused the breakdown, so we are fixing it for free.”

A bullshit excuse for charity, but I hadn't been working the last week, so I wasn't in a position to argue. I had money, just not a lot. “Uh, thanks. Do you know how long it will be?”

“Nah. You'll need to go see Walt in the morning. He's a cyclops. He and his clan live here.”

Longwei gave me directions to Walt's garage and patted me on the shoulder before he got back in his car. He waited until I was inside, the door securely locked, before he drove away. I wondered if he thought I was going to vanish in the night.

The warmth of the cabin seeped into me. I'd been unable to shrug off this chill since Longwei had found me on the side of the road. Even sitting in the diner, I had felt cold to my bones.

Here, inside and finally alone, I was able to relax and let the heat in.

Rather than undressing and getting into bed feeling utterly bone weary, I shifted into one of my comfort forms after checking there was no one spying. My fox form was an unusual one since it was mainly black with patches of orange rather than red with black and white. Climbing on the bed, I hopped up on top of the wardrobe with a blanket between my teeth. It took me a few moments to get it situated, then I curled up, my bushy tail as a pillow, and went to sleep.

Everything, all of my worries and fears, could wait until morning.



# Chapter Five

## Gareth

THE MAYOR JUST STARED at me. “I—well, I didn’t think he would react like that.”

I rounded on her, angry for some unknown reason. Part of it was a feeling that she had wronged my mate somehow, and I needed to avenge that. “What the fuck just happened?”

“Gareth, I think you should sit down and have some more tea.” Hestia didn’t react to my outburst, just sat back in her chair and took a sip, prompting me to do the same. The air was filled with awkward tension and my own bitter dismay. “Riley has a history with a warlock. I felt he could overcome it to begin the process of breaking the curse on his family. I was wrong.”

A goddess admitting she had made a mistake was rare, so I bit back any retort that wanted to slip from my tongue. “What do we do now?”

This felt insurmountable. Other things, like my appearance or job could be changed. What I was couldn’t, and until Riley



could cope with having a warlock as a mate, we had no chance to build anything.

Now that I knew he existed. Now I'd seen him, I wanted to be everything for him.

Hestia sighed. "Honestly? I'm not sure. Riley had to have hidden some of his trauma from me. I really didn't think it would upset him that badly."

"Part of that is me. We are fated mates," I said with a resigned sigh.

"Hmm, I thought so. There was a thread that ties you together." Hestia looked pleased with this development.

"This is a huge problem, Madam Mayor. My fated mate has a massive issue with warlocks, likely stemming from trauma. You also mentioned a curse, and now, a warlock, me, is his mate? There's no way he's going to accept my help, let alone our bond."

The situation came crashing down on me. My fated mate had rejected me, and I saw no way of changing his mind.

"With time, I think he will come around on you helping him. Once he sees what a good man you are, then, of course, he will accept you. Unless you think he's too damaged for you?"

"What? No!" My outrage had me rising to my feet.

"Settle, young warlock. I knew you would feel that way." Hestia smiled at me. Happy with my reaction. I pushed my irritation at her condescending tone down. There was no way I would win an argument with a goddess.

I sat back down and drank my rapidly cooling tea. My nerves were frazzled, and I needed the soothing liquid and the love that Debra had put into it. “So what’s the plan?” I finally asked, putting the empty cup down.

“Well, I would like to give him some time. While he is thinking, or likely scheming, of leaving Greyhaven, I will speak to other spellcasters. You were my first choice as our best and brightest.” Now she was just flattering me. Guilty conscience much? “Then I will do my best to help the poor boy. I only wish...” Hestia looked torn.

“Wish what?”

“That I could help his mother.” Now I understood her pain. Her powers would be itching to reach out, to restore the family.

“You can’t?” It bothered me that she was offering so little help.

“No, she is much too far away and the protections around Greyhaven need me to power them.” I sagged a little. Putting the needs of the many over the few was understandable. So many vulnerable people lived in Greyhaven.

My mind kept repeating the look of horror on Riley’s face when he found out I was a Warlock. “Just how bad is his past with Warlocks?”

“It’s not my story to tell, but Riley has scars, both mental and physical.” Hestia answered the question I hadn’t meant to voice.

The whole situation felt hopeless. I slumped further in my seat, my brain whirring as I thought of ways to indirectly help Riley. Being close to him was all I wanted, but I knew that was selfish right now. I needed him to learn he was safe from me.

Long minutes passed before Hestia spoke with a finality that told me my time in her presence was up. “Remember, there’s magic in mating bonds.”



Debra took pity on me and gave me a ride home. “You’ll catch your death!” she admonished when I tried to walk. Really, she didn’t live all that far from me, so it made sense to car share with her. I’d thought the walk would help me think about Hestia’s final words.

All through a hastily put together dinner, I mulled it over. Halfway through the dishes, it occurred to me that I didn’t know all that much about mating. Especially fated mate bonds between different supernatural species.

Hours passed as I tore through my home library, looking at all the books that even mentioned mating, fated pairings, and cross species bonds. When it turned out that I didn’t have much at home, I figured it was bothering me too much to sleep, so I’d head to the college and have a look there.

Throughout the night, I worked. I got coffee from the pot in the teachers’ lounge when I was struggling to stay awake. I wanted to get the answer or it would plague my dreams with it.

“Everything all right here?” Finn, the night security, asked. The man had the keen eyesight of a shifter, and in his gryphon form he was fearsome.

“I knew my brain wouldn’t let me rest until I got to the bottom of something cryptic Hestia said,” I explained as I pulled three more books to put into my stack.

“Ah,” Finn smirked. Everyone knew how infuriatingly vague our patron goddess could be. “Need any help?”

“You sure?” I paused in my searching to look at him. The man was tall, nearing seven feet, the usual size for a gryphon male. His species were lucky that, like shifters, they had a human guise and could often live in the outside world. He had blond hair that he wore tied back in a low ponytail for work. I knew it was shoulder length and contained all the colors you could find on his lion half. Finn’s eyes were the color of gold and were watching me steadily.

Finn glanced at the pile of books and then down the empty hallways. “I’m not sure that I really need to guard the college, but I like that paycheck.” His grin was infectious.

“Right, well, I met my fated mate today—“

“Congratulations!” Finn went in for a hug, but I tensed and he drew back. “Or not?”

“Not. He rejected me. Or rather, has issues with Warlocks. Couldn’t be in the same room with me as soon as he found out. Literally shifted and ran away.” Okay, so it still hurt, even if I understood it.

Finn winced. “Right. So are you trying to break a fated bond to get a new one? Because that can’t be done.” He sounded a little mad that I might be considering that.

“No!” I protested, on the too loud side. “No,” I repeated more softly. “Hestia said something about there being magic in mating, and I’m trying to understand it.”

“Hmm,” Finn mused as he rubbed his golden stubbled chin. He went through the pile of books, sorting them into three piles.

“Why three?” I asked as one pile got bigger and then pushed to one side.

“This one,” he pointed to the largest stack, “is useless.”

“How?” I was taken aback.

“I watch the researchers and help the librarian when I take the day shift. You know,” he said, changing the subject, “my clan has a lot of myths surrounding mates, fated bonds in particular.”

“Oh, I’d forgotten that.”

Finn shrugged. “There are tales we are told from childhood, and I think it might be what Hestia was talking about. Your mate is scared of you because of you being a warlock, right?” I nodded. “Likely because he thinks you can harm him.” Again I nodded. That was probably it. A warlock had probably used magic on my poor innocent mate, leaving scars behind.

“Well,” Finn continued, “I was always told this story when I

was young.” He launched into a familiar yarn about two young gryphons, just entering adulthood.

One day, the female, her name long forgotten, was walking along a road when she met two others, both young men. They tried to woo her, though her heart was already taken. One tried with gentle words and flattery, the other with boasting. She was polite to the second and preferred the first, having recognized him as her true mate. Soon, seeing he was out of favor but misunderstanding their bond, the second attacked the first. Having seen the first was a gentle soul, the young woman put herself between them. The males clashed. The first’s wild hits, since he was unaccustomed to violence, always veered away from her, even when they should have struck her. It was their fated bond that protected her. He put his body in harm’s way until her gryphon, sick to her soul, rose to defend him in return. She tore the second to pieces and bonded with the first. When he died at a blessedly old age, surrounded by their children, grandchildren and beyond, she followed him into the afterlife.

The story touched me deeply. I wanted that kind of love. “So you are saying he literally couldn’t harm her? Not with violence?”

“That’s right. I think you’ll find similar tales in these books. I’ve heard it in other species. A fated mate is the other part of yourself, you cannot cause them harm.”

“So Riley would be safe from my magic?”

Finn shrugged. "I think so." There was a noise from down the hall. "I better check that out. Probably kids wanting somewhere to hang out. Read these books." He patted the smallest stack.

"Thanks!" I called to his retreating form. He threw a wave my way.

I read all through the night. Made notes and drank the coffee that Finn gave me. Everything that I read gave me more hope. As Finn had said, I couldn't harm Riley with my magic because of what he was to me.

Now I just had to prove it so he could feel safe enough to give me a chance.





# Chapter Six

## Riley

AS THE DAWN LIGHT filtered through the curtains, I roused from a nightmare soaked sleep. Even sleeping in my comfort form hadn't kept the memories at bay.

With a yawn that ended in a bark, I hopped down from the wardrobe and shifted back into my human form. The chill in the air made me miss my fur, so I rushed to the bathroom to take a steaming hot shower rather than tinker with the aging boiler.

The water cascading over my body worked out all the kinks from my weird sleeping position. I shouldn't have spent the night shifted, especially since I hadn't checked out the cabin for any traces of magic. My paranoia had kept me safe this last decade out on my own, I couldn't abandon it now. Not knowing that there were warlocks here.

Refreshed, shaved, and teeth brushed, I ventured into the bedroom to find some clothes. I made sure all my shit was packed because as soon as my car was ready, I was out of here.

Greyhaven was a bust. There was no way I could work with warlocks and the mayor had crossed the line.

Thinking about warlocks made me think about Gareth. I was torn over leaving my mate behind, but until I got the curse broken and had time to heal, I wasn't sure there was anything that I could offer a mate, especially one that happened to be a warlock too. He couldn't help what he was. Had he been anything else there still would have been issues. This was just too much to handle.

I shoved the thoughts into a box, locked it and hid the key then focused on checking my things. I wanted to make sure that as soon as I could leave, I would. There were stories of other sanctuaries. I'd head their way and check them out.

First, though, I needed to see about my car. If I could afford to fix it, I would get that done as soon as I could, then ask around about the other supernatural havens. They had to have more information about them here. If not, maybe I could find a coven. Witches weren't as bad as warlocks. They focused more on spells and some used the elements. Warlocks, they came from the fae, so were, by nature, capricious. They could use spells to focus their magic and were more powerful than witches. I remembered my mom explaining the difference. Warlocks had many names, like mages, sorcerers and were mostly male. They were made of magic, while witches used tools to focus what magic they were born with.

A druid might also be useful. They were born from the elves and were closely tied to the earth. They worshiped the earth,

moon and sun. I'd never met one, but a place as rich with supernaturals like Greyhaven had to have a tribe of them.

Tasks done, I stood and thought about all that had happened in the last couple of days. The box in my mind rattled as thoughts of my mate tried to escape. I shut that down.

My stomach growled. I'd been neglecting eating and looking after myself since I'd arrived in this strange place. I went into the kitchen to see if there was anything to eat, not wanting to venture out unless absolutely necessary. The pantry, fridge, and cabinets were bare. Guess it meant going to eat somewhere or getting groceries, neither of which I wanted to face.

After getting myself ready to go out, I headed for the door as someone knocked. I yanked the door open, not giving myself a second to overthink it.

At the other side of the door was a tall... person, their gender was indistinct. They were bundled up against the cold and had a pair of stunning dove gray wings. "Hi, I'm Raina," they said, with a pleasant, female sounding voice muffled slightly by their scarf. "I'm in charge of the post and deliveries for Greyhaven," they continued as I stood staring at them. "Here," they presented me with a gift basket. The cellophane held a dusting of snow. "This was ordered for you."

Taking it, I stood mutely. The basket was heavy and contained perishables and some canned goods. Basically, everything I'd been heading out to get.

When they realized I wasn't about to speak, they smiled again. I could tell by the crinkling of their eyes. "It's the wings, right? I'm a Nephilim. Y'know, the race born of half human and half angel pairings?" I still couldn't speak. They pushed down their scarf. "Pronouns then? I go by she/her, if you don't mind. I'd rather you just used my name, but whatever." Her mouth turned down.

Shit, I was making Raina feel bad. Just that realization had me breaking out of my frozen state. "Sorry, Raina. I wasn't expecting all this. To be honest, I've been off my game since I stepped foot in Greyhaven. You just surprised me, is all."

A smile lit up her face. She had ocean blue eyes under sandy brown eyebrows. "No worries." My stomach let out a loud grumble. "Guess you really need some of this. Was nice to meet you, Riley. See you around."

*Unlikely*, I thought. Then closed the door. Food and then a progress report on my car.



"Well, you see, we have to order that part in, and that means a trip all the way to Farmsworth, since that's where we get our big stuff sent to." Walt was looking at me with genuine sorrow on his part. I really felt like he didn't want to be keeping me here against my will, but the reality was my car was fucked.

The mechanic looked under the car again. Since he was a cyclops, he was gifted with being able to work metal. Being a

mechanic was a genius job for him. He just got to how they worked and found the root of the problem quickly. I thought his massive form would make it difficult for him to do the more fiddly bits, but he was graceful and delicate when he needed to be. I watched him treat my car with the care it had lacked while in my possession.

“How long do you think that will be?” I hoped for a couple of days, max. Things were not on my side.

“A week at least. Maybe two, to be honest.” He slow-blinked his single eye. I should have felt threatened by his size, the one eye, the bright red of his skin and alien appearance, but he had quickly put me at ease. He had this gentle giant thing going on. Aside from Raina, Walt was the first supernatural that I’d met that wouldn’t blend in the outside world.

“Aw, fuck!” I thought about alternatives. Could I buy another car? I had some money stashed away. Some less than legal cash that I hid in various accounts. So what if I had skimmed off of jobs he had made me do? I deserved to be paid for putting myself in danger.

Walt scratched at his chin thoughtfully. “I’m sorry, kid. That’s the best I can do.”

“It’s fine, Walt. I get it. Is there anywhere I could buy another car close by? Something that could pull my trailer if possible?” Leaving the trailer was the last thing I wanted to do. It was perfect for life on the road.

Walt blinked his single eye at me again while he thought. “There might be something at the lot. I’m not too hopeful for

ya. You'd likely have to go out of town to get one.”

Fuck. If I left Greyhaven without all my shit, I wouldn't get back in, not now I'd spent two nights here. That was, apparently, the magic number. Mom had two kids, and any more than two nights in a place was counting it as a home, albeit a temporary one. Something we weren't allowed to have. If I left, my curse wouldn't let me back in. It didn't matter what I left behind, I would lose it.

“I'll have a look if you'll point me in the right direction. In the meantime, if you could order that part just in case. I'll settle up with you for the part and your time if I find another car.”



The lot didn't hold a lot. Ironically. There were a few electric and hybrid vehicles, but all small city cars that had two seats and wouldn't cope with hauling a trailer. The only one that was almost what I wanted wouldn't start when I asked about it.

Greyhaven was conspiring to keep me here.

The note with the basket had been an apology letter from the mayor for “a lack of consideration” of my feelings. While I felt better that she had at least acknowledged that what she had done was wrong, I still had this urge to flee.

Perhaps it was that I felt flayed open after telling the mayor most of my history. After that, the dreams had been worse.

Meeting my mate had opened those old wounds and I'd had the worst nightmares ever because of it.

Maybe it was that I didn't know what Gareth was going to do about us being mates. I knew I owed him at least a conversation before I skipped town, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Fear had drained all reason from me. I knew it was hurtful. That it was a dick move, but I couldn't do it in case he persuaded me to stay.

A part of me was already tempted by him.

The mayor's number was heavy in my hand. For some reason, I'd taken the card with the apology with me. For the next week or so, I was stranded in Greyhaven, so I needed to know they would not ambush me with well-intentioned help. I would figure out the problem myself.

Before I knew what I was doing, I was calling the mayor's office. "City Hall, I'm Debra. How can I help you?"

"Hey, Debra, it's Riley. Is it possible for me to speak to the mayor for a sec?"

"Hello! Did you get the basket this morning?" Debra's voice was cheerful.

"I did, thank you. Did you arrange that?"

"Believe it or not, it was Hestia's idea. I just helped her pick out what to put in. I think she's in a meeting. They should be about done. Could I put you on hold to check if she can chat?"

"Of course, that's great, thanks." It was a relief to not feel any weirdness from the brownie after my running off. The line

was filled with the elevator music that most government offices played. That was strangely reassuring that even here, so far from human life, there was something normal.

Debra came back on the line. “You’re in luck. They were just chatting about unimportant stuff. I’ll transfer you now unless you need anything else?”

“Nah, I’m good, thanks Debra.” My hands became sweaty, belying my casual tone. I was not good. I was nervous as fuck to speak to the goddess that ran this place. For the next week, at least, I had to be welcome to stay and also needed a promise that she wouldn’t push my boundaries.

“Hello, Riley,” Hestia’s voice was smoothly polite. Not frosty like I had worried about.

“Madam Mayor, I’m having car issues and need to stay in Greyhaven for a while longer... will that be okay?”

“Of course, Riley. You are welcome here as long as you need.”

“About yesterday...” I trailed off.

“I am sorry about that. It was too much too soon. It won’t happen again. You have my word.”

“It won’t?”

“No. I see it was wrong, though the intentions were pure. You need to seek the warlock out on your own terms somewhere you have control of the situation. I shouldn’t have ambushed either of you. It was very poor behavior on my part, especially knowing what I do about your history.”



“Oh,” I mumbled, astounded. This conversation really hadn’t gone the way I thought it would.

“Can you forgive me, Riley? The plaintive tone suggested that my answer truly mattered to the ancient goddess.

“I do.” That was the truth.

“Thank you, Riley. I know it’s a lot to ask, but please consider speaking to Gareth about the curse, if nothing else. My heart believes that he will be instrumental in helping you.”

“I will. Thank you, Hestia, for letting me stay.”



# Chapter Seven

## Gareth

RATHER THAN TRACK DOWN my runaway mate and scare him even more, I took the day to go over the reading that I had found with Finn at the college. Since I was an employee, the administration let me take the books home. I took a personal day so that I could compile the evidence for my mate. Riley wasn't going to just trust my word on it that he was safe from my magic. I had to give him certainty.

So instead of teaching or doing anything useful, I holed up in my house and read. While I was reading, I made notes to see if I could track down sources. When I took breaks to eat and shower, I thought about fated mate matches in Greyhaven. Were there any that could demonstrate what I was talking about?

Lists, endless lists. By the time the sun fell on the day, paper, takeout containers from my lunch and coffee mugs surrounded me. I might have showered, but I hadn't slept or shaved. I felt stretched thin. My emotions had been leading me, bolstering

me until I was fraying at the edges. This wasn't going to be a simple fix.

It was around eight when the doorbell rang. I was expecting pizza, but found my best friend at the door with the box instead of Raina or one of her siblings. "Hey Gareth, can I come in?" Tatsuya held up my pizza. "I brought dinner."

"Um, I ordered that," I snarked.

"Well, I paid for it," he shot back. "Saved Zayne a journey."

One of Raina's brothers, Zayne, had a job in the messenger and delivery service. All the nephilim that lived in Greyhaven loved to have their wings on show like they couldn't on the outside, so picked jobs like that.

"Right, thanks Suya." I moved out of the way to let him inside and wandered into the kitchen. "Want a beer? Wine?" I called as I opened the fridge. I needed to restock pretty much everything. This research and meeting Riley had knocked me out of the routine that I craved and needed, leaving me feeling all wrong.

My powers sparked under my skin, reacting to the imbalance. Of course, my best friend noticed. "Beer." He frowned. "What's got you all sparky?"

"Riley." His frown deepened, so I explained with a roll of my eyes. "The fates are having a laugh at my expense here. 'Sure, you can have a fated mate, Gareth. A super cute one, too. We can't make it easy for you, though. He's terrified of

warlocks, by the way.' Perfect, thank you, fate." I sighed, feeling hopeless.

"Huh?"

"What? That's all you have to say?" My temper rose at his nonchalance.

Tatsuya shrugged. I clenched my fists, then reached for his beer. It wasn't his fault that fate had fucked me with no lube. "You'll figure it out. Besides, I think the fates threw you a bone." He popped the cap off the bottle I handed him.

"How'd you figure?" I asked as I found napkins and plates for our dinner. Not wanting to risk alcohol and my tentative control of my magic, I poured a glass of water instead.

"His car is busted. Walt needs at least a week to fix it. He's stuck here in the meantime. Sources say he went looking for a car, but couldn't find anything big enough to pull his trailer."

"Shit."

"Yeah, the situation is fucked. The thing is..."

"What?" I flopped onto the sofa, thoughts of food gone from my head. All I wanted was for Riley to give me a chance.

Tatsuya looked at me with a sympathetic expression over his sharply angled face. "Hestia promised Riley that no warlock would approach him."

His statement landed like a rock in my gut. All of my work was for nothing if I couldn't at least speak to him! "But he's my fated mate! How am I supposed to convince him to give us

a try if I can't even speak to him?" Fuck, fuck, fuck. I would not cry. The frustration nearly welled over. I took a couple of calming breaths.

"How are you going to convince him? He ran at the mere mention of the fact you're a warlock, Gar." Tatsuya chewed on his slice of pizza while I answered.

"With this." I showed Tatsuya all of my work. It was hard to miss with it strewn all over the place. Finally, I just put my head in my hands.

Tatsuya gave me a sympathetic look and patted my knee in a semi-comforting gesture. As much as I loved my friend, he was not who I went to for cheering up. He was too realistic. His hugs were great, though. Rare, too. He just didn't do the touchy-feely stuff. "There's a chance he'll realize he needs you and comes to you. He's cursed, remember?"

"What if he doesn't?" I muttered, eyes burning as I glared at the floor. Fate was really fucking me over. "What if he just leaves without giving me a chance?"

