

HITCHED LIVE
SEASON 2

Dark
Desire

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
G.K. DEROSA

DARK DESIRE

HITCHED LIVE, SEASON 2

G.K. DEROSA



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*To all my Vella readers who continue to provide invaluable
ideas for this story. I couldn't do it without you!*

~ GK

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ABOUT ME



*S*lade

Where was that tiger tool anyway? Deacon better not have gone chasing after Dawny. He was practically drooling all over her at breakfast, which made me wonder if something more had happened between them? He needed to get that cute pixie out of his system and his head back in the game. Or we'd all be screwed.

This was not the time to get attached. My traitorous thoughts flickered back to a certain drunk she-dragon. Those lips capturing mine, like they were hers to steal.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I paced in front of Deacon's door on the third floor of the modern villa, pulling at my wild hair from the roots. *Nope, not going there.* We needed to find Roxy and fast. A pit of dread gnawed at my insides, burrowing deeper with every second that passed.

I was the last one to see her, the last one seen with her.

All of these incidents were about me; I was certain of it. If anything had happened to the little fox, I was the one to blame. I couldn't risk anyone else.

I rammed my fist into the door and the thick timber cracked, four fissures zipping across the black wood. Damn, it felt good. I pulled my arm back for another hit when the shuffle of approaching footsteps stilled my fist.

Rose appeared around the corner, her lips pulling into a scowl as her gaze landed on me. “What did the door do to you?”

“It’s standing in my way, precious.”

“Deacon has banned you from his room for your misdeeds?” She walked closer, hands on her hips.

“Misdeeds? I haven’t done a damned thing, she-dragon.” And gods, I wanted to last night.

She glared up at me, eyes narrowed, her pupils nothing more than thin slits. “So you’re sticking with your story about Roxy?”

My jaw ticked, a volley of curses barely restrained between my clenched teeth. “I never saw her,” I growled. “Hell, I never even hooked up with her.” I supposed the truth would come out eventually. The bet between the sisters would have to be put aside for now. Getting to the bottom of Roxy’s disappearance was far more important.

“You’re such a liar, Slade. I saw you coming out of the bathroom with her.”

Every tether of restraint snapped. I lunged at the infuriating dragon, trapping her against the cool white wall. She let out a satisfying squeal as I pinned her, my body flush against hers.

Flames flickered across those golden irises, and a growl vibrated her throat, rumbling through both our bodies. “Back off,” she snarled.

“Ooh, I like this fiery side, precious. Let her free, let’s see that gorgeous dragon.” She eyed the narrow hallway and looming rafters. Despite the high ceilings, her thirty-foot beast would take out the entire third floor. She knew that as well as I did.

Rose blinked quickly, and her pupils rounded. Her shoulders slumped against the wall, and she released a frustrated sigh.

“The only female I hooked up with last night was you,” I whispered.

Deep crimson flushed her cheeks, and damn, that sultry, cinnamon charred scent filled the air between us. We remained trapped against the wall, eyes locked for an interminable moment. The air thickened between us, along with a lower part of my anatomy. I shifted uncomfortably in a vain attempt to control the lusty urges.

Rose squeezed her eyes closed and turned her head to the side. “That’s not true. You kissed Harper too.”

A grunt slid between my clenched lips. “For someone who doesn’t care about me at all, you certainly are keeping close tabs on me.” I snagged her chin between my fingers and forced her eyes to mine. “And for the record, I said hooked up with, not kissed. What you saw in the hallway with Harper was only a peck.”

She glared up at me, jaw clenched in a defiant expression.

“You are the only woman I was with last night.” I repeated the words slowly, punctuating each one. *The only one I wanted to be with...* I didn’t dare whisper the treacherous words. Instead, I tossed the errant thought to the furthest corners of my mind.

“Then why didn’t you say that last night when we found you with her?”

“Maybe I enjoy getting a rise out of you.” I smirked.

Rose shoved me back, palms fitting too perfectly against my chest. I finally released her and took a step back, putting some much-needed space between our bodies. I could still feel her warmth after we separated, the feeling oddly discomfoting.

Heavy footfalls jerked my attention down the corridor. Deacon stomped toward us, a scowl carved into the tiger’s face.

“Where have you been?” I barked.

“Checking the camera footage, demon douche. That would be the smartest place to start, right?”

Rose chuckled.

I shot her a narrowed glare but didn’t engage. “And what did you find?”

He opened the door to his bedroom and ushered us in. The floor-to-ceiling glass enclosure showcased the sprawling jungle around the villa. “Nothing, of course. I was stonewalled by the crew manager. He said he had to check with Shep before giving me access to the footage.”

“And let me guess, our producer is conveniently off set?” I barely restrained the urge to roll my eyes.

“Until this evening, but the guy promised to take a look through last night’s footage himself.” Deacon paused, then eyed me. “Starting with the two of you exiting the first-floor bathroom.”

“Good. That was the last time I saw her so hopefully the camera caught more.”

Rose scoffed, and I curled my fingers into tight fists to keep from hitting the wall again. Deacon’s curious gaze darted between us. “Everything okay here?”

The she-dragon perked right up, gifting him a mega-watt smile. “Yes, perfect. I actually came looking for you. I was hoping I could help you find Roxy.”

“Such an eager little helper.” I flashed her a sneer.

“We need all the help we can get,” Deacon answered. “In fact, I was coming to get Slade, then to recruit the rest of the ladies. We need to scour the property. Roxy couldn’t have gone far.” He turned to Rose and squeezed her shoulder. “Would you do me a favor and round up the other bachelorettes?”

She nodded quickly, her eyes lighting up like a freaking Golden Doodle. “Of course.”

“Thank you. We’ll meet in the front foyer in five.”

With another quick dip of her head, Rose darted out of the room and down the hallway toward the girls’ wing. As soon as she was out of earshot, I turned to the tiger. “I got a bad feeling about this, D.”

“Why?”

This time I couldn’t suppress the overly dramatic eyeroll.

“Okay, sorry, stupid question. I know why in general, but any specific reason?”

“Just a gut feeling.” My hand went to my chest, and I attempted to rub the anxiety away. I failed. “We have to find Roxy now.” Deacon reached for my shoulder and squeezed. I

was so surprised by the reassuring touch my brows shot to my hairline. “Easy, tiger, while I’d love to have a taste of your beast, now’s not the time.”

“Ass,” he grumbled and snapped his hand back. “That’s the last time I try to make you feel better.”

I shot him a smirk. “I do appreciate the effort.”

His expression grew serious, and he seared me with those feline eyes. “Now, before we go down there, I need you to tell me the truth. I’m not one of the girls so I don’t care how many of them you’re fucking around with. You swear you never saw Roxy after the bathroom incident?”

“Yes,” I gritted out. “The last time I saw the fox shifter was heading out to join the girls on the dance floor.”

“Okay.” He muttered the word on an exhale, like he was relieved somehow. He really thought I’d lied to Rose. A pinch of irritation roiled inside my rumbling gut. I may have been many things, but a liar was not one of them.

“I’ve always been very upfront with the women I frequent, Deacon. I don’t lie or sneak around.” I threw my friend a pointed glare.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I just had to ask.”

My head dipped, then I turned for the door. We were wasting time. We had to find Roxy and figure out what the hades was going on.

Rose

My racing heart finally slowed as I marched away from Deacon's chamber. The hallway was quiet, giving me a second to reflect on the erratic flutter before I reached the girls' wing. I didn't want to think about what it meant, couldn't even contemplate the traitorous beats around the demon bachelor.

Gods, I'd been such an idiot last night. Why had I let myself drink so much? I'd practically thrown myself at Slade for absolutely no explicable reason, and the slutty incubus had actually denied me. I wasn't sure what was worse, that I'd tried to hook up with him or that he'd refused me. Heat flooded my cheeks at the hazy memories. His lips ghosted over mine, those warm hands all over me. The feel of him was seared into my flesh, and it had haunted me all night. It had to be the sex demon thing, right?

I was never drinking Fae wine again.

Shaking off the lusty thoughts, I trudged through the archway into the bachelorettes' side. None of that mattered right now. We had to find Roxy. A murmur of voices reached my ears before I turned the corner to the entertainment room. All the girls were gathered, sprawled across the couches, except for Iris. She paced the room, staring out into the Manta Sea.

The faery spun at me as soon as I walked in. "Did they find her?"

I shook my head. "I'm, sorry, nothing yet, but Deacon asked me to round up everyone and meet in the foyer. We're going to search the villa and grounds for her."

Harper shot up and stood beside me. "This is just terrible, poor Roxy. I hope they find her soon."

“Why is everyone so worried?” Arista sipped on her iced coffee and leaned against the pool table. “She probably just got wasted and passed out somewhere. You’re all overreacting.”

“My sister wouldn’t get wasted and wonder off like that.” Iris speared the mermaid with a glare, and deep green vines sprouted from her palms. They crawled up her arms and pointed at Arista, like leafy missiles.

Everly stepped between the girls, her downy wings unfolding. “Calm down, ladies. Arguing isn’t going to help us find Roxy.”

“She’s right,” I blurted. “Deacon and Slade are waiting for us downstairs. They’re trying to organize the search party and they’re waiting for us.”

“What about the production team? What are they doing?” Crystal asked.

A big fat nothing, like usual. I kept the thought to myself. There was enough drama going on without adding to it. “I’m not sure exactly, but they are reviewing the video footage from last night.”

“You see, Iris? I’m sure they’ll find Roxy in no time.” Arista gave the girl a forced smile before she sucked down the rest of her latte, the loud slurp echoing through the tense room.

“Let’s just go, please.” Iris led the way, and I quickly moved into step beside her. I didn’t know much about the Fae female or her sister, but I needed to find out more.

“So you and Roxy are half-sisters, right?” I asked.

Iris nodded, her lips pressed into a tight line. “We grew up together though, with our mom. Our dads are both kind of assholes, so Mom left them both and raised us on her own.”

She wrung her fingers as we walked down the staircase. “Sorry, that was probably TMI, but when I’m nervous, I ramble.”

“No, don’t worry. It’s fine. I’d love to hear more about her.”

“She’s a year and a half younger than me and has always been the fiery, feisty one. I’m her big sister. I’m supposed to look out for her.”

“So maybe Arista is right... maybe she just curled up somewhere and fell asleep?”

Iris shook her head. “Roxy wouldn’t have gone off by herself. Since we got here, I’ve gone everywhere with her. She told me she was going to meet Slade. That’s the only reason she went by herself.” She heaved out a breath as we stepped into the foyer. Deacon and Slade were already there waiting. “I never should’ve made that stupid bet with her.”

“What bet?”

“To see which one of us could hook up with one of the bachelors first.” Her lips twisted. “If I hadn’t pushed her, she never would’ve gone to meet Slade and she’d still be here right now.”

My stomach clenched at the thought of Slade’s hands on the cute redhead.

She eyed the demon bachelor from across the foyer. “You don’t think he would’ve hurt her, do you?”

My heartrate escalated, a maddening thump vibrating my chest. My mind whirled to only a few moments ago, to being pinned against the wall by the dark lord. For some reason, I believed him. Or maybe I was just stupid and wanted to. “I just don’t know,” I finally murmured.

THE SEARCH PARTY



Deacon

“Thanks for coming, everyone. The staff has volunteered to search the villa, since they know the house better than anyone, which leaves the exterior of the property up to us.” I stood at the top of the front porch steps with Slade fidgeting beside me. The remaining seven bachelorettes all peered up at me from the driveway, Iris’s dismal gaze particularly piercing.

The entire sprawling jungle lay in front of us, a tangle of deep greens. To say it was intimidating would be the understatement of the century. It was just past noon, and the sun was high in the sky its heat boring down on us. A trickle of sweat dribbled down my spine. If Roxy really was in trouble, we needed to find her before nightfall. During my brief tenure with the SIA, it had been drilled into us how important it was to find a missing person within the first twenty-four hours. “We’ll split up in groups of two and search the perimeter.” I pulled out a blueprint of the property I’d managed to persuade out of Sam, along with five sets of coms from the crew. Pointing at the three-story glass villa, I continued, “We’ll start here and work our way out, this way.”

The door behind me slammed shut, and I spun around. My heart staggered on a beat as my eyes settled on Dawn, her pink wings fluttering nervously. “Sorry, I heard about Roxy and wanted to help.”

“The more the merrier.” Slade jabbed his elbow into my side, and I barely suppressed a growl.

Dawn stepped beside me, and her sweet scent drifted toward me. My tiger let out a contented chuff, and Slade slid me a dark glare. *Shit*. “Any questions?” I shifted my focus to the women in front of me, ignoring my friend and my tiger.

A quiet murmur rippled across the ladies.

“Let’s just go quickly, please,” said Iris. “I just have this terrible feeling...”

Slade shot me another glare, and this one I couldn’t ignore. Gods, I hoped everyone was wrong.

I turned to Dawn, her silver irises sparkling as she glanced up at me. “Um, do you want to go togeth—”

Rose jumped between us and wrapped her arm around mine. “Let’s get moving. We have to find that girl.”

“Oh, yeah, sure.” My gaze darted to Dawn then to Rose, and I offered the cute pixie a shrug as I mouthed a quick, “Sorry.”

Her head dipped, and an awkward silence ensued for an incredibly long minute before Slade leapt between us. “Come on, Dawny, you’re with me.”

I glanced from the demon to Dawn and back, and another growl echoed deep in my gut. My crazy territorial tiger was not pleased with this situation. Knowing the mischievous

demon ass, he'd probably try to pump her for info on us. "Keep it professional," I gritted out through clenched teeth.

Slade slid me a smirk. "Of course, tiger tool."

Clearing my throat, I returned my focus to the remaining bachelorettes to pair them off. "You'll each have a set of coms so we can all be in constant communication." I held up the small black earpieces. "Okay, we'll start with Harper and—"

"Everly," Slade shouted over me.

Rose eyed him, her dark brows lifting before her expression returned to neutral. I didn't miss it though, and more importantly, neither did Slade. His mouth twisted into a smug grin. What the hell was going on with those two?

"Continue." Slade jabbed me in the side again.

"Fine. Harper and Everly, Arista and Chance, Crystal and Iris." I handed out the coms, then pointed on the blueprint again and traced the paths each pair would take. "If you see anything, no matter how insignificant, let me know immediately."

"Don't worry, Deacon, we've got this." Harper shot me a smile. I supposed it was smart of Slade to put the human with the angel. If she got into any trouble, at least Everly could help her. I glanced at the dark lord from the corner of my eye. Did he really care about the girl? Or was he just trying to score good-guy points with Rose?

"Let's move out!" Slade and Dawn turned toward the cliffside, and I couldn't help from trailing after them.

"Come on, Deac." Rose tugged on my arm, diverting my attention. "You ready?"

“Sure am.” I led the way, taking the path toward the Bath House. A whole week here, and still, I’d yet to venture in there. Maybe it was the memories of last season, when Aspen and one of the bachelor’s got trapped at the old bath house with gargoyle assassins. I shook off the uneasy thoughts and traipsed down the drive.

“You okay?” Rose sidled up beside me and cocked her head, her golden irises shimmering beneath the brilliant sun.

“Yeah, just tired, I didn’t sleep well last night. And I’m worried about Roxy, of course.”

“Of course.”

“How was the rest of your night?”

Rose pressed her arms across her chest, and her entire posture stiffened. “Fine,” she gritted out.

“Sorry I ran out on you early.”

A smile formed across her lips, but somehow it seemed strained. “Don’t worry about it. It was probably for the best. I had a little too much Fae wine at the after party, and to be honest, I don’t remember much of the night at all.”

I let out a low whistle. I couldn’t imagine the prim female letting loose like that. “Now I’m regretting having missed that.”

She released a rueful chuckle. “Trust me, it’s for the best. It wasn’t one of my most stellar moments.”

“I’m sure Slade would’ve loved to witness that—” I cut myself off when her eyes went comically round. “What?”

She snapped her mouth shut and gazed up at me, all graceful innocence. “Hmm?”

I slowed and turned to face her. “What is it with you and the demon dark lord?”

“Ugh, he’s just infuriating,” she hissed. “I don’t understand how anyone could tolerate him—”

I raised my hand, my turn to cut her off. “Slade might be a lot to handle sometimes, but he’s a good man. I’ve witnessed it firsthand, so don’t insult the demon until you’ve gotten to know him like I have.” I wasn’t even sure where the words came from until they were out of my mouth. Damn, did I actually care about the slutty incubus?

“Sorry,” she murmured. “He just drives me so crazy sometimes...” A rosy hue blossomed across her cheeks, and she dropped her gaze to the lush grass.

Yup, there’s definitely something there.

A long minute later, she lifted her shimmering eyes to mine once more. “I never expected this all to be so complicated. I came here with a very clear idea in mind, and with every passing day, it’s harder to remember why I came in the first place.”

“I get it, trust me.” I slid my hands into my pockets and released a breath. This whole season was supposed to be about me, me and my tiger having fun. Then Slade showed up, and then all the usual bullshit, and just when I finally decided to let go and have a good time, this happens. Not to mention, my choice for a good time was the worst possible one.

Because I *liked* Dawn.

And that was *not* the plan.

Worse, I also felt something for the female walking beside me, and I’d have to be blind not to see that she had a thing for

Slade. Rose might not be able to admit it, but the truth was clear.

“And it’s only been a week.” Her quiet whisper pulled me from my spiraling thoughts.

“It only gets harder, trust me. You’d think it would get easier with less competition, but the truth is as feelings start to deepen, every elimination grows more painful.”

“Why did I sign up for this show again?” She let out another half-hearted chuckle.

My thoughts swirled back to our one-on-one date on the beach just a few days ago. “Because you were looking for love, remember?”

“Right.” She smiled, and this time the warmth reached her eyes. “Anyway, enough about us, we’ve got a girl to find.”