Tatsuya kneeled in front of me and held me by the shoulders until I met his eyes. "Fate will find a way to bring you together. Trust it." He pulled me close, wrapping me up in a tight hug. "I'm here for you, okay? We'll work something out." I must have looked pretty bad if he was breaking out a hug for me.

"Sure," I said, my voice hollow. I broke free of his arms and picked up my food. "Better eat before it's too cold." I picked

up my stone cold pizza and frowned. With a thought, I heated it so that the cheese was bubbling once more.

“Do mine! I always set it on fire when I try.” Tatsuya flung his plate under my face, making a smile break free.

I heated his food and watched him scarf it down. “You’ve been working too hard,” I chided.

“You know what it’s like after a storm and in the run up to the winter celebrations.”

Greyhaven was a multi-faith sanctuary for all the supernatural, whatever faith they had grown up in, so I knew how busy December was for my friend. “How are the preparations for the parade coming along?”

“The amount of paperwork is just stupid! I keep telling my sister and the mayor that we need to go digital. Other havens have already.”

I listened to my friend with half an ear while my mind wandered back to my mate. There had to be a way around Hestia’s promise. I thought about all the other magic users that I knew in Greyhaven, ones that could undo curses, and none of them felt strong enough to trust Riley’s safety to. While I didn’t know the story of his curse, what it entailed, or any punishments he would receive, Hestia requesting me first suggested that the others wouldn’t be powerful enough to break it on their own.

My thoughts spun as I plotted to get Riley the help he needed and to keep my involvement quiet. I could research

things for the other witches and mages. I would offer them talismans to bolster their power if they needed me to. To give him what he needed, I would linger in the background until he either sought me out, or left Greyhaven altogether.





# Chapter Eight

## Riley

HESTIA KEPT HER PROMISE. Though I wandered the town, visited the library and college to speak to magic users, I didn't come across any warlocks, mate or otherwise. Not surprising really, since it felt like no matter where I went, there were eyes on me, spies reporting my whereabouts. No, it was impossible to hide from the residents of Greyhaven, but they were hiding Gareth from me. I just didn't know how I felt about it.

I spent a few days in the cabin they had put me in, too terrified that the curse was going to rebound on me, that it would punish me somehow for finally telling someone about it. Then I started work on ending this curse for good when nothing happened aside from me being bored, and honestly, kind of lonely.

The library near city hall, and the one at the college, were both well stocked with many tomes of every magical variety. Just the ones that I thought could be useful would take me years to read. There were that many. I knew I had to get help.

The issue was that all magic users, dragons, mages, witches, whatever these sorcerers called themselves, were all avoiding me. The only problem I had was with warlocks.

We classified magic users under how they came to be. Warlocks were also mages or sorcerers, depending on their preferred term and gender. They came from the pure-blooded fae, a race that no longer existed. The fae that remained on this side of the veil were diluted from years of intermingling with other supernatural species, giving birth to sprites, nymphs, goblins, and, of course, warlocks. They were tricky by nature. Mercurial. Stubborn. Quick to temper. They loved bargains and deals. There was duplicity in all that they did. It was part of their inherited fae nature.

Witches, the name for any gender, came from demons, which would make most suspicious of them, but the demons, though powerful, used the elements and were often bound to a coven and made harmless. Most witches had never met the demon their line came from and only had a spot of demon blood in them. Usually, their magic was quite tame.

Then there were the druids. I'd searched for any sign of them, but like the warlocks and mages, there was no trace of them. They would have been my preferred choice of magic user to turn to. Seemed like I wasn't getting the choice.

So, being the lesser of evils, I sought out some witches. There were only a handful in Greyhaven and most were unwilling to speak to me, aside from the newest resident, a

young guy called Oscar. He and his bird had left their coven and then some friends to seek out a fresh start.

I didn't know his past, and even if I could stay in Greyhaven, I wasn't sure that I cared to. Hypocritical maybe, but I wanted to take Oscar at face value. He had only been in the supernatural sanctuary for a couple of weeks, so had a lot to prove.

We bumped into each other in the library. Oscar had been taking a library science degree back home, which made him more than qualified to look after the collection of books in the vast building. It took a lot for me to squash down my bitterness that Oscar had only been in Greyhaven for such a short time and had found a job, a purpose, in the place.

He helped me find the right books on curses and then to cut the pile down further. With his own knowledge added in, and that of his previous coven, we soon figured out that since it was a warlock that cast the curse, then a warlock would be needed to break it. Oscar's magic was too different. While he had been fairly gifted in his hometown, he rated low compared to the other casters in Greyhaven.

"I'm so sorry, Riley. There's not much more I can do. I can maybe buy you some time using talismans, but they are only effective for a few days." Oscar grimaced and wrung his hands.

My time in Greyhaven was quickly running down. Over a week had passed since I'd arrived, and I was no closer to breaking the curse on me. "Let's call that our Plan B, right?"

The younger man looked close to tears. He looked away from me and swiped at his eyes. “Um, sorry. Yeah, I’ll work on them later. There’s things I’ll need to get for them.”

“Like?”

“Some herbs, crystals, things like that.” Oscar seemed reticent to discuss magic with me, which I understood, though it was frustrating. I had so little time to get to the bottom of this curse.

“Anything I can get for you? I want to help if I can.” Something about the younger man made me want to look after him. He appeared so vulnerable. Sort of broken. I wasn’t going to push for information on his past. It was his to deal with.

“I thought...” Oscar trailed off, looking uncomfortable.

“The only problem I have is with warlocks, and you should get that by now. You’ve heard enough of my story to know some of the shit that bastard put us through.”

“Maybe I just thought that it would be all casters.”

I made a sweeping motion, brushing that aside. “Nah, I can compartmentalize with the best of them. Witches are not warlocks or mages or sorcerers. Your magic smells and tastes different.”

Oscar looked at me with wide eyes. “Does it?”

“Yeah. Besides, I just feel... I dunno. Nothing about you puts me on guard like other magic users. Maybe it’s because you’re new here, too.” I wasn’t about to tell him that he felt like an injured bird to me. He wouldn’t appreciate it.

He brightened. “Maybe. Okay, you can help with the shopping. Want to wait until change over and walk with me?”

“Sure.”



It was no hardship to stay inside the quiet, warm and welcoming library to wait for my new friend. It was rare to have one of those that actually knew the truth about me. I’d met other shifters in my travels, but they didn’t like my unique scent, even when I made an excuse for that. Those brief friendships fizzled before they had any depth. That was part of the curse. Keeping me a wanderer, a loner, until I was forced to return home. To him.

Being different, other, all my life had me used to my own company, though. I think I surprised him with how long I was holding out alone. Mom called sometimes, never sounding like herself, asking for me to come home. I always said no, but it still caused an ache to deny her.

I liked the young witch, even if he was half my age, well it felt that way. He was barely in his twenties and I was in my mid thirties. Still, Oscar was nice. He seemed lonely here, so if I could help him as he tried to help me, then it was all good. I’d be his friend for as long as I was here. There was always the chance we would stay in touch when I moved on.

Conversation between us was still that slightly awkward, stilted kind as we shopped late afternoon. Together we walked

downtown, avoiding shoppers as best as we could. Greyhaven was bustling about in their hurry to get the last-minute things they needed. The parade was the next day, the beginning of their winter festivities.

We went into a magic shop that only ended with me sneezing, so I handed him some cash and waited outside while Oscar shopped. He emerged ten minutes later slightly pink faced and handed me the change. “Just a couple more places and then I better get going.” His stomach growled.

“Oh, I was going to get some groceries while we’re here. Could I make you dinner as a thank you?” I really didn’t want to spend another night on my own. It was rare that I sought out company, but after spending hours with Oscar, I felt comfortable enough with him to want that friendly feeling to continue. Friends ate meals together.

Oscar blushed a deep red, obvious with his golden blond hair and pale blue eyes. “I... uh...”

“It’s not a date or anything,” I said gently.

He gave a humorless chuckle. “Obviously. Rumors are you have a mate. I just don’t want to make anyone angry. Things are strained enough here as it is.”

Shit. I hadn’t thought about what it would look like. I felt my temper rise. “You know what? I don’t want a warlock as a mate. I’m allowed to say no. Fate isn’t in control of that. But that isn’t what this is. I’m also allowed to have *friends*.” Anger made my words come out as a hiss. “And that’s what I want this to be. Friends hanging out, sharing a meal.”

His laugh this time was genuine. There was a sparkle in his eyes that was missing before. “Well, I need a friend. I’m not too proud to admit that. Back home... I fucked up. Greyhaven is my chance at a fresh start.” The light dimmed. “I hope I can help you, Riley. I want you to stay in Greyhaven. Then maybe you can find a way to make it work with Gareth.”

Just his name in my friend’s mouth made my stomach flutter. “I’m not sure, Oscar. There’s so much in my past—“

“That you can work through once you have the chance to settle somewhere. Where better than here, where your mate is? Do you know how rare fated mates are?” Oscar’s voice only got more passionate as he spoke.

“I’ll think about it.” I stopped outside the grocery store. “Gonna get something for dinner. Any allergies? Dislikes?”

“Not liver!” Oscar’s face screwed up in a grimace. “Other than that? No. I’m headed over the street. I’ll come help when I’m done.”

Entering the store was a relief. The noise and biting cold gave way to the subtle sounds of shopping and Christmas music playing over the speakers. The temperature, while not warm, was less biting than it was outside. There were still plenty of people, but most seemed in a hurry to go make dinner or do whatever task they had.

I was browsing the aisles, putting stuff into my cart, when I sensed him. His scent hung in the air. Gareth was in the store with me.



I paused, not sure what to do. Ignore? Give a greeting and hurry away? What did you do when you were confronted with a fated mate that you weren't sure you could ever accept? I didn't want to out and out reject him. No, I wanted him. There was a piece of my soul that already belonged to him. Deep in my heart, I wanted that special connection. I just couldn't believe this was who fate had tied me to. It felt like some big cosmic joke was being played on me. Like the fates saw my trauma and wanted to poke at it.

After a minute of blindly looking at cereal options, I shook it off. There was nothing to do. I'd say hello if I saw him and go on my way. I wasn't ready to talk to him. He'd just have to understand.

Rounding a corner, I nearly slammed my cart into his legs. "Fuck! Sorry."

Our eyes met. He had gray eyes that were flecked with blue and gold. Beautiful. My mate was a stunning man. Tall, long and lean, with golden brown hair and a wide mouth. He gave me a tentative smile, flashing perfect white teeth. "Riley! Hi. How are you?"

We stared at each other in silence for a moment. "Um, okay. You?" This was good, right? Sort of having a conversation with the man that the fates had decided was my perfect fit. Even if he was a warlock, he had a comforting aura.

This wasn't so bad, right?

Surrounded by people, I didn't have the urge to run. We stood just staring at each other. The moment stretched between

us becoming strained until it was broken. “Riley?” We both turned to look at the speaker.

Oscar caught up with me. “Oh, I’ll, uh, wait here.”

Gareth looked between us, a slight frown pulling his lips down. “Just getting some things. I’ve been putting it off all week.” Gareth gave a weak laugh.

I looked between Gareth and Oscar. “I’m making dinner for Oscar as a thank you.”

“A thank you?” Gareth asked, his brow wrinkled. He wore every emotion on his face. He didn’t like that I was spending time with the witch.

“For helping with the curse,” Oscar hastily explained. “Not that I can do much.” He became withdrawn.

“I still appreciate what you can do.”

“Riley—“ I loved the sound of my name on Gareth’s tongue. Why did he have to smell like one of them? Why couldn’t he be anything else?

“Yeah?” I needed to know what he wanted to say.

“I’ve been doing some research...” He looked worried I was about to flee, which, fair enough, I’d done before. “On fated mates.”

“Why?” It came out sharper than I had meant it to.

He flinched but forged ahead. “To show you I wouldn’t harm you. The research proves it. As your fated mate, I can’t harm

you with my magic.” He looked so goddamn hopeful. Tired too. There were dark circles around those lovely eyes.

The breath left my lungs when I finally understood the words. “Impossible,” I wheezed out.

My reaction seemed to embolden him. “It’s the truth. If you let me, I can give you all my notes. Where I got the information. Everything. Will you?”

“Will I what?” I still couldn’t comprehend what was happening. It was too much to process. Gareth could be safe? A warlock unable to use their magic on me? It couldn’t be!

“Let me show you that you are safe from me. Just give me a chance, please,” Gareth begged. My mate looked ready to get on his knees just to prove it.

I looked from his imploring face to Oscar. “Let him,” he mouthed urgently.

“Okay.”



# Chapter Nine

## Riley

I MUST HAVE LOST my mind. It was hormones, the connection we shared, something. There had to be a reason that I was putting aside my concerns to listen to Gareth when he was probably spinning me a line. It was probably why I went and made things so much worse. “Why don’t you join us for dinner?” I wanted to curse my mother for bringing me up with manners. Not only was I listening to my enemy, I was inviting him home and feeding him.

The absolute joy on Gareth’s face, and the cautious hope on Oscar’s, meant there was no taking it back. “Oh! Um, yes. I’d like that. Give me half an hour and I’ll take this,” he brandished his basket, “and go home so I can gather my research.”

“Right, okay.” Suddenly, everything was more awkward than it had been. I needed a moment to work through it all. What had I just done?

Gareth hurried off without a backward glance, clearly worried I’d change my mind. I had. Over and over, I was

swinging back and forth over what I should do. Cancel? Take Oscar and hide somewhere? Actually feed him?

Then it hit me. Sharing a meal between fated mates was part of establishing a bond! No wonder Gareth was so excited about this.

“Wow! I’ve only seen Gareth from a distance, but your mate is hot!” Oscar had a dreamy look on his face. I wanted to shake him. A feeling of possessiveness washed over me. I could feel a glare boring into him. “Whoops! He’s all yours, Riley.” he held his hands up in a placating manner and changed the subject. “What are we feeding him? You still want me to come for dinner, right?”

That shook me out of my head. “What? Of course I do. I need you as a buffer!”

Oscar bumped his shoulder into me. “Buffer is onboard. We need something quick and easy to feed us, though.”

“Right.” I looked at the contents of the cart. Nothing in there was enough to make a decent meal. I felt a sudden need to impress Gareth with my cooking. Growing up with a single parent, I’d learned a few things in the kitchen. Daxton, my older brother, had spent a lot of time making sure that I was self-sufficient so that he could go to his job, or play football, without worrying about me.

“We need something that doesn’t take a lot of time,” Oscar mused as he scanned the shelves. I wasn’t sure what he thought he was going to find in the cereal aisle for dinner.

“Pasta? There’s this dish that I can make with pre-cooked chicken. We just need mushrooms, cream cheese...” I trailed off as I found where I needed to go to get the ingredients.

My new friend followed me as I quickly assembled everything that I needed and checked out. Together, we rushed to the cabin I was staying in. “Oh! We’re neighbors, look! That’s mine just there!” Oscar lit up at seeing how close we lived to each other.

“Glad to have a friendly face nearby,” I said, as I ushered Oscar inside and began unpacking in the small kitchen. It wasn’t perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but it would do for making a simple meal.

I put everything I didn’t need away and then washed my hands before preparing the mushrooms.

“What can I do?” Oscar asked.

“You can wash up and then make a quick salad.”

Handing over the vegetables, I got to work alongside Oscar. We slipped into a companionable silence while we worked.



The knock at the door a little while later startled me into almost dropping the pot of freshly cooked noodles. I set them down and looked anxiously at the door.

“I’ll get it. You finish up,” Oscar suggested as he dried his hands.

“Thanks,” I muttered gratefully before concentrating on my task, trying to ignore Gareth coming into my space. My skin felt tight. I longed to break into one of my animal forms. Well, my fox form. I wanted to cuddle up in a ball with my tail covering my face, hiding me from the world. I wanted the safety and security being in that form gave me.

Oscar led Gareth into the cabin, took his coat and the offered bottle of wine. At his side, Gareth had a messenger bag. I assumed this was where he had his evidence that he was hoping to show me.

I wondered if I was just stringing him along. Would I be open to hearing him out? To see the proof he said he had found?

Deep in the recesses of my soul, I knew the answer. Yes. I wanted him to be safe to be around. I wanted to belong to someone. To Gareth. The person that was supposed to be the missing part of my soul.

The food was ready, and I plated it while grabbing glimpses of my mate. He was dressed in gray wool pants with a cream sweater of what looked like cashmere. Everything about him looked friendly, safe, warm, inviting. The overhead turned the highlights of his hair into gold. Damn, he was tempting.

There wasn't a dining table, so I placed our food on the coffee table and gestured at the others to help themselves. Gareth took a seat in the only armchair, leaving a safe distance between us, and began piling food onto his plate. “This looks delicious. What is it?”



“Um,” I hesitated. Gareth shrunk a little, which made me continue. “It’s creamy, garlic chicken pasta. A recipe my mom taught me. I had to cheat and use precooked chicken, but I think it turned out okay.”

Gareth shoved a forkful in his mouth and let out a groan. “Fuck! That’s so good!” he said around a mouthful, making me smile. I loved it when people enjoyed my food.

“Oh my gods, yes! This is fantastic!” Oscar ate enthusiastically.

Content that they were happy, I served myself and took careful bites. Now that I didn’t have cooking and hosting to occupy my brain, my tension was flowing back in.

They continued to empty their plates, complimenting the food, until both sat back, looking full and slightly sleepy. “You being my neighbor, is the best news of the day. I need you to feed me more often. I’m useless at anything aside from basic potions,” Oscar remarked.

Gareth opened his eyes sleepily. “That was the best thing I’ve eaten in a long time, but I promised you facts and reassurances.” He leaned over to get his bag, exposing a patch of creamy skin and toned muscles. “Okay,” he said, pulling out a notebook. “I’ve been putting this into sections and trying to track down fated mate pairings near here. We’ve got two couples that fit in Greyhaven that I know of.”

“So, is this so they can demonstrate it?” I asked warily. I looked at the information written in a slightly messy scrawl on

the page and then at the photocopies of books that Gareth spread out on the arms of the sofa and the chair.

It was undeniable. There were cases upon cases of mates showing how their magic didn't work on their partner. Even before a bond, they were immune. My eyes scanned all the pages. Unknowingly, I'd gotten up and drifted closer to Gareth, drawn in by our connection and somehow soothed by all of this.

This, the information he had painstakingly collated, probably taking days of work, was exactly what I needed to see. Then I realized I needed more than words. I needed to see it.

I took a deep breath and trusted my inner senses on this.  
“Try something on me.”



# Chapter Ten

## Gareth

“TRY SOMETHING ON ME.”

The words rang in my head. For over a week, I’d stayed away, even with my soul crying out for Riley. Hestia had made me swear, even coming to my office to get the promise that I’d leave Riley alone and let him come to me. The goddess was sure that eventually he would, to break his curse.

Unable to repair things with Riley, I’d taken what little knowledge I had of this curse, and tried to look for solutions. Quickly, I’d given up on that and focused on proving that I couldn’t harm my mate. Hence the half ton of paper I’d brought with me. Riley had no reason to trust my word for it. He had to see it for himself, and apparently, this meant testing it on him, too.

“What?” I was astounded that he would trust me this quickly after everything that had happened.

No, there it was. The tremble of his hands, his blown pupils, the tension in his body. Riley was fighting with himself. He

wanted to flee, but something else was telling him to brazen this out.

“I want you to try something. Just a small spell, like freezing me to the spot or something. Show me that it works, then I’ll tell you everything you need so you can keep me here.”

Riley’s chin jutted out in a stubborn fashion. His bravado was on display for us both to see.

Oscar sat, just watching us both. It looked like he was hardly breathing. Riley reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder. “You’ll fix anything that goes wrong, right?” He peered up at Riley and eventually nodded.

Riley looked at me. The first time he’d maintained eye contact with me since I’d arrived. “We can try to track down these couples and waste days I don’t have, or we can try something now and get it over with.”

“Days you don’t have?” I asked, stuck on those words.

“After. Explanations after you prove this.” Riley looked fearful but determined.

“Okay.” I stood. “Why don’t we take this outside? I don’t want to miss and break something.”

Riley nodded. He began putting on his winter gear, and I followed suit. Oscar scrambled to catch up with us as we left the cabin and stood on the snow covered lawn.

“A freezing spell or a fireball?” This was probably a very bad idea that would land one of us in the hospital. Okay, me,

since I guarantee if I successfully managed to use magic on him, he would shift into his cat and rip me apart.

“Start with trying to freeze me. I’ll run at you.”

*Seriously?* I cast him a dubious look and followed it with words. “You’re going to run at me and expect me to freeze you? What happens when I don’t?”

“Oscar will push us apart, or something.”

*Reassuring, thanks Riley,* I snarked mentally.

“Um,” Oscar didn’t sound happy with the plan, either.

“Ready?” No, I really wasn’t. “Three, two, one, go!”

My mate charged at me, running across the snowy lawn at a fast rate. I got my hands up and willed my power to freeze him in place.

Nothing. It seemed to bounce right off him.

Barely a second before he would crash into me, I tried again, and still it didn’t work.

Riley collided with me with an “oomph,” taking us both to the ground. He landed on top of me. We were about the same size, though he was more muscular than me with linebacker shoulders. The air was knocked from my lungs and I gasped as Riley laughed. His hazel eyes were lit up with happiness.

I heard Oscar laughing behind us. “Sorry!” he yelled. “I didn’t manage the spell in time.”

“It’s okay,” Riley told his friend with a grin. “Fireball this time!” he proclaimed as he jumped up off me and dashed

across the yard.

“Um, are you sure that’s a good idea?” Oscar looked worried.

Unable to deny Riley when he looked so damn happy, I conjured a fireball in my hand and got to my feet. “Ready?” I asked Oscar. “I don’t think you’ll need to heal him, but you might need to put a fire out if those trees go up.”

“Ready!” Oscar stood off to the side, well out of range.

I tossed the fireball directly at Riley’s chest. It seemed to hit a wall before it could touch him, then rebounded and hit a patch of grass, fizzling out instantly.

“Again!” Riley laughed.

I shot fireball after fireball as my mate stood in place, unharmed. Each one that failed seemed to take some of his anxiety and fear away. He got closer and closer to me. I stopped, tired. “Are you okay?” he asked, taking a step closer. I could almost touch him.

“I... I’m relieved. Tired. Glad.”