I nodded and lengthened my stride, leading us toward the Bath House.

Slade

“Dawny, you’re awfully quiet.” I smirked at the pixie as we plodded down the hundreds of steps to the beach below.

She peered up at me, silver irises in a turmoil. “I’m just so worried about that poor girl.”

Her words wiped the smug smile right off my damned face. She was right; this was a serious matter. I shouldn’t be trying to use this time alone with our faery stylist to get dirt on her and my friend. Although, wasn’t it my job to protect that silly tiger from himself?

She picked up the pace, racing down the last few steps. Once we reached the beach, her wings gave a nervous flutter. She eyed the rolling waves of the Manta Sea, and her slender shoulders rounded. “I’d hoped we’d find her passed out on the sand somewhere.”

“I had the same thought myself.” I walked further down along the narrow shore, nothing but the cliffside to our right and the crystalline waters on the opposite side.

“You don’t think she would’ve gone for a midnight swim, do you?” She gazed out across the sea. “Oh, goddess, I hope she didn’t drown.”

“I have no idea, Dawny. Women do strange things when they’ve been drinking.” My lips twisted, unbidden. It was easy to put on the smirking mask when Rose chose Deacon to partner with, much easier than facing the pang her choice elicited.

“Come on, let’s keep walking down the beach.”

“After you.” I motioned to the cute pixie, and she actually rewarded me with a smile. It was the best one I’d gotten from her since I’d arrived on this damned island.

We walked for a while in silence, scanning the horizon, the sea, the strip of sand below the cliffs. Nothing. I willed the girl’s bright red hair to appear, but nothing but blue and powder sand stretched before us.

“Why don’t you like me?” I blurted after a long bout of silence.

Our stylist spun around, perky nose scrunched up. “I never said I didn’t like you.”

“You don’t have to say a word, Dawny. I’ve never met anyone with such an expressive face. Your mouth might not

move but the crinkle of your eyes, the scrunch of your nose, the creasing of your forehead, they speak volumes.”

Her innocent smile turned sheepish. She drew in a breath and exhaled slowly. “It’s not that I don’t like you, Slade. It’s that I met Deacon first, and I think he’s such a great guy. I only want what’s best for him. He was so excited when he first arrived to have all the bachelorettes to himself, and I lied to him. I hated that. I knew you were coming, but I couldn’t tell him. So it’s not so much that I don’t like you, but more that I resent your presence here.” She shrugged, big bright eyes peering up at me.

“I accept that response. More than that, I admire it.” I gave her a smile, not my usual smirks, but a genuine one. A surprising prickle of guilt reared its head. I’d been trying to get Deacon to forget about the pixie, but maybe, just maybe, she was the best girl for him here.

A female voice shot across the com in my ear, the high pitch deafening. “I found something!”

AN INVESTIGATOR & A RANSOM



Iris

“Roxy was here, I know it!” I stared from the broken emerald bracelet strewn across the dirt pathway up to Crystal. My chest tightened, each breath more difficult than the last. Shit. “Something terrible happened to her.”

“Why do you say that?”

I knelt on the floor and peered down at the scattered pieces, tears blurring my eyes. “Because my Nonni gave me this bracelet, and I let Roxy borrow it last night for good luck. She was sure she was getting eliminated.”

Crystal eyed me like I was losing my mind.

I heaved in a breath and tried to explain better. “My dad left when he found out Mom had cheated on him with a shifter. He left us when I was barely two and my mom was only a couple months pregnant. Worse, he made sure the entire Spring Court knew what she’d done. She was ostracized by the royal Fae and lost everything. Sure, she made a mistake, but he didn’t have to abandon us like that. Anyway, for years we were alone, poor as shit, and one day, a fancy Fae woman showed up. She explained she was my grandmother and had

only just learned about my existence. Having found a family meant the world to me. Nonni gave me that bracelet before she died, and Roxy knew how much it meant to me. No way she would've just left it here like that." My throat tightened, the burn becoming impossible to swallow down.

"What did you find?" Deacon's voice echoed across the quiet jungle followed by heavy footfalls. He and Rose appeared first with Slade and that pixie stylist right on their heels.

I pointed at the glimmer of emerald encrusted within the silver bracelet. "That's Roxy's, well, mine, but she was wearing it last night."

Deacon crouched down and sniffed the piece of jewelry from a careful distance. When I'd found it, my first instinct had been to grab it, but thank the faeries I'd controlled myself. I'd learned enough about shifters to know their sense of smell is far more acute than ours. With any luck, maybe Deacon could track her down.

I slid down beside him, my heart raging against my ribs. "Do you smell anything? Do you know who took her?"

He scrunched his nose, nostrils flaring and inhaled another deep breath. "I'm sorry, I don't smell anything besides her."

"Maybe she went for a run in the jungle," Slade offered.

"No." I whipped my head back and forth. "She never would've left my bracelet like that. And anyway, since we arrived, she's only gone for a run once and I went with her. She's a fox, not a tiger. There are all kinds of wild animals out here."

Deacon offered me a reassuring smile. "We'll find her, I promise." He eyed the encroaching jungle as the rest of the

contestants arrived. Arista, Chance, Everly and Harper all joined our circle around the broken bracelet. “We’re going to have to expand our search perimeter.” He turned to Slade, his expression dark. “If Roxy went into the jungle, she could be anywhere.”

“She was kidnapped, I just know it,” I muttered. “There’s no way she would’ve gone by herself.”

Deacon nodded. “I believe you. We’ll head back to the villa to regroup and get some more supplies. We still have a couple hours of sunlight to search.”

“Thank you.”

Crystal wrapped her arm around me, and I sank into the tall human. “Don’t worry, girl, we’ll find her.” She’d been pretty decent with me today. It was the most I’d spoken to her since we’d arrived. With Roxy here, I hadn’t needed to make friends with any of the other contestants.

The rumble of an approaching vehicle sent my head spinning back toward the property. A huge black SUV rolled up the driveway with a motorcycle trailing on either side.

“What the...?” Deacon blurted as I marched back toward the villa.

“Please don’t tell me that’s—” Slade muttered.

The car stopped, and the back door swung open. A woman in a conservative black pantsuit and crisp white oxford stepped out. Her light hair was pulled back into a severe bun, dark sunglasses completing her foreboding look. Her head snapped in our direction, razing over each and every one of us.

“Investigator Rizin,” the bachelors murmured in unison.

Another door slammed before I could ask the bachelors about the woman. A tall dark-haired male rounded the vehicle, and Rose let out a gasp. Hot damn, even with at least twenty years on me, the guy was gorgeous.

“Uncle Ryder?” Rose squeaked.

I spun around to find her mouth open and eyes wide. “Who the faeries are these people?”

“SIA,” Deacon responded.

“Former SIA, actually.” The woman stepped closer and tipped her sunglasses up so her eyes fixed on each of us. Her pupils elongated, and Rose released another frustrated sigh. “I’m Investigator Rizin and this is my colleague, Ryder.”

“I just came along for the ride.” The male’s dark gaze settled on Rose. “Imagine my surprise when we discovered you were one of the contestants, Rosey.”

She weaved between the girls and leapt at the super hot SIA male, tugging on his tattooed arm until he bent down so she could whisper in his ear. “Oh, please, Uncle Ryder, tell me that you’re the only who knows I’m here?”

I doubted I was the only one who heard, out of all the supernaturals the Fae had the least sensitive senses. Probably the humans were the only ones who missed it.

“We’ll talk about this in private,” he murmured back.

“Yes, we have more important matters to deal with,” Investigator Rizin announced. “I got a call from the producer a few hours ago, and I’m here to assist in the investigation for the missing girl.”

“Roxy,” I blurted.

The investigator's icy gaze settled on me. "You must be the half-sister?"

I nodded.

"Very well, let's take this inside."

Deacon cleared his throat and stepped closer. "With all due respect, Rizin, we don't have many hours of daylight left. Shouldn't we be searching the area instead of conducting interviews?"

A grim line slashed her lips, eyes narrowing. "This is my investigation—"

"But—"

"Yes, yes, I know who you are and your past with the SIA, Mr. Darkridge. Nonetheless, we're doing things my way this time."

Slade

"This is such a joke," Deacon muttered under his breath as he sat perched on the end of the couch cushion.

The lovely investigator had rounded us all up in the great room for questioning. Like last season, her methods were sorely lacking. Instead of concentrating on the inane proceedings, my focus was on Rose and the male whispering across the room.

There was something familiar about him, something I couldn't quite place. He was a demon, of that I was sure, but beyond that, I couldn't figure out how the hades I knew him. I

strained to listen to their hushed conversation, but with all the excited murmurs in the room, I couldn't make out a damned thing.

“Slade!”

“Hmm?” I spun back to Deacon, and judging by the look of annoyance scrawled across his face, he must have been trying to get my attention for a while. “What’s up?”

“I said I’m surprised Shep got the SIA here so quickly.”

“Well, technically, she’s a private investigator with no obligation to report any of this fucked-upness.”

“That is true.”

I ticked my head at Rose and the unknown male. “Who’s that guy?”

Deacon’s expression lit up, his eyes going wide. “Ryder Strong. He’s a legend at the SIA. You’ve heard of the supernatural slayer squads, right?”

My head dipped.

“He was on the first team, along with his wife. That’s how they met. He went on to train dozens of teams after.”

“Are you fanboying about this guy?” I smirked. The tiger had a total hard-on for the male.

“Screw you,” he snarled. “I told you, he’s a legend.”

“And what’s his relationship to Rose?”

Deacon quirked a brow, the hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his lip. I ignored it, along with the sudden escalation of my pulse. “I’m not sure,” he finally answered. “He’s a demon though... maybe she’s got a thing for Underworlders.”

“Fuck off, tiger tool.”

His gaze felt heavy on me, too heavy. Deacon wasn't an idiot. It was only a matter of time before he'd ask...

"What's going on with you and Rose?"

"Nothing," I snapped. Too quickly. Too guiltily.

"Then why are you getting all hot and bothered?" The ass smirked. *At me!*

"I'm not." I slid off the couch and stood, throwing my shoulders back. "I need to use the bathroom."

Deacon grinned up at me, that stupid smile plastered across his face. "Don't be gone for too long, you don't want Rizin coming after you."

"I'll be back before she knows I'm gone." I marched out of the great room, a pair of golden irises trailing my steps, but I refused to meet that gaze. Because I knew who else would be watching me. Instead, I headed straight for the stairs. I needed a few minutes to compose myself.

I drew in a breath as I darted up the steps. It did little to loosen the knot in my chest. Roxy's disappearance had me on edge, and now the appearance of these two investigators was only heightening my anxiety.

It had nothing to do with a certain she-dragon.

When I reached my room, I whipped the door open and stomped straight for my bed. Maybe I could hide out in here for the next hour. For some reason, I was dreading the conversation with Investigator Rizin. Maybe it was because of how poor the first one had gone all those months ago when Castiel had been attacked.

As I approached the silky black comforter, a white scrap of paper caught my eye. My pulse spiked with each step closer.

Unfamiliar black lettering was scrawled across the note, but my name caught my eye from a distance.

No. No. No.

I crept closer, my heart rapping out a thunderous beat. Picking up the note, I scanned the dark writing.

My dear dark lord Slade,

If you wish to see the lovely shifter girl alive, come to the caves at the foot of the waterfall at midnight. Alone.

I muttered a curse and crumpled up the paper in my fist. I was right. This *was* about me.

A DATE WITH THE DEVIL



*S*lade

I dragged my hand through my hair, tugging at the ends as I stared at the scrap of paper. My heart slammed against my ribs like a battering ram. How was this happening? More importantly, who the hell would do this and what did they want? And what did Roxy have to do with any of it?

It had to be one of the Underworlders I pissed off, maybe one of the other dark lords or worse, a dark lord wannabe. There were always countless demons waiting to usurp my throne. Why the hades had I let Lucifer convince me to take on this damned title? It's been nothing but problems from day one.

The air in the room thickened, and the noxious scent of sulfur permeated the air. I drew in a breath and immediately regretted it as filth filled my lungs. No, no, not now. A swirl of darkness consumed the sunlight beaming in through the glass windows as if *his* very presence blotted out every shred of light.

The inky black twisted and bloated into a familiar figure.

Lucifer. As if I'd summoned the devil himself.

My grandsire stood in the middle of the chamber, the sunlight that had disappeared for an instant now haloing his tall, broad form. He was impeccable as always in his trademark three-piece suit and ruby pocket square. Still, that interminable darkness lingered along his features, crawling over his form. Brilliant blue irises pinned to mine, and I released a frustrated grunt.

“What’s the matter, my dear Slade, you aren’t happy to see me?”

“No,” I spat. “It’s not really a good time, Lucifer.” I squeezed the note tighter in my fist.

He stepped closer, his hair so dark it gleamed beneath the patches of sunlight daring to touch him. “Well, I haven’t heard from you in nearly a week. I’d hoped you would’ve gathered some useful intel by now.”

“They’re just girls, Lucifer. They don’t hold vital secrets to their respective realms.”

“How do you know for certain?”

“I don’t. Because it’s only been a week and the great reveal only happened yesterday. I wasn’t even certain from which houses these females belonged until the elimination ceremony.”

“And now that you do? Anyone interesting?”

Squeezing my hands into fists to keep from snarling at my grandsire, I pictured the remaining females. “Ocean Realm, Arista is betrothed to some noble. She’s likely a princess, the loftiest position of the group would be my guess. We have a Nephilim from Celestia, two regular humans, a unipeg shifter—which by the way I didn’t even know existed, a Spring Court faery, barely a Royal, and her sister, a fox shifter.” My

throat closed around the next words. “Who is currently missing...”

His eyes widened.

“Which is why I’m in a hurry, Lucifer. I need to find that girl before something happens because of me.”

“You?” His dark brows drew together as his curious gaze lanced over me.

I tossed the note at him. He scanned the paper, lips twisting. “Interesting...”

“Any ideas who could be behind it?”

Lucifer scoffed, an irritating twinkle in his eye as if he found this all so amusing. “It could really be anyone, couldn’t it? This TV show does have a rather dismal track record.”

“Can you help me find out?”

My grandsire’s lips pursed, and I immediately regretted asking. The prince of hell didn’t do favors without a price. Even for his own grandchildren.

“Never mind,” I snapped. “I’ll figure this one out on my own.” Just like I have for the past six months of my rule. I barreled past him toward the door, hoping he’d get the hint. “I really have to go. The investigator is waiting for me downstairs.”

He spun at me, fingers closing around my upper arm. “Just one more thing, Slade. It was my understanding there were eight women remaining. You only alluded to seven of them. To which house does the eighth female belong?”

Damned Lucifer. I could never get anything past him even when I was certain he wasn’t paying attention.

“The Brotherhood of Dragons,” I muttered.

His irises twinkled in amusement. “Is the girl the daughter of an alpha?”

My thoughts whirled to Rose, to her gilded dragon, to the fiery burn of her golden irises. There was no doubt in my mind that she was. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Hmm.” He rubbed his clean-shaven chin, eyeing me. “Let’s keep an eye on her nonetheless.”

“Fine,” I gritted out and moved to the door. Jerking it open, muttered voices hummed up the stairs.

Lucifer twitched, then cocked his head toward the staircase.

“What?” I barked, eager to have my meddlesome grandfather away from here.

“Nothing, I thought I recognized a voice.” He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter anyway. It’s better if no one knows I’m here.”

“Better yet, if you’re not here at all.” I threw the devil a smirk.

He stepped closer and gingerly slapped my cheek. “Careful, dear Slade, one would assume you didn’t appreciate everything I’ve done for you. If it weren’t for your appointment as dark lord, you’d still be living under the thumb of your father’s ravenous enemies.”

A chill slithered up my spine, memories of their dirty hands on me sucking me into the past. Darkness edged into my vision, a scream building in my throat.

Lucifer slapped me once more, this time a bit more forcefully. I snapped back to the present and focused on my

grandfather's face. "You are a capable young man, Slade. I chose you for a reason, don't make me regret it."

My head dipped, and he finally released me. "I take it you will show yourself out."

"Yes, but don't worry, I'll be back soon. I hope you've discovered at least one useful tidbit of information I can file away for future use."

Don't hold your breath. I marched out of the room and slammed the door behind me. Hades, how had this day gone from bad to worse? The prince of hell thrived on secrets and deals. It was the only reason he'd allowed my absence from the Underworld for these eight weeks. I had no desire to spy for him or betray these women.

I also preferred not to incur Lucifer's wrath.

I'd have to figure out a way to do both. But not today, today I had to find Roxy.

Deacon

"Psst, psst!"

I stopped midsentence in conversation with Crystal and whirled around to find the source of the persistent whisper. Slade peered around the corner, beckoning me with a long finger.

"Come here," he mouthed.

I was still sitting in the great room with the rest of the contestants waiting to be questioned by Rizin. So far, she'd only spoken to Crystal, and she'd dragged Chance in next. I

was just getting the scoop from the first bachelorette, but so far, it seemed the former detective had nothing solid. And as for my SIA idol, Ryder still stood off in the corner in deep conversation with Rose.

The whole thing was odd.

She'd called him "uncle" earlier, but that made no sense. How would the beautiful dragon be related to a demon?

"Deacon!" Slade hissed.

I returned my attention to Crystal who was still chattering on about Rizin's interview tactics. "I'm sorry, I have to run to the bathroom. If the detective comes out, will you let her know I'll be right back?"

"Yeah, sure, no problem."

"Thanks." I gave her a smile and crept out into the hallway.

Slade practically shoved me down the corridor.

"What the hell has gotten into you?" I snarled.

He thrust a scrap of paper into my chest, his eyes wild. "Read it."

A pang of dread blossomed in my gut, coiling around my insides. It wasn't often I saw the demon worked up like this. As I scanned the paper, the anxiety became suffocating. "Shit," I muttered when I'd finished.

"I told you this was about me."

"Any idea who could've taken her?"

Slade's head whipped back and forth. "Too many options to count, Deac."

“Damn it, Slade, how many powerful fucking demons did you piss off in six months?”

“There are a lot of them, okay?” He dragged his hand through his hair, the tendon in his jaw ticking like mad. “What are we going to do?”

“You’re going to calm down, first of all.”

Slade stopped his manic pacing and inhaled a deep breath. “I just don’t understand why they took Roxy. Does she have something to do with it?”

A fox shifter... didn’t seem likely. “Maybe she was just a convenient choice. Maybe they’d seen you with her earlier?”

He clenched his teeth, that tendon fluttering through the skin of his scruffy jaw. “Maybe.” He glanced at the clock on the wall and cursed again. “I’m going to lose my mind waiting until midnight.”

“No, you’re not. We’re going to use this time to come up with a plan.”

“What plan?” He ripped the note from my grasp. “It’s very clear that I need to go alone.”

“No way. I’m going with you.”

“You can’t, Deacon. What if whoever it is hurts her?” His expression shuttered, and a twinge of pity for the dark lord surged to the surface.

“And what if whoever has her kills you both once you get there?”

“It’s a risk I’ll just have to take.”

I shook my head. “I don’t accept that.”

“Listen, I wasn’t even going to tell you, but I figured it was better if someone knew what was going on. I’m going alone, that part’s not up for discussion.” Slade wrapped his hands around my shoulders and speared me with a steely glare. “I’ll need you to send help if anything goes wrong.”

I nodded slowly. “Slade...”

“I’m not arguing. The plan is I go in alone and you stay behind at a safe distance. If I don’t come back with Roxy in a predetermined amount of time, then you call the cavalry. Got it?”

I hissed out a breath. “I don’t like it.”

“Doesn’t matter, tiger tool. This is my mess, and I have to clean it up.”

“Then I’m coming too.” An unexpected female voice filled the air, and Slade’s eyes widened to matching pits of inky darkness.

I didn’t have to turn around to figure out who was standing behind me.

SCARY A.F



*S*lade

“No, absolutely not.” This meddlesome female was going to be the death of me. “You are not going. It’s too dangerous.” I glared at Rose over Deacon’s shoulder as she appeared around the corner.

“She may not be, but I am.” The dark-haired SIA male popped up behind her, his shoulders so broad they nearly extended the entire length of the corridor. I hissed out a curse.

The last thing I needed was the SIA butting into this mess.

“Uncle Ryder...” Rose spun at the large male.

He lifted a hand, immediately cutting her off. “You’re not even supposed to be here, Rosey. If your parents knew—”

“No, please, you promised you wouldn’t say anything.”

“I did, but that was before you set your sights on gallivanting through the jungle with these two.” He hitched a thumb at Deacon and me, the corner of his lip curled into a snarl.

“I think we’re all in agreement that Rose should have no part in this,” I added.

Both males nodded.

“I’ll just follow you then.” She pressed her arms across her chest and leveled me with a glare, her lips twisted into a gods’ damned irresistible pout. “You can’t stop me.”

“Like hades I can’t.”

Rose closed the space between us and jabbed her finger at my chest. “I wouldn’t be so quick to dismiss me. Can any of you fly?” Her steely gaze ran over each and every one of us. “I can go in first and check out the scene from above without the kidnapper knowing I’m there.”

“Yeah, because a thirty-foot golden dragon is super inconspicuous.” I scoffed.

“I can half-shift.” She stretched out her shoulders, and a pair of gilded wings unfurled. The breath caught in my throat as the dazzling scales shimmered beneath the recessed lights. They were nowhere near the size of the reptilian appendages when she was in dragon form, but they still spanned the length of the hallway. And despite their exquisite beauty, the razor sharp talons on the ends of the leathery skin were damned lethal. “Just let me help, please.”

Ryder’s dark eyes flashed a familiar citrine. *Animas demon*. Their soul sucking powers were similar to that of an incubus. No wonder he’d made such a formidable SIA agent. “I still don’t like it, Rosey.”

“I promise I’ll be careful. Besides, you let Azara become a dark lord for gods’ sakes. That’s so much worse.”

“Dark lord Azara?” The name was highly uncommon, even for a group of supernaturals who reside within the realm of Azar.

Ryder’s gaze flicked to mine. “You know my daughter?”

Demon's dicks. No wonder the male seemed familiar. If Ryder was Azara's father and Rose was his niece, the two females were cousins. But Rose was a dragon and Azara was clearly a demon. "I do," I mumbled. "Dark lord Slade at your service." I sketched a bow, but I must have been making my confused face because Rose clucked her tongue before explaining the familial connection.

By the time she was finished, my head spun. A wave of nausea hit me when she reached the part about Ryder being Lucifer's son. I had no idea what that made me and the surly SIA agent since Lucifer was my grandfather but Rose... "Wait a second. Are Rose and I related?"

Our eyes met, and terror streaked through my chest for an endless minute.

Ryder shook his head. "There's no blood shared between the two of you. Rose's father is a dragon, and her mother is a human with a warlock father. I'm her uncle only because I married her mother's half-sister, not by blood. Now Azara on the other hand... You stay far away from my daughter."

"I've met her dragon mate, so I'm good there, thanks." Images of the massive dragon shifter had my blood running cold.

"Now that that's been settled," Deacon began.

"Shit," I muttered. This weird family reunion had gotten us way off track. We had hours until midnight, but still, we had a plan to formulate. "Just let Rose tag along, or we'll never get anything settled."

Ryder glared down at me, his impossibly wide chest growing larger with each exhale. "You're ready to face the dragon alpha if anything happens to his daughter?"

“From the limited amount of time I’ve spent with the precious alpha heir, she seems pretty capable.” My gaze flickered to Rose’s. “Besides, she’s a big girl. She can decide what she wants to do for herself.”

“Thank you,” she gritted out.

“Anyway, *Uncle* Ryder, I trust you can keep an eye on her.” I shot the male a smirk. Apparently, Lucifer didn’t only sire hell spawn like my own father. I had about a million questions for the man but now was clearly not the time. Perhaps once we’d found Roxy, we could have a family catch up session.

“Fine.” He slapped his thick arms across his chest. “What’s the plan?”

The sultry air of the jungle grew thicker with every step closer to the waterfall. Thick vegetation swatted at my face, the deep green lashing my cheek. I shoved the errant blades of mile-high grass out of my way, grumbling. My heart thrummed against my chest, the pounding so loud I could barely make out the dainty footsteps of the she-dragon beside me. Why had I agreed to let Rose come again?

I stole a glance from the corner of my eye. Her jaw was set tight, golden eyes aglow beneath the pale moonlight. She didn’t seem the least bit frazzled, while my heart had morphed into a battering ram in the last twenty minutes.

Deacon and Ryder weren’t far, only a few yards behind us keeping watch. Once Rose completed her part, she was to return to her uncle and the tiger. Then it was my turn.

The rush of the waterfall grew louder with each step, echoing the frenzied pace of my pulse. I halted midstride. The clearing was only a few yards away. The time for Rose's recon was now or never.

Rose stopped and turned to me, her lips slightly parted. The swell of her breasts strained against her tank top, and it was only then I noticed the haggard rise and fall of her chest.

"You don't have to do this," I whispered.

She gritted her teeth and pivoted her gaze to the waterfall. "Yes, I do."

"Why? Do you even know the girl?"

She shrugged, her eyes trained on the rushing cascades. "I know her as well as most of the other contestants."

"Then why risk coming out here?" My hand moved without my permission, thumb and forefinger latching onto her chin. I forced her eyes to mine. "Why?"

"Because my whole life I've been coddled and protected. If I'm truly to become the alpha of the Brotherhood of Dragons one day, I need to step up. At home, my father won't let me do anything, but here, I'm in charge of my own destiny."

The fire in her eyes demolished the layer of icy frost around my heart. For months, I'd been going through the motions in the Underworld. I'd been doing the least I could only to survive, but I wasn't actually thriving. Rose's cousin, Azara, had done so much as dark lord of the sixth realm, and I hadn't done shit. Aspen's words from last season drifted to the surface. *You could really make a difference in the Underworld.*

But I hadn't.

And here was this young woman who wanted to do so much more for her people.

Realms, I was an idiot.

I glanced up at Rose, my fingers still latched onto her chin and met those fiery, blazing orbs. Her tongue jutted out and swept across her bottom lip. It would be so easy to kiss her right now. The moment was so right. If I just tipped my head forward a few inches... I could practically taste her sweetness, feel her soft pillowy lip. A growl vibrated low in my throat.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I swallowed hard and released her, despite every bone in my body begging me not to. “Okay, let’s do this then.”

She nodded and took a shaky step back.

“You remember the plan, just a quick sweep for recon. No heroics. Do you understand, Rose?”

“Yes, I got it.” She threw her shoulders back, and her wings snapped out. Gods, they were beautiful. The golden scales shimmered beneath the moonlight, and it took everything I had not to reach out and touch them.

She turned away from the clearing, toward the thick copse of trees that would provide coverage, but before she took off, my hand jutted out, unbidden. My fingers wrapped around her wrist, and I jerked her toward me. Rose’s eyes were like two brilliant full moons as she gazed up at me, her heaving chest pressed against mine. I stood there, motionless, like a complete fool for an endless moment. “Be careful,” I finally mumbled, my voice so rough it sounded like I’d swallowed sandpaper.

Real smooth.

Rose nodded and wriggled out of my hold. She disappeared into the jungle before I could string another sentence together.

Realms, what was it about that girl?

My gaze rose over the thick expanse of trees, willing the she-dragon to appear. It was imperative she remained close to the heavy band of vegetation to avoid being seen. An interminable minute later, I caught sight of the unmistakable flicker of gold. Rose soared over the tree line, barely hidden. I only hoped whoever had taken Roxy was too preoccupied with the fox shifter to notice the hovering dragon.

She flew over the waterfall and circled the foot of the caves. I held my breath with every flap closer. “Come on, Rose,” I gritted out. She whizzed by the opening again and banked to the right.

Too close. “Get back here,” I hissed.

Rose rounded the cascades once more, and my hands curled into fists. She was taking too long. Someone would surely spot her if she kept this up. I stared at my watch and counted down the seconds. Only ten minutes until midnight. I had to move soon.

An eternity later, golden wings streaked across the crescent moon, and I released the breath I’d been holding. She disappeared along the tree line, but I kept my gaze on the spot. Endless moments longer, the crackle of underbrush sent my head spinning to the right.

Rose appeared from within the deep green stalks, her wings pinned behind her back. Her eyes were alight, and a grin curled her pink lips.

“You took too long,” I barked and closed the distance between us. “That wasn’t the plan. One fly around, not three, Rose!”

Her nostrils flared as she stared up at me, indignation blossoming in those expressive irises. “I couldn’t see anything the first time around. That’s why I circled back.”

“What if someone had seen you?”

“They didn’t.”

“How do you know?” My hands wrapped around her shoulders, fingers digging into her skin. A tremor raced through me, or maybe that was her.

“Let go, Slade. You’re hurting me.”

Her words were like ice through my veins. I released her and stepped back, inhaling a deep breath. The tremor finally subsided. “Gods,” I muttered. *Get it together, Slade.*

“Roxy’s in there.”

“You saw her? Was she okay?”

She nodded. “I think so. Just one other person in there with her. A male, demon of some sort.”

“What did he look like?”

“Scary A.F.”

“You’ll have to be a little more specific, precious. There are a lot of scary demons in the Underworld.”

“Red, leathery skin. Bald. A few horns. It was hard to make out much detail when flying so fast.”

“Okay.” I paced a quick circle. I could handle one demon, no problem. I glanced at my watch. Five minutes to go. “Anything else catch your eye?”

“Roxy’s tied up and blindfolded. The guy is at the front of the cave, and she’s in the back.”

“Okay, that’s good. She won’t have to witness me flaying the demon alive.” I stretched out my hand and claws broke through my fingertips.

“Let me go with you. I can help.”

I shook my head and took a measured step closer. “You’ve done more than enough. I can’t risk—” I let the words fall away. Already, tonight was spinning out of control. “Go back to Deacon and your uncle. If I’m not out in five minutes, they know what to do.”

Rose worried her pouty lower lip between her teeth. “You really shouldn’t go alone.”

My brow lifted, a smirk curling the corner of my lip. “Is that concern I hear, precious?”

“No, of course not. I just don’t want you to screw things up for Roxy.”

A rueful laugh squeezed through my clenched lips. “Right.” I turned toward the clearing and drew in a breath. Here goes nothing.

YOUR HEAD ON A PLATTER



*S*lade

The hair on the back of my neck stood on end as I emerged from the thick stalks of vegetation at the mouth of the cave. I hazarded a quick glance over my shoulder and met a pair of piercing golden irises only a few yards behind me. Damn it, Rose. Why didn't she listen?

I threw her a pointed stare and mouthed, "Go back!" She didn't move. Damned stubborn female. I glared at her once more before I stepped through the opening of the cave. A damp chill raced across my skin as I crossed the threshold. Narrowing my eyes, I focused, adjusting to the dim light, and found a familiar redhead slumped on the rocky ground. I rushed forward and slid to my knees. I strained to make out a heartbeat, but with the steady rush from the waterfall, I couldn't be certain.

Two brilliant yellow orbs glowed in the ominous darkness, and I shot up to my feet.

"For a second, I thought you weren't coming." The demon's growl vibrated the tense air. A large form stepped from the shadows, and I struggled to recognize the deep crimson leathery skin. Nope. I definitely did not know this

demon. Had I banished his brother? Killed his cousin? Slept with his wife? No, couldn't have been the last one. It had been a long time since that... Way too long. The hora demon crept closer, the moonlight bathing the hornlets protruding from the top of his head and neck and cascading down his arms. "Are you ready to die for this woman?" he drawled, his voice as smooth as the slick cave walls.

"Who said anything about dying?"

"I thought this woman meant something to you?"

My brows furrowed, and I slipped on the smirk, the mask that protected me from too close a scrutiny. "All women mean something to me, demon." A jagged stalagmite jutted from the earth, and I casually leaned against it. "I had hoped I was here for a ransom." I ticked my head at Roxy. "Isn't that why you took her? Some sort of revenge against the dastardly dark lord?"

He shrugged. "I have no interest in money."

"Then what do you want? A dark lord title maybe? A fancy crown?" My smirk grew wider. "What's your name anyway?"

He cocked his head to the side and scratched at a dark brown horn. "What I want is your head on a platter."

The smoky darkness wrapped around his form as the air thickened with anticipation. "As unappealing as that sounds, I'd like to give you the benefit of the doubt. I assume I must have done something to deserve your anger. Since you won't give me your name, would you mind enlightening me as to what I may have done?"

A sinister smile curled his lips. Without another word, he lunged, his leathery form melting into a blur of shadows. Shit.

I barely had time to react, my claws extending and ripping through the mass of darkness.

With each swipe, the shadows reassembled. Faster. They twisted and writhed, morphing into snakes. The murky coils wrapped around my body and squeezed. And squeezed. I drew in a breath, summoning my powers but the tendrils only tightened. All the air evacuated my lungs.

I forced my legs forward and slammed the shadows against the wall. They dissipated long enough to catch my breath. “Now you’ve done it,” I growled. Faint tendrils of blue vapor slipped through my lips and encircled the demon’s chest. “Come to me, baby.”

Whispers of energy fled his mouth, his eyes as wide as the curve of his lips. I inhaled a deep breath and drew in his dark life force. The black shadows receded, and his body coalesced into one. Now this I would enjoy. My powers, much like that of an animas demon, come from consuming a tiny bit of the soul. After all, isn’t an orgasm a soul-piercing experience? It’s up to my discretion how much I take. And right now, I was ravenous as all hell.

I gulped his energy in, each inhale fueling my own power. And my rage. Sparks of blue illuminated the murky cave, bathing it in an ethereal glow. More, I needed more. Darkness crept into the corners of my vision, and I welcomed it.

A faint whimper, barely a whisper over the pounding of my heart and the relentless cascade surging just outside the cave, caught my attention. I forced my gaze away from my prey and to the woman huddled on the floor.

“Demons, Roxy!” My mouth snapped shut, my powers dissipating, and I released the monster. He crumpled to the floor like a sack of rotten popos. I slid to the ground beside her

once again and loosened the bandage around her eyes. “Are you all right?”

Her lids fluttered, and she let out another whimper.

I unraveled the rest of the bindings and she blinked quickly, her pupils adjusting to the faint moonlight. Cupping her cheeks, I brought her face to mine. “Roxy, are you okay?” I repeated.

A bitter scent lingered on her breath as she exhaled. “Uh, huh.” Her eyes rolled back, and her body went limp in my arms.

“Curses,” I hissed. Cradling her against my chest, I leapt up and pivoted toward the entrance of the cave. The demon was strewn across the floor, eyes closed, but I could still make out the weak rise and fall of his chest. It was a damned good thing I didn’t kill him. I needed answers.

The slap of approaching footfalls shifted my gaze to the pathway that led back into the jungle. The thick stalks parted, and Rose emerged, her wings draped across her back and talons poised for a fight. Realms, she looked like an avenging angel, her damp skin aglow beneath the moonlight.

“What are you doing here?” I hissed and shifted Roxy in my arms.

Her lips screwed into a pout, and after the adrenaline high of the fight, all that unused energy was surging below my belt. “I just came to make sure you were okay.”

“That wasn’t the plan, precious. You were supposed to go hide out with your uncle and Deacon. If anything happened to you, I’d be dragon alpha flambé. And as you can see, I have enough problems with authority.”

The ghost of a smile tugged up the corner of her lip. “My dad is actually a big softie.”