“Glad?”

“That we are mates. That I could be someone safe for you. Riley... I want to be someone you can trust.” I meant those words with my entire being. Since the moment that I’d met him, my mate had held me captive. I didn’t want to be free. I wanted to drown in those deep chocolate brown eyes and let them be the last thing I ever saw, so long as I got to be with him.

Riley reached out and cupped my face. “All of this... I don’t have words. You make me glad I trusted myself enough to ask for this. You showing me meant more than words could.” He ran his thumb over my cheekbone.

I held his hand to my face. “Thank you for trusting me.” My voice nearly broke on the words. “It means everything. I hope we can build from this.”

His eyes became sad. “What if I told you I have about three weeks left in Greyhaven? Would you still want me?”

Without thinking, I answered. “Yes. If you leave, I’ll come with you.” I didn’t even hesitate to make the offer. We didn’t know each other, but I knew I’d gladly leave Greyhaven just to be by his side. The outside world held no appeal before Riley came into my life. But if that was where he was, then that’s where I’d go.

He startled. “You’d do that? Give everything here up for me?”

“That’s what mates do. We were made for each other, Riley. No one can replace you.” I smoothed my fingers over his hand, wanting to keep him close to me.

“But we don’t know each other!” he protested. Riley didn’t pull away. If anything, he stepped closer.

“Maybe not now, but we have time. Let me get to know you while we try to break this curse.” I wrapped an arm around him. The outside world ceased to exist. “Give me a chance to decide for myself if losing you is better than losing what I



have here, because I can already tell you that I've been waiting thirty-three years for my mate to show, and I already don't want to give you up. Not while you are here and touching me."

"Gareth?"

"Yeah?" I whispered.

"Can I kiss you?" His breath was warm on my face. He was so close to me.

"Okay, this is awkward, but I'm going to head home and check on Hayto. I'll catch you tomorrow, maybe. Have fun!" Oscar gave a wave and scurried off towards a nearby cabin.

"Who's Hayto?" I asked, voice low. Neither of us had moved.

"His bird. His familiar."

"Right."

"Gareth?"

"Hmm?"

"Kiss me."

We surged towards each other. Lips meeting for the first time. The feeling was electric, sending a jolt through me. I opened to his tongue, letting him taste me. I adored the feeling of him in my arms, of him directing the kiss. His scent, apples and spice, surrounded me, making me think of safety, warmth, and home.

Long moments passed as we made out on the lawn until the cold nipped too harshly at us. We broke apart breathlessly, grinning at each other.

Riley grabbed my hand. “Come inside with me. Stay, please.” His dark hair was tousled, his lips kiss swollen, eyes bright. He was so beautiful.

There wasn't a thing inside of me that could deny him.  
“Okay.”



# Chapter Eleven

## Riley

EACH TIME THAT GARETH had failed to touch me with his magic, a weight had lifted from me. It renewed my faith in the fates little by little until I could thank them for giving me a fated mate. Even if he was a warlock.

No, it was important he was one. Gareth was going to restore my opinion of mages, sorcerers and warlocks like spending time with Oscar had made me feel better about witches.

I found myself drifting towards him, pulled along by our connection, my soul crying out for its other half. Touching him was a lesson in patience. I wanted so much more than the warmth of his skin next to mine.

It ripped the final shred of denial away when Gareth confessed he would come with me when I had to leave. I didn't think it was fair to do that to him, but maybe with more time, we could break the curse somewhere else and then return to Greyhaven with me as a free man.

Getting in my head about it, I nearly didn't ask for the one thing that I really wanted: his lips on mine.

Resisting this bond was painful. Knowing I had a mate, having seen him, had hurt, especially knowing it was my hang up that was keeping us apart.

My clever, special, gorgeous mate had found the perfect solution. He had spent hours finding examples only for me to throw that out and ask for a demonstration. I was sure he was going to find me difficult to get along with. I was too used to having my own way after being alone for a decade.

The kiss rocked my world on its axis. The feel of his arms surrounding me, the taste of the wine he'd been drinking on his lips, all of it came together to shove all sense out of my mind.

I knew what I was doing when I invited him inside. It wasn't just to tell him the sad story of my past; it was to get my mate in my bed. Talking would have to wait.

We went through the cabin directly to my bedroom, not even bothering with the pretense that anything else was going to happen.

There was a brief moment of hesitation from Gareth before he brushed his lips against mine again. That small taste was like lighting a match. All I could focus on was getting more. More skin. More of his kisses and touches.

I stripped him of all his clothes and pushed him back onto the bed. "What do you like?" I asked, my voice husky. I

shoved my pants down and threw my t-shirt across the room so that I was standing naked in front of him.

“Anything. You. Whatever you want.” His voice was a rasp. He clung to the comforter as if he was holding himself back. I didn’t want him to hesitate to touch me. He’d proven he was safe. We could have it all.

“Can I top you? I like both.”

“Me too, and yes.”

He moved up the bed as I crawled on. I straddled his lap, groaning as our cocks brushed. There was no way I was going to last long with how divine he felt.

I reached for the lube I’d stashed in the drawer next to the bed I pushed him into laying on his back. Gareth grasped my hand. “Are we going too fast?” It looked like it pained him to ask.

Pressing a kiss to his lips, I said, “I might only have a few weeks with you. Why don’t we make the most of it?”

Gareth frowned up at me. “I don’t think you understand, Riley. Now I’ve had a taste of you, I’m never letting you go. If you leave, I’ll track you down.”

I laughed. “That’s starting to sound a little sinister there, Gar.”

His expression softened. “Until you say you don’t want me and really mean it, then you’re stuck with me.”

“I’m okay with that.”

“Also, always call me Gar. I love it.”

“Hmm,” I nuzzled my face against his neck, breathing in his scent, bergamot and lemongrass. “Okay. Now shut up, Gar, and let me fuck you into this mattress.”

He grabbed my head so he could bring our mouths together. I didn't have the patience to draw this out, so I reached down for his puckered hole and ran a lubed finger over it, making him gasp against my mouth. I broke from his lips to trail kisses down his body, loving the rasp of his light body hair against my skin.

When I reached his cock, I blew a breath over the mushroom head, eliciting a shiver as I breached him with a finger. Gareth moaned my name, the sweetest sound I'd ever heard.

I licked around the tip, tasting the precum there and groaning at the bitter, musky taste. “Hmm, so good,” I muttered, before I took him into my mouth. Carefully, I eased another finger inside him. I sensed that we were both too on the edge for more thorough prep.

Opening my throat, I took him deep, loving the weight of him on my tongue, the taste, his smell. He shuddered as I cupped his balls with my free hand and rolled them. “Riley! Please,” he begged so prettily.

His fingers in my hair pulled me off him. “I'm gonna blow if you keep doing that.” His eyes were dark with lust. Eyelids heavy with pleasure, a flush over his pale cheeks. “Fuck me, please. I need you.”

I used more lube. “This okay? I don’t need to use a condom, but I can if you’d prefer.”

“No, I don’t need them either. Magic protects me.” Gareth blushed. “I, uh, also like the thought of you still being inside me hours later.”

It was my turn to moan. “Fuck, that’s hot!” my inner animal agreed. They wanted our mate covered in our scent.

With shifter strength, I flipped him over and pulled his hips back to nestle against mine. “You sure?”

Gareth nodded and then dropped his head with a groan as I breached him. Watching my cock sink into him was so amazing. I’d be having flashbacks of how hot, tight, and perfect he felt.

I ran a hand over his back as he took some deep breaths to get through the burn. Once I felt him relax, I pumped my hips experimentally. His murmured, “Fuck! Yes!” encouraged me to thrust harder, push deeper inside him.

Gareth pushed back against my movements, making me see stars as he clenched around my dick. I came down over his back so I could thrust in even harder. He gasped as I bit down on his shoulder, not breaking skin, but holding him firmly as I fucked into him.

My balls slapped against his thighs and Gareth panted out nonsense and collapsed against the pillows as I pistoned into him. Nothing, no one, had ever felt this good. He cried out for



more and reached down to stroke his cock in time to my pumps.

Within a few strokes, Gareth was shuddering and coming over his hand and the bed.

I pulled him up against me and rested back on my heels. Holding him close, I rocked into him. I was so close. With a finger, I scooped up some of his cum and brought it to my mouth. Gareth gasped and tightened around me as I tasted him. That was all it took. I laid him back down on the bed and thrust into him once, twice, and then pulled out. Shuttling my hand over my cock a few times, just imagining my cum all over him, I reached my peak and painted my cum over his crack and balls.

Sweating and panting, I used the head of my dick to spread my cum over him, pushing some back inside him where it belonged. Gareth turned his head to watch me. “Fuck, that’s got to be the hottest thing anyone’s ever done to me.”

“Hmm,” I muttered. “You like being covered with me?”

“Yeah.” He reached a hand out for me. “Come cuddle. You cuddle, don’t you?”

“I fucking love cuddling.” I flopped down next to him and pulled him close, breathing in his scent and enjoying the afterglow.

We lay entwined in the sheets for a while, until the frigid air cooled the sweat on our bodies, making Gareth shiver. “I’ll turn up the thermostat. It’s been temperamental.”

“If I was braver, I’d suggest you move in with me while we work on the curse.” Gareth smirked at me from where he rested against the pillows. If I continued to stare at the long lines of his body, I’d want to go another round, and I didn’t want to hurt him. I’d been rough. Unless he wanted a turn... “Whatever you are thinking, don’t. Go and fix the heating before we freeze to death.”

“Ah, you forget I have fur.”

“Even knowing it’s you, I don’t think I can sleep with a bobcat in the bed.”

“I prefer to sleep as a fox.” The minute the words left my lips, I realized my mistake. I wanted to tell him who I truly was, but as part of the story of the curse. It was why we had been cursed after all.

“You have more than one form?” He looked so confused. “I thought you were a bobcat shifter?”

My skin was covered in goosebumps, and I shivered. “I’ll explain as soon as I fix this. Back in a sec.”

Dashing out of the room, I grabbed up a blanket from the couch and wrapped myself in it. I locked the door. Even though Greyhaven had next to no crime, it wasn’t good to tempt fate. Then I padded to the thermostat. In the kitchen, I took a moment to drink a glass of water and calm down. I got the boiler running and heard the familiar sound of water in the pipes. It wouldn’t take long for the place to warm up again.

When I returned to the bedroom, Gareth was sitting up, the comforter pulled up to his bare chest. I sighed in relief that he wasn't leaving. I handed him the glass of water I'd gotten for him.

"I'm a metamorph," I explained. When he went to interrupt I carried on, "they are a type of animal shifter. Very rare. Which is part of the problem. We don't tend to tell people what we are."

He stared at me. "I don't understand."

"How about I show you?"



# Chapter Twelve

## Gareth

“SHOW ME? HOW?”

Riley shed the blanket that was around his broad shoulders. He stood naked for a moment, then in a blink he was in the bobcat form I'd heard about. He was magnificent in both forms, and I was proud to call him my mate. With another blink, he was a fox. At least it looked like a fox. The coloring was different to any I'd ever seen. Then he was a dog. A raven. A squirrel. Then a rabbit. A tiger.

He went through his forms quickly, never giving me a chance to examine them properly. Finally, he returned to his human form, panting and a sheen of sweat covering his skin. I flung back the comforter and opened my arms to him. He came to me with a contented noise, pressing close and letting me hold him.

“You are amazing!” I said honestly.

He was quiet. I waited for him to speak, not wanting to rush him. “You know what? I've heard of metamorphs,” I mused,

filling the silence. “I thought them to be myths.”

“We stay hidden,” Riley finally said.

“Why? I mean, it’s cool, changing into so many animals, but why would that mean you have to hide?” I wasn’t trying to be insensitive, I just wanted to know more about my mate.

“Any women are treated as breeding stock, though they don’t always produce metamorph children, it depends on who the father is. My brother, Daxton, was born to a wolf shifter father, so a wolf is his primary form. He has a few animal faces, but not as many as me. My dad was a metamorph, too. He... uh... he died getting Mom and Dax out when she was pregnant with me.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. They had been staying near a shifter village, only sticking to one form, but Dax was only four. He didn’t understand that he was supposed to stay as a wolf. He knew that Mom and Dad could shift into birds, and he wanted to fly, too. Someone saw him.”

A sick feeling swept over me, stopping any words from escaping. Maybe that was all Riley needed. Not a bunch of platitudes. I just held him, smoothing a hand over his back. I couldn’t be sure, and I certainly wasn’t going to point it out, but I felt tears.

“Another shifter caught Dax and my dad had to fight to get him free. Dax ran to freedom, doing what he was told by my dad, but—“ A sob escaped. I held Riley tighter as he

shuddered against me, my chest getting soaked with his tears. “The injuries were too extensive. Mom begged a witch to help, but there was nothing to be done at that point. He died as I was being born. The stress of it all was too much. We nearly lost Mom. If it hadn’t been for the witch, we would have.”

“The witch hid us for a few days until Mom was strong enough. Then we ran. New base forms, since we can’t hide that we are shifters from other shifters. They found a town to stay in for a while. There, they blended in, going under the radar. Daxton didn’t shift into anything other than his wolf for three years. Mom worried that he’d damaged himself, but his grief just wouldn’t let him.”

“Fuck. I’m so sorry.”

“Every few years, we would move because complacency leads to danger. Then, when I was seventeen, Mom met Boyce.”

I heard the hatred when he said the name. This had to be the warlock that made Riley hate my kind.

“Boyce was charming. Rich. Successful.” He paused for a moment. Then sighed. “Mom was tired of hiding. Sick of moving all the time. She wanted me to have some stability, so it was easy for her to fall into his trap. To be fair, for the first year, he was good to her. He moved us into his big house when they got married. Dax was finishing up at college, but Boyce even impressed him when he came home for breaks. It was only when I graduated that cracks began to form.”

“Is that when he found out what you were?”

Riley's red-rimmed eyes met mine. "No. He knew almost straight away. He promised Mom he would protect us from those that would use us. Then he became the biggest user."

"Riley, you don't have to tell me any of this."

He stayed silent, and I thought he was taking me up on that out. "The thing is, if we want this to work, and for me to stay in Greyhaven, you need to understand what happened and why."

"It doesn't all have to be now," I argued, tightening my grip on him.

"Maybe not, but I'm running out of time. I get a month in a place, Gareth. I can't waste a day."

My heart sank. "I'll use every spare moment I have on breaking this curse," I vowed.

"You also have a life here. A job. You can't ruin that, just in case—"

"Don't say what you were about to," I cut his words off. "If you leave, I'm tracking you down." Pressing a kiss to his head, I pulled him even closer.

"Fuck! We're not bonded. We hardly know each other, Gareth. You can't say that shit already!"

"I can. Did you know I've been on my own for the last decade? I thought I was fine. My parents got me through college early and started on my teacher training, then they left. They never truly wanted to be parents, too engrossed with themselves for me."



“Are they fated?” Riley’s question came out muffled against my chest. I loved the way he had wrapped himself around me.

“No, I think they felt like they had to love harder because of it. They were obsessed with each other. Are. They are traveling the world right now. Going to other havens and teaching all that they know, which is a lot, but it was a lonely time for me. I’ve gotten used to being on my own. This last week...”

“What is it?”

“I thought if I could just convince you to give me a chance, then I wouldn’t be alone anymore. Now you’re saying that you’ll leave me.”

“Gareth—“ He sounded so goddamn sad.

“No. We are fated. That means something to me—“

“And me. I tried fighting it.”

“I mean it, Riley. Even if it takes years, I will follow you and make things right. Hell, I’ll track down Boyce,” I spat his name. “And I’ll end him.”

Riley laughed. The sound was so genuine and pure. It made me smile. “I mean it. I know dragons. They’ll help.” Now I was teasing, but honestly, I was sure Tatsuya would want to help me.

“It might be too late for Mom, but if it would give her some peace...”

“Okay, it’s getting late. Let’s sleep and we can plan in the morning. Just know that we have a plan. If the curse isn’t broken, I’ll track you down and we’ll head to Boyce. Let’s see which of us is the more powerful warlock.”



# Chapter Thirteen

## Gareth

WHEN I WOKE, I was sure that I was still dreaming. I pinched my arm just to assure myself that this was real. Nope, real. Riley was still cuddled up next to me, sleeping soundly, tiny snores escaping.

So much had changed since our chance meeting at the grocery store. I was going to enjoy this for as long as possible. Riley was dealing with some real trauma. I didn't know even half of what he'd been through, so I was sure there were going to be blips in our future. He just had to know that I was committed to making this work. No matter what.

A fated mate was a gift that I wasn't going to take for granted.

Finally, he stirred and opened one bleary eye. "Morning," he croaked, his voice sleep roughened. It made a shiver work through my body. I longed for hundreds, no, thousands of mornings just like this. "What time is it?"

My phone was on the nightstand. As I reached for it, it vibrated with an incoming call. I looked at Riley, who nodded at me to answer. “Hello?”

“Gar? Where are you? You’re supposed to be helping set up the parade!” Tatsuya sounded worried, not mad.

“Fuck. What time is it?” I struggled into a seated position. Riley snuggled up beside me and listened in.

“A little after nine. We were supposed to meet at eight for breakfast and you never showed.” Now Tatsuya sounded annoyed. “It’s not like you. Are you sick?”

“He was with me, Tatsuya. Sorry about that. We’ll be there soon.” In my shock, Riley took the phone from me and ended the call.

“What?” I scrambled to get out of bed and follow Riley as he made his way to the bathroom and started the water for a shower. “We? Are you coming with me?”

Riley got under the spray, pulled the curtain back, and beckoned for me. “Of course I am. I’ve still got a lot to tell you and we aren’t going to waste a day apart, are we?”

With a grin, I joined him in the shower.



Greyhaven was already busy with people wandering about, others dashing from place to place, their arms laden with items for the parade and fair. The air was crisp with the threat of

snow, dark clouds gathering, ready to dump on us. Snow would be useful in cutting down the magic needed for parts of the parade, but I prayed it would hold off until later on. We still had an hour before the festivities began. The parade itself wasn't until late afternoon, taking advantage of the short daylight hours.

“Woah!” Riley’s eyes were lit with happiness as he scanned the busy street and all the decorations helpers were hanging all over.

“Right?”

“I’ve never been to a parade. When we were hiding, we didn’t want to do anything to stand out, and when Boyce came along, he was too busy showing Mom off in other ways.”

“Other ways?” Nothing about that sounded good.

“Like I said, he was good at first. Treated Mom to expensive dinners, took her on elaborate dates. He dropped a lot of money on me, too. Buying me all sorts of shit and even letting me drive his sports car. We didn’t know he was keeping track of everything that we owed him.”

“Riley—“

“It’s easier to talk about it here, somewhere so far and different from anything I had while in his clutches. This... all of this is so pure and wholesome. The opposite of what we had.” Riley tugged on my gloved hand, pulling me closer to him.

“So, as I was saying last night. Boyce impressed my mom and soon we moved into his big house. It all started inconspicuously. Boyce knew what we were straight away, so we didn’t have to hide. I could shift freely, and I did. We later learned he’d been tracking us for a while. He waited for us to let our guard down, thinking that we were safe before he approached Mom. Boyce never hid what he was, either. It started with requests for me to shift into things so he could have a feather for a spell, or shit like that. He tested my range. He got bored with Dax pretty quickly until he figured out how strong Dax is.

“Mom changed. It was just little things. Always tired. Her shifts would take longer. Then I noticed the bruises.”

“Fuck!” I couldn’t hold it back.

Riley gave a humorless laugh. “That wasn’t the worst of it. I noticed this weird scent around her a couple of weeks later. Then the fang marks appeared. They weren’t even hiding it. Fuckers were always taking a little too much, so her shifter healing didn’t kick in, or if she’d pissed off Boyce by not being accommodating, he repressed her healing with magic.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. I heard him once. He offered me to them instead of her, but she refused. She bore it so I wouldn’t be given to his vampire friends. Instead, he had me breaking into places. He said I needed to pay my way. Pay for my upkeep, for all the things that he’d given to me. Again, he had asked a favor to start with. Said they had cheated him out of something, or a

rival had stolen it. So I stole things for him. The other reason why metamorphs hide. We can shift into pretty much anything. Mice can get around security, bats can fly around sensors. Metamorphs are almost always exploited in some way.”

“I... uh... fuck... Riley, that’s just... I don’t even know what to say.”

“Just answer me this. Do you still want to be with me, knowing that I’ve had to lie, cheat and steal to protect myself and my family? Even if sometimes I enjoyed it?”

“Of course! I think it’s understandable that you’d learn to like it. Probably kept you sane, made you feel powerful when you were powerless at home.”

He stopped our progression just outside the diner where Tatsuya was waiting for us and brushed his lips over mine. “Thank you.”

We shared a smile. Despite the cold, I felt all warm inside. I led him into the diner and over to my friend. Tatsuya’s eyes flashed with his dragon as we approached, our hands still entwined.

“I’d heard rumors that you two were talking, but not this. Are congratulations in order?” Tatsuya’s voice was carefully neutral, but I saw the tension in how he held himself and around his mouth.

“Sorry for being so late,” I apologized and pulled Riley down to sit next to me. I noticed Tatsuya’s nostrils flare, and he frowned.



“Yeah, sorry, that’s on me.” Riley looked wary, but sat close. We both shed our outer gear as Tatsuya watched us.

“It’s fine. I’m glad that you could work it out.” I could sense the lie. Why was Tatsuya acting like this?

“Dragon, is there going to be a problem?” Riley cut to the chase.

My mate and my best friend sat staring at each other, neither wanting to blink and back down. “Suya, come on,” I pleaded.

“No, Gar. He smells off.”

Riley sagged back in the booth. “Yeah, I do. All metamorphs do.”

Shit. Riley outed himself without hesitation. Tatsuya straightened. “Seriously? You’re a fucking metamorph?”

Riley tilted his head in an animalistic gesture, sort of like the German Shepherd he’d shifted into the night before. “I can’t get a read on you. Is that good or bad?” I wanted to know the same thing, so I was grateful that Riley asked.

“All I’m saying is I’ve met more unicorns. No wonder you’re so cagey. Does Hestia know? What am I saying? Of course she does. Why didn’t she say anything?”