“I highly doubt that.”

Her concerned gaze shifted from me to the unconscious bachelorette in my arms. “Is Roxy okay?”

“I think she will be.” I hitched a thumb over my shoulder at the kidnapping bastard. “The demon must have given her bardake root. I smelled the sedative on her breath. Hopefully, she’ll wake up without any memories of this whole disaster.”

“What demon?” Rose stood on her tiptoes to see over my shoulder.

I spun around, and a volley of curses spilled through my clenched teeth.

He was gone.

Rose

“I’m sorry, okay?” I trudged behind Slade back to the villa, guilt eating away at my insides. Uncle Ryder led the way with Deacon fangirling beside him. If I didn’t feel so badly about losing the demon, I would’ve enjoyed the lighthearted moment.

Slade whirled around and a still-unconscious Roxy flopped around on his shoulder. “I told you to stay back. If you hadn’t showed up and distracted me—”

I rolled my eyes as the demon dick glared down at me. “I had no idea I was so distracting.”

“You know perfectly well you are,” he roared.

Uncle Ryder paused mid-stride and whirled back at us. “Everything all right back there?”

“No!” Slade barked as I answered, “Yes!”

“I lost the demon because your precious little niece didn’t follow the plan. It was simple. Everyone stuck to it but her. I needed to interrogate that demon. Now he’s running free, and we have no idea why he came after Roxy or who he’ll go after next.”

“Maybe you should’ve been paying better attention to the prisoner,” I hissed.

“I was until you got there!”

My uncle moved between us, his dark eyes fixed on the infuriating bachelor. “Do I need to separate you two?”

“Yes, please do.” Deacon shook his head. He strode toward Slade and held out his arms. “At least give me Roxy; the poor girl doesn’t deserve to have to listen to the two of you fight-flirting after all she’s been through.”

A gasp escaped through my gritted teeth. “Fight-flirt?” I squealed.

“What are you talking about?” Slade leveled his friend with a narrowed glare.

“I’m not arguing with you two about this right now.” He shifted Roxy in his arms, so she was cradled in his chest. “It’s late, and we’re all tired. Let’s just get her home, and we can all discuss this further in the morning.”

“Fine,” we gritted out in unison.

Freaky.

When we finally reached the house, a fine layer of dirt and sweat coated every inch of me. I glanced at the clock as we tiptoed into the quiet foyer. It was after one o'clock in the morning. Deacon inched by me with Roxy still sleeping in his arms. His expression was unreadable, very unlike the typically easy-going bachelor. I shifted my focus to Roxy; now in the light, I could make out the smattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks. Her fine porcelain skin was relatively unharmed. Like me, she was just dirty and tired. Maybe we'd lost the demon, but at least, we'd saved the little fox shifter bachelorette.

Another twinge of guilt speared me in the chest. I'd been jealous of her. Jealous because I thought Slade and her had hooked up. Which was ridiculous. I didn't care who the demon bachelor messed around with. Right?

Deacon's words from earlier echoed in my mind. Like they had been the entire silent trek back from the waterfall.

We were *not* fight-flirting...

Besides, Harper was crazy about Slade, and I could never do that to my friend. And anyway, I liked Deacon. I came here for *Deacon*. I glanced across the great room at the tiger bachelor. He lay Roxy down on the couch and sat beside her, gently sweeping her tangled hair from her face. He was everything I wanted in a mate.

"I'll get the healer." Slade's voice tugged at something buried deep inside me. My head spun toward him, and something I refused to acknowledge blossomed low in my belly.

No, this wasn't happening. I was not falling for the demon dark lord dickhead.

7

CONFESSIONS AND REVELATIONS



Deacon

“The grounds around the property have been thoroughly searched, and the demon is gone.” Sheppard’s snide grin curled my fingers into tight fists. The executive producer had made an appearance to reassure everyone how safe we all were once again.

Total bullshit.

Beside him stood Detective Rizin and my SIA idol Ryder Strong. His arms were behind his back, his dark brows furrowed. I’d never admit it to the demon dark douche, but getting to hang out with the SIA legend last night was the coolest thing ever.

“You should’ve let us in on the plan,” Rizin grumbled, “instead of going off by yourselves.” She leveled a glare in my direction.

Ryder opened his mouth, but I quickly shook my head. Slade and I had decided to take the blame for losing the demon and leave Rose and Ryder completely out of the story. Neither of them was happy about it, but this was our screw up, not theirs.

“How about the rest of the island, Shep?” Slade asked. He stood across the room, a nervous energy strumming around the incubus.

“Our security team conducted an aerial canvas and did not detect anything unusual.”

“I bet it was super thorough,” he gritted out.

“Detective Rizin and her colleague will be leaving now. They’ve questioned everyone on staff as well as all the contestants and bachelors. This seems to be an isolated incident. We’ve wasted enough time during the past two days,” the producer answered. “It’s time to get back to filming.”

Right. Time wasted on finding a missing girl. Idiot.

According to Iris, Roxy was fine, thank the gods. Just a little shaken up, but no physical damage. She was the only contestant missing from this morning’s meeting.

Dax stepped in front of Shep and cocked his aviators atop his spikey blue hair. His mohawk wasn’t quite at full height this morning. “As Shep mentioned, filming will recommence this evening with the first group date of this round. So that Roxy can have another day of rest, Deacon, your date with the ladies you chose at elimination will be first.”

Slade let out a visible sigh of relief, his shoulders sagging against the wall.

After the drama of the past few days, I couldn’t even remember which girls I’d chosen. It had all been such a blur. My gaze flitted to my right. Rose. She sat upright on the chair, her eyes glued to the front of the room. Was it because Slade was loitering in the back?

I'd been so excited to be able to pick her first, and now... now with everything that had happened with Dawn and whatever the hades was going on with her and Slade, I was confused as all hell.

“Deacon, Rose, Chance, Crystal and Iris, please convene in the foyer at five o'clock for your date. Attire is jeans and comfortable shoes, sneakers preferred, and of course don't forget a bathing suit.”

“I never get to wear my heels,” Crystal murmured.

I couldn't help a smile from tugging up the corners of my lips. I needed to get to know that human better. I had a feeling she had a feisty side. Maybe this thing with Rose and Slade was for the best. I hadn't been giving the other girls a fair chance.

Dax clapped his hands. “Those of you that are filming tonight, please return to your respective rooms to meet with your stylists.”

My stomach bottomed out. I hadn't been alone with Dawn since the other night besides the few quick moments we'd stolen since Roxy's kidnapping.

The executive team departed, followed by Rizin and Strong. I offered a weak wave to Rose's uncle before he marched out with his niece trailing behind him. The rest of the girls filed up the stairs, leaving me alone in the great room with Slade.

“What's got you all twitchy?” I called out.

“Nothing.” He plastered on his typical smirk. That plastic grin would've fooled me six months ago, but not anymore. I knew the demon too well. “What about you? If you keep frowning like that, you're going to dig a trench between your

brows.” He crept closer, dark eyes scrutinizing. “Are you worried about your big date?”

“No.”

“Then what has your panties in a twist?”

“I said it was nothing.” I barreled past the demon bachelor but walked past the stairs leading to my chamber. Would Dawn already be up there?

A dark chuckle echoed behind me. “You’re worried about seeing Dawny, aren’t you?”

“No,” I gritted out, heat rising up my neck.

“Oh, realms, Deac. Don’t tell me something happened with her last night.”

“Not last night—” My jaw snapped shut as Slade’s eyes went comically wide. Only there was nothing comical about the situation. I’d slept with Dawn, an unforgivable sin in the world of *Hitched*. A part of me wanted to confess, needed to talk to someone about it, but I couldn’t risk the secret coming out.

“But something *did* happen?” A wicked gleam flashed across my friend’s eyes. “Something more than what you told me?”

“This isn’t a joke, Slade!” I eyed the cameras perched along the walls. The tell-tale red lights were off, had been since Roxy’s abduction, but they could turn on at any minute. I trudged down the hallway and through the back door. Slade’s footsteps echoed behind me.

The moment the warm, humid air filled my lungs, I whirled around at my irritating shadow. “I didn’t ask for company.”

“You didn’t stop me either.”

I leaned against the outer wall of the villa and released a frustrated breath.

“Damn, you’ve got it bad for that little pixie, don’t you?”

My tiger let out a growl, and I internally cursed the damned traitorous beast.

“Your tiger’s involved now?” He cocked a curious brow. “Don’t tell me you slept with her, Deac?” His tone shot up a few decibels.

I dragged my hand through my hair, wishing for nothing more than to sink into the ground and disappear.

“Deacon...”

“Yes!” I hissed. “I slept with her, okay.” The moment the words were out, the massive weight pressing on my lungs for the past few days felt lighter.

“You naughty little tiger! When?”

“The night after the elimination. Guess I’d had more to drink than I thought and somehow, I found myself at her door.”

“Seems like there was a lot of that going around that night,” he mumbled.

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing. Continue, please.”

“I’m not going to give you the dirty details, you fiend. Is that why you’re all jittery? You need a fix?”

He clasped his hands behind his back and threw me an eyeroll. “I have my desires well under control, thank you.”

“Sure doesn’t seem that way.”

“Well, maybe if I’d had a release, I’d be more calm and collected like you.” The demon dickhead scoffed.

“You mean to tell me you haven’t had sex with anyone since we arrived?” There was no freaking way I got laid before the incubus.

“Not in the traditional sense, no.”

Mind blown. He’d had Aurelia on her knees our first night here. I’d only assumed he’d done that and more with at least a few of the others. “How is that possible?”

He shrugged. “I promised you I’d keep a tight rein on my powers, so I have been.”

A pang of guilt speared me in the gut. Just when I thought the guy couldn’t be more insufferable, he’d do something noble like this.

“Anyway, tell me more about banging that cute faery.”

And just like that the guilt was gone.

“No,” I growled. “I don’t want you getting off on my memories.”

“Ugh, you’re no fun.” He smirked, the devilish grin a real one this time. Then he turned his gaze to the sprawling sea and drew in a deep breath.

I followed his line of sight to the gentle rise and fall of the Manta Sea, and a weirdly comfortable silence descended over us. I wasn’t sure how long we remained that way, but when he spoke again, the panic of seeing Dawn again wasn’t so acute.

“So what are you going to do?” Slade asked.

“Break it to my tiger that our pixie stylist is not his future mate.”

“How?”

“Not sure yet.” I blew out yet another frustrated breath.

“You know what they say about getting over someone, right?”

“Getting under someone else.” I chuckled.

“Yup.” He threw me a mischievous grin. “Any other contenders?”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek as I considered spilling the name on the tip of my tongue. A part of me just wanted to gage my friend’s reaction.

“You can say her name.” His eyes met mine, and the mirth from a second ago vanished. “I know you think there’s something going on between Rose and me, but there isn’t.”

“Are you sure?”

His head dipped, those dark eyes dropping to the ground. “Rose deserves to be with someone like you, Deac. You’re perfect for each other.”

I didn’t miss the fact that the demon never said he didn’t want her, only that she *should* be with me. “Slade...”

He lifted his head, eyes finally meeting mine. “I’m not trying to be noble here, Deac. I don’t have a selfless bone in my body and you know that. Rose and I are just not right for each other.”

A sharp intake of air spun my head toward the driveway, and Slade followed suit. He muttered a curse as Rose raced

around the corner, the smack of her retreating feet pounding along the cement.

“That didn’t seem like nothing,” I muttered.

Slade’s eyes were fixed to the driveway until the footfalls completely disappeared.

“Go after her, you idiot.”

He shook his head, expression hardening. “No, it’s for the best this way.” Without another word, he spun on his heel and trudged into the back entrance.

The moment he was gone, I blew out a breath. Now it was my turn to face Dawn.

PIXIE & UNIPEG WINGS



D *eacon*

Yup, this was awkward as hell.

Dawn danced around me, plucking at my hair until each strand rose to perfect spikey points. Getting me ready for a date had never taken this long. Or maybe it had just never felt like this because of the unending torturous silence. Usually, my stylist chattered on like a mad hummingbird flapping its tiny wings. Today, nothing.

Every so often, her lips pursed and I was certain she was about to speak, but her mouth would flatten out and not a sound would escape. I, too, had tried to come up with some sort of safe conversation topic for the last hour, but all the words were stuck at the back of my throat.

This was ridiculous. We still had over a month on this gods' forsaken island, and it couldn't go on like this. Drawing in a breath, I reminded myself I was the damned alpha of the High Claw Cliff tigers. I could talk to a freaking girl.

My inner beast chuffed a contented sigh as Dawn's thigh brushed mine. She moved between my legs, dabbing concealer beneath my eyes. I hadn't slept for shit last night. She inched

closer, her cleavage practically pressed to my face and oh, so tempting.

My chest heaved as she rested a dainty hand on my shoulder and continued dousing me with powder. Gods, how could she not be affected by this?

A faint scent brushed the air, and my nostrils flared.

“Almost done,” she murmured.

Was it me or was her voice a little breathy?

I inhaled a lungful of air tainted with her sweet, gardenia scent. Just beneath the honeyed perfume was a muskier, more dangerous fragrance. My tiger let out an appreciative growl, the unmistakable scent of arousal blossoming between us.

Dawn’s eyes widened at the sound, and she took a big step back. “Done!” she squeaked and darted to her makeup bag on the farthest counter of the bathroom.

I rose and heaved out a breath. “I’m sorry,” I finally forced out. “I told you my tiger—”

She lifted her hand, stopping me mid-sentence. “No, please don’t apologize. This whole thing is my fault.” Her translucent wings sagged against her slim shoulders.

“No.” I closed the space between us, my fingers itching to touch her. I balled them into tight fists to keep my hands in check. “I was the one that came to you that night.”

“But I started it.” She snagged her lower lip between her teeth, bright eyes gazing up at me.

“I don’t regret what happened one bit, Dawn. I need you to know that.”

Her head dipped. “Neither do I.” She paused before her eyes lifted to mine once more. “Unless it ruins what we had... I loved our friendship. I don’t want things to be weird between us for the next few weeks.”

My hand moved without my consent and cupped her cheek. My thumb grazed her soft skin and again, my tiger stirred. His longing filled my chest, and dragging in a breath was nearly impossible. My head tipped forward, mouth only inches from hers. A crackle of energy zipped between us, and I could practically taste her. Gods, I wanted to.

“So can we just be friends again?” she whispered.

Her words were like a bucket of ice to the smoldering embers in my core. I staggered back, jaw clenched tight.

“You’re here to date these girls, Deac. Even if I wanted this, even if it was all I could think about, we can’t. We’d both get in trouble. I’d get fired from the show or worse, and you —. I’m just not worth it.”

“Don’t say that.” I shook my head as my hand slid from her cheek to her shoulder. I squeezed her tight with both hands.

“Would you be willing to quit right now? Walk away from all of it, for me?”

My heart smashed against my ribs, and my tiger let out a frustrated growl. He would. But could I? If I walked away, I’d be deserting the demon douche after my promise, not to mention the hefty paycheck my tiger streak could really benefit from. And that didn’t even account for the feelings I had started to develop for the other women. I liked Dawn a lot, our connection was real, but had I even given the other contestants a real shot?

“You don’t have to answer. I get it.” She whirled around, but before she could get away, my fingers latched around her wrist. I tugged her into my arms, and my lips captured hers.

She melted into me, her soft, petite form so perfect against my chest. My hands closed around her hips, fingers digging into the sliver of flesh between her top and jeans. Gods, I wanted her just one more time. Memories of her soft moans as I filled her the other night surged to the surface. I was instantly hard, my hips grinding against hers as if we were already back in her bed.

It was a damned good thing there were no cameras in the bathrooms. I lifted her onto the vanity and parted her legs, fitting myself between them. She groaned as my erection stroked her center. Her slender legs folded around my waist, drawing me closer.

Dawn’s fingers dug into my hair, messing up the blonde strands she’d worked so hard to perfect. My tongue danced with hers, a desperate last tango. A part of me knew what this was, but I refused to accept it in this moment.

My hands slid up the back of her top and brushed her soft wings. Her entire body shuddered beneath my touch. She arched into me, another faint moan spilling from her lips. “Deacon,” she murmured.

“Just one more time,” I rasped against her mouth.

Her eyes snapped open, the brilliant silver orbs piercing mine. The corners of her lips twisted, and she swallowed thickly, the slender column of her throat bobbing. “I can’t.” Her palms moved from my ass to my chest and shoved me back. “I can’t do this just one more time, Deac.” She slid off the counter and raced out of the bathroom before I could get another word out.

Fuck.

Crystal

“So we’re actually going to fly on these things across the ocean?” I eyed the winged horse, pawing at the sand, and fear lanced into me. Riding the New York City subway at midnight was nothing, but this, this just seemed foolish.

Iris laughed and ran her hand down the unipeg’s muzzle. “Didn’t you have to ride one on the day we arrived?”

“Sure, but that was for like two seconds across the front yard. And I was scared as fuck.” I wrapped my hands across my chest and stared at the endless waves of the Manta Sea. “And that was before all the crazy stuff started happening. Not sure if you’ve noticed, but I haven’t had the greatest luck so far.”

Rose stepped into the conversation, a reassuring smile on her face. “I’ve got wings too, remember? I promise if anything happens, I’ve got you.”

“Thanks.”

Iris curled her arm around Rose’s shoulders. “This girl is the best. She’s got your back. Slade told me how brave you were last night, what a big help you were in saving Roxy.”

“He did?” Her voice rose a few octaves.

“Yeah, after the SIA people left. I know no one was supposed to know you were involved, but Roxy remembered seeing you.”

“How is your sister?” Chance asked Iris, appearing behind the big silver stallion.

“She’s okay. She doesn’t remember much about what happened. The last thing she recalled was walking outside to join the after party. Then she woke up in that cave with the crazy demon.”