Riley scoffed. “You know why. I’m taking a huge risk by telling you. Thing is, I want to make Greyhaven my home if I can.” Riley took my hand, threading our fingers together. “We’ve a lot to work out, but I’m hopeful for the first time in a long time. It also means I have to trust people.” He stared

straight at my best friend. “You’ve got dragon magic. What does your inner dragon say about my curse?”

Tatsuya leaned forward and let a shift come over himself. His face elongated into a snout, his eyes turning yellow and reptilian. Riley shuddered. I felt his fear spike as the dragon blew dragon’s breath over him and then tasted the air with a forked tongue.

There was a long silence as Tatsuya, still half in dragon form, processed what he’d got from Riley. Finally, he spoke. “Only a warlock can break that curse.”



# Chapter Fourteen

## Riley

DEFEAT, HEAVY AND THICK, weighed me down as I ate breakfast quietly as Tatsuya kept up a flow of conversation with Gareth over what was needed for the parade.

I guess I had always known that only a warlock could end a warlock's curse. It was only logical, really. I hated it. Hated Boyce more than ever. I felt trapped and alone, even with Gareth by my side.

If Gareth couldn't break the curse, what was I going to do? There was no way I'd allow him to go up against Boyce. The older warlock had power, connections, experience. Gareth was no match for him. No, we had to find another way, more warlocks that were sympathetic to my cause. Maybe we could check out other havens together if there were no others here that could help.

For the rest of the day, I followed Gareth around as he helped out all over the place, using his magic and knowledge to make the parade a success for the people of Greyhaven. I

did what I could to make things easier. Usually, that was just doing the heavy lifting. Shifter strength came in handy.

Just being with Gareth was enough to make me happy, as strange as that was considering our start. We could afford to give one day to spending time with friends and getting to know each other better.

All day he told me stories about the town, his parents, and friends. There was a lot to learn about Gareth Bowen, not just his middle name; Rhys, or that his family originally came from Wales. I already knew that he taught Magic Studies at the college, that Tatsuya was his closest friend and he was an only child.

No, it was learning about him as I watched him with the people of Greyhaven. He put everyone else's needs before his own. He never had a bad word to say about anyone, even when his patience was wearing thin after explaining things for the third time. I found out, first hand, that he couldn't say no to anyone, and had to put that boundary in place for him, many times, or he would have worn himself out trying to keep everyone happy.

Being the bad guy was sort of funny. While I wanted the residents to like me, what was more important to me was Gareth and his health. He was all too happy to push his magic for anyone. It didn't matter if they could do it another way that would take longer, he would just fix things in a flourish of magic, exhausting himself.

None of the people I said no to treated me badly for it. Some of them seemed to respect me for it, in fact. Gareth seemed to appreciate it. He leaned into me more and more as the day went on.

We stood together under the stars, a light sprinkling of snow falling on us as the town celebrated the many winter festivals, giving space to people of every faith.



“You don’t have to do this now,” I told Gareth as we settled onto the sofa in the guest cabin. Going to Gareth’s house was just... it was a step I wasn’t ready for yet. Though if the heat kept playing up, I could be left with no choice. Freeze or cuddle up in my mate’s house? Hard one.

“I’m just going to pluck at the strands of the curse and see how far it is embedded.” Gareth was studying me closely. “I need you to tell me the details of the curse and why it was placed upon you.”

I winced. This was not going to be a pleasant conversation. “Right, so we got to where Mom was feeding vampires.” I tried to tell this as if the story was about someone else and not about my life. Getting into my feelings would stop me from telling Gareth what he needed to know.

“Yeah. If this is going to be too hard—“

“No. We need to get this out there, so you know why I am the way I am. When I realized that he was using my mom that

way, I stopped doing jobs for him. He told me if I wanted to keep my mom away from the vamps, I needed to do bigger scores. Gone was the pretense that this was revenge, or getting his shit back. I was to steal things he wanted from some pretty shady people, not all of them supernatural, and then he wouldn't whore my mom out.

“I'll spare you the details, but it went on for years. If I messed up, he gave Mom to a vampire for the night. Then I found out that she had a vamp regular that was hooked on her blood. Boyce was trading her blood for compulsion and spell ingredients I just couldn't get for him.”

Clenching my fists, I pulled back from the memories assaulting me. “When I was twenty three, I made the plan to escape. I'd had enough. I got Dax to come home. We tried to make sure we didn't leave Mom alone for long. Then Boyce realized he could use us both. Turns out his greed helped us. For every job we did together, we took a portion for ourselves. We hid the money away and booked tickets. Dax had grown up on the run, so he prepared as much as he could to get us out.

It all went wrong. Or maybe Boyce had begun to suspect us. Dax went on ahead and he got free for a while, anyway. When we were taken back to Boyce, I thought he was going to kill me. Maybe it would have been better if he had. That was when he cursed me. He was yelling about how his home, under his roof, was the only place that I could ever call my home. That I'd be back to beg for his forgiveness.”

“What does that mean?” A frown marred Gareth’s face. I stroked his cheek, loving the feel of his short beard against my fingers.

“Whenever I stay a place more than two nights, that’s when the clock starts counting down. I get until the full moon in that place before I’m ripped out of there.”

“How?”

“I dunno what magic it is. It feels like my body is being torn apart and I get tossed out somewhere completely different. Sometimes it’s only thirty miles, another time it could be a thousand. It’s always towards Boyce, though.”

“Shit. That’s powerful magic.”

“Yeah. He’s unhinged. I didn’t understand a lot of what he was saying since I was out of it after the beating his cronies gave me. I stayed in that house because I didn’t think I could leave. It took me so long to figure the curse out. I thought I couldn’t tell anyone about it until recently.”

Gareth pulled me into his arms and kissed the top of my head. “You’re not alone. Never again.”

“It was easier when Dax came back for me. We couldn’t get Mom out. Dax traded his freedom from the curse for getting me out of the house. I think Boyce was confident that we would crack before now and come running back to him.”

“But you haven’t.”

“No. Not that it’s been easy. In my darkest days, I thought about going. He still uses Mom, but Dax destroyed the



vampire that was feeding on her. She's safe from that now. Boyce keeps her locked away, knowing that it is more of a punishment than the feeding was."

"Why don't you and Daxton stick together?"

I thought about my older brother, how much I loved him, and how guilty I felt about dragging him back to save me. "We tried it for a while, but I was broken for a long time. Neither of us was in a good place, and really, Dax needed to be a lone wolf. He started spending most of his time in fur rather than speaking to me."

Gareth squeezed me tighter. "I'm sorry."

"Nah, it's okay. We're better now. We both just had stuff to work out, and that was better to do alone."

"So what happens when we break the curse on you?"

"We break it on Daxton, get some allies and then go kill Boyce," I said matter-of-factly.

His grin was feral, showing me another side to my sweet mate. "I like that plan."



# Chapter Fifteen

## Gareth

RILEY WAS GETTING IN his head. Dredging up the memories of his past would do that, though. I needed him here and present with me, so that he could have a little piece of happiness in all that had been done to him. He needed to know that good times were ahead of us, once we got rid of the blight that was his stepfather.

“You know that it wasn’t just stealing. Boyce... he controlled me. He used me like a puppet and then tortured me if I dared to speak back.”

I turned Riley’s face towards mine. The shadows in his eyes spoke of how deep this hurt ran. My mate had been battered and bruised from another’s magic. He may never fully heal from it but at least he knew he was safe from me. I’d only ever use my magic to shield him. I pressed a feather-light kiss to his lips. “I know. That’s enough for today, sweetheart. You don’t need to tell me everything all at once. I’ll always listen, but this won’t do you any good.”

He sighed and rested his forehead against mine. “You’re right. It’s just so hard to let it go.”

Cupping his jaw, I kissed him again, deeper this time, sucking his tongue into my mouth, nibbling on his lip. I broke away to ask, “ready for bed?”

In a flash, he shifted and a mouse scurried down the sofa to the floor from the heaped pile of his clothing. He shifted back as he got to his bedroom door, giving me a great view of his bare ass. “Your turn to top. Give me some new memories!” His lascivious grin had me charging to follow him.

Laid out on the bed, still smirking, Riley looked like all my dreams come true. His skin still held the glow of a summer tan. Naked, I could see where he’d worn shorts, the paler skin still stark. With his olive toned skin, he had a fine layer of dark body hair all over. He was lean with long limbs and those wide shoulders.

My clothes were thrown into a distant corner of the room with my haste to be naked with him. I couldn’t believe after our rocky start that he was willing to be with me like this, so I didn’t want to take any opportunity for granted.

I crawled over the bed and held myself over him, my arms shaking a little. What? So I wasn’t athletic, I was an academic. I didn’t have shifter strength either.

Riley laughed and tapped at my arms. “Let me up.” I moved away and slumped onto the other pillow. He straddled me, leaned down and kissed me. “Much better.”

We made out for a while. I enjoyed the feeling of Riley surrounding me. My arousal was simmering underneath my skin, just one touch would set me aflame.

Neither of us had the patience to drag it out. The touches started exploratory, then I concentrated on opening him up for me. He groaned so beautifully, tossing his head back when he came down on my cock.

Riley rocked, rose and fell, working us slowly higher and higher. My magic reached for him, unable to touch, just surrounding us in a cocoon.

Unable to keep my hands in one place, I let them wander as I just let myself feel him. The solid heat around me, muscles clenching. I was ruined for all others.

“Touch my cock, please,” he begged in a whisper. “So close!”

Wrapping a hand around this thick cock, I stroked in time with his movements which became jerky and rough. Sweat ran down his chest, I leaned forward to lick at it and laid a nip at his collarbone.

With a cry, Riley came, squeezing so tightly around me I yelled in surprise. He slumped against me for a moment, my release just out of reach.

He eased off me and reached for my dick. His movements were sure as he worked me. He kissed my chest and licked my nipple. He sucked then bit as he twisted his fingers over the

head of my cock. I came in spurts over his hand and my stomach, vision blacking out.



Riley's cabin was ice cold again. I had to convince him to move in with me, or move somewhere that was better for him. It took a lot for regular shifters to get sick, and I assumed it would be the same for a metamorph like Riley.

I tried heating the room with some of my magic. With a thought I had heat traveling over my body. Riley was still sleeping but he was looking a little blue. Goosebumps littered his skin. I tried sending the heat washing over him, but nothing happened. I expected him to react in some way. Relax or for the chill to fade from his body. Nothing. I tried warming my hands, concentrating the magic on them and then attempted to touch his shoulder. There was a barrier.

My magic, good or bad, couldn't touch him!

Shaking off the magic, I got out of bed, making sure that Riley was covered first. I went to the boiler and got it going before heating some water to make tea. When it was ready I returned to the bedroom and roused Riley with a gentle kiss. He opened bleary eyes and smiled as they landed on me.

"Morning," he mumbled before stretching.

"Morning." The worry in my tone must have alerted him that something was wrong. He straightened, pulling the comforter higher.

He accepted the mug with a small, “thanks,” and lifted an eyebrow in question.

“I can’t use magic on you,” I said plainly.

He shrugged and took a sip of his tea. “Yeah, so? That’s why I’m here. You’re safe.”

While I knew what he meant, it still rankled. I wasn’t a danger to Riley because I wasn’t an abusive jerk. I didn’t use my magic for my own gain on anyone. “No, Riley. Not just to harm. I couldn’t warn you up earlier. I don’t know if I can do any magic on you at all.”

Now he was alert. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. What if I can’t touch the curse?”

Silence stretched between us while we thought about this. “Try something else. Just try sending some magic in me to check the curse.” Riley looked like he was stealing himself for something horrendous, not just a scan. I suppose, though, to him, it was just as scary to let me do that to him.

He looked so vulnerable that I almost didn’t try it. Yet, dragging this out, the not knowing, was going to suck, and not in the good way. “Okay, just give me your hand. I need a point of contact.”

With his hand in mine I sent the magic into him. I could sense the curse. A dark, oily, sludge that had worked its way all through him. “I can see it.”

“Try, I dunno, breaking it. Whatever you normally do with curses.”

I knew some of it from theory and had only ever broken simple curses that had been for training. First I started trying to unbind it. “No, it’s not moving,” I whispered, like the news would be easier to bear if it was delivered quietly.

Riley’s voice broke. “Try something else. Please, Gar.”

Again, I sent the magic in searching and unwinding. As soon as it looked like I could touch it, the curse would slip away from me.

“I can’t, Riley.” My magic can’t touch you, or the curse.”





# Chapter Sixteen

## Gareth

“THERE ARE OTHER WARLOCKS in town, aren’t there?” I could see Riley struggling to put a brave face on it. His pain made me want to crawl into a ball and sob.

I took the mug away from him and pulled him into my arms, holding him tightly as he held in his tears. “Somehow, I’ll fix this. You’ll stay here with me until we can track down Dax, or he can come here. We can do this.” I didn’t know who I was trying to convince. I think we had both been banking on me breaking the curse so we could get on with our lives. So Riley could recover.

“What do we do now?” Riley asked against my neck.

“Well, we move you out of here because you’re going to freeze to death otherwise. More snow is on the way and it’s only going to get colder.”

Riley pulled away. “I, uh...”

“I’m not asking you to move in with me.” I was.

“You aren’t?” He did that head tilt thing that I thought was really cute.

“Well, I wouldn’t mind, but if you aren’t ready, that’s fine. We can ask if there is anywhere else you can stay. Even another cabin while they get this one fixed up.”

He played with my hand, brushing his fingers over mine. He looked slightly relieved, which shouldn’t have hurt as much as it did. We had jumped into the physical side of our mating without really discussing anything. Riley was right to take some space, even with how little time we had. I’d just have to make sure I had some way of finding him if we didn’t break it in time.

“Can we try something later?” I asked.

“What?”

“I’d like to see if I can trace you using my magic. I wonder if that would work.”

His eyes met mine, but he still smoothed his fingers over mine. It was relaxing, and I loved that he was maintaining touch with me, even as it felt like he was pulling away. “I’d like that. Though, if we are bonded by the time I have to leave, then that will help, too, right?”

“You’d want that?” I could hear my shock.

Riley gave a wry grin. “Let’s just say I’m open to it.”



I drove Riley to city hall to see if there was anywhere else he could stay. If worse came to worst, he had his trailer and could hook it up to the amenities of the cabin. It had a generator for heat. Though it was uncomfortable for me to think of Riley sleeping in his trailer when he could be in my bed, I respected his need for space too much to push the issue.

Our bond would grow until we went through the ceremony to cement it, leaving it unbreakable. I just had to give it time. Something we were in short supply of. Faith in the fates would have to get us through this.

“Hi Gareth, Riley.” Debra was in her usual position behind the large desk near the mayor’s office. “What can I do for you? Madam Mayor is busy right now, unfortunately. Budget discussions with the Chief of Police.” She smiled and waited.

“Um, my cabin... I’m so grateful, but—“ Riley rubbed the back of his neck nervously.

“But?” Debra perked up. “Is there something that needs fixing? Does it need cleaning?”

“Well—“

Debra interrupted again. “I can fix a lot of things, but I might need to get Walt to look if it’s anything more technical than a blocked sink!” She gave a tittering laugh.

“No, it’s the heat. It keeps cutting out, and it’s just getting so cold—“ Riley explained.

“Say no more. Hmmm.” She looked down at her computer. “Ah, that’s going to be a problem. Okay, let’s get you the keys

to another one and I'll get someone to look at it. We just won't put anyone in there until we get it sorted. It's been on the sheet for maintenance for a while."

"Thank you," Riley said, accepting another set of keys and handing the other set over. "I thought I was going to have to sleep in my trailer there."

Debra gave me a significant look. "We aren't there yet," I said quietly.

Riley blushed, but took my hand and led me out of the building.

In the car, we listened to the faint sounds of Christmas music as I drove him to his new cabin. We had packed up his stuff from the first one, hopeful that we'd have some place to put it by the end of the day.

"Are you okay with this?" Riley asked, breaking the silence.

"Of course!" It came out strained.

"Gar—"

"No, I get it, Riley. Just a few days ago, you couldn't be around me. I don't want to push."

"And I don't want you to think that I'm not in this. Thing is, I'm shit with people. All I've had for the last decade is month-long relationships at best. These people were barely seeing one side of me. What you're asking for, it's just... I don't want you to hate me when you realize I have nothing to offer someone like you."

“Someone like me?”

“You have a life here. A stable, respectable career. All I’ve had is cash jobs here and there. Bar work, serving, construction. I didn’t finish high school, Gareth.”

“That doesn’t matter to me. It doesn’t mean anything. You’ve been all over, experienced so much. You know things I could never have learned.”

“Here you have friends, history. I’m just so scared that if you follow me out of here, you’ll regret it. You’ll be tied to me and miserable. A fated mate is no guarantee of happiness.”

“No, but it’s a good place to start.”

“I—“

“I won’t regret you. As soon as this curse is broken, we can come back here if you want and you can find out what you want to do with your life with me by your side, supporting you all the way.”

Riley rested his head back against the headrest and sighed. I pulled over in front of his new cabin and just stared at the long line of his throat, his eyelashes resting against his cheeks. He was so beautiful, and also so broken. Riley needed more time than we had to come to terms with what we had.

“Even if you leave me behind, I’ll follow. I know I can’t undo the spell now, but I’ll find a way, Riley. One day we’ll look at our start and smile.” I didn’t know what made me say the words. Some sense, maybe, that Riley was ready to give up.

He turned his head and looked at me with those intense brown eyes so filled with pain. “I know, though I wish you wouldn’t. Just... give me a couple of days, okay?”

“Riley? What’s happening? Are you going to run?” Fear closed over my throat. I wanted to beg him to not give up. To promise that I would find another way to free him.

With a shake of his head, he clicked the release for his seatbelt and gave another trembling sigh. “No. I won’t run. I just need some space to get things right in my head.”

The only sound was the engine running as he waited for my response. “Three days. That’s all I can do.” Any more than that would be sure to create a gulf between us. “Then we’ll go on a date or something. Dinner?”

His eyes met mine, a faint trace of hope in his expression. He wanted me to fight for him. “Yes, a date. Dinner sounds good. At your place?”

“Okay. I’ll see you in three days.” Riley started to get out of the car. “Riley?” He paused. “If you need me before then, you know where to find me. Whatever you need, I’ll be there.”





# Chapter Seventeen

## Riley

**Riley: Hey Dax. Where are you? I've found my mate.**

I DIDN'T THINK IT was the right way to discuss everything, so I kept it brief just giving the most important details and sent the message, then waited for Daxton to either call or text me back. Hell, a decent length email would be good.

We would go so long without checking in with each other. There had been a time, just after we parted ways, that it was a couple of months before we spoke. Things had been so tense between us, our relationship so fraught, that I thought our sibling bond was irreparable. Then, one day, Daxton had called about something random, I still can't remember the conversation. It was as if our last fight hadn't happened.

As I waited for my brother's response, my thoughts kept going back to how crushed Gareth had looked when I asked

for some space. I knew that I wasn't handling things well, but I also wasn't used to having someone know my entire history.

It was just as well he had set a boundary. If given the chance I would have hidden away from him and this whole situation. It was funny that he knew me so well after a couple of days together.

So what if Gareth couldn't undo the curse on me? He was my mate, he was more than his magic to me. We hadn't spent nearly enough time together, but my inner animal, that mysterious amorphous creature, trusted him. Legend had it that when a metamorph bonded with their fated mate, the creature took its true form for the first time. I wondered what it would look like.

The phone rang and I stared at it for a minute, long enough that the call went to voicemail before ringing again. I answered before it hit it again. "Riley? Seriously? Your mate? Tell me everything! Are you okay?"

I launched into my story. Daxton had known that I was sick of living like a nomad, hell, he was too. We had spent many hours commiserating over the pitfalls of our traveling, so he knew about my search for this haven and all the months I'd passed nearby trying to find a way in. I'd been trying to time it just right too, so that I'd have a full month. There was nothing like accidentally staying somewhere and making it a temporary home for less than a week. I'd gotten it down to a fine art.

All through my explanation Daxton added comments like “fucking dragons!” and “a goddess?” then “seriously? You shifted and ran?”

“Not one of my finer moments, but I panicked! You know some of the shit that Boyce did. He did some of it to you.”

“That’s fair. Sorry. I’m not judging. I’m not even sure how I’d react if I was put in front of another warlock and knew they were my fated mate. Honestly? I’d probably wolf out and hide in the woods for days.”

We both laughed and it lightened the mood. “Dax? I want you to come here. He might not be able to break the curse on me, but he might be able to do it for you.”

“I—“ There was a long pause. I thought that maybe the call had dropped. Signal wasn’t the best here. The Wi-Fi had to be magically boosted to be a somewhat decent speed. “Do you trust him? Is he...? Are you sure he won’t turn on me to get to you?”

My heart landed somewhere in my stomach. Then I thought about the week I’d been left alone. Gareth had told me he had been made to promise to wait for me to approach him. Our meeting was accidental. I had invited him to dinner. There was also the parade and every kind word he had said to everyone. I thought of Tatsuya, of how suspicious he had been of me. No, Gareth was genuine.

“I promise that’s the last thing he would do. He wants us to be free.”

“Do you think the wards will let me in?” It shocked me that he was actually considering coming to Greyhaven. I’d been prepared to persuade him a bit more. Maybe I’d sold it with my stories of the place.

“As long as you don’t want to harm anyone inside, then you should be fine. I wonder if you’ll get the dragon welcome wagon, or if Longwei is finished with his hours?”

“Hours?”

I answered with a long explanation over what had happened last time Longwei had been flying. I realized then that I hadn’t spoken to the dragon in a few days, and that perhaps I should catch him up with things. I’d seen him from a distance at the parade, but he had been busy with his duties. I’d seen his surprise when he’d caught me standing next to Gareth. Yeah, I really owed him a beer, or five.

“When do you think you can get here?” I asked my brother.

“Well, I’m near Florida and you’re in Montana, so it’ll take me a while to drive there.” Daxton wouldn’t give up his van to fly. There was nowhere he could stash it. “I’ve got a job here...” I let him think it through. “Not for another week or so.”

“The next full moon is just after Christmas so...” I trailed off. I was grateful that he was coming at all.

“Yeah, I know. I’ll be there before then. The solstice even.”



The bar was bustling with activity when I opened the door, stepping from the bitter cold into a sweltering room. It wasn't a big place. Probably only held about fifty people, leaving room for a tiny dance floor.

Longwei was waiting for me in a booth, a plate of nachos and two beers sitting in front of him. I shook off the snow in the doorway and headed over to join him. "Hey," I called as I got close.

His eyes, warm brown with hints of silver and gold, lit up when he caught sight of me. "Hey! I've been hoping you'd reach out. I want to hear how things are with Gareth. The town is buzzing about you two."

The heat rose in my cheeks. "I'm sure we aren't that interesting," I scoffed.

Longwei laughed, drawing eyes from the patrons at the bar. "I think you underestimate the lack of gossip in this town. And the interest in fated mates. We have so few true pairings here. Everyone wants to know if you've bonded, when you will bond if you haven't. Everything."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. They've been talking today about how quiet Gareth was when he was teaching his classes and helping out at the greenhouses. He didn't look upset so they weren't too worried but—"

"But they'll get worried if they don't see us together soon?" Longwei nodded. "Fuck!" I jumped into a long rant about

small towns then told my... friend? about what had been happening with Gareth. Of course, this meant I had to tell him more about the curse and my fears. It was so fucking uncomfortable. I'd never really been taught to express my feelings as anything but happiness, and that was always the restrained kind, or anger. So spilling my deepest fears and regrets? Out of my comfort zone.

I pushed through. Greyhaven was where I wanted to settle, small town gossip aside. Eventually me and Gareth would be old news. Hopefully we'd be one of those golden couples that were the shining example of what fated mates were. It was stupid to wish for peace, but the sanctuary that Greyhaven represented offered me that hope that one day I could live peacefully as a metamorph and be accepted.

"I'm so fucking sorry that you had to live like that, Riley. Shit, metamorphs are rarer than unicorns. You know you're safe here? Right?" Longwei sat forward in the booth, looking so genuine and sympathetic that it had tears welling up. I swallowed the lump in my throat.

"Yeah. I thought Tatsuya might have said something before."

"Suya knows? Fucker didn't say!" His indignant expression made me burst out laughing. "Fuck off!"

I laughed harder. "Sorry!" When I calmed down I turned to the reason for meeting Longwei, aside from catching him up on the last few days and getting to know him better. It felt like I had another ally here aside from Gareth and Oscar. I'd need

the witch for this too. “I need your help. I want to set something up for Gareth.”





# Chapter Eighteen

## Gareth

I WOKE ON WEDNESDAY hopeful that I would be seeing Riley for dinner. He had sent a couple of messages letting me know that he had spoken to his brother and that Daxton was coming to Greyhaven.

Meeting his brother would be strange, but I was happy that Daxton was coming to us, rather than waiting for us somewhere. Once we left Greyhaven, I wanted us to head straight to Boyce so we could end this once and for all.

In our time apart, I'd spoken to a few of the magic users in Greyhaven, hopeful that they would have the power needed to untie that curse to my mate. I would help Daxton myself. It would heal the wound that being unable to break it for Riley caused.

My alarm buzzed and I turned to switch it off. When I picked up my phone, I noticed that I had a message from the college telling me that my classes were covered for the day. It was the last week of the semester. Some of my classes had

done their exams the week before so really, this week didn't cover much. It was still strange that I'd been given the day off.

Besides that message, I had more from the greenhouses also saying they had everything in hand and to have a great day off.

An entire day off with nothing to do.

I'd promised myself that I would leave Riley alone until the evening. I wanted him to come to me. Loneliness bit at me, but I tried to ignore it as I got up and started my day.

The doorbell rang as I finished loading the dishwasher and putting laundry in the dryer. I'd spent a couple of hours pottering around my house and getting showered, though after all the cleaning, I'd want to shower again before picking Riley up for dinner.

A glance through the peephole had my heart hammering. Riley was outside. I threw open the door without thinking. "Is everything okay?" I asked, panicked suddenly at his appearance on my stoop.

His grin stretched across his face, picking up a dimple I'd never noticed before. Perhaps I hadn't seen him smile so widely before. "I'm here to take you on a date."

"A date? I thought we were having dinner later?" Why the fuck was I questioning my good fortune? Riley had come to me!

"We are. I just thought we would spend the day together first. I've got us a picnic and a spot set up. Even borrowed Longwei's car since mine isn't ready yet." His grin hadn't

slipped, the dimple still out in full force, but there was a tinge of worry in those warm brown eyes.

A whole day with Riley? “That sounds great. Let me get my coat.”

“Wear comfortable shoes. We’re going to be outside a lot,” Riley called from the doorway.

“Come in. I won’t be long.” He stepped into the foyer and I watched him take in the open plan living space. It was spacious with large skylights and a lot of floor to ceiling windows showcasing the backyard space. What walls I did have were lined with groaning bookshelves. There were even a couple of piles of books stacked on the hardwood floor.

Riley perched on the edge of one of the overstuffed sofas. I had a TV over the fireplace, but I was pretty sure I’d lost the remote somewhere. The thing mainly gathered dust unless Tatsuya was over. I hadn’t had him over since he paid for my pizza since he was so busy with all the winter events. He likely knew where the damn remote was.

I rushed to get some comfortable walking shoes and a thick, waterproof jacket. I vaguely wondered about a scarf and picked up my fleece-lined leather gloves. A spare pair went into my pocket, just in case Riley wasn’t prepared.

Seeing that I was ready, he led the way outside towards Longwei’s all-terrain vehicle. I let out a low whistle at the sight of it. “Wow. How did you get the keys to his baby?”

Riley flushed red and I felt a prickle of jealousy flow through me. “Get that idea out of your head,” Riley demanded as he opened the passenger side for me. I got in and took my seat quietly, chastised. Riley sighed when he took his seat behind the wheel and turned the engine over. “I told him about being a metamorph. He promised everything apart from his firstborn, though I think I could have had a dragon egg if I asked, just to see me shift.”

“Seriously?” I was a little taken aback. Though there was still a thread of envy. Riley hadn’t shifted for me since that first time when he was explaining it.

“Yeah, he’s fascinated by rare shifter types. I think he knows more about metamorphs than I do. Did you know he’s been collecting histories?” Riley pulled away from my house and to the outskirts of Greyhaven. He seemed to be taking particular care to drive alongside the inner barrier.

*Of course, if he leaves Greyhaven now, he won’t get back in,* I mused. Then Riley’s words registered and made me raise an eyebrow. “Wow! No. That’s great, though. Important.”

“Yeah, so I asked Longwei out for a beer so I could pick his brain about a surprise for you.”

“For me?”

“Yeah. I feel like asking for space hurt your feelings and maybe you think I’m not as invested in this as you are. Not true, FYI. Finding a fated mate is something I never thought would happen to me. Yet here we are.” Riley’s face reddened and he took a hand off the wheel to scrub at the back of his

neck. “This is me showing you that I’ve been thinking about you and I do want us to date while we figure out this curse.”

“I’ve been working on—“

“Not today, okay?”



It wasn’t long before we came out at the lake. Riley parked the car while I took in the sights. Over the years I’d been to this lake so many times, but somehow this felt new. Maybe it was because it was with Riley, or perhaps because of the way the jetty was decked out with lights, a heater, comfy throws, and even a picnic blanket. Riley and his helpers had constructed a tent of sorts to keep the wind out on three sides.

“Oscar used some magic to make it safe. Longwei did all the heavy lifting.” He took my hand and led me over to the nest of blankets. “You know, it’s weird.”

“What is?”

Riley sat and tugged on my hand until I dropped gracelessly down next to him. He smiled at my awkwardness. “Having friends here. I stopped trying after a while but I care about what they think about me. Oscar doesn’t really know you, but Longwei is a big fan. I think it helped having his perspective. It makes me happier knowing this is where we will settle. Dax is even thinking about staying and he hasn’t seen the place yet!” He leaned into me.

I soaked up the contact while I wrestled with what I wanted to say. Part of me didn't want to be too eager to keep him here. I needed to offer him his freedom, if not from me, but from Greyhaven. "I love Greyhaven, but—"

"No. I'm not taking you away from your home. We can see how it goes. For now, though, it is where I want to be." He closed his eyes, looking serene in the early afternoon light. The sky was clear, the weak sun casting its warmth onto the surface of the peaceful lake. I wrapped an arm around him, grateful for this beautiful moment.

"I'm glad about that. If that changes, you need to tell me. We can visit other sanctuaries."

"We should do that if we can't break my part of the curse. I think you'll manage it on Dax."

"Yeah. I hope so. It's just so... I dunno. I hate that the thing that makes you feel safe also makes it impossible for me to help you. It makes me feel powerless."

"I don't. It makes me feel safe around you. Safe enough to do this." Riley backed away as he stood. He dashed to the end of the jetty and shifted into a tall black horse. He tossed his head at me and pawed at the ground.

Standing slowly, I moved closer to him, until I was able to reach out a hand and touch his velvety neck. "You're just stunning in all your forms, aren't you?"

Riley kept craning his neck and looking behind him. It took me a minute to get what he wanted. "You want me to ride

you?” I raised an eyebrow and he snickered, a weird look from a horse. “Fine, as long as the other type of riding is on the menu for later. I might need to work up an appetite.” I winked at him. He whinnied and shook his head.

He was patient as I settled on his back, taking a firm grip of his mane to steady myself. Riley started at a slow walk before working up to a trot. I rose and fell in time with him, squeezing my thighs around him as he picked up his pace into a canter around the lake. It was exhilarating to share this experience with him. I’d been on horses before, hell, Tatsuya had taken me on a flight, but this was extra special. This was Riley opening up, showing me his other form, trusting me.

Together, we flew around the lake before Riley stopped at the end of the jetty again. I slid from his back and clumsily walked to his head. Resting my forehead against his, I took a deep breath and just let the feeling out. “If you carry on like this, Ry, I’m going to fall so in love with you. I feel like I’m almost there.”

Riley shifted and kissed me. “Same.” He backed away sharply and shifted, this time into a barn owl, and took to the skies. I watched him shift between different birds, a gull, a crow, eagle, then a tiny sparrow. He flew a loop then returned to my side. Back in his human form he kissed me swiftly before breaking out a basket of goodies.

A laugh broke free. My fated mate had feelings for me despite the odds. He was perfect.





# Chapter Nineteen

## Riley

GETTING THE CHANCE TO fly was wonderful, running in my horse form even better. Exhilarated, I slumped down into the nest of blankets alongside Gareth. He looked at me with such joy, passion, pride that it nearly stole my breath.

Needing to feel him under me again, I pressed my mouth to his. He opened to me, letting my tongue explore. Gareth tasted of the mulled wine that was kept heated with some of Oscar's magic. He had spelled this pergola to be resistant to the wind and for the heater not to run out of fuel.

I ran my fingers through Gareth's hair, tugging lightly on the strands and making him moan. I kissed along his jaw, nipping at his ear before working my way down Gareth's neck. His skin was scented with bergamot and lemongrass. He tasted delicious under my tongue.

Aware of our surroundings, I didn't strip him, though I desperately wanted to feel more of his skin against mine. It was far too cold, even with the heater and the blankets. I was grateful my clothes came with me when I shifted. I pressed

kisses on his chest and abdomen before reaching his straining bulge. The denim was constricting him in a way that must have been painful. Being the caring mate I was, I popped the button and slowly worked down his fly, keeping eye contact with him. He moaned with relief as I freed his cock from the fabric of his underwear.

Gareth gasped as I leaned over and blew on the tip of his cock before licking a stripe along the length. He grasped at my hair, holding me in place as I took him deeper, sucking him down. This was just to take the edge off before we went back to his house. I tongued the slit and worked the shaft before letting him into my throat. I swallowed around him, making him curse and gasp out my name.

I felt so powerful on my knees for him. Turned on to the point of discomfort, I reached into my pants and stroked myself as I worked Gareth's length. His grip on my hair tightened, holding me in place as he fucked my face. "Close," he panted. "Fuck! Your mouth." He pushed in deeper and held himself there. I could hardly breathe but I didn't care. He cupped my throat. "Swallow baby, I want to feel it from both sides." I did as he demanded, the heat in his eyes taking me to the edge. He pulled back letting me gasp in some air before thrusting in again. He used my throat roughly. Tears pricked my eyes, spit covered my chin, yet I loved it. "I'm going—" With a final thrust, he unloaded on my tongue.

"Hold it there." I loved this bossy side of Gareth. He grasped my chin and kissed me, sucking his cum into his mouth and pushing it back into mine. We swapped it back and forth as he

reached for my cock. He stroked me firmly then flicked a fingernail over my slit. The bite of pain sent me over the edge. I couldn't stop my cry and I spluttered and coughed as I came and tried to swallow at the same time.

“Easy,” Gareth soothed as he tried to clean me up and tucked us both away. He used magic on a cloth and then rinsed it with water from the lake. “I hope the kelpie liked the show,” he mused with a smirk. “Damn, that was hot.”

“It was. Kelpie?” The thought of someone getting to see Gareth like that made me furious. A burst of possessive anger burned away that languid afterglow that had made me sleepy. I wrapped Gareth up in my arms, hiding him mostly from sight.

“Yeah, we had a herd here but now there's just Dante. I heard he spends most of his time in his kelpie form in the water.” Gareth nuzzled close.

I changed our position and got us some food. Shifting and sex had certainly worked up an appetite. “Well, I hope he enjoyed it. No more free sex shows here. You're mine. Just mine.”



We packed up most of the picnic things an hour or so later as the magic began to fade. Rather than ask Gareth to use his energy to refill the spells as we got cold, I decided that was enough of the lake. I wanted to get my mate back to his house

so we could warm up in a shower, or a hot bath before we went out for dinner.

As much as the thought of keeping Gareth in bed appealed, I also wanted to show off what a gorgeous mate I had. Now that I had grown used to the idea of a warlock mate, I was proud that the fates had paired us together.

Gareth needed some convincing to leave the house. He tried to convince me that we should just order take out after he fucked me in the shower. It was only when I promised to return the favor after dinner that I got him to agree to keep our reservation.

When our main courses were delivered, a juicy steak for me, a salmon dish for Gareth, I asked the question that had been on my mind all day. “When Dax arrives, can I move in with you?”

Gareth shrugged. “Why wait until then? If it was up to me, you’d be living with me already.”

I hesitated answering, then decided that the only way we’d move forward was if we were always honest with each other. “I loved today, I’m just not ready.” He smiled, though I saw his sadness. Eager to make him smile, I added, “Maybe after a few more dates I’ll be more inclined.”

When he grinned, I felt lighter than air.

“I’ll have you convinced by the end of the week.”

“Okay. Bet.”

Sure enough, by the end of the week I was regretting not moving my stuff into his house sooner. I'd refused to go see other warlocks, wanting to concentrate on my relationship with Gareth rather than using him for his connections. He didn't quite see it that way, but all I had to do was suck his cock or offer my ass up for him to be diverted.

Over the week, I had been with him to his final class, sitting in the back row and trying not to distract him, then waiting as he turned in the grades and praised his students. I'd gotten on my knees for him under his desk until he decided he would rather be fucked over it instead. "I'm going to get hard everytime I see this desk from now on. Fuck, just the memory of you inside me gets me hot," he had complained on the drive back to my cabin.

Gareth had taken me to the greenhouses so he could check on the plant he had helped and check no one else needed him. I'd sensed that some of them had checked out my curse slyly by the way Gareth's face had fallen a few times. I'd also seen a few shake their heads.

We ate every meal together, cooking sometimes in his decent sized kitchen. "You know, if I'm going to move in, you're going to have to let me rearrange this place," I grumbled as I looked for a strainer for the noodles.

"We can do that," he said brightly. "I'll also need to make some closet space in the bedroom and a cabinet in the bathroom. I want this place to feel like home."

The words left a pang in my heart. Gareth was my home. That was a truth that I clung to, because until Boyce was ended, I couldn't have one.



“Don't be mad,” Gareth pleaded as he headed to the door.

I speared him with a look as I finished putting away my stuff and straightened from where I'd been kneeling in the bottom of the bedroom closet. “What did you do?”

“Okay, I have a cousin, she's also a warlock. Jacquie was at another sanctuary but is visiting her parents for Christmas. I asked if she would take a look.” Gareth looked sheepish.

“Sorry!”

“It's okay. I know you mean well.” I got up and followed him into the main space to the door. “Do you think she can manage it?”

Gareth opened the door to a shorter, curvy woman with brown hair and green eyes. “I can give it a damn good try,” she said breezily as she stepped into the house removing her scarf, gloves and coat. “The fates blessed you,” she said to Gareth. “And they did a number on you. Jesus wept, that thing is nasty.”

“Hey!” Gareth leaped to my defense.

“I meant the curse, you idiot.”

“Oh.” He deflated. I grinned at him. “I forgot about your extra sight.” To me he explained, “Jacquie is really good at diagnostic magic. She can see into the heart of things without touch.”

“Taxing but I hate touching random people, so it’s a blessing,” the woman in question confirmed. “Now this curse is a doozy.”

“Can you do it?” I asked, sitting next to her on the sofa.

“Only one way to tell.” Jacquie took my hand.

“Wait!” Gareth cried. “Don’t you want to use any herbs, have a cup of tea or anything first?”

Jacquie fixed him with a stern look. “I’ve been priming my magic for the last couple of days. I’ve got my crystals and I fucking hate tea. You know this. Get your head out of your ass Gareth and get ready to boost me if I need it.”

With some muttering, Gareth sat on her other side. Boosting must require physical contact. Jacquie took up my hand in her smaller one. With a bracing smile she sent her magic out.

The feeling was so immediately intrusive that I flinched and tried to pull away. I guess that was part of why she started straight away. Not giving me time to second guess or make excuses.

Gareth was suddenly in front of me holding my free hand. “I’m here, cariad.” I adored the Welsh endearment. He didn’t use many Welsh phrases, having lost the habit with his parents away exploring the world. I wanted him to stay in touch with

his roots so I encouraged it. I knew focusing on it was just my brain's way of coping with the stress that Jacquie's magic was causing me.

Long moments passed as magic was funneled into me. I braced for pain, but none came, just a prickling discomfort.

"Boost me," Jacquie broke the silence. My eyes snapped to hers. I could see the strain, sweat beading her brow. She wiped it away with a frustrated hand before clasping Gareth's offered one. "A little less," she panted. Gareth leaned away from her. "Okay, stop. Fuck!"

"Jacquie?" Gareth's concern worried me.

"Fucking stings. Your magic is too powerful to boost me. It's like an ocean when I need a lake."

"I—I can't give you less."

She hung her head, defeated, and pulled her hand away. "I know. I'm so sorry. Both of you, I'm sorry I can't fix this for you."

Gareth pulled me into his arms. We stayed wrapped around each other on the floor while Gareth thanked his cousin and she made her farewells.

"I'm sorry, Riley. I wanted this to work."

"Me too." I tucked my head into his shoulder and let the tears flow.

"It doesn't matter. As soon as I find you after the curse enacts, we are going after Boyce. You, me, Daxton, whoever



else. Then we're going to kill the bastard."

As much as I appreciated my mate getting a little bloodthirsty on my behalf, there was no way that I would let him blacken his soul with murder. I'd already damaged mine, likely beyond repair, so with Gareth by my side, his strength and love with me, I would be the one to end Boyce for good.



# Chapter Twenty

## Gareth

MY HEART BROKE THAT Jacquie had been unable to break the curse of Riley. I'd spoken with my cousin later, once Riley had fallen asleep, and asked if she would be willing to try again with a witch or druid.

"I don't think our magic would be compatible, but we can try." It felt so hopeless. I just wanted to try everything so we could go after Boyce without him being able to manipulate Riley.

Sure enough, the next day we tried with Oscar. He had grown close to Riley and wanted to help, but his magic wasn't strong enough to be what Jacquie needed as a boost.

"There's someone else," Jacquie suggested carefully over lunch.

Riley had cooked for us all moving around the kitchen like he had always lived here. Longwei had gotten off the night shift and checked in with him before heading home for some sleep. With the return of a lot of families for Yule and

Christmas, the town was busier than usual. With the constant snow storms and high winds, the police had been called out more often.

Having friends and potentially his brother here was a great step towards settling somewhere. I wasn't going to be one of those mates that wanted their partner's attention all day every day. Riley's happiness was important to me. That meant having a support system outside of our relationship.

It took me a minute to register who Jacquie was talking about. I made a pointed glance towards Riley. "No, I'm sure he's too busy," I said.

"Who is?" Oscar asked, curious. He had caught the look I'd given my cousin and wasn't letting that go.

"Did you know the mayor has a son?" Jacquie asked as she leaned towards Oscar to gossip conspiratorially.

"Hestia? Really?" Oscar moved closer to her. Riley stopped wiping down the countertops to listen in.

"Yeah, Eason is a demi-god. Half druid. If anyone could break the curse aside from Gareth, it would be him."

"Why didn't you mention him before?" Riley asked mock casually. My avoidance of Eason had hurt him.

"Well, to be fair to Gareth, he was out of town until I got back. We flew back together." Jacquie shrugged and took a sip of her water.

"That's right, you are both part of the Westhaven outreach," I said watching as Riley relaxed and resumed wiping up.

“So Eason might be able to help?” Oscar asked.

Jacque raised an eyebrow at me. “He will.”

I glared at her before picking up my phone. “I’ll give him a call.”

Wandering through to the bedroom, I closed the door over and settled a silencing spell before I dialed Eason. It rang a few times first, making me think it was going to go to voicemail. Then he answered. “Gareth! It’s lovely to hear from you. How’ve you been?” His voice was warm and friendly. Friendlier than I deserved.

“All good here. How was Westhaven?”

He chuckled. “Come on, I know you didn’t call to ask about the sanctuary outreach. Lonely or do you need something?” His tone turned frosty. Ah, there it was. The bitterness that I expected.

Nervously, I pulled at a loose thread on the comforter. “I, uh, well—”

“Spit it out, Gareth,” Eason demanded.

“I wouldn’t have called to ask, but Jacque suggested you could help.”

“Help with what?” He sounded wary.

“Uh, well, I found my fated mate.”

I had to pull the phone away from my ear because Eason was cursing up a storm on the other end of the line. “What the

fuck, Gareth? So is this for him? You want me to use my magic to help him?”