“Poor thing,” Chance cooed. “She must have been so frightened.” The shifter patted the unipeg’s mane.

“So wait a second, Chance. You’re a unipeg shifter, so does that mean that all of these pointy horned horses can become human like you?”

She shook her head. “Nope. Just like wolves, tigers and foxes, some creatures are just animals. There are very few unipeg shifters like me.”

“Is that why you came on this show?” I asked. “To find other supernaturals to mate with?”

Rose laughed.

“What?” Crystal chuckled. “Isn’t that how this stuff works?”

“Not exactly.” Rose finished saddling her tawny unipeg and climbed on. “Shifters don’t have to mate with other shifters. Not all of us find a fated mate. Sometimes connections are just formed.” She shrugged, something unreadable flashing across her face.

“Oh, there comes Deacon!” Iris pointed to the steps descending from the villa.

His hair was tussled, t-shirt slightly untucked, and damn, he looked fine. Between the two bachelors, I still wasn’t sure which was my favorite. Why not both, right? I marched

toward him and grabbed his hand. “Hey, Deacon!” I liked all of these girls well enough, but the competition was starting to ramp up, and I needed to keep my eye on the prize.

“Hey, Crystal, and hello, ladies.” He gave me a warm smile, and his hand closed around mine. “So uni-pegs, huh?”

“That’s right, my dears.” A voice echoed from the sea. A puff of white smoke coalesced over the lapping waves, and Methyss’s tall form floated toward us. His typical white top hat and tux gleamed beneath the sun’s setting rays, the deep oranges and pinks casting a rainbow of colors across his suit.

“Oh, goodie,” Deacon murmured under his breath.

Rose clucked her uni-peg forward, and she joined Deacon, Chance, Iris and me in the circle around Methyss.

“Everyone ready for today’s date?” Methyss’s eyes sparkled as they glanced around the semi-circle.

A chorus of yeses resounded.

He clapped his hands, bouncing up and down on the toes of his white, patent leather shoes. “Today you’ll enjoy a sunset ride across the Manta Sea atop these lovely uni-pegs followed by a picnic on one of the secluded islands of Mystic Cove.”

“How will we find it?” Deacon asked.

Our emcee clucked his teeth. “Don’t you worry your pretty little head. These lovely creatures know exactly where to go.”

“Great,” I muttered.

“All right, ladies, let’s do this.” Deacon released my hand and offered a leg up.

I eyed his entwined fingers nervously as he bent down in front of the huge silver uni-peg. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

“I promise you’ll be fine. These creatures have the temperament of children’s ponies, and besides, I’ll be right next to you.”

“Okay. Here goes nothing.” I dropped my knee into his intertwined hands, and he shot me up onto the unipeg’s back. The huge beast’s wings unfolded, revealing a rainbow of feathers. I had to admit, the animal was beautiful.

Deacon and the rest of the girls mounted their stallions, and my fingers tightened around the reins.

“Good boy,” I murmured soothingly. Meanwhile, my insides were a tangled mess. You want to know how many pony rides I went on as a kid? Zero. There was barely enough grass for my dog to pee on let alone for a little horse where I grew up in Harlem.

You can do this, Crystal. You are a badass human, and you have to prove to all these supes that you belong here too.

The unipegs trotted to the end of the beach, and my stomach bounced around with each step. When we reached the edge of the shore, my horse’s wings unfurled. With one powerful flap, my stomach sank to my toes, and we were flying.

DRAGON FIGHTS AND FAE KISSES



D *eacon*

My dapple gray unipeg sidled up to Rose's big chestnut and let out a chuff. "I guess he likes yours." I shot her a smile.

She leaned over her mount's neck and patted her light mane. "And why wouldn't he? Sugar is the sweetest."

I hazarded a quick glance over my shoulder at Crystal. She'd been so nervous about riding the unipeg, but she'd adjusted quite easily. She chatted with Iris and Chance as the stallions zipped over the tranquil sea below.

My *encounter* with Dawn still niggled at the forefront of my mind, shredding my insides. I knew she was right. We couldn't let this continue. But before I closed off my heart to Dawn forever, there was something I had to know.

There was no easy way of asking, and I'd been struggling with the right words for the past half hour, but nothing made it less awkward. "Do you have feelings for Slade?" I blurted.

Rose's head spun toward me, her golden irises wider than the setting sun. "Excuse me?"

I huffed out a breath and weaved my fingers through the reins. "I'm sorry for asking so abruptly, but I just need to

know.”

“I don’t think that’s a fair question. You’ve been dating eleven other girls, and I’ve never questioned your feelings about any of them.”

“Fair enough.” I chewed on the inside of my cheek. “But my question still stands.”

“Deacon...,” she growled.

“I guess I just don’t understand your hesitation. Since the moment he arrived, you’ve been so adamant about your dislike toward him, but lately, it feels like something has changed.”

Her mouth curved into a capital O and sheer horror streaked across her face. “Did Slade say something?”

“About what?” My brows slammed together. Was the devious demon keeping something from me?

“Nothing.” Her lips pinched into a tight line.

A bout of silence lingered between us, only the steady flap of unipeg wings interrupting the quiet.

“There’s nothing going on between Slade and me,” she finally snapped. “You were there, yesterday. You heard what he said.” A twinge of hurt laced her words.

I’d tried to deny it yesterday when she ran off after overhearing our conversation, but the truth was written on the pucker of her lips, the deepening line between her brows. She was clearly upset.

“But would you like there to be?” I hedged.

“I’m not answering any more questions, Deacon. If you’re feeling so chatty, why don’t you tell me about all the other girls you have feelings for. There are only two of you and until

just a few days ago, twelve of us. How many of the dozen have you kissed?”

More like baker's dozen for me.

Gods, I was an insecure idiot.

“I’m sorry, forget I asked.” I fixed my eyes to her and tried to instill as much honesty as I could muster in a fucked-up situation like this. “I do have feelings for you, Rose, and yes, there are others too. You know it wouldn’t be fair for me to choose so early in the game. I only hope you feel the same.”

Her lips pressed into a tight line, and she nodded slowly. “I’m going to play the game just like everyone else.”

“Good.”

Chance’s white mare poked her head between us. I was beyond thankful for the interruption. “Hey guys, how’s it going?” For the first time in a while, I really looked at the sweet shifter. She seemed right at home atop the unipeg, much like I imagine I’d feel riding a tiger.

“I’ll give you two some time to chat.” Rose slowed her mount and fell back between the other girls.

I opened my mouth to thank her, but she was already gone. Realms, Deacon, you’re an idiot.

“You’ve been awfully quiet lately.” Chance inched her mare forward, so we flew side by side.

“I know. There’s been too much drama lately. I miss our chats.”

My unipeg’s wings began to slow before he banked to the right. Below, I could just make out a small island covered in lush green foliage and a white sand beach. “I guess this is us.”

Chance's mount trailed mine, then the rest of the herd followed suit. As the sun began its descent bathing the sky in bright pinks and purples, the deserted isle took shape. The uni-pegs landed smoothly, their hooves sinking into the fine sand.

"Woohoo!" Crystal shouted. "We made it!"

I shot her a smile. "You see, easy."

As we dismounted, my gaze caught on the small, checkered blanket alight with a candle and set with only two place settings.

Rose must have followed my eye because her brows lifted as she regarded the picnic set up. "Why is it only set for two?"

Iris called out from further down the beach. "There's another one over here."

Chance jogged another few yards down the shoreline. "And a third this way."

"I guess we're doing semi-private dates tonight." Iris shot me a grin. "Finally, I get you all to myself." Her finger trailed down my t-shirt.

Yes. This was exactly what I needed to get my mind off Dawn.

"I get first dibs!" Crystal shouted.

A wave of moans echoed around the secluded beach.

"What are the rest of us supposed to do in the meantime?" Iris complained.

"We could swim." Rose offered the girls a smile and tugged off her shirt.

I couldn't help my gaze from running over her perfect body in that scandalous red bikini, from the swell of her breasts to that slim waist and curvy hips. Despite her gorgeous, womanly figure, power emanated from her toned, well-muscled form.

Crystal's hand wrapped around my forearm, drawing me from the blatant ogling. "Come on, you're mine now, tiger."

What was wrong with me? I was supposed to be here to enjoy myself, not to fall in love with the first female I slept with or to pine over someone who clearly didn't want me. Shaking my head out, a chuckle escaped as I followed the flirty human to the first blanket.

Crystal folded her long legs beneath her and searched the contents of the wicker basket poised beside the ice bucket filled with a selection of Azar's finest liquors. "Definitely no champagne for me today."

I winced. My friend from the SIA hadn't been able to get far with Crystal's blood sample. Besides determining she had been poisoned, and it would've been fatal to a supernatural, we'd had no further leads. Maybe if we would've found a clue, we could have avoided Roxy's kidnapping all together.

My fingers latched around the bottle of Fae wine she held. "Maybe I should have the first taste."

"My hero." She tossed me a smirk.

After popping the cork, I inhaled a deep breath of the fruity liquor. Smelled normal. Unfortunately, one couldn't always rely on supernatural senses to sniff out poison. I tipped the bottle against the flute, and the pink wine dribbled out. I took a quick sip and swallowed. Turning to Crystal, I shrugged. "Seems fine."

She grabbed the bottle and poured herself a big glass. “That’s good enough for me.” Clinking her flute against mine, she took a long pull. “To the first of many solo dates.”

I brought the glass to my lips once again, and my eyes lifted over the rim at the beautiful woman. Crystal and I had talked here and there, but I couldn’t say I really felt like I knew the girl. If I was serious about playing this game, I needed to give everyone an equal chance. “So tell me about your life in the human world.”

“It’s pretty fabulous.” Her bright red lips slid into a smile. “My latest modeling gig was big enough that I could finally move from my apartment in Brooklyn to a fantastic little studio in the West Village. I absolutely love everything about it. I’m right by the Meatpacking district which has all the greatest clubs and nightlife. And oh, my gawd, the restaurants!”

Another chuckle escaped as Crystal’s tongue slid over her lips.

“Don’t get me wrong, the chefs at the villa are solid, but nothing is like the foody scene in Manhattan.”

“You’ll have to take me one day.” The words slipped out before I could stop them. I wasn’t sure who was more surprised by my request, her or me.

“Yeah, I’d love to.” She shrugged and placed her flute onto the checkered blanket. “Even if this whole thing doesn’t work out, it would be really cool to show you around Manhattan.”

I’d always wanted to explore more of the human world. My alpha duties didn’t allow for much free time. I cleared my throat. “So if things did work out between us, I take it you

wouldn't be too enthusiastic about moving to Marlwoods to live with the High Claw Cliff tigers?"

Her smile fell, and my chest deflated. Maybe there was a reason I'd never dated any human women. "We could split our time..."

"We could."

The rest of the date flew by once we'd gotten over the logistics of how this relationship could actually work. As it turned out, there was much more to the gorgeous model than I'd thought.

My mini dates with Rose and Chance were as I'd expected. Spending time with Chance was always easy, while the time with Rose was a little awkward given our earlier conversation. I avoided the demon dark lord in the closet and somehow, we managed.

Iris popped her head between Rose and me just as the final rays of light dipped below the horizon. "My turn!"

I stood and brushed my lips across Rose's cheek. "I shouldn't have said anything earlier. I'm sorry," I whispered. "I hope we can move past it."

She nodded, the ghost of a smile curling her lips. "I hope so, too."

Iris's fingers slid through mine as she toted me to the last blanket. After multiple glasses of Fae wine, human champagne and malta, the dragon beer, I was feeling pretty damned good. As I stretched across the blanket, a yawn split my lips.

“Oh, no, did the others tire you out?” Iris kneeled in front of me, her mouth curved into a cute pout.

“No, I’m just super relaxed.”

“That’s good, right?” She settled in beside me and poured us each another flute full of Fae wine. Of course, it had to be the strong faery stuff.

“Of course.” I could feel my mouth curve into a sleepy smile. “So tell me about the Spring Court.”

“Ugh. I hate it there.” Iris swept a lock of vibrant green hair behind her pointy ear. “I didn’t exactly have the typical royal Fae upbringing.” She went on to tell me about her mother’s affair and the subsequent shunning from the upper echelon of Fae society.

“Fae really can be arrogant bastards.” My thoughts flitted back to another cocky Fae I knew. I often wondered what happened to Fallon. I’d never heard a thing about him after he disappeared last season. I hoped he was okay.

“Which is exactly why we’re here.”

“You and Roxy?”

She nodded. “This was our shot at making our own future.” Her hand drifted up my arm, her sly fingers raising the fine hairs. “There’s something I’ve been dying to do since our dance the first night.” The pretty Fae leaned in and brushed her lips against mine.

The kiss was tentative, gentle even. It was nice, and my body was relaxed enough to react, despite its chaste nature. Iris pulled back a moment later, a satisfied grin on her pink lips.

“I hope it was worth the wait,” I whispered.

“Totally.”

I wrapped my hand around the back of her neck and brought her mouth to mine. We kissed under the stars until our uni-pegs came to collect us.

BEDDING A PRINCESS



*S*lade

“What’s wrong with you, Dawny? You look like your favorite fae-pup just died.” I eyed my sullen stylist as she packed up her bag of supplies. An array of brushes and hair gel lined the marble bathroom vanity.

“Nothing.” Her lips slid into the fakest smile I’d ever seen.

“This wouldn’t have anything to do with a certain tiger, now, would it?” I twirled around in the makeup chair, lifting my legs for maximum speed. I’d been quite the gentleman despite every bone in my body urging me to tease the little faery after hearing Deacon’s dirty little secret. But come on, I wasn’t a saint.

“No, of course not.” She whipped around, pink bangs shielding her expressive silver irises.

Oh gods, these two had it bad for each other. I stood and squeezed her slim shoulders. Standing in front of me, she looked so fragile, so easily broken. “Listen, Dawny, I’m going to give you some unsolicited advice.”

She groaned.

“Hear me out. I may not know much about relationships, but I do know two things: I know Deacon and I know *Hitched*. That gooey-hearted tiger thinks he can play the game and date multiple women, but we all know he’s not built for that. He’s a shifter; he wants love and fated mates and all that bullshit. If you want that big beastly softie, you have to go after him.”

The corner of her lip twitched, and I knew I had her right where I wanted her. Then the blossoming smile fell.

“Even if I wanted more with Deacon, I can’t. You know fraternization is against the rules. I’d lose my job, and he could get kicked off the show.”

“Those are a lot of ifs, Dawny. And anyway, what do you need the show for if you’ve found true love?” I held a straight face and was extremely proud of myself.

A buzzer went off and Dawn’s wings whipped the air, nearly catapulting her off the ground. “Shoot. Time’s up.” She spun me around and shooed me toward the door. “Off to your date, you.”

“Just think about it,” I called out over my shoulder.

There, good deed done for the day. I’d have to remember to tell the tiger tool he could thank me later. As I descended the stairs, one of the crew members rushed me along.

“They’re all waiting for you!” the woman with headphones hissed.

I picked up my pace, darted past the foyer and through the open double-doors. My dates already sat astride their uni-pegs: Harper, Arista, Everly and Roxy. I knew very well a certain she-dragon was not on the schedule and still my traitorous eyes searched for her.

Realms, Slade, it was time to put an end to this pining. Even the goody-two-paws tiger bachelor had gotten laid, how was I the only one still with blue balls? I'd have to remedy that today. Now with Aurelia and Vesla gone, both sure things, the only question was who would the lucky lady be?

Arista

I glared at Slade and Harper across the stretch of white sand on the tiny island, the pair whispering and giggling. An irrational bout of envy filled my chest. What kind of a dark lord giggles? And that human girl... Now he's interested in her? I was certain he had feelings for Roxy; I'd seen them disappear into that bathroom together the other night. Cocking my head over my shoulder, I searched the beach for the fox shifter.

She lay on a blanket identical to mine on the opposite shore of the narrow beach. Her eyes were sunken in, and there was a certain twitchiness to her movements that wasn't there before. Poor girl, to suffer at the hands of that demon...

"Hey, Arista!" The sweeter-than-candy angel bachelorette waved as she strolled by.

Keep walking. Keep walking. I was in no mood for chitchat. Hmm, would my siren abilities affect an angel? Something to test later.

Either Everly read my mind or the scowl on my lips, but thank Poseidon, she continued her stroll down the beach. My gaze trailed after her until she settled down beside Roxy, folding her gleaming alabaster wings behind her back. The

angel was likely there to give the fox shifter a shot of healing energy.

The girl could use it.

Movement caught my eye, diverting my attention from the two bachelorettes to the dark lord. He kneeled on the blanket across the way, attempting to rise while the silly human wrapped her arms around his neck. She kissed him, and that burn of jealousy unfolded again.

It had been nearly two years, and somehow my body still craved his.

Slade kissed the girl one more time, the brush of his lips against hers, sweet and tender. Nothing like I remembered it. Then he moved toward Everly and Roxy. I strained to listen to their conversation.

“How are you feeling Roxy? This isn’t too much is it?” Slade asked. Of course, he’s playing noble now.

“No, I’m fine. It’s nice to be outside honestly.”

Everly gave a warm smile, and I could practically feel the soothing energy the angel emanated despite the distance. “I can go if you want more time with Roxy?”

He’s had enough time with her already.

The girl’s hand closed around the angelic contestant. “Would you mind staying just a few minutes longer? I haven’t felt this relaxed in ages.”

A beaming smile crossed Slade’s face. “I like my contestants relaxed. Take your time, ladies. There’s another bachelorette I need to see anyway.” His gaze drifted in my direction.

I shut down the dark thoughts and forced a smile as he rose and sauntered toward me. “Hey, stranger,” I purred.

“Always a pleasure, Arista.” He folded down beside me, his thigh brushing mine.

“For a second there, I thought you were going to abandon me for poor Roxy.”