“Shit, E, you make me sound like a monster. Riley came here to Greyhaven needing help with a curse. He’s terrified of warlocks and against all odds, I’m his fated. It took a lot for him to trust me, but the nature of the bond—“

“Means you can’t use your magic on him. Not even for that. Fucking hell, Gareth. You don’t half get into some shit.”

“Jacquie isn’t powerful enough on her own. His friend is a witch and he’s not strong enough either. Dragon magic can’t undo warlock magic. You are the only one Jacquie could think of. I wouldn’t have dared to ask. It’s just... I love him,” I finished, my voice low.

Those words of love should have been said for Riley to hear first. Not my ex.

We sat in silence while Eason chewed over what to do. I knew him. We may not have worked as a couple, but I knew that he had a healer’s heart and couldn’t stand to see anyone suffer. “I’ll come over in a bit, okay?”



I returned to the kitchen and found them sitting at the table waiting for me. “He’ll be here soon.”

“So, is Eason an ex-boyfriend or just a hookup? You’ve slept together, right?” Riley asked as he pushed his food around his plate. He avoided my eyes.

“Ex. We were together for a couple of years just after my parents left. He wanted to travel and I wanted to be here teaching.”

“He still wants you, though, right? You hookup now and again, don’t you?” There wasn’t quite a hostile accusation in his expression when he finally met my eyes. More like resignation.

“No backsliding for the last couple of years. It wasn’t healthy for either of us.”

“You’re completely done? No feelings left over?” Riley confirmed.

“None on my part. Even before you showed up, so don’t even question,” I said firmly.

“He’s right. Gareth avoids all situations where Eason might get the impression that something could happen. I’m sorry to have suggested it,” Jacquie apologized. “I just know that it’s time sensitive. We have seven days.”

“I get it. Just wanted to be prepared and not blindsided,” Riley said quietly. “We all have pasts.”

Eason didn’t knock, just swanned into my house in one of his beautifully tailored suits, a Christmas theme going on with the elaborate outfit. I caught Riley looking down at his plain navy t-shirt and black jeans. “Gorgeous,” I whispered only for him as I squeezed his thigh under the table.

Riley clasped my hand tightly in his as Eason approached and introduced himself to him and Oscar.

The young witch looked enamored with my demi-god ex. Oscar was so not his type, so was only in for disappointment there.

I caught my mate and ex measuring each other up before, defeated, Eason said, “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Eason tried to undo the spell first, thinking that his demi-god talents might stretch to curse breaking. They did not. Tatsuya and Longwei could have told him that. Then he held hands with Jacquie and let her channel him.

My cousin gasped and pulled away from Eason. “Fuck! That burns!”

Sure enough, her hand that had been in Eason’s was blistered and red. She cradled it in her unharmed one and directed a tear-filled glance at Riley. “I’m sorry. That was my last hope.”

Riley stood and hugged her. “Thank you for trying. I’m sorry you’re hurt.”

“Here,” I gently took her injured hand and sent healing magic into it. Unfortunately my healing was best on plants and not people or animals.

“Oh! Let me!” Oscar shouldered me out of the way and took over with the healing. Under his care, the blistering reversed course and the red faded into the peach tone of Jacquie’s usual skin.

“Wow! Oscar, that’s amazing!” Jacquie praised.

Eason looked over. “Are you a healer?”



“No, I’m a librarian,” Oscar answered, a flush rising in his cheeks.

He received an appraising look from Eason, making him blush harder, all the way to his blond hair. “You know, with that healing skill, you should be at the hospital or clinic. You’d do wonders there.”

Jacquie raised an eyebrow at me. “Well, why don’t we clear out and let these guys enjoy the rest of their day. Eason, you could show Oscar the clinic. He likely didn’t know that was an option for him. I doubt your mom would have overlooked his healing skill.”

“I didn’t!” Oscar shook his head.

“I’m sorry to you both,” Jacquie said as she gathered her things. I caught her looking at her hand in wonder. Oscar had done an amazing job on it.

“Thank you for trying.” I squeezed her to me and shook Eason’s hand. Riley did the same, adding a hug in for Oscar.

They cleared out of the house leaving me to fold Riley in my arms. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. We’ll figure it out.”

“I know.”

We stood holding each other for a long time until Riley’s phone rang. “It’s Dax!” he exclaimed when he took it from his pocket. “Dax?”

“Where’s this path again? I’m nearly here.”

Riley started with directions until I cut in with a better road for Daxton to take. I sent a text to Tatsuya to let him know we wouldn't be needing the welcome wagon. We were going to go get Daxton ourselves and introduce him to Greyhaven.



# Chapter Twenty One

## Riley

GARETH AND I SQUABBLED a bit over which car we would take now that mine had been repaired. Walt had even put on snow tires, the old ones too worn to be safe. With the snow once again coming down outside, I won that argument. Gareth drove, after all, he had more experience driving in the snow.

Carefully, he steered my car through the streets of downtown Greyhaven towards another route that I hadn't explored. We had to wait until Daxton properly crossed the wards. I couldn't venture out of Greyhaven without enacting the curse.

Gareth pulled the car over a good few hundred yards from the marker that signaled where the wards began. "Now we wait," he said, keeping his focus on the road ahead of us.

It didn't take all that long for Daxton's camper van to come into view. He pulled over to the other side of the road and exited at the same time we did.

We stood and stared at each other before Daxton broke the standoff and rushed forward to bring me into a massive hug. “I’ve missed you, Ry,” his voice broke.

“Missed you too.” I pulled away, keeping an arm around him. “Come meet Gareth,” in an undertone I added, “Remember, he’s safe.”

Daxton squeezed me before stepping forward to shake Gareth’s hand. “Welcome to the family, such as it is.”

“Thanks. Listen, it’s cold as balls out here. How about we head back to my house, or would you rather get some sleep in your cabin?”

“Cabin?”

I brandished the key I’d kept a hold of, after asking, of course. It had delighted Debra that my brother was moving to town. Once he got on his feet, he could rent somewhere. They did not design the cabins for long-term use. “This,” I said, wiggling it, “is the key to the cabin I was staying in. Now I’m living with Gareth. The mayor agreed it would be best to give you the key. Better than staying in your van, right?”

Daxton moaned, “tell me it has decent water pressure and a full size bed.”

“It does,” I confirmed.

“I love this place already!” This was the most enthusiastic I’d seen him in years. “It’ll be even better once this curse is off me. Tomorrow, though. Today I just want to shower, have

dinner with my little brother, his mate, and anyone else you want me to meet. Then we can hit the hard stuff tomorrow.”

To me, it felt like Dax was gearing up for Gareth using magic on him, which I understood. Though he hadn't had magic used on him as often as me, Boyce still abused him. He saw the damage inflicted by Boyce's magic and that had affected him almost as much.

“Would you rather eat out or at our house?” Gareth asked Dax.

It gave me tingles to hear it called our house. It had been so long since I could consider anything as really mine. Yet here I was with a mate, a home, friends, and a town that accepted me as I was. I'd shown Oscar what I could do. It felt unfair to have Longwei know and not Oscar. Both were my friends.

“I'd like to see more of the place, but nothing too fancy.”

“The diner?” I asked Gareth.

“Yeah.”

A sudden gust of wind took Daxton's response from me. Then I heard the now familiar sound of wings beating. Dragons.

“You said it, but I didn't fucking believe it!” Dax shouted over the two dragons' landing.

It was easy to pick out Longwei. Even in dragon form, he was pretty. He was sleeker than his cousin. Tatsuya was all brute strength and muscle. Longwei was graceful and elegant.

He had a longer body with ice blue coloring with an underbelly of navy.

The pair landed further down the road and shifted. Like me and Dax, they shifted with their clothes intact. They jogged the distance. Longwei stopped in his tracks just before he got to us. “No fucking way!” His eyes widened, and he looked hopeful, awestruck, fearful at... my brother.

No.

No way!

“Are you?”

The wind blew the dragon’s scents over us. “Shit!” Dax exclaimed.

“Hey, is that a bad or good shit there?” Longwei looked ready to flee.

“Depends,” Daxton said, a smirk on his face. “Longwei or Tatsuya? You’ve got to be one of the dragons my brother mentioned.”

Tatsuya scowled but stayed silent next to Gareth.

“Um, I’m Longwei,” he pointed to his cousin and ventured closer. “That’s Tatsuya.”

My brother’s face lit up. Relief nearly had my knees buckling. “Nice to meet you, Longwei. I didn’t think I’d come here to find my brother and then meet my mate.”



“You don’t want my cousin as a mate,” Tatsuya muttered, looking vexed by the situation.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Dax fired back. “I think that’s up to us to decide, isn’t it?”

“No, really. Ask him why he’s on community service.” All eyes went to Longwei who flushed several shades of red.

“We’re family, but you have a lot of growing up to do,” Tatsuya said to his cousin. “You’re irresponsible. Unreliable.”

“I think that’s quite enough,” Daxton barked.

“I don’t think it is,” Tatsuya yelled, getting in his face. “He flies about as well as a fledgling and has the attention span of one too. Do yourself a favor and think it through. The fates are playing jokes on you all here.”

Neither of them had been looking at Longwei, so they didn’t catch how crestfallen he was at Tatsuya’s remarks. I wished I’d been able to say something, but I was too tongue-tied over the situation to leap to his defense.

Finally, my brain restarted. “Longwei has been so great to me while I’ve been here. He’s a good friend already. I think he’d be good for you, Dax.” Longwei straightened at the praise. “He doesn’t take things too seriously.” He wilted, maybe he thought I meant it in a bad way. It was a great quality. “He knows where the line is and has a great way with people.”

“There’s nothing that says we have to accept the bond,” the man in question finally spoke. “We get free will.” He looked



defiant, almost as if he was getting ready to be rejected.

“How about we get to know each other better before we choose either way?” my brother suggested.

I didn't think that was what Longwei wanted to hear. He appeared uncertain before smoothing on a mask of indifference. “We can try that.”

The cold was getting to Gareth, so I suggested we move this into the town, get Daxton's van dropped off, and all meet at the diner. I sent a message to Oscar asking him to join us.

Without looking at Tatsuya, Longwei shifted back into his dragon form and took to the skies. He didn't say a word to any of us, and that concerned me.

Tatsuya frowned at his cousin and stepped away from Gareth so he could shift and follow. Once in the air, he put on a burst of speed to catch up with Longwei, who seemed to fly even faster to keep space between them.

They were almost over the town when Tatsuya barreled into Longwei and nearly took him to the ground. They tussled in the air before Longwei shot in the opposite direction, leaving Tatsuya flapping and hovering in the air, watching him fly away.

“Will Longwei be okay?” Dax asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

I didn't know how to answer. “Dunno,” Gareth said. “Maybe he just needs some space. He and Tatsuya butt heads a lot. It'll blow over.”

“Hmm,” I hummed noncommittally. I shared a glance with my brother, who appeared to agree with me. “We can call him if he doesn’t show up for dinner,” I said to Daxton.

Gareth went over to the car, leaving me with my brother for a moment. “Maybe being around Tatsuya isn’t for the best right now. Could you give me Longwei’s number?”

This sensitive side of my brother was one I hadn’t seen before. The match between him and Longwei must have brought out a buried protective instinct. The one he had when I was younger, before Boyce tried to sever our bond.

“Okay, I’ll do that, but let’s get out of the cold first. I can’t feel my toes.”

Daxton laughed. The sound was pure and light. “Nah, me neither.”

“Welcome to Greyhaven. All I’ve seen so far is snowy weather, but the people are nice.”

His chuckle followed me all the way to my car, where Gareth was waiting in the driver’s seat.



# Chapter Twenty Two

## Gareth

THE DINER WAS PACKED with people. Friends, old and new, lined the booths, all desperate for a glimpse of Riley's brother. The gossip mill must have been working overtime in the couple of hours since he had landed in town.

We had taken him to his cabin and helped him get settled. Riley had taken me to the grocery store with him while Dax unpacked, picking up some signal that his brother was overwhelmed and needed a couple of minute's peace. "He's putting on a brave face. Just come with me and let him process."

Inside the store, Riley was stopped often and people asked questions, having seen two dragons flying to the outskirts of town. Some had even seen the fight and wanted to ask what Longwei had done for Tatsuya to react like that. Riley's hackles rose at their accusations. Even I got annoyed on his behalf. Tatsuya had been a dick for some unknown reason. Sure, he could be gruff with people, but that had been almost cruel.

Honestly, I was angry at my friend for ruining such a sweet moment between fated mates. The expression on Longwei's face would live with me for a long time. It cast a shadow over Riley and his brother being reunited. I just hoped that Longwei and Daxton could move past Tatsuya's comment to be happy together. Daxton had clearly been happy with the fates' choice of mate for him.

When we got back to the cabin, it was obvious Daxton had made an effort to look like this was a long-term arrangement. There were little trinkets from his travels dotted around the place. He had laundry in the washing machine and his own comforter on the bed. In less than an hour, he had transformed the space into his home.

Something passed between the brothers. Both of them looked a little teary-eyed before Daxton let out a grumble about being hungry. Riley then shuffled us out of the door and down the street for food.

It was walking distance to the diner, which was great since the snow wanted to keep falling, leaving a thick blanket on the pavement. If we had to, Riley and I could get home by foot. It wasn't all that far. I'd hiked it before. Riley could shift and I could use some magic to keep myself warm. I didn't like to do it often since it was taxing on my energy using all that power for sustained lengths. I also had to factor in that it would likely delay me from undoing the curse of Daxton. If it was our only way of getting home safely, then that was what we would have to do.

I led Riley to a reserved booth, Oscar and Jacquie already sitting there waiting for us. Riley led the introductions, with Daxton slowly slipping on a mask and becoming standoffish. It was clear all the people were making him uncomfortable. Even Riley was looking twitchy.

Making an executive decision for the group, I went to the counter and asked if we could make our order to go. Though they kept up with the small talk, the relief when the server dropped off our packaged food was palpable.

Daxton extended the invite to Oscar and Jacquie to join us, and they did, making the short journey arm in arm. “Why are all the cute ones so very gay?” I heard Jacquie asking, prompting both Riley and Oscar to laugh. Even Daxton cracked a smile, his icy exterior cracking now we were out of the busy diner.

“I’m bi,” I said at the same time Daxton said, “I’m pan.” We shared an amused look. Maybe bonding with Daxton wouldn’t be too difficult. I wondered how much Riley had shared with him about me and Greyhaven.

“First, cousin, so ew, and second, you met your fated first. The fates really fucked me over there.” Jacquie shook her head. I caught both Oscar and Riley almost bent double laughing. The Christmas lights shone brightly, the snow had slowed, making it a picturesque night to be spending with the guy I was falling in love with and our friends and family.



We almost got snowed in. As it was, Jacquie ended up crashing with Oscar in his cabin rather than her trying to walk home. She was younger than me and still lived with her parents. My aunt and uncle were good people. We just weren't very close. My uncle had struggled with being lower in power than my mom. Jacquie had been something of an anomaly, being much stronger than both parents. Her relationship with her father was strained because of it. Once I caught him, while drunk, complaining that she had stolen his and his wife's magic when she was born. No wonder Jacquie spent most of her time going between havens all over the country and abroad.

Riley shifted into a polar bear to walk. He had even offered to carry me, but I hadn't wanted to be a burden. By the time I had fallen three times, he shifted back just to demand I climb up so we could finally get home.

Exhausted, we just lay under the covers wrapped up in each other. As much as I loved sex with Riley, there was such beauty and genuine intimacy in moments like that. "Do you think Longwei is alright?" Riley asked sleepily, snaking his arm over me.

"I dunno. Maybe we should give him some space or send Dax after him if we don't see him for a few days. I'm so pissed at Tatsuya!" My anger sparked along my veins, breaking me from my drowsiness. I nuzzled his hair.

Riley yawned and snuggled closer. "Me too. But I'm also not surprised. I always got the feeling that he and Ryuu looked

down on Longwei somehow.”

I wanted to be angry on my friend’s behalf. Tatsuya had always been a great friend to me. Yet, I could see what Riley was saying if I looked at some situations in the past objectively. “I don’t get what their deal is.”

“Dax doesn’t believe Tatsuya. He knows Longwei is a good person. He’ll convince him, somehow.”

With those last words, Riley fell asleep. I wasn’t so lucky. For a couple of hours, despite how weary I was, I couldn’t sleep. I ended up messaging Tatsuya, demanding that he apologize to both Longwei and Daxton. He left the message on read, which only made me more annoyed and less able to sleep.

Eventually, sleep got me, and I slipped into a strange dreamscape.

Daxton wasn’t ready to do the spell the next day, saying that it was Yule, and we needed to celebrate that rather than use a lot of magic and leave me too tired to do anything. I wanted to argue that he was overestimating the power needed, but Riley tugged on my arm and urged me to let it go.

“He needs a little more time,” he whispered into my ear. Daxton’s shifter senses must have caught it, because he scowled at his brother. Riley made an innocent expression and nothing else was said.

The day after Yule, Daxton still wasn’t ready. I didn’t want to push the issue, but selfishly, I wanted to test breaking the



curse, so when I met up with Riley after the full moon, I could direct whichever warlock we found to help us. I didn't want to leave it to chance.

By Christmas Eve, with only days to go, I was determined to get this curse off my brother-in-law so that we could have a peaceful Christmas with at least one of the brothers uncursed. Since I couldn't help Riley directly, freeing his brother would have to do.

I knocked on the door to the cabin early in the morning of Christmas Eve with an apprehensive Riley by my side.

“Gareth...”

“No, Ry, it needs done. One of you deserves Christmas free. He's earned this happiness. I can't give him his mate—“

“Poor Longwei.”

No one had seen the dragon since his fight with Tatsuya. At his apartment, a bag of his stuff was missing. He had fled Greyhaven without a word to anyone. I could only guess what was going on in his head. Daxton had spoken about following his mate, trying to pick up his trail, even using some magic to find him, but if he left Greyhaven now without the curse being broken, he wouldn't get back in.

There was also the worry that none of us had voiced. We all wondered if the curse would prevent them from causing any harm to Boyce. Having Daxton free would give us an extra weapon other than my magic. It was lunacy to go up against an unknown warlock without a backup. The town needed the magic users here, especially in deep winter. Jacquie had

offered to come, except I had asked her to take over my classes when they started back up and help at the greenhouses.

Daxton opened the door and frowned. “Before you make an excuse, it’s happening now. I’m getting his curse off you so we can plan how we are getting it off Riley. Think of your brother. He needs to see it can be done.”

His frown deepened. “Now that’s just emotional blackmail there. I can respect it, though. I like you being ruthless for him. He deserves it.”

Riley blushed. “I’m going to make us all a big breakfast while Gareth does his magic.” He rushed off to the kitchen. I got it, magic still made him uneasy. He wouldn’t want to watch me break the curse down.

I took a seat on the sofa and patted the cushion next to me. “We are just going to give it a shot and see if we need anything else.”

“Right. What do I need to do?”

“Hold my hand and don’t fight the magic when it comes at you. It shouldn’t hurt. I can’t promise it won’t. You might feel warmer, or colder. It all depends on what he put on it to protect it.”

His hand was clammy in mine. I squeezed it in sympathy and stared into his pale green eyes. In some lights, they would look blue or gray. “Okay,” I said, quietly. “I’m going to start.”

Daxton flinched as I sent the first trickle of magic into him. I tightened my grip on his hand and sped up the search for the

core of the curse. With a laugh, I touched it. I wasn't sure if Riley's had been constructed better, I'd have to talk to Jacquie about it. Daxton's was poorly made.

While it took a lot of power, leaving me feeling drained, it was almost laughably easy to smash the curse to pieces and extract it from Daxton.

It was a matter of minutes before I could look him in the eyes and say, "Congratulations, Daxton. You are now curse free."

He slumped against the sofa cushions, letting go of my hand to scrub a hand over his face and hide his eyes from me. "Thank fuck for that. No, seriously." He turned red-rimmed eyes towards me, his eyelashes wet. "Thank you, Gareth. I don't even have the words."

Riley must have heard something because he entered the living room. "Is everything okay?"

"I'm free, Riley." Daxton rose and embraced his brother. He turned away from Riley. "I need you guys to bond because Ry, if you don't—" He gave me a lascivious look.

"Hey!" Riley said, elbowing his brother in the ribs. "That's my warlock! You've got a fucking dragon as a mate."

"I do," Daxton sobered. "Once we get this mess with Boyce done and Mom freed, I'm going after him. No matter where he is, I'm going to find him and bring him home. Then I'm going to beat that fucker Tatsuya into the ground."

“I’ll help.” Riley gave me an apologetic look. “Sorry, I know he’s your friend.”

“No, I’ll help. In fact, I’ll do worse. I’ll tell his sister. She’ll help you.”

I yawned, my jaw cracking with how wide it was. Despite how easy it was to break the curse, it had still used a fair amount of power. A nap and some food would be enough to replenish me.

Daxton rose. “I’ll finish making breakfast. Pancakes?” We both nodded as Riley sat close to me. “Ry, let your man have a nap. Then we need to talk about what happens after.”



# Chapter Twenty Three

## Riley

WAKING WITH GARETH'S LIPS around my cock on Christmas morning had to be the best sort of Christmas present I could ask for. I hardened further in his mouth as he bobbed up and down on the shaft, ran his tongue around the underside of the head, and took me deep into his throat, swallowing around me.

The suction, the warmth of his mouth, was perfect, taking me close to the edge in just a few minutes. He laid a hand on my stomach, pressing my hips into the mattress as I tried to pump them.

I sank my fingers into his hair and tugged on the strands as he pulled off until just the very tip was in his mouth. He looked up at me, a mischievous look in his brown eyes as he licked and sucked the head. I tried to push him down further, but he resisted and took a grip on my balls. "Oh, fuck!" I cursed as he massaged them and ran a finger down my taint to my hole. He circled it, grinning around my dick as I moaned.

“Please!” I begged, wanting him to push inside me as he took me into his throat.

Pulling away and releasing me with a pop, Gareth reached for the lube and coated his finger before returning it to my entrance. With his other hand, he pumped me using his saliva and my precum to slick the movement. “More,” I gasped as the finger sank knuckle deep.

Gareth licked a line from my root to my tip as he pushed another finger inside me. The burn was exquisite, making me flex my fingers and toes and cry out.