His gaze flickered to the unfortunate bachelorette and the angel tending to her. “She has company and besides, it’s your turn.”

“How generous.”

He cocked a dark brow, scrutinizing me. “Is something wrong? You seem different...”

“Maybe I’m just a little irritated. It seems every other female here has gotten your attention but me.”

“That’s not at all true.” His lip curved into a mischievous smile. “In fact, I was just going to ask if your offer was still valid?”

“And what offer was that?”

His hand clamped around my thigh. “You know, the one about this being a last hurrah for you before you’re bound to whatever horrible Ocean male you’ll be forced to bed for the rest of your days.”

“Oh, that one.” I inched closer so that his hand crept further up my thigh. “Of course, it’s still valid. I just thought you’d prefer to skulk away with that little fox.”

His eyes darted to Roxy. “That little fox is actually interested in a big tiger.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “We’ve never even kissed.”

“Then it’s the human you’re interested in?”

The slope of Slade’s jaw clenched as he cast a wary gaze in her direction. “Why the sudden interest in who I’ve slept with, Arista?”

“A girl has a right to be interested on a show like this, don’t you think?”

He released a noncommittal grunt. “Like you said, it’s just a show, only a game.”

I leaned in so that my nose brushed the shell of his ear. “There’s a cave just past the curve of the inlet. It’s tucked away behind a thick stretch of trees. No one would find us.”

His dark eyes sparkled as he regarded me. “Sounds perfect.”

“Follow me.” I rose and hauled him to his feet, weaving my fingers through his. Leading him past Everly and Roxy, I offered the bachelorettes a quick wave over my shoulder. Dark lord Slade was mine now.

“How did you know about this cave?” He stepped in front of me and pushed aside a tangle of tall stalks as we ventured deeper onto the island.

“I took a walk while you were getting cozy with Harper.”

His dark brows bunched before he nodded. “I see.”

Another moment of silence passed, and I quickened my pace. I needed to get him alone now.

“So why don’t you tell me about this man you’re betrothed to?” Slade’s curious gaze ticked in my direction.

I shrugged. “There’s not much to tell. Attila is a royal, a distant cousin to king Elijah.”

“And let me guess, you’re the mer-king’s daughter?”

“If you say so.” I shot him a smirk.

“If you think bedding a princess in a cave is beyond me, you’re mistaken.”

“Good.” My fingers tightened around his, and I tugged him along faster.

When we finally reached the cavern, my heart pounded against my ribcage. I pushed him up against the wall and drew his shirt up over his head. Finally, after all this time I’d get what I wanted. The dark lord at my mercy.

His lips claimed mine, powerful and insistent. For an instant, I was transported back in time to that nightclub in the Underworld. To the dark hallway and the intimate moment we’d shared. I’d allowed the incubus to take a piece of my soul as he thrust inside me over and over again.

Once we’d finished, he’d strolled back to the dancefloor and moved onto the next.

I bit down on his lip, and the copper taste of blood filled my mouth. He let out a hiss and dug his hand into the back of my hair, fisting it.

“You like it rough, do you, little mermaid?”

“I’ll take it any way you give it to me.” I palmed his ass, urging him closer.

A few more seconds, and I’d have him right where I wanted him, but first a little revenge.

A sharp whinny echoed from just outside the cave. Slade leapt back, muttering curses.

“What is that?” I rasped out, smoothing my ruffled sundress.

“The unipecs are back.” His shoulders lifted, the demon as nonchalant as ever. “Date’s over, sorry, princess.”

A PISSED OFF SHE-DRAGON



*S*lade

I eyed Arista as the sparkly silver unipeg between my legs unfolded its wings, and we shot into the darkening sky. There was something odd about the siren today. Not that we'd had that many interactions in the past, but something felt off about the whole encounter.

Shaking off the unsettling thoughts, I focused on the fact that my efforts at getting laid were once again thwarted. Maybe for the best though. Perhaps, Arista wasn't the best option. Then who? I could go on the prowl this evening after hours. Surely, there'd be someone around to donate to the feed-the-hungry-incubus fund. At this point, it wasn't just sex I needed. I'd done my absolute best at keeping my word to Deacon, but there was a certain point when starvation would prove more dangerous than indulging a tiny bit.

My unipeg flapped its rainbow wings, and I dug my heels into its flanks to sidle up between Everly and Roxy. The guardian angel had remained by her side most of the date, which I appreciated.

"The view up here is really incredible." Roxy's gaze latched onto the smoldering sun dipping behind the horizon. A

smattering of pinks and purples painted the sky. “When I woke up in that cave—” She sucked her lower lip between her teeth.

My eyes widened. She hadn’t been able to remember much of anything. “Are you getting flashbacks?”

She shook her head. “Not exactly. I just remember waking up for a second and seeing the demon’s outline in the mouth of the cave, the moonlight illuminating the night sky. I didn’t think I’d ever see the sun again.” A shudder rolled up her spine, the tremor so violent her entire body shook.

That guilt bowled over me, burrowing deep in my core. If I hadn’t been distracted by Rose, I would’ve had that demon. Without him, I had no way of stopping this. Or understanding what the hell was going on. Harper flew up beside Everly, her contagious smile chasing away the grim thoughts. If anything happened to her because of me...

I’d never forgive myself.

I never thought I’d feel so protective over someone, especially not a human. Getting more involved with her would only put her at greater risk, but sometimes her sweet kisses were the only things that got me through the day.

“What are you guys talking about?” Harper asked.

“Nothing good,” I muttered.

“It’s probably for the best that Roxy doesn’t remember much of the kidnapping,” Everly offered. “The memories could lead to more trauma.”

“But if we knew more about the demon who attacked her, we could figure out who he was and why he came.” My tone came out sharper than intended, and the angel stuttered before snapping her lips closed. “I’m sorry,” I grumbled. “I just wish

we'd found out more." None of these girls knew the truth, hell, I hated to admit it, but the attack was because of me.

I glanced over my shoulder to find Arista a few lengths behind us. Her eyes locked onto mine, and her lips curled into a smile. If I snuck into her room tonight, I had no doubt she'd let me devour her. But I couldn't shake the tiny part of me that was relieved we'd been interrupted. Which had to be a sign I shouldn't be messing around with the betrothed siren. The last thing I needed was another pissed off supernatural coming after me.

What the devil was going on anyway?

When we finally reached the villa, I bid the ladies goodnight and stomped up to my wing on the third floor. An odd gnawing sensation chewed at my insides, but for the life of me, I couldn't quite figure it out.

The light seeping between the cracks in the door of Deacon's room had me pause in the hallway. The tiger was always good for a little pick-me-up. I lifted my knuckles to the door, but before they hit the thick timber, it whipped open.

Rose's soft form barreled right into me, and I couldn't help my hands from closing around her hips to keep her from running me over. Her fiery eyes met mine as shock curved her mouth into a capital O. Oh realms, that mouth. I could just imagine it wrapped around—. No, no, no. Not going there.

"Who are you trying to escape, precious?" I donned the mask, willing my lips into a smirk. Why the hell was she in Deacon's room? I shut down the thoughts, slamming a thick wall down. It didn't matter what the she-dragon did in her free time.

“Out of my way, demon.” She glared up at me, her pupils thinned to tight slits. Which of course deviated my thoughts to another slit. One I’d love to devour... *Bad, Slade!*

“You’re the one that ran into me,” I snapped.

Deacon appeared in the doorway in only low-slung sweatpants, his hair disheveled.

A blast of irrational fury scorched my veins. “Well, tiger tool, I see you certainly moved on to the next quickly.”

“Slade...” Deacon gritted out.

“I never said who, tiger. I may be an ass, but I’m not completely self-destructive.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” he bit out.

Rose’s eyes darted between us as we bickered. She crossed her arms over her chest and leveled me with a glare I didn’t think the prim and proper dragon heiress could muster. “Not that it’s any of your business, but this is not what you think it is.” She pointed between the half-naked shifter and herself.

“It doesn’t matter what I think, does it, precious?” My nostrils flared as I sniffed the air for the telltale scent.

“Go to your room before you make more of an ass of yourself,” Deacon growled.

I inhaled another deep breath, but I couldn’t scent what wasn’t there. The familiar odor of sex, of arousal, it was completely absent. A twinge of heat raced up my neck, and I gritted my teeth. “My apologies,” I muttered, raising my hands, palms up. I obviously was in desperate need of a good lay. Spinning on my heel, I darted down the hall toward my chamber as fast as I could without breaking into a jog.

When I reached my side of the wing, I leaned against the wall beside my door and released a frustrated breath. Idiot. I stood in the hall for a moment longer, waiting for I wasn't sure what, but it never came.

I trudged into my bedroom, and an eerie crimson glow emanated from the corner. The red room... The secret door was open. I slipped my shoes off and crept closer. When I reached the doorway, my eyes landed on a fully naked, blindfolded, and bound figure spread atop the silk sheets.

If it wasn't for the brilliant blue hair that spilled over the pillow, I would've barely recognized Arista beneath the silky blindfold that covered the top half of her face.

Oh. My. Sirens.

"It's about time," she purred. "I thought I was going to be trapped in here forever."

"Arista, what are you doing?" I barked. And still, I could barely rip away my gaze. Her arms were tethered to the bedposts with fuzzy pink handcuffs and her legs were spread wide, fastened in a similar fashion, baring everything.

"Picking up where we left off, my dark lord." She wriggled on the sheets, and that tantalizing fragrance reached my nostrils. Lust. Desire. Arousal. Oh gods, I needed it.

My powers flared to life, that hunger clawing at my chest. I inhaled a deep breath, and tiny veins of energy seeped through my parted lips. Even from this distance, I could taste her in the air. And she smelled heavenly. My nose twitched at the oddly familiar fragrance. Not quite what I'd expected from a siren, but who the hell was I to be picky?

My feet propelled me forward even as my mind fought for control. *So hungry.*

“Slade!” A voice from my bedroom sent ice surging through my veins.

Shit, Rose. What the hell was she doing here?

I raced out of the red room so quickly I made my own head spin. “Be right back,” I called out and swung the door closed. Red light seeped through the cracks, and I muttered a curse. “Coming!” I yelled toward the other end of the chamber. Grabbing a blanket from the bed, I shoved it beneath the door to hide the freakish glow. *Good enough.*

After turning on every light in my room to drown out the traces of crimson, I drew in a deep breath to slow my racing heart and casually walked to the door. I leisurely opened it and stood in the sliver of space between it and the doorframe. “Yes?”

Rose jabbed her finger into my chest until I was forced to step back. “You have some nerve, Slade.” She shoved me back into my room and slammed the door shut behind her. “First, you insult me and tell me I ruined everything in Roxy’s rescue mission and then you go around throwing false accusations.” She stood on her tiptoes, and fire flickered across those golden irises. “And then I’m the one feeling guilty?” She shook her head and let out a very un-Roselike grunt. “Nothing happened between Deacon and me. I went over there to apologize because we’d left things a little unsettled—anyway, none of that matters. I don’t owe you anything. I don’t owe you an explanation or an apology—”

“You’re right. You don’t.” My feet moved of their own will, and in one long stride, I backed her against the wall before my mouth captured hers.

She let out a gasp as my lips claimed hers, the fire behind it powerful enough to set the entire island ablaze. My tongue

parted her clenched teeth, and the wicked little thing nipped at me. My body caged her against the wall, unwilling to give even an inch. With each haggard pant, I pressed closer. A smoldering inferno built in my chest, the desire to taste her so overwhelming darkness inched into the edges of my vision.

I kept the monster at bay with every shred of my being as our tongues entwined and hands moved in a desperate, blind search. To touch, to explore, to plunder every inch of each other.

“Slade...,” Rose groaned as I slipped my hand beneath her top.

I pawed at her breast, dipping my fingers beneath her bra and toying with her nipple. Gods, no wonder I was hesitant with Arista. *This* was what I wanted. I wanted Rose more than anything. The infuriating, holier-than-thou she-dragon had gotten under my skin, and I wouldn’t be content ever again until I had her all across this room.

“Damn it, Slade, let me out!” A shrill voice rang out through the lusty haze.

No. No. No. How could I have forgotten?

Rose’s entire body stiffened beneath me. “What was that?” Her eyes narrowed like daggers spearing into my very heart and soul.

“It’s not what you think,” I stammered. She shoved me back, and I staggered a few steps. “When I came back to my room, Arista—”

“You’ve got to be kidding me, Slade!” Rose raced across the bedroom to the secret door and tugged on the *Fifty Shades of Fae* novel which sat askew on the bookshelf.

The door creaked open, revealing the very naked Arista. My heart plummeted to the soles of my feet.

Rose whirled on me, the look of betrayal in her eye a hundred times worse than a slap in the face. “How could you?” she cried.

“I told you I didn’t know...”

She slapped her hands on her hips, and those eyes burned brighter than the fires of hell. A growl vibrated her throat, and a twinge of fear lanced through my insides. Would the house survive if her dragon was unleashed?

She slammed the hidden door closed, and Arista let out another angry cry. A tiny part of me felt bad for the girl, but the other part couldn’t give a shit, not when I saw the hurt in Rose’s eyes.

“Let’s say for an instant I believed that you didn’t know she was here *at first*,” said Rose. “You already knew she was in there when you let me in, didn’t you?”

I gritted my molars and nodded.

“You kissed me knowing full well there was a naked woman in your bedroom.”

“Not in my bedroom,” I roared. “In that gods’ damned sex room I never asked for.”

She jabbed her finger into my chest, and my gaze landed on the golden scales rippling across her forearms. *Uh, oh*. This wasn’t good. “How could I be so stupid?” she hissed. “Let me ask you something and I need you to swear to tell me the truth.”

“Okay.”

“Swear it!” she growled.

“I swear I’ll tell you the truth.”

“If I’d let you, would you have fucked me with Arista hiding in there?”

“I wouldn’t call it fuck—”

“Just answer me, Slade!”

I swallowed hard. I wanted to say no, I wished I could have. But I wouldn’t lie to her. One day I hoped to be a better man, but right now, I wasn’t. Burying myself inside Rose was all I wanted in that moment. Hell, even right now.

“Yes,” I finally whispered.

“I need you to say it louder, Slade.”

“Yes, I would have claimed you on my bed, on the floor, on every cursed inch of this room if you’d allowed it because I can’t get you out of my damned head, Rose. I know it’s wrong and I know you despise me, but gods, I want you.”

“Then you should’ve thought about that before you kissed me with another woman tied up and naked in the same room!” She whirled around, and leathery wings slapped me in the face. One of her talons grazed my cheek and bit into my skin. The sharp sting was nothing compared to the pain carving out my insides as I watched her race to the balcony and leap into the midnight sky.

“Rose!”

I chased after her, leaning over the balcony railing, my eyes trailing her form as she morphed into the beautifully terrifying golden beast. “Rose, come back!”

Realms, what had I done?

LETTING OFF STEAM



Harper

“And Slade was just so cute last night on our date.” Sprawled across my bright pink comforter on the plush mattress, I brushed my finger over my lip as the heated memories of his mouth on mine flushed my cheeks.

“I’m really happy to hear you had fun,” said Rose. But the frown carved into her jaw said otherwise. She’d already seen Slade and I kiss, and she’d made it very clear she wasn’t a fan of the demon, so I typically tried to steer clear of the subject, but I was just so excited.

I stared at my roommate who was perched at the edge of her bed, still wearing her pajamas and all the excitement leeches right out. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, totally fine.” She dipped her head in an exaggerated gesture as if she needed the reminding.

“Shouldn’t you be getting ready for your group date with Slade?”

A grunt slid through her clenched lips.

Guess she doesn’t want to talk about it. “How’d it go with Deacon last night? You didn’t come back till late. I was kind

of worried.”

She blew out a breath and sat back against the bland, beige wall behind her bed, drawing her knees to her chest. “Deacon and I are fine, I think.”

“That’s a lot of fine going around.” I offered her a teasing smile, but the one she returned didn’t quite reach her eyes. “What did you guys do for all that time? Did you hook up?”

Her lips twisted, then curved into a pout. “I was only with Deacon for a little bit, then I went for a flight around the island. I needed to let off some steam.”

“Oh, right. Because you’re a dragon.” My voice hitched around the word. I still couldn’t believe my best friend here was a humongous fire-breathing beast.

“I could take you for a ride one day, if you’d like?” Her eyes brightened for the first time since our conversation began.

“Yikes, that sounds terribly scary.”

Rose let out a laugh. “My dragon has been a part of me for a very long time. I’m in full control when I shift.”

“Okay, that’s reassuring.” I propped my chin in my hands, leaning on my elbows. “Honestly, I’m kind of scared of meeting Deacon’s tiger, and I’m sure that’s bound to happen at some point.”

“I’d be more worried about Slade’s demon,” she muttered.

A twinge of irritation flared. I knew Rose wasn’t a fan of the demon bachelor, but Slade had been nothing but nice with me. “You know, he’s been a perfect gentleman.”

She scoffed.

“I’m serious, Rose. Every time we’re together I practically throw myself at him, and we’ve never done more than kiss.”

Her lips screwed together like she’d just eaten a super sour lemon. What was going on with her?

“I know you don’t like him but—” *I really do.*

“He’s an ass, Harper. He’s a sneaky, underhanded demon with zero redeeming qualities.”

“That’s not true!” My voice hitched again. “You don’t know him at all. You haven’t even given him a chance.”

“I know more than you think.” She snapped her jaw shut, nostrils flaring.

“What does that mean?” I hated the slight tremble. In only two weeks here, I was already starting to fall for the demon bad boy.

Rose slid to the edge of the mattress and huffed out a breath. “I just want you to be careful, Harper. You need to guard your heart. He’s an incubus demon; he literally thrives off sexual pleasure. You can’t honestly think he’s not hooking up with other women, do you?”

I swallowed hard, just the idea of it making me queasy. “I’m a big girl, Rose. I know I’m the most inexperienced contestant here. You might think I’m naïve, but I’m not completely clueless.”

“So you’re okay with that?”

I sat up and narrowed my eyes at my friend. “Do you really think Deacon isn’t doing the same? For someone who knows so much about the show, you don’t really seem to understand how the game is played.” I pushed myself off the

bed and made my way toward the door. I needed to get out of here before I said something I'd regret later.

“Where are you going?” Rose asked.

“I guess it's my turn to blow off some steam.” I slipped out the door and slammed it behind me. Moving quickly down the hall, I rushed down the stairs and through the sliding doors in the back.

When I finally reached the warm air outside, I drew in a breath and willed the hurt down. I wasn't stupid. I knew Slade wasn't only kissing me, but still, Rose was my only friend on this island and hearing her say such awful things about him just didn't sit well.

I walked to the veranda and looked out over the rolling waves of the sea below. Maybe Rose was right about one thing. It was time to take things to the next level with the sexy incubus. I'd waited so long to lose my virginity, who would be better than a freakin' sex god?

“Hey, Harper!” A shrill voice had my heart racing up my throat.

I whirled around to find Arista climbing up the steps from the pool below.

“Oh, hey.” I gave her a smile. The gorgeous mermaid had never been overly nice to me, but she'd never been rude either. Not like some of the other girls. In fact, now that Vesla and Aurelia were gone, the cattiness in the bachelorettes' wing had leveled out nicely.

“What are you up to tonight since Slade has his big date with the other ladies?” She sidled up beside me, and I couldn't help the hint of jealousy that flared at her perfect body in that tiny bikini.

Shoving it far down where it belonged, I finally shrugged. “No plans really.”

“I saw you guys kissing yesterday.” She stepped closer, crowding me against the veranda. “Do you like him? Is he into you?”

“Umm.” I chewed on my lower lip, suddenly very uncomfortable. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Did you know we almost had sex right after your cute little kisses on the shore?”

My heart plunged to the soles of my bare feet.

“He took me to a cave on that island and if we hadn’t gotten interrupted, I would’ve shown him what it was like to be with a real woman.”

I gritted my teeth, a swirl of nausea threatening to toss the contents of my lunch all over the mean-girl mermaid.

She leaned in closer so that my back was pressed to the precarious ledge. The railing creaked, and fear spiked in my veins. “Do yourself a favor and stay away from Slade,” she hissed, her breath hot against my neck. “He’s mine.”

I remained frozen, too scared to move an inch and plummet to my death until she backed off. Just like that, she spun on her heel and disappeared back inside the villa. The moment she was gone, my knees gave, and I slid to the ground.

“Hey, are you okay?” Rose appeared through the glass doors, her dark brows knitted. She was still rocking her pajamas and for some reason, the sight eased the knot in my chest.

Finally, I shook my head.

She rushed across the patio and slid down beside me. “What happened?”

“Arista was just being a royal B.” I sucked in my lower lip as her words about Slade echoed in my mind. “I don’t know, or maybe it was more. For a second there, I thought she was going to push me off the cliff.”

“What?” she shrieked.

I closed my eyes and shook my head. “Or maybe I only imagined it. I just got the weirdest vibe from her, beside all the normal mean girl crud.”

She wrapped her arm around my shoulders and drew me into her side. “I’m sorry for earlier, Harper. I never should’ve said what I did. I know you’re a grown woman and perfectly capable of making your own decisions.”

“Thanks.” I tugged my friend into a big hug. “I just really like Slade, you know?”

Her lips pressed together and again, she forced a smile. “Well, if he’s the bachelor you want, then you should go for him.” She rubbed my back, like my mom used to when I was a kid. “Just be careful, okay?”

I nodded and leaned my head against her shoulder. “I’m kind of glad you don’t like him, to be honest. I’d hate for us to be fighting over the same guy.”

A nervous chuckle slipped through Rose’s clenched teeth. “Yeah, that would definitely be awkward.”

I glanced at my friend’s pajamas and frowned. “Speaking of Slade, why aren’t you ready for your date?”

“I told the stylist I needed to find you first. Chicks before dicks, right?” She smirked and the amusement actually lit up

her dark eyes this time.

“Promise me, Rose, that we’ll always be honest with each other when it comes to the guys?”

Her head dipped. “I promise.”

“Good. I don’t think we have much to worry about. Deacon’s nice and all, but Slade...” I let out a low whistle.

She laughed again and wrapped her hands around mine. “Come on, help me get dressed or I’ll be late for this damned group date.”

“I wonder what you’ll be doing.”

“Something intellectually tantalizing, I’m sure.”

I rolled my eyes at my friend. “Just try to have some fun, okay?”

“I’ll do my best, but no promises.”

Slade

I paced the corridor in front of Deacon’s room like a silly schoolgirl. I’d acted like an ass last night, and I owed my friend an apology. That damned Rose had me strung so tight I couldn’t think straight.

“Are you coming in or are you just going to wear a hole in the rug outside my door?” Deacon’s voice rushed through the cracks in the timber.

I twisted the knob and let myself in.

“What’s wrong now?” The tiger was shirtless, wearing only blue swim trunks.

“You going for a swim with anyone special?”

“No, now stop evading the question.”

I dragged my hand through my mess of hair and spat out the dreaded apology. “I’m sorry for last night. I was out of line. Even if you and Rose had been—doing whatever, it was none of my business.”

Deacon lowered himself onto the mattress and stared up at me. “Do you remember the pact we made at the start of all this?”

“To have fun, tons of meaningless sex, and no commitments?” I smirked.

“Yes, that and also the other one. The one where you said if either one of us started feeling something real for one of the contestants the other would back off?”

“I vaguely recall something of the nature spoken.”

“Is Rose that girl for you?”

Lie, dammit. “No... Ugh. I don’t know. Maybe. But I’m not that guy for her, so this is a moot point.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because she deserves better than me!” I snapped my jaw so tight, my brain vibrated in my skull.

“Gods, Slade, you’re not this horrible, murdering demon dark lord that you make yourself out to be. We’ve all done bad things; none of us is innocent. Give yourself a damned break.”

“What about you?” I threw my hands in the air. “You’re clearly into the pixie. Why don’t you do something about it?”

“I can’t, and you know it.”

“Well, then I guess we’re both fucked.” I whirled on my heel and marched to the door. “I just came by to apologize, okay? Now I have a group date to get to. Wish me luck.”

“Have fun with Rose.”

I swung my head over my shoulder at the grinning bastard and shot him the middle finger.

Fun with Rose is the last thing I should be having. I should stay as far away from her as possible. For everyone’s sake.

ENJOY YOUR THREESOME



*S*lade

Whose ridiculous idea was this? I tugged my thick fur-lined coat tighter around myself as the five of us, Chance, Crystal, Rose and Iris trudged along the frigid peak of the Draeko mountains. An icy blast of air bit at the tip of my nose. Even Rose squeezed in closer, which said a lot considering the dragon grew up in this frosty tundra. And hated me with a burning passion.

Methyss bounced around beside us as happy as a clam. His white tux must have been spelled against the frigid weather. There was no other explanation.

“Are you going to tell us what we’re doing in this freezing hell hole or what?” I snapped at the smiling emcee.

“Just a little farther, my dark lord.” That megawatt smile seemed completely out of place given the inclement conditions.

“Do you live near here?” Crystal turned to Rose, tugging up her fur-rimmed hood.

Rose pointed toward the valley of towering crags. “Sky Lair is just that way.”

“Is it this cold here all the time?” The spring Fae had a layer of frost atop her brilliant green hair.

“No, this is unusually cold. There must be a storm coming.” She eyed the darkening sky, and a whirl of unease rooted in my gut.

“Fantastic,” I gritted out.

Rose’s eyes flickered to mine for an instant before they darted away. She hadn’t said a word to me since we set off on this date from hell. I convinced myself it was for the best anyway. Until I figured out who was after me and why, it was safer for everyone to keep their distance. And the best way to accomplish that was to ensure all the contestants hated me and loved tiger boy. Easy enough.

I was pretty sure Chance had a thing for Deac, and Rose was a no-brainer. Crystal and Iris were a bit more difficult to read. There was a sure-fire way to get on their bad side, and nothing like a freezing trek to push it along more quickly.

“Do you ladies know a guaranteed prevention to frost bite?” I glanced to the women huddled on either side of me.

“No, what?” Crystal’s teeth chattered as she bit out the words.

“Skin to skin body heat.” I shot them each a wink. “Nothing like five warm bodies to stave off a chill.”

“You’re disgusting,” Rose grumbled under her breath.

“What? I’m just trying to save us all from some wicked frost bite.”

“I might take you up on that,” Crystal stammered.

Rose threw her a nasty glare.

“What? I’m freezing, and he’s not wrong.” The beautiful human shrugged.

“Don’t be judgy, precious. We’re not all hot-blooded dragons here.”

She lengthened her pace, darting ahead of us to catch up with Methyss.

“You know she likes you, right?” Chance leaned in close. “Or are you really that clueless?”

Ouch. I eyed the formerly nice unipeg shifter. “And what makes you so sure about that?”

“I can just sense things, moods, emotions, etcetera.” She shrugged. Then she inched closer, and her warm breath brushed the shell of my ear. “I can also tell when you’re bullshitting.”

My eyes widened, and it took all my restraint not to jump back from the nosy little filly.

“All right, ladies and gentle dark lord, we have arrived at our destination.” Methyss pointed at a niche along the promontory. Haggard pants and excited yips floated through the air.

I took a few steps closer, and the ladies followed. Hidden beneath a rocky overhang stood a pack of djingos, wild canine beasts native to Draeko.

“What in the five boroughs are those?” Crystal cried out.

Chance stepped out from our warm foursome and knelt on the snow-covered ground beside one of the furry creatures. “Hi there, boy.” It jumped up, placing its massive paws on her shoulders, and a slobbery tongue lolled out. A second later, the rainbow-haired shifter was flat on her back as the beast licked

her to death. She giggled and squirmed beneath the oversized dog until it finally released her.

“They’re pretty much like dogs you’d find in the human world,” said Iris. “Only bigger and faster.”

“That’s absolutely correct, Ms. Iris.” Methyss clapped his hands. “And today the djingos will be taking the five of you on a sledding adventure.”

“Great,” I groaned.

“Oh, yay, this going to be fun!” Chance stood in the middle of the pack of howling mongrels.

Methyss snapped his fingers, and the oversized sled appeared behind the mass of hairy beasts. “You’ll find the sleigh to be fully equipped with everything you’ll need for your journey. The djingos will take you across Daggerclaw mountain and down into the valley. You’ll find a lovely set up for your dining pleasure at the bottom of the hill just beside Jaggedtooth Lake.”

“Oh, I used to love ice skating there as a child.” Rose’s golden eyes sparkled, the first hint of light I’d seen all day.

“Wonderful, Ms. Rose, then you can take the lead as tour guide once you’ve reached our destination.” Methyss pointed at the wooden sled. “All aboard!”

The djingos lined up two-by-two and the leather straps magically fastened around their furry bodies.

“I’ll drive.” Rose scooted into the front seat, and the three ladies slid in the back.

“I suggest you ride with the young lady just in case.” Methyss tipped his hat toward me. “The djingos can be quite strong.”

“I’ll be just fine,” Rose hissed.

“You heard the lady, Methyss. She said she has things under control.” I dipped my head at our host and slid in the back with the bachelorettes. A soft cushioned seat covered the wooden bench, making it surprisingly tolerable.

“Do you really know how to drive one of these things, Rose?” Iris asked.

“Well, it’s been a while, but how hard could it be?” Letting loose a bit of slack on the reins, she snapped them in the air just above the djingos backs.

They lunged forward, and the sled lurched after them. The four of us nearly slid right out of our seats.

“Whoa!” Crystal’s arm hitched through mine.

“Everyone, hold on!” I shouted.

The sleigh raced across the clearing, frigid winds blowing a rainbow of hair across my face. Rose pulled back on the reins and the beasts slowed to a more manageable pace. After a few moments, the she-dragon had the excitable creatures surprisingly under control.

“Let’s see what we have back here.” Iris rummaged through a large wooden chest. “Oh, look, warm mead.” She handed each of us a thermos, extending her arm to offer one to Rose.

I swatted at her hand. “None for our driver. She has to keep her wits about her.”

“Don’t you worry about my wits, demon. For the first time since I arrived, I’m finally thinking clearly.” She reached back for the warm drink and snatched it out of the Fae’s hand.

I took a long gulp of the warm liquor, and the knot of unease in my gut began to loosen. The dogs fell into an easy rhythm, and though I'd never admit it to the haughty dragon, Rose was actually a decent driver. She expertly steered the djingos through the snowy, winding terrain and I settled back on the bench, my arms draped around the other bachelorettes.

All in all, it was a shockingly good time.

Before long, we'd descended the mountain, the sharp peaks giving way to a valley below. The crystal-clear lake glistened ahead, and the girls' ooo's and ahh's warmed the air.

"It's so beautiful," Crystal crooned.

"Do you know how to ice skate?" I asked.

"Of course, I do. My dad used to take me to Rockefeller Center every Christmas break." She thumbed the silver locket at her throat.

"Sounds lovely."

"Yeah, they're some of my best memories of him."

"He passed away?"

She nodded, darkness casting over her beautiful features.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

Her lips pressed together before she forced a smile. "It was a long time ago."

"I'm sure that doesn't make it any less painful."

"You're right, it doesn't."

I squeezed her hand, and she inched closer. From over her shoulder, I could just make out Chance and Iris, chatting away, and Rose's gaze fixed ahead. Crystal's lips brushed mine, the

contact so quick I could've imagined it if it weren't for the hunger it ignited in my core.

Realms, I needed a snack or things were going to get ugly.

Crystal would definitely do. Wasn't that my plan anyway? Hook up with as many women as I could so they'd all despise me?

Yes, as soon as we reached the lake, I'd sneak off with the first willing contestant.

"Thank you, Slade." Crystal's hand wrapped around my thigh as she leaned closer to whisper in my ear. "You're not at all like the evil, soul-sucking demon I imagined."

The sled lurched forward, and if I hadn't wrapped my arm around Crystal and braced my hand against the front seat, we would've been thrown from the blasted vehicle.

"Oops, sorry." Rose canted her head back, a wicked gleam in her eye.

Had she seen the kiss?

A swirl of guilt pummeled my insides. *Stop it, Slade. This is exactly what you wanted. Rose needs to hate you.*

"We're here!" Rose announced. The sled slowed to a halt beside the shimmering frozen lake, and the djingos began yipping like mad.

"That wasn't as horrible as I thought it would be." Iris took another sip of the mead and dropped the cannister into the wooden chest.

"Yeah, I had a great time." Chance squeezed Rose's shoulder. "You were fantastic. How'd you learn to drive like that?"

“I’ve done it a few times when I was younger with my brothers. It’s been a long time, but I guess it’s just like riding a bike.”

“Oh, look, that must be our picnic.” Iris pointed along the left bank of the lake where a small structure composed entirely of ice sat illuminated in a golden glow.

Crystal and Iris took off toward the ice hut as Rose and Chance settled the djingos. Like before, the tethers magically disappeared, and the dogs were free to roam.

“I hope they don’t run off,” I muttered.

“They won’t,” said Chance. “They’re trained to stay with the sled.”

“Can you communicate with them?” Rose asked.

“No, I just know.” She grinned and patted the lead djingo. “You were such a good boy. Good boy!”

Rose turned toward the ice picnic, and I followed a few steps behind. About a dozen things swirled on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn’t get out a single one. More than anything I wanted to apologize for the disaster that had become last night, but when I tried to put my apology into words, nothing seemed right. Besides, it would be better if she just hated me anyway.

When we reached the overgrown igloo, the golden globe wafted over us, and a wave of heat reached deep into my bones. Rose let out a groan beside me, and my damned dick twitched at the sexy sound. It was like she’d felt my reaction because her head swiveled in my direction. Clearing my throat, I pressed my arms across my chest, as if I could somehow block her effect on me. It was no use. When I was

near Rose, I was always turned on. I simply had to have her. Or at least that was what my stupid dick thought.

I'd have to set him straight soon or the results would be disastrous.

I followed Rose into the warm bubble and found Crystal and Iris basking in the interior.

"Oh, this is just heavenly," Crystal purred. She sat on a pile of fur cloaks in the center of the blocks of ice. Iris lay beside her, stretched out across the warm mound.

I forced my feet around Rose and dove into the middle of the heap of fur. "Well, I think I'll join you ladies."

Crystal and Iris giggled, scooting closer until each had a hand on my chest. I'd have to take my jacket off if they kept this up.

Rose spun on her heel, a scowl carved into her pouty lips. "I'm going ice skating."

"Alone?" The concern tinged my tone without my permission.

"Yes, Slade, but please don't worry about me." Sarcasm dripped from every word. "Enjoy your threesome."

She darted from the hut before I could get another word out.

Iris's fingers danced across my chest, and she draped her leg over mine. "Let her go, Slade. She'll be fine."

"Iris is right," said Crystal. "She's a dragon, and anyway, Chance is out there too. Stay in here with us where it's nice and warm." She shot me a grin, and the scent of arousal permeated the air.

Oh, realms, I needed this. Just a few kisses from each of these women should tide me over.

WILL IT HURT?



R_{ose}

“Gods, I hate him!” I gritted through my teeth as I stomped out of the igloo, and any icy blast whipped hair across my face. Why was that incubus so fickle? One minute I was the only one he wanted and now, Crystal and Iris would do? Schnikes, what was wrong with me?

I picked up the pair of ice skates I’d confiscated before I darted out of the igloo and dropped to the snowy ground. Lacing them up, I mumbled curses. Why had I let that demon get to me? I’d watched last season; I knew how irresistible his powers were. And still I’d succumbed.