Once again, he took me deep into his throat, tightening around me as he pumped his fingers. Between hitting my spot and the perfect suction, I was lost. I tipped over the edge, my hips jerking as I came, shouting his name.

He licked me clean and gently eased his fingers from my body. I lay there as he grinned at me and kissed my inner thigh tenderly. “Gimme a minute,” I rasped, hoarse from my shout, “and I’ll return the favor.”

I’d spent enough time with my mate to know what he liked, so once I recovered, I launched up and wrestled him back to the bed so he was face down on the pillows. Kissing the back of his neck, I worked my way down to the loose cotton pants he was wearing low on his slim hips.

Slowly, I eased his pants down, baring that peach of an ass to the cool morning air. Gareth shuddered and goosebumps broke out over his skin. I ran my hands over the exposed skin, squeezed his cheeks and spread them, showing me his hole. I

leaned over and blew a breath over it, making Gareth whimper.

“Please,” he groaned as I laved my tongue from his nuts to his pucker. He cried out as I began to eat him out in earnest. I licked, sucked, and nibbled on his ass as if it was the tastiest treat I’d ever had.

Gareth wriggled, trying to get friction on his neglected cock, and I speared my tongue inside him.

Taking pity on him, I worked his cock and pulled it back so I could suck on the head and tease his rim with a finger. I swapped, licking around his hole as I stroked him, his length now trapped between his legs. He bucked, but stilled when I whispered, “Be good, baby. Stay still and I’ll take care of you.”

Leaving his cock for a moment, I pried his cheeks apart and blew again, loving the sounds he made. I returned to licking and sucking on his hole before I spat and worked the fluid in with a finger.

He was impossibly tight around me. Needing more to slick the way, I grabbed the lube and worked it and two more fingers inside him as I went back to sucking his brains out via his cock.

Gareth looked down at me, his teeth around a pillow as he tried to quiet his cries. He was shaking, his eyes full of pleasure as I sank my fingers deeper and twisted. He jerked as I hit his spot. I kept hitting it while stroking his cock. Feeling



him about to hit his peak, I took him on my tongue. “Let go, baby.”

Shuddering and groaning against a mouthful of pillow, Gareth unloaded. I swallowed him down and worked him through it. I stopped just before he became oversensitive and flopped down onto the bed next to him, drawing the comforter over us.

“Merry Christmas, Gareth.”

“Merry Christmas, Riley.” He turned and kissed me deeply.



Together we layed in bed for a little while, just chatting about nothing and trading kisses, until my stomach interrupted the peaceful moment with a growl.

“Presents?” Gareth suggested.

“Sure,” I said, my voice cracking around my nerves. I got out of the bed and got on one knee, fishing out the box I’d stashed under the bed. “Gareth, would you do me the honor of bonding with me today?”

He bolted upright so he could meet my eyes properly. “Yes! Absolutely, let’s do it now.”

I laughed, relief and joy at war inside me for top billing. “We’re hosting lunch, remember?” I checked the time. “In fact, we better hurry up and open presents and start the food or we won’t be eating until late.”

Gareth pouted with twinkling eyes. “Do we have to?”

“Yes. We promised Long—“ Shit. It hurt to know that my friend was gone. He’d messaged late the night before that he was okay, just needed a little time away. While I was grateful he had done that, I was still furious at Tatsuya. Thankfully, he wasn’t coming to the gathering.

My mate got out of bed and wrapped me in his arms. “We still have your brother, Oscar, Jacquie, True, and Dawn, coming for lunch.”

“Right,” I pulled away and headed into the living room to the pretty little Christmas tree that Gareth had insisted upon setting up. There were a few packages for him under there, all from me. I handed them to Gareth in order, from my place on the floor, leaving the best for last. The usual gifts; socks, aftershave, and shower items were opened and appreciated before I got to the main present.

“Here,” I handed it to him carefully. The contents fragile.

Gareth was gentle as he unwrapped it, placing the discarded paper on the sofa beside him. His eyes met mine as soon as he unveiled the glass case, a single raven feather inside. Etched into the glass were the words, “I’ll always fly home to you.”

A single tear made its way down his cheek as he stared at it. The air was filled with all the emotions that he was feeling. I could practically taste them.

“This means so much to me. Thank you, Riley.” He leaned over to kiss me.

We swapped places so he could find my gifts. I unwrapped a cozy scarf, some thick gloves, a book about the history of Greyhaven, and then a dog collar with an Airtag. Gareth blushed when I opened it and looked at him, confused. “So I can always find you. Even without the bond. You can wear it in dog form and I’ll be able to come to you.”

My heart warmed, a feeling that spread out from my chest. It made me feel so safe and wanted to know he would search for me if it, the curse, separated us. We might have been fated mates, but he was choosing me. I choked back a sob. “This is perfect. No one would think about this. Magic, yes, but tech? No, Boyce doesn’t know shit about technology. This could be really useful, thank you.”

“I just wish it was as special as your gift.”

I kissed him. “I love it. And you.”

“Gah!” he wailed and covered his eyes. “Why do you have to be so good at this romance stuff? You even said it first!” His eyes were filled with tears as he put his arm down. “I love you too. I’m going to show you how much every day until I die.”

“When that day comes, I’ll follow you into the after.”

“Okay, now you’re pissing me off. Stop topping me!”

“You didn’t say that last night. In fact, you were begging—“ Gareth launched himself at me, toppling me back into the sofa cushions and covering my mouth with his and cutting off my laugh.



Our friends stayed late, only getting the hint that we wanted to be alone when Gareth started tidying up around everyone.

It had been the best afternoon I could remember. I'd never really had a group of friends like it. Always too afraid of leaving them. Greyhaven had given me the opportunity to revel in what I could do.

“Are you ready?” Gareth asked.

“I am. The food part might be a problem. I'm kinda full from lunch.” The food had been fantastic and plentiful, with everyone taking a dish over to add to what Gareth and I had made.

“Me too. Which is why I made us some cupcakes and thought you could make us something small, like sandwiches,” Gareth said as he got the pretty cupcakes out of the larder.

“These are cute.” He had iced our names onto them in red.

“Red velvet. I'd heard you say they were your favorite.”

A lump rose in my throat at the gesture. “They are.”

I went to the fridge and set about making two of the best sandwiches I could construct in under five minutes. Once done, I cut them into little segments so they would be easier to feed to Gareth.

“Ready?” he asked, looking nervous.

“Yeah.” I snagged a segment of the sandwich and fed it to him. “I accept our bonding,” I intoned. “With this offering, I nourish your body, as my love will feed your soul. My heart and life are yours until my death. Nothing can part us.”

Gareth took the morsel and chewed as I spoke. Once he swallowed, he spoke, “I accept your offering and your heart until death.”

He fed me a piece of the sandwich without speaking. We let the magic and the moment swell as we were tied together.

Then it was his turn to repeat the vow, only with something fed to me by his hand that he had made himself. I accepted it, loving the burst of sweetness from the cupcake as the bonding began.

Gareth ate his share of cupcake, a symbol that he would only give what he would receive. Then, once finished, he led me to the bathroom.

Inside, he set the water running, and we slowly stripped each other. He backed himself into the cubicle, towing me along. The water was the ideal temperature for the next part of the ceremony. Gareth had laid out bars of soap. One for our bodies and one for our hair. I started by lathering the soap for his hair and gently scrubbed it through the strands. I helped him rinse off and then started washing his body. It was only when I kneeled at his feet that I spoke. “With this gesture, I demonstrate my care for you, body and soul. My willingness to perform acts of service will show you how much I value our bond.”

The magic was almost tangible as Gareth copied me, washing me down as gently as I had done for him. When he got to his knees, the emotions were almost overwhelming. Hearing the words had tears running freely down my cheeks.

Gareth stood and switched off the water. He wrapped his arms around me. “Nearly there, sweetheart.”



# Chapter Twenty Four

## Gareth

ONCE RILEY WAS WRAPPED in a towel and quickly dried off, he did the same for me. This time, he led me to the bedroom.

Though they were slightly damp, we laid the towels down on the bed and got a couple of jars of lube open. I took hold of Riley's wrist as he went to climb onto the bed. "Are you sure? There's no going back if we do this."

The magic had wound so tight around us that it was almost painful to give Riley an out like that. I was grateful when he nodded. "I want this. Do you?"

Instead of answering, I got onto the bed and pulled him on top of me.

He braced himself above me, and I took the chance to study him. His stubble was growing in, giving him a roguish look. His brown eyes were bright. I saw flecks of green and gold in there. His nose was slightly crooked, likely from being broken and not reset before his shifter healing kicked in. No one had



ever looked as beautiful to me. Those full lips quirked in a smirk before he leaned down and they captured mine.

I twisted us onto our sides so we could kiss and touch each other easily. In this position, my cock brushed his, making me gasp against his mouth. Burying my face in his neck, I took us both in my hand and stroked. Riley added some lube and helped stroke us.

It was awkward, but we both wanted to be joined in as many places as possible, the magic only happy when we were touching. I wriggled an arm under his ass and some lube from the pot on my fingers. My arm wanted to fall asleep, the tingling making it difficult to prep him properly.

Riley huffed a laugh against my collarbone as he tried to do the same to me. We were just too impatient. The magic was pulling on us almost painfully. He pushed me down onto the bed and positioned himself over me. Taking my cock in his hand and placing it at his entrance, he sank down slowly with a loud moan.

“You okay?”

“Fine,” he muttered. “Just burns a little.” I laughed, and he groaned. “Gimme a minute.”

I ran my hands over his hairy thighs, loving the feel of them against my skin. He was so warm, solid, real. Best of all, he was all mine.

After a minute, Riley began to rock.

We lost ourselves in sensation, just following our instincts and the magic that was binding us together. With this final act, we would be fully bonded. “I take you into my body. You and I are one. Never to be parted.”

Tears flowed even as Riley controlled our pleasure. He brought me to the edge, slamming down hard on my cock, until I filled him with my release.

Riley pulled off me and raised my ankles to his shoulders, my knees pressed to my chest. “Okay?”

“Yes!” He pressed inside. “I take you into my body,” I gasped. “You and I are one. Never to be parted.” His thrusts were fast and wild. The magic soared and filled the room with a kaleidoscope of colors.

His sweat dripped onto me and he was grunting sexy sounds in my ear when finally, he went rigid and I felt his pulse inside me. He kissed me sweetly and rested our foreheads together.

The room lit with sparks of magic as finally, the bond settled. Complete.



We spent the night basking in our new bond, not getting much sleep. Neither of us ventured far from the other, just to the kitchen or the bathroom, but usually, the other followed after. It was almost painful to be apart.

When we woke after a few hours of sleep the day after Christmas, the skies were clear, the snow melting on the sidewalks. It seemed almost like a sign that things were going to get better from here.

Daxton and Oscar arrived at our place pretty early so that they could help us pack. We had already planned to head to Westhaven since Jacquie said there were a couple of powerful warlocks there that would help us.

With them there, it was easy enough to get the camper stocked with gas, fuel for the stove, and get everything cleaned and ready for life on the road. It would take a few days to get to Westhaven, more if the curse decided to pull Riley far away, in the opposite direction from where we wanted to go. It had happened before. He made his way out of the town before the deadline and somehow still found himself a thousand miles from where he had been.

There had been a brief argument over who would take the car to tow the trailer. Riley reasoned it was better that he leave on foot than I would catch up with our stuff. Eventually I gave in. I didn't like the thought of Riley walking out of Greyhaven, but it was better than him vanishing in front of me.

The day was filled with touches and kisses as we settled further into the bond. More than once I caught Daxton gagging at us, Oscar laughing beside him. I wouldn't apologize for loving my mate. He was everything I had never thought to want, yet also exactly what I needed. Riley would never be soft, except for those vulnerable moments that he chose to

show me. He was always going to want my best self. More than that, I wanted to give that to him. To be worthy of his love.

“Why don’t we have a nap? I’m exhausted,” Riley asked after we finished putting the last of the dinner dishes away. He wore the signs of stress and tiredness all over his face and leaned against the counter like it was the only thing holding him up.

“Sounds like a good idea. I don’t want to drive this tired.”

We both lay fully clothed on the bed. Riley wriggled into place, putting his head on my chest, a leg over one of mine so I couldn’t escape even if I wanted to. “Gareth, are we doing the right thing?”

“What do you mean?” The room was lit with only a lamp, the darkness complete outside. We only had a handful of hours before Riley had to leave or risk the curse. He said it was painful to be pulled away. I didn’t want him to hurt, so he had to leave.

“Going to Westhaven instead of just going to Boyce with Daxton.”

I sighed. His worry was valid. It felt counterintuitive to be heading away from our target. “Because he will absolutely use his hold over you to harm both me and Daxton. You would be his weapon against us.”

“Yeah, I just needed to hear it again. I’m nervous that we’ll get to Westhaven and they won’t be able to help me.”

“If that happens, we will track down my mom and dad. Their magic works in harmony together. Between them, they can break it. Then they’ll fall in love with you. Maybe they could come kill Boyce with us.”

Riley chuckled. “That right?”

“One hundred percent true. Maybe I should just call them once I pick you up and we could meet them somewhere...”

“No. Let’s try Westhaven first. I don’t want that to be their first impression of me. Or how we bond. Could you imagine? Telling any kids we have—“

“You want kids?”

“Maybe to adopt some. Older ones that people don’t take a chance on because they want babies.” He let out a strained sound. “There’s probably plenty of supernaturals that will take those kids in.”

“Less than you might think. A lot are too fucked up from their pasts to even think about taking on some kids’ baggage. Babies are easier since they don’t come with the same trauma.” I was silent a moment, just picturing our future. “I’d really like that, y’know. Taking in some kids. Giving them love. Teaching them how to be good people. Seeing them grow.” I had to push back the emotion that threatened to choke me. “To do that with you would be something special.”

We lapsed into our own thoughts for so long I’d believed that Riley had drifted off. “When I wake up, I’m just going to

slip out. Stay asleep if you can. I'll call you once I'm on the other side of the barrier, okay?"

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I won't want to leave if I have to say goodbye. Even if it is only for a couple of hours."

"Don't you want Oscar to take you? Do you have to shift?"

"I don't want to risk any backlash on him. You've seen how nasty this curse is. I don't have enough friends to risk Oscar," he joked.

Laughing, I tugged him closer, pressed a kiss on his head, and closed my eyes. "As soon as you call, I'll be on my way."



# Chapter Twenty Five

## Riley

SOMETHING WAS WRONG.

The light in the room was different. Gareth was pressed up behind me, spooning me. Both of us were still fully dressed. My boots were hanging off the end of the bed.

I took stock of the room, my body, and wondered what was leaving me feeling off. My inner animal was trying to tell me something I just couldn't understand.

My phone was on the nightstand where I'd left it, what felt like hours ago. Worry bloomed in my chest. The curse. I wouldn't have much time. I worked my way free from Gareth's arms and picked up my phone.

The screen lit up with the time. Four. It was four in the morning. On the twenty-seventh.

Impossible.

Taking Gareth's shoulder, I shook him awake. "Gareth!" The joy in my voice was foreign.



“Hmm?”

“I’m still here!”

“What?” He struggled into a seated position and reached for his phone. He peeled his eyes open, still looking cute and sleepy, his hair and clothes all ruffled. He bolted upright at the display. “The curse!”

“Check me!” I held my hands out to him. He grasped them and I felt the tickling sensation of his magic. “Huh!”

“What is it?”

“You aren’t blocked to my magic anymore. Remember that cut you got yesterday?”

“Yeah...”

“Watch.” I felt the magic wash over the cut on my palm and erase it. I started to shake. Panic taking hold.

“Woah, don’t worry,” he said soothingly. “I still can’t hurt.” He held fire in his free hand and tried to give it to me, a barrier keeping it in place.

“Sorry!” I felt guilty about my reaction.

Gareth wrapped his arms around me, resting his head on mine. “Don’t be. It’s going to take you a long time to unlearn those natural reactions to magic. Maybe once Boyce is done, we should do some therapy or something.”

“That’s a good idea. I don’t want to flinch away every time you can do an innocent spell on me. Being able to heal me is amazing.”

“Even better is that the curse is completely gone.”

“It is?” I wanted to break down and cry. Hope was so beautiful it hurt.

“You’re free.”



Rather than head out with Gareth to go get Boyce, I crawled back into bed with him. I took off my boots and pants and just... lay there with him. For once, I got to stay with someone I cared about. There was no time limit.

“It doesn’t feel real,” I admitted quietly.

Gareth’s arms tightened around me. “How about later on we take a drive up and show you?”

I backed up closer to him. “Yeah. I just want to enjoy this right now. Even if it is a dream, it’s the best one I’ve ever had.”

We must have gone back to sleep, because my eyes pinged open when someone rang the doorbell.

“I’ll get it,” Gareth muttered sleepily as he unwound himself from me and left the bedroom. His hair was sticking up, his clothes ruffled.

Picking up my discarded pants, I put them on and followed him into the entrance. There, Tatsuya was standing with a woman I’d never met before. She bore a striking resemblance to him. The sister, I presumed.

Then my attention was stolen by Hestia. She was in our house. I'd never seen the goddess outside of city hall. I was beginning to wonder if she was able to leave the place. It wouldn't have surprised me if she wasn't.

“Ah, Riley. Congratulations on being curse free!” she said with enthusiasm when she caught sight of me.

“Um, thank you. How did you know about the curse? Is that why you're here?” I asked.

Hestia looked troubled for a brief moment. The expression quickly settled into her usual calm demeanor. “Well, it's clear that you and Gareth are now bonded. I can see the gold strings of fate wrapped tightly around you both.”

“So you knew that us bonding would rid Riley of the curse?” Gareth cut in. I could feel his anger.

She had the audacity to look sheepish. “I did, but wasn't allowed to tell you. The bond had to be chosen because it was what you both wanted. Not because it automatically breaks all other magic.”

Gareth frowned, yet stayed silent.

“That wasn't the reason we came here today. Even without seeing the bonding, we all knew that the curse was broken,” Hestia said.

“How?” I blurted. There was an odd tension between Tatsuya and his sister.

“Hi Riley, I'm Adalinda. Ada for short, please. I'm the chief of police here. Sorry I haven't met you before. I know Tatsuya

was in the party that welcomed you to the town.”

“Longwei was really friendly. Went above and beyond,” I said before glaring at Tatsuya. “Your brothers, not so much. Especially this one. You might want to reconsider him being the welcome wagon with how he likes to leave a lasting impression.”

“Right,” Ada glanced at her brother. “I’ve heard rumors and we’re going to discuss that later. We have a situation right now that can’t wait.”

“Situation?” Gareth and I said together. It would have been funny, but there was just too much worry in the air.

“We take the security of the town very seriously. There are reports that a man, a warlock, is outside of the town trying to get in. He’s slowly stripping the wards.”

I flinched back. “No! It can’t be.”

Hestia rushed to reassure me. “You are safe, Riley. The town’s wards need more than a second rate dark sorcerer to break them. However, it does mean that Boyce has found you.”

“The sentries heard him shouting about the curse being broken, but never letting you go,” Ada said sympathetically. “Tatsuya told us about your plan to go after Boyce now that you are free. Do you feel ready to face him, or would you rather we take care of it?”

“Take care of it?” My mind was spinning.

Gareth wrapped his arms around me. “Whatever you want, baby.”

I breathed in his scent. The bergamot and lemongrass that was so familiar to me now. It soothed the rough edges of my panic. I knew what I needed to do. “We need to end this. Me and my brother.”

“You should take back up,” Ada said. “I don’t feel comfortable sending two shifters and a warlock out to deal with someone as unhinged as this man is.”

“Jacquie and Oscar will come with us,” Gareth chimed in, “though we wouldn’t say no to a dragon.” Tatsuya’s eyes lit up. “Maybe not you, Suya, sorry.”

Tatsuya deflated. “I get it. I spoke without thinking. It’s just —“

“Nope,” I interrupted. “No time for bullshit excuses. Ada, would you be able to come?”

She looked frustrated. “Unfortunately, no. I will have to return the mayor to city hall. I’ll get my other brother to help you.”

Hestia saw the question before I asked it. “I cannot leave Greyhaven without leaving the wards open and the town vulnerable. Though I wish I could help, I have to put the safety of the town first. I hope you can understand, Riley.”

Her genuine sorrow was clear. “I get it. It’s fine. Greyhaven is too important to put at risk. Besides, two shifters, two warlocks, a witch and a dragon? It sounds like the start of a

weird joke.” I laughed, the mental picture quelling the panic inside me. “Between us all, I think we can end this for good.”



A couple of texts and a party showed up on Gareth’s doorstep. Ryuu had brought Eason and Jacquie. Oscar and Daxton were neighbors, so they came together.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Daxton asked, after wrapping me in a tight hug. My brother had never been this demonstrative before. I hoped Greyhaven would be a fresh start for our relationship and our lives. I prayed to the fates that Daxton would convince Longwei to come home.

“Yeah, it has to end now. We are free for the first time since Mom met him. Let’s free her now.”

“Do you think she’s with him?”

“There’s no one else I can think of that he would trust with her.” I knew for a fact that Boyce wouldn’t let her stay alone or with any of his past cronies.

“Plus, she’s a pretty big bargaining chip,” Gareth added. “He will try to manipulate you using her.”

“Right. I think that when we get close, one of us should try to get her away from Boyce and through the wards,” I suggested.

“Good plan,” Ryuu agreed. The dragon looked exhausted. There were dark circles under his eyes that held none of the

sparkle that was there the day I met him. I hadn't actually seen him since. "Load up!"

We took two cars, my brother and friend with us, the rest in Ryuu's police SUV. In the car, there was quiet. The radio stayed off as we all focused on what was to come.

I had made peace with killing Boyce. It was a necessary sin to free my family. I thought about the form that I would use so I could kill him quicker than he deserved. We just needed this over and done with.

The weather was on our side. For once, there was no snow or rain. The skies were a light blue with only a few fluffy clouds. We passed through the town quickly and followed the road that I had taken that first day.

"He must have traced you. This is where you would have dropped off. The last tugging point in the spell when the curse broke." Gareth answered the question that had been echoing in my head.

"So that's how," I mused.

We lapsed into silence again until we had to park and get out.

The ward shimmered in front of us. On the other side was Boyce. Beside his furious form was a car. Inside was my mom. Next to her was a boy that looked a little like Daxton. Like me.





# Chapter Twenty Six

## Gareth

BOYCE WAS... UNIMPRESSIVE. BOTH as a man and a mage. He was tall, reed thin, with a beaky nose, thinning greasy dark hair that he had kind of combed over to hide the bald patches. Basically, he was a stereotypical bad guy. Think of that Count guy from Lemony Snicket. That's who he reminded me of.

I heard an intake of breath when Riley and Daxton spotted the people in the car. My sight wasn't as good as theirs, so I pushed a little magic into it and had to brace myself against Ryuu to stop my knees buckling. "That's a child," I whispered, aghast.

Jacque looked at me in horror.

"I think that's my brother," Riley said, barely over a whisper. We all heard it, the words rocketing through us. "We didn't know."

Boyce had found a stronger bargaining chip.

“This is how it’s going to go,” Ryuu laid out a plan. Jacquie and Oscar would use magic to hide themselves and sneak towards the car. They would focus on getting the kid, but if they could get their mom too, they would. While they did that, we would head out and keep Boyce distracted.

Riley was pale. Sweat rolled off him and he was trembling as I took his hand and led him to the wards. On his other side, Daxton didn’t look much better.

Boyce grinned when he saw us emerge from the wards. We could see out, he couldn’t see in. “Ah, there you are, boys. It’s time for you to come home. Your mother and I need you. We can put this nonsense aside.”

I used my magic to mask what Ryuu was and lowered my levels, so I looked less powerful to him if he tried to scan me. The mage dismissed us as I hoped, all too focused on Riley. Even Daxton was ignored for my mate. It made my blood boil.

“I’m not coming back,” Riley called firmly. He was shaking. We needed to get this over and done with. Once we got the signal that the kid was safe, we could move against Boyce.

Boyce sighed. “I thought you might say that. You’ve found yourself your own warlock so maybe you don’t think you need me now, but your mom does. And your little brother.” He turned to see the car only held their mom. The woman was ghostly pale and looked on the brink of starvation. Her dark hair was frizzy and unkempt around her heart-shaped face.

Magic came arcing out of the other warlock. I shielded as best I could. “Jacquie?”

“Got the kid behind the ward with Oscar!” came the reply.

It turned into a battle, Boyce flinging magic at me and Riley, while Riley changed into many forms, trying to get close. He was an eagle, a lion, a fox, a rabbit. All quick shifts that were draining his energy. I felt him through our bond. He was tiring and getting no closer to ending this.

Ryuu used his innate magic to shield Daxton while Boyce continued to fling spells at me. We had underestimated him. In his many pockets, he had charms and amulets to boost his power.

A spell crashed through my wards, hitting Ryuu in the back. He let out a roar, his dragon surging forward. He pushed Daxton away and turned mid shift.

“Move!” he yelled at Riley’s mom. She screamed and did as she was told, rushing into the trees that lined the road.

Ryuu, once he saw the path was clear, let out a long stream of dragonfire as he let the shift take over. Finished, he stood over us, shielding us from the sight of the smoking man.

Boyce let out a twisted laugh that was cut off when the dragon leaned down and swallowed him whole.

“Fucking hell!” Riley cried as he stumbled away from the dragon and landed on his ass.

“I bet Longwei could have turned him to ash,” Daxton crowed. “Man, I wish he was here.”

“Doubtful,” Ryuu said as he turned back to his human form. “Longwei is an ice dragon.”



There was nothing left of the car or the man that once was called Boyce. If I had anything to do with it, we would soon forget his name.

“Mom?” Riley shouted for her.

“Riley?” Her trembling form came closer until she collapsed into his arms. “I’m sorry!”

A little hedgehog came running and butted at my feet before turning and heading towards Riley and his mom. The creature shifted into the little boy Oscar was supposed to be holding. He was tiny and could only be about five. “Mommy?”

“I’m here Jayden. Come meet your brothers.” She held out a shaking hand for her youngest son. “Riley, Daxton, he’s not Boyce’s son. He just kept him because he thought he could replace you if the curse didn’t work.”

It surprised me that she was so coherent. Especially after all that she had been through.

Jayden looked shyly at Riley, who opened his arms for him. The pair just fit together.

“Sorry!” Oscar came running through the wards. “He’s fast!” It was almost comical. I felt too outside of myself to take part in any conversation. My power was buzzing along my veins. I sent another blast at the car, adding to the fire. With that done, I was able to rein it in and focus on Riley and his family.

“I think we should move this to city hall,” Ryuu said, taking charge of the situation. “I’ll call Calder to come put the fire out.” He started typing on his phone.

“I can do that,” said Jacquie, who changed her mind at Ryuu’s look. “Or maybe I’ll let the fire chief do it.”

“No offense, Jacquie, but Calder is trained to deal with fires like these. You’ve never dealt with dragonfire and gas.” He pocketed his phone and watched the reunited family.

I went into autopilot and directed people towards cars. Riley’s mom, Molly, clung to Daxton, and Jayden to Riley, so I made sure they were all riding with us. For such a short journey, it didn’t matter that Jayden was in the passenger seat on Riley’s lap.

The kid was cute. Full of stories of traveling on a plane and things his mom had told him about his brothers. It was a good sign that he was happy to talk to us.

City hall was bustling when we arrived. Debra showed us straight into the mayor’s office where Hestia went about the introductions we’d neglected to do. The young metamorph/mage seemed content to stay with the brownie. He was fascinated by Cian. Speculation was that the bodach and brownie had made their relationship official over Christmas.

I tuned in to hear Hestia say in a sad voice, “unfortunately there is no one here capable of working with your needs. There is another sanctuary in Westhaven that has the people we would need to restore your shifting and heal you fully.”

“I’ve heard rumors that Longwei has gone there,” Daxton said. “So, if you’d be okay with it Riley, I’d still like to go. Maybe I could take Mom with me and once she is ready we can come back?”

There were sounds of agreement, but all I could focus on was Riley. His sadness bled into our bond. “Ry?”

“Mom, Dax, I want to stay here. Gareth has his life here, and I’m finally making friends. I want to see you healthy as much as anything, but I have to think of him.”

Molly looked at her sons, then me. “Of course you do. In fact, I was wondering if you could do me a favor.”

“Anything,” I said, desperate to keep Riley here in Greyhaven with me. In the first place he had felt free and happy. I would have traveled all over with him without hesitation. Riley had chosen to stay here.

“Could the pair of you look after Jayden? He needs stability, healing, love. I just...” She pushed down whatever emotion stopped her words. “I don’t feel like I can be the parent he needs right now. Could you two try?”

Riley looked at me hopefully. Outside of the office, I could see Jayden eating a cookie and smiling at something. He was so innocent and sweet.

I took Riley’s hand and squeezed it. “We would be honored.”



# Epilogue

Riley

## **Valentine's Day**

“RILEY, CAN I WAKE Gareth up now, please? I want to show him my pancakes.” Jayden was giving me a spectacular pout for making him wait to deliver this breakfast.

“I’m just finishing up with the strawberries and I’ll have to carry the tray. You’re strong, but we don’t want to spill the coffee again, do we?” I said as gently as possible.

We had come a long way in the last few weeks with Jayden. He was still small and skinny, though with how much he ate, he was filling out. We had him enrolled in school. While he was behind, it was a lack of opportunity rather than any learning issues. He was picking things up quickly and, despite his solitary upbringing, he was friendly. Mom had done an amazing job with him, no matter what she thought. Jayden was a sweet kid, well mannered, a little too polite, likely to avoid



Boyce's notice. The therapist, a witch and empath, said it was a sign of trauma. It was something they were working on in their sessions.

Mom was still in Westhaven. I'd received a couple of calls from her apologizing for leaving Jayden with me and asking us to keep him for longer. She was making substantial progress in her therapy, yet it was going to take many months, if not longer, for her to raise a kid alone. Then last week, she had found her fated mate. The man was a bear shifter and held the position of alpha over a decent sized pack within Westhaven's territory. Mom said he was looking forward to meeting us all, then begged us to keep Jayden for longer.

Austin, her mate, then called me a couple of days later saying Mom had gone through a setback in her therapy. Both he and the therapist believed she felt so much guilt and shame over Jayden that he wondered if we would consider asking to adopt him. I liked Austin. He seemed to really care for my mom. He said he wanted to be a father to us all, but after everything she had gone through, Mom was killing herself with the shame she carried over not being able to be Jayden's mother properly. Austin thought if we raised him as his dads, then she could take a step back and love him in a new way, without the guilt of Jayden being parentless.

Gareth had loved the plan and so had my mom, when I had worked up the courage to ask her. Hestia was going to draw up the papers with the head of Westhaven. Then, when Daxton and Longwei finally came home, they would bring us the proof that Jayden was ours.

We just had to tell him.

I tucked the printed out email Mom had sent to explain to Jayden alongside the breakfast I had made for us all to enjoy in bed. We didn't have long before Jayden's other surprise.

"Okay, I'm ready. Here, take this." I handed Jayden a red rose. I know, cliché. He took it and went ahead of me into the bedroom.

"Oh hey, Jay. What've you got there?" Gareth was sitting up, scrolling through his phone. He set it aside when we entered the room.

"Happy Valen... Valentine's Day!"

I set the tray on his lap, gave Gareth a kiss and carefully climbed onto the bed, pulling Jay into my lap.

"Thanks, Jay! Did you make these pancakes?" Gareth asked.

"I did! Riley helped me."

"Did he now?" Gareth winked at me.

"I let him cut the fruit!" Jayden giggled.

"Here." I handed Jayden his little plate, which held a pancake with a smiley face made of strawberries and a banana. I'd sliced the banana first, naturally. I'd learned plenty of parenting lessons in the last few weeks.

Gareth took a sip of his coffee and nibbled on a strawberry. "Ready?" he asked me.

I nodded. Jayden was too busy eating to pay attention. "Jayden? Me and Gareth wanted to ask you something."

Jayden paused, sitting stiffly. He said nothing.

“Me and Riley really want to be your dads. Would you let us adopt you?”

“So I’d have two dads and a mommy?” I wondered if Jayden already knew what was happening. He had stopped asking for Mom the day after she had left for Westhaven.

“No. Mom would be your grandma or nana instead of your mommy. She loves you so much, but she’s going to be getting better for a long time. She wants you to have two parents here that can give you all the love in the world....” I had to wrestle my emotions under control. “Mommy loves you so much she wants to give you to us to look after because she can’t.”

“So I get two dads and a nana? I’ve never had a nana before.”

“Don’t forget Austin. He’ll be your grandpa one day.”

He considered it for all of a minute. “I like Austin. He’s a bear. Okay. You can be my dads.”

I shared a tearful smile with Gareth. It was a lot. It was fast. There was nothing I wanted more.

“There’s something else I wanted to show you. Something special that people like us keep for only family.”

“What?” I had Jayden’s full attention.

“You know how you can be a hedgehog, a mouse, or even a puppy?” Jayden only had smaller animal forms and only a few of them since he was only half metamorph. Jayden nodded.

“Well, I have a special form that you might have one day if you meet your fated mate. Gareth gave me mine.” I explained. “He’s seen it, and sometimes at home I will want to let it out. I don’t want it to be scary for you, so I thought I would show you it now we know you are staying here forever.”

Jayden met my eyes, curiosity burning there. “I’m not scared.”

Gareth wrapped an arm around him and pulled him off my lap to sit with him instead. “It looks so cool when he shifts. You’re going to love it.”

Getting off the bed, I faced the pair and let the shift come over me without a form in mind. It had taken me a long time to practice this. Gareth had pulled all the information Greyhaven had on metamorphs so that we could teach Jayden about his abilities better. My mate was also in charge of his magic lessons.

The form, when it came, was as black as a void. I knew my eyes glowed an eerie amber color, the only light on my body. I had fur, scales, and feathers running all over me. My wings were both bat-like and had longer flight feathers, like the one I’d gifted to Gareth. I had paws with wicked claws for hands and clawed feet like a bird. My legs were long and slender. Instead of a nose, I had a beak, but also with fangs. My neck could turn all the way around like an owl and I had a mane like a horse. My ears moved independently of each other. I was all and not just one thing.

Our son let out a breath of wonder, his eyes wide. “Can I touch?”

I made a chirruping sound, then nodded for good measure. Patiently I stood while Jayden poked and asked Gareth questions. I caught a look at the time and shifted back. “We need to get ready for school! Oscar will be here any minute.”

“Fu—dge!” Gareth recovered from his mistake. “Have my pancake, Jay. I better hurry.” He rushed into the bathroom and I heard the water turning on.

I sat eating with Jayden while he peppered me with questions. “Who should I call Dad? And what do I call the other one?”

“We can be Dad one and Dad two?” Jayden laughed and shook his head. “No, you’re right, that sounds silly and it would hurt Gareth’s feelings to be Dad two all the time. Obviously I’m Dad one because I’m the best.”

“You can be Dad and Gareth Baba.”

“Baba?”

Jayden blushed. “A girl at school calls her daddy Baba.”

“I like it. Now come get ready for school.”

Our morning routine was already out the window, so I just let Jay pick whatever he wanted to wear to school as long as he actually got dressed. I got him washed in his bathroom while Gareth finished up in the shower. Once Riley was in school, I’d clean up the house and shower. Maybe I’d work on Jayden’s room some more. Over the last week, I’d been

painting him a mural in his room. I was rocking the stay-at-home parent gig. We had plenty of time for me to decide what to do with myself.

The doorbell rang, Oscar on the other side of the door. He didn't wait for me to answer, just walked in. Greyhaven residents didn't really lock their doors. I still did it out of habit, but had unlocked it when I'd started breakfast.

"Hey, Oscar," I called. "Gareth's running late."

"Uncle Oscar, I have two dads now!"

Oscar crouched to speak to my new son. That was going to take a lot of getting used to. "That's amazing! You are so lucky, Jay!"

They hugged as Gareth exited our bedroom and picked up his coat from the entryway. He came over and kissed me quickly before ruffling Jayden's hair. "See you later?" We had dinner booked for just us. Oscar was on babysitting duty.

"Yeah. Have a good day."

They were halfway out the door when Jayden called, "bye Baba, bye Uncle Oscar."

Gareth stumbled a bit, looked around and walked into the doorframe, but I'd never seen him happier.

"We better get a move on, too. Want me to shift today?" Jayden liked me to walk in animal form alongside him. I'd been a bear, tiger, and my German Shepherd form. The kids at school loved it.

“Can you be a pony today? I’m tired and don’t want to walk.”

“Are you okay?” I felt his forehead. He seemed normal. Just a little pale, likely because we had been up earlier to cook. He wasn’t always sleeping through from nightmares and bedwetting. All things that would pass with a lot of love and safety. “Sure thing, little man.”

When we got outside, I shifted into a Shetland pony so Jayden could climb on easily. He held my mane all the way to the school. All the children from his class were late inside because I had to let them have a ride around the playground.



## **Gareth**

“Are you sure you’re okay babysitting?”

“Relax Gar, I’m going to have a great night with my little dude. We’re going to get pizza delivered and watch a movie,” Oscar said with an edge of excitement. I worried after his last relationship blew up and he had to leave his coven that he would be down on such a romantic holiday, but he really didn’t seem bothered. He genuinely seemed to want to spend it with my new son.

Son. The word was on repeat in my mind. It had been ever since Molly and Austin had asked us. The alpha bear had grown kids of his own and they had already decided not to have any more. Molly wasn't handling the trauma she went through around having Jayden. We still didn't know who his warlock parent was. His magic was there, easy to sense. He could be powerful with training. A worry for another day.

Oscar went ahead of me into the house I shared with Riley and Jayden. Before Riley had arrived in my life, the house had been lonely. Now it was full of life and joy. My favorite time of day was coming home to my family.

I greeted Jay with a hug and Riley with a kiss. Riley was helping Jayden with a painting. "I'm painting us for the fridge!" Jay said proudly, puffing out his chest. There was something off about him. A lack of his usual energy. I felt his forehead. It was fine, so I dismissed it.

"Just going to get ready for dinner. Do you need me to do anything?" I asked Riley.

"Nah, I just need to change my shirt. Os, I've ordered your pizza. It'll be here soon."

I was just leaving the bedroom, ready for dinner, when the doorbell went. "I'll get it," Jayden yelled as he sprinted for the door. He struggled to open it, so I helped him and handed Raina her tip as she gave me the box. All her attention was on our little boy. "Can I touch your wings?" He had been working up the courage to ask her.



“Of course! Maybe one day I can take you flying,” Raina caught my expression. “Not high, of course! Plus, you could be a bird, couldn’t you?” I winced. We knew Jayden had a few forms, but none of them had flight so far. “Anyway, I better get going. Lots of deliveries to do and, of course, Keifer is nowhere to be found. Bye!”

Jayden said nothing about flying, which had alarm bells ringing. He just followed me into the kitchen and sat in his chair.

“We better get going if we’re going to make that reservation.” Riley looked gorgeous in an emerald green shirt under a black waistcoat. We were matched in height, but his legs looked so long in his black tailored pants. He hugged Oscar, kissed Jayden on the head before taking my hand and towing me to the door. “Have a good night! See you in a couple of hours.”

The restaurant was busy. This early table was the only one they had free. While Riley could leave Greyhaven, he hadn’t wanted to go to another town for dinner with Jayden at home. Both of us preferred to be close by in case he needed us.

“Did Jay seem off to you at all?” I asked him over our main courses. The worry had been in the back of my head all day. I just couldn’t ignore it anymore.

“A little.” Riley laughed. “Look at us. Barely parents and already this is all we talk about. Are you sure this is what you want?”

Alarmed, I asked, “What do you mean?”

“We could still be mated if me and Jayden lived elsewhere. We could date and let things progress at a slower pace.”

“Where’s this coming from, Riley?” It didn’t feel like this was something he wanted. The bond held some doubt, but it was hollow.

“A parent at the school heard Jayden call me Dad, and she made some comments.” He didn’t meet my eyes.

I took his hand and squeezed it. “It’s everything I didn’t know I wanted. Honestly, I think Jayden is a gift from the fates. You make me so happy and he just makes it... I dunno... just more, y’know?”

“Yeah,” Riley smiled, a dimple popping in his cheek. “We would have been fine just the two of us. Jayden just makes it better. Ties us closer, I think.”

“Exactly.”

We lapsed into silence before we both tried to speak over each other. “Want to get this to go and head home?” Riley asked.

“So much! You read my mind.”

Within minutes, we were on our way home. Riley got a call when we were a block away. “Riley, Jayden isn’t well, he’s running a fever. What should I do?”

I took the phone from Riley and wrapped an arm around him. “Oscar, there’s medicine in our bathroom cabinet, but remember, you have healing magic.”

“No! I can’t use magic on him. What if I hurt him?”

“You’re going to be a healer, Os. Sometimes you have to hurt to heal. Not this time, though. Just seek out what’s wrong and we’ll be home in a minute.”

“But your dinner!” The poor guy was panicking, much like Riley was. He was almost running, trying to get home faster.

“We were nearly home anyways. Both of us felt something off with him. Sorry, we asked you to babysit when we weren’t sure he was okay.”

“No, it’s okay. It’s Valentine’s Day and you are so new.” We entered the house, going straight to the living room where Jayden was looking pale and sweaty. Oscar hung up and flung the phone on the couch. “Oh, thank the goddess!”

“Daddy? Baba?”

Riley knelt in front of Jayden. “We’re here. Let’s get you fixed up.”

With me watching, Oscar checked him over. He’d been covering healing in his classes, so he knew what to do. I got it was different on someone you cared about, though. “Hmmm, I think it’s just a virus. I can help with the fever, but I think it needs to burn out.”

Riley looked at me for my opinion. “I think we should just stick with the medicine we have. We stocked up on things after Hestia visited to welcome Jay to town.”

“Well, okay. I’m going to get out of your hair. See you in the morning?” I nodded and led Oscar out.

When I came back, Riley was feeding Jayden the medicine and tucking him under a blanket on the sofa. I took the food to the kitchen, put it on plates, and headed back to my guys. “Here.” I handed Riley his plate and silverware. He thanked me and settled in to eat with Jayden between us.

“Movie on?” Jayden asked sleepily. He was resting against Riley, the remote in his little hand.

Riley hit the button for the movie. Within minutes, Jayden was asleep.

It might not have been the romantic night we had planned, yet this Valentine’s Day had been the best one I’d ever had.

I leaned over Jayden to kiss Riley’s cheek. “How about a do over when Dax and Longwei get back?”

He smiled. “Hopefully it won’t take Dax much longer to convince Longwei we need him here.”

“Don’t worry, I might not know your brother well, but I know he won’t give up until he gets what he wants.

“Like you, you mean?” Riley grinned, his eyes lit with happiness.

“I had to convince you somehow. As soon as I saw you, I just knew you were going to change my life.”

“And you saved mine.”

“I’d do it all again, just to land up here with everything I ever wanted. I love you, Riley.”

“Love you too.”

The end.



# Afterword

Thank you for reading Cursed at Christmas. This book marks the start of a new series that also pulls in characters from my standalone novel, My Demon Husband. However, it is unnecessary to have read that first. Oscar is a character from there that felt his story wasn't quite done. In the Greyhaven series he will get his own book.

At the moment, there are four more books planned for this series.

If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review. Each review helps so much.





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# Also By

## **Sweetwater Pack Series**

*His Reluctant Omega Mate*

*His Forbidden Beta Mate (short story)*

*His Rejected Alpha Mate*

*His Bonded Omega Mate*

*His Unexpected Gift (a Bonded bonus)*<br>

## **Northarbor Coven Series**

*January Blues*

## **Second Chances Series**

*So Worth More*

*So Worth More: The Wedding #1.5 (Freebie short)*

*For All It's Worth*

**Standalone spin-off**

*It's Truth For Love*

**Love Abroad**

*Under a Greek Twilight*

**Possessive Love**

*My Demon Husband*

**Short Stories**

*Growing Love*

*Last Call*



# About Author

Jax Stuart is a Scottish-born author, mum of two and owner of a menagerie (two cats, a tortoise and 3 fish tanks of fish!).

She started writing her first book at age eleven, but gave writing up for years. A big birthday prompted her to finally go after that publishing dream.

When she isn't writing, Jax is an avid reader and likes to spend time with friends and family.

You can find her on:



Or come join her reader group: Stuart's Syndicate