If Arista hadn’t been all naked and tied up in his room last night, I would’ve let him do *anything* to me. I was completely out of control around Slade, and I hated it. I hated *him*.

Only I didn’t.

Gods, when Crystal kissed him earlier, I’d barely been able to keep my dragon from peeling out of my skin. It was a damned good thing we’d nearly reached the lake at that point, or I could’ve sent us careening off the mountaintop.

“Hey, are you okay?” Chance’s face materialized in front of me, blocking the sprawling frozen lake. Her eyes were wide as she stared at my hands.

No wonder I hadn’t been able to tie my skates. Sharp claws jutted out from my fingertips, and I could practically feel my pupils narrowing. I willed my dragon back, taking slow breaths and stilling my accelerating pulse. “Yeah, sorry, my emotions are a little out of control.”

“I see that.” Chance folded down beside me, sinking into the powdered snow. “Why don’t you just tell him how you feel?”

My eyes nearly bugged out of my head. “What? Who?”

“Rose, don’t pretend with me. You can’t anyway. I can feel it.” She pressed two fingers to her forehead. “It’s a unipeg thing. I’m much more sensitive to emotions, both people and animals alike.” She paused for a long minute, likely to allow me to get a grip on her words. “Isn’t that why you came on the show anyway? To meet a guy and find love?”

“Love?” I scoffed. “That demon bastard doesn’t know the meaning of the word. Let alone common decency.”

A smile slid on Chance’s face despite her best efforts at smothering it.

“I don’t want Slade,” I muttered. “Or at least I don’t want to want him.”

“Sometimes we have no say in the matter.” She squeezed my shoulder. “I’m pretty sure I have no chance with the bachelor I like, but I’m still here. Still trying.”

“Deacon?” I asked.

She nodded, her pale blue eyes intent on her folded hands. “It’s hard because there are only two of them and so many of us. Even if we feel a connection, they could be feeling the same for so many others.”

“How do you do it?” Being able to sense what everyone else was feeling had to be incredibly overwhelming.

“Just something you get used to.” She revealed a pair of ice skates from behind her back and began unlacing her boots. “So trust me when I say whatever he feels for you is nothing like what he feels for the other girls.”

My ridiculous heart grew wings and fluttered around my chest like a stupid child with a crush. I tried to smother the silly sensations. My dragon was a one-man kind of female. She’d never put up with Slade’s philandering tendencies.

“Come on, let’s go for a skate.” Chance offered her hand, and we helped each other stagger to our feet.

Slade

A threesome? I never saw that coming today. Iris’s hand slipped beneath my shirt as Crystal fluttered kisses down my neck. The igloo wasn’t exactly private, but it was secluded enough. If Chance or Rose walked in... Sharp claws shredded at my heart at the thought of the she-dragon walking on in this. She’d be so angry; she’d hate me.

Perfect.

Iris’s hand skated beneath the waistband of my jeans, her fingers teasing the sensitive flesh. Another few inches and

she'd reach—I hissed out a breath as her hand closed around me. Damn, I hadn't expected this from the prim and proper Fae female.

I laid back on the soft furs and tried to relax. Arousal thickened the air, and I inhaled a deep breath. That hunger stirred in my core, and wisps of blue vapor fled my lips. Iris let out a faint moan as her hand slid up and down my length. I swallowed up every last enticing sound.

Crystal's mouth captured mine, and I tasted her too. Just a few nibbles, despite the overwhelming desire permeating the small space. These two were totally getting off on this, on all three of us together.

As Iris continued her attentions below, Crystal's mouth explored mine, her tongue teasing. She reached for my hand and tugged it around her waist. I palmed her ass going through the motions. I was ravenous, but the need was purely physical. To fulfill a basic need. My head and my traitorous heart just weren't in it.

“May I?” I whispered against Crystal's lips.

“Will it hurt?” Her eyes flickered with curiosity.

“Not even a little bit.”

“Okay.” She nodded and gauzy blue filaments swirled between us. I breathed her in, and the gnawing hunger in my gut began to subside. I consumed my fill of the lusty sensations floating in the air, taking enough from each of the contestants without overindulging.

Iris continued pumping, and though pleasurable, I could see no end in sight. I simply wasn't there yet. I sat up and gently removed her hand, dropping a kiss on her palm. “That was incredible.” The lie slipped easily from my lips. What was

incredible was how wrong it felt. “It’s getting a bit too hot in here,” I teased. “Should we go cool off?”

Crystal and Iris shook their heads, practically in unison. “You’re leaving us?” the human whined.

“Unfortunately, I must. The two of you are just too tempting for my demon. It’ll be for the best, trust me.”

Both girls pouted, but I shot them my trademark smile and soon their scowls melted away. “We’ll wait for you in here then,” said Iris. The Fae rifled through a basket in the corner. More cannisters of warm mead.

“Well, help yourselves, ladies, and keep the place warm for me when I return.” With a quick wave over my shoulder, I reached for my coat and speared my arms through the furry sleeves.

The blast of icy air when I stepped across the golden haze of the mystical bubble was like a slap in the face. Realms, it was frigid out here. How anyone could possibly enjoy this weather—My mental musings were cut off as my gaze landed on Rose, twirling across the frozen lake.

Her movements were graceful and elegant, a ballerina performing an intricate dance along the ice. I stared, speechless for a long moment, taking in her exquisite beauty. My heart flip-flopped, the empty cavity roaring to life with each spin, every twirl of her perfect form.

Paralyzing fear speared my chest, reminding me what an idiot I was. Aspen had nearly been killed because of me all those months ago, and now Crystal had been poisoned, Harper stabbed, and Roxy kidnapped. How could I possibly put anyone else in danger?

I heaved in a breath and clenched my fingers into fists. I had to be strong. I had to do the right thing.

“Hey, Slade, why don’t you join us?” Chance called out with a wave from the ice.

I hadn’t even seen her I’d been so fixated on Rose. “Um, I don’t think so. I’m not quite adept on ice. Hellfire and brimstone, now that’s more my thing.”

The sweet unipeg giggled. “It’s not like you’re going to fall through the ice, Slade.”

“I don’t know, I wouldn’t completely rule it out. I am *super* hot.”

Rose rolled her eyes, shaking her head, and I couldn’t help the thrill her reaction elicited. “Just leave him alone, Chance. He’s too scared.”

“I am not.”

The she-dragon leapt up and twirled in the air, landing perfectly. “Then prove it.”

Oh realms, she was hot when she baited me.

I had the dreaded skates on seconds later and gingerly made my way across the ice. I could count on one finger how many times I’d attempted this.

“Slow and steady, you’ve got this,” said Chance.

When I reached the bachelorette, I clutched onto her hands like they were my last lifeline. She was surprisingly nimble for a unipeg shifter. Nothing like Rose’s grace, but she held her own on the frozen lake. She led me around in a small loop as the she-dragon danced circles around us.

“Rose is amazing, right?”

“Hmm.” I nodded. “A little too much of a showoff if you ask me.”

The haughty dragon shot me a snarl, and I couldn't help the smile that melted across my face.

“Why do you have to do that?” Chance scolded.

“Do what?”

“You know very well what I mean.”

“I like to rile her up. It's fun.”

Chance released my hand and moved behind me, placing her hands lightly on my hips.

“What are you doing?” I snapped.

“Just taking you for a little ride. Relax.” The shifty unipeg steered me right toward the twirling dragon. Then gave me a shove.

“Chance!” I squealed as I barreled across the slippery ice and straight into the spinning prima ballerina. Where are the brakes on these stupid things?

Rose's wide eyes lifted to mine a second before I slammed into her. I flattened her soft form against the ice, an oomph escaping both our lips as we hit the hardpacked ice. “Sorry,” I mumbled and braced myself over her body as soon as I got my limbs untangled.

She stared up at me, a mix of irritation and something I couldn't quite name flashing across those expressive irises. Her nostrils flared, and the annoyance quickly escalated to rage. “Get off me, Slade, you stink.”

“Stink?” I rolled off her and sat on the ice.

“Yes, like Iris and Crystal.” Her pupils narrowed, the intense gold swallowing up everything else.

“They were kind enough to offer me a snack.” I forced a smirk across my face.

“I bet that wasn’t all they offered you.”

“You’re right. Iris also tried to jack me off.” Every crude word I spat was like a knife in my gut, but I pried them out, nonetheless. The more she hated me the better.

Her mouth curved into a capital O, rage coursing through those fiery golden orbs. “I’m so happy for you,” she gritted out.

“Hey, an incubus has to eat, precious.”

“Whatever you say, Slade.” She spun on her skate, cutting a tight circle around me. Flames flickered across her eyes, and I realized my mistake a minute too late. She opened her mouth, and a wave of dragonfire expelled from her lips.

I leapt to the side, and the flames ignited across the frozen lake. “Shit, Rose!” The dragonfire scurried across the slick surface, and the ice cracked. A fissure crawled around me, until it separated from the main slab attached to the shore. My little island of ice drifted free, and the fire blazed more brightly.

“Slade!” Rose threw her hands out, but it was too late.

The ice continued to crack, and I drifted further away.

UNEXPECTED CONFESSIONS



Rose

“No, no, no!” I gritted through clenched teeth as I willed my uncontrollable dragon back. Good gods, she almost fried Slade alive. The demon dickhead floated farther away, and despite the seething anger filling my chest, a tiny hint of regret poked through. He deserved a time out and most definitely a cool down, but I didn’t want to kill the philandering bastard.

The image of Iris’s hands on him had red seeping into the corners of my vision. My dragon let out another growl, vibrating my entire ribcage. *Easy girl. Slade is not ours, nor will he ever be.*

The sooner we accepted that the better.

“Rose!” Chance skated up beside me, her cheeks bright pink. “We have to help him.”

I shrugged. “The fire will eventually burn out on the ice. He’ll be fine.”

“He’s floating farther and farther away.”

“You have wings, can’t you save him?”

Chance slapped her hands on her hips and tossed me a disapproving scowl that reminded me way too much of my mom. “My unipeg is much too heavy to land on that tiny island of ice.”

“So is my dragon.”

“I know you can half-shift, Rose. I’ve seen you do it.”

I muttered a curse. “Can’t we just leave him out there for a little while longer? He reeked of those two girls.” I hated how pitiful I sounded.

She bumped her shoulder against mine and threw me a half-smile. “I guess a few more minutes would be okay.”

“Oh, no Slade!” Crystal emerged from the igloo and appeared along the icy shore. Iris popped out a second later, her flowing, green locks in a messy tangle.

My stomach churned at the sight of the Fae and the memory of Slade’s disgustingly vivid description of what she’d done to him.

“What happened?” she squealed and ran toward us.

I hazarded a glance across the semi-frozen pond. The ice had doused the flames as I’d expected, but Slade’s form grew smaller with each passing moment. “Thin ice, I guess,” I muttered.

Crystal’s hand wrapped around my forearm. “You have to do something!” Her breath reeked of sweet mead.

I huffed out a breath, and a puff of smoke curled from my lips. *Oops*. “Fine...” Focusing on the dragon squirming just under my skin, I called on the flicker of magic, careful not to completely release my jealous beast.

My wings snapped out, and Crystal's hand dropped from my arm so quickly you'd think I'd actually burned her.

"Whoa." She eyed my leathery golden appendages, her gaze fixed on the sharp talons on the ends.

"Hurry, he's so far away already." Iris stood on her tiptoes, wobbling, as if somehow that would make it easier for her to see him. Geez, how much mead had they indulged in?

I rolled my eyes at the annoying little Fae. *Ugh, stop it.* This was not me. I was not some petty, hateful girl. Unfurling my wings, I pushed off the icy surface and floated a few feet over the lake. Cracks and fissures ran along the ice, separating the sea of endless white. I kept my eyes down, anything to avoid the bottomless midnight orbs drilling into me from across the lake.

"No need to rush, precious." Slade's voice forced my gaze up. "It's not like I'm floating on a shrinking ice cube."

"What's wrong, dark lord, can't you swim?" I shot him a cheeky smile.

"Oh, you'd love that wouldn't you? If I froze to death and sank to the bottom of the lake."

My wings flapped leisurely just a few feet above the infuriating demon. "I certainly wouldn't cry about it."

He scoffed. "Deny it all you want, but you know I'm the only one that makes things interesting around here."

"Sure, if you call being kidnapped and poisoned interesting."

Slade's dark brows furrowed, and all the humor vanished from that smart mouth. "You're right, precious," he mumbled.

“You’d probably be doing everyone a favor if you just left me out here.”

That damned guilt rose again, and I let out an exasperated grunt. Angling my wings toward the floating block of ice, I slowly descended. “I’m pretty sure leaving you out here to die wouldn’t sit well with the producers.”

“You really know nothing about them, do you?” The hint of a smile re-emerged, curling his lips.

I landed gingerly beside Slade, and the tiny frozen isle teetered, barely big enough to hold us both.

“Are you going to sweep me into your arms like a real-life dashing hero?” He stood over me, his damned musky scent invading my personal space.

“Heroine,” I gritted out.

“Oh, right.” Slade’s arm snuck around my shoulders, drawing me closer. My breath hitched at the contact. Then he jumped up, throwing all his weight on me and slung his other arm around my neck. I barely got my arm under his legs in time to cradle his massive weight against my chest.

“Are you crazy?” I shouted as we wobbled on the edge of the frozen ice. Slade practically had me in a choke hold.

“Don’t drop me, precious.” He smirked and snuggled in closer.

“I’m about a second from launching you across the pond.”

“So violent. I like it.” The idiot booped me on the nose, and his grin only grew wider. “You know, I misjudged you, Rose. I thought you were this goody-two-shoes, daughter of the alpha, but as it turns out, you’ve got a little of a dark streak.”

My thoughts flickered to my maternal grandfather. Slade had no idea how dark... “I think it would just be better if we didn’t talk.” I bent my knees and my wings unfurled, launching us off the tottering ice island.

As soon as we were airborne, a chorus of whoops filled the air. Crystal and Iris cheered from the shore, both females bouncing up and down as we approached. My mouth must have twisted into a snarl because an irritating chuckle broke the minute space between Slade and me.

“What’s got your panties in a twist, precious?”

“Nothing,” I hissed. I could already imagine what his welcome celebration would entail, especially now that the girls were drunk on warm mead. I flapped harder and faster, desperate to get this man out of my arms. I could feel every point of contact fiercely. My traitorous she-dragon reveled in each and every brush of skin.

We reached the shoreline to a round of applause, and despite my roiling gut, I forced a smile to my face. Though I was fairly certain it came off more like a sneer.

Slade’s warm breath tickled the shell of my ear, and every nerve ending in my body sang. “Thank you,” he whispered. “And I want to apologize in advance for all the ways I’ll likely hurt you in the coming weeks, but I want you to know I’m only doing it to save you.”

“Slade—”

“No, let me finish, please.”

I didn’t dare look at him. I kept my gaze fixed on Chance’s reassuring face, forcing my own mouth into a half-smile as my feet hovered over the snow.

“What you overheard the other day, when I was talking to Deacon, you misunderstood my meaning. I didn’t say we couldn’t be together because I didn’t want to be. Trust me precious, I want you so badly I can barely breathe most days. And right now, with you holding me like this, it’s taking every ounce of restraint not to capture your lips and claim you as mine for good.”

A soft gasp slid through my parted lips.

“The reason I said what I did was because not only do I desire you physically, but you’ve also somehow managed to sink those talons into my shriveled up, dark heart. And because of that, and only that, I will not pursue this further. Because I’ve been down that road before, and nothing but hurt lies in wait. For both of us.”

Slade leapt out of my arms before my boots sank into the soft snow, and much before I could muster a word after his shocking confession. I swallowed thickly as he trudged across the bank, into the waiting arms of Crystal and Iris. My mind spun with his words, a mixture of surprise and regret battling it out in my gut. He couldn’t have been serious, right?

The demon dark lord didn’t really have feelings for me...

I trailed his tall form for another long second before turning away. I couldn’t watch the girls fondling him, pawing at him. It was ridiculous and insane, but goddess dammit, he wasn’t the only one with inexplicable feelings. I’d fallen for the demon dark lord, and now I wasn’t sure how I’d survive the remaining weeks.

A MUSHY IDIOT



D *eacon*

“Thanks for hanging out,” I whispered to the scowling demon. Dawn flitted around on the opposite side of the chamber, collecting her styling supplies from the bathroom.

“You’re such a chicken shit,” Slade growled. “No one’s buying this I-needed-company-while-I-get-ready act.” He leaned in closer and hissed in my ear. “You’re just scared to be alone with the cute pixie.”

“I am not.”

“You are too. You just want me here as a buffer.” He threw his hands up and stomped in a big circle.

“Keep your mouth shut,” I hissed.

“She’s not blind or stupid, you tiger tool.”

I shoved my hand through my newly gelled hair, tugging at the ends.

“You’re going to have to be alone with Dawny again at some point.”

“I know that, but I was hoping some space would make my tiger chill out a bit. And who better than you as a cock

blocker?" I shot my friend a smirk.

"If you want, I can shoot little Dawny with some of my incubus power. She'll forget all about your lame tiger ass."

My beast surged to the surface, and a deep growl vibrated my chest.

Slade tossed me a shit-eating grin. "Told you."

"Like you have any room to talk. I already heard all about your fantastic date. Rose had to save your ass and carry you like a baby over the frozen lake." A chuckle slipped out as I imagined the dark lord cradled in the beautiful girl's arms.

Fire lit up his dark irises, the flames of hell scorching through the interminable black. "Who told you?"

"Chance of course. We had a nice little chat last night after you all returned."

"That sneaky little unipeg."

"She also told me about you, Crystal and Iris?" I cocked a brow. "Why would you do something so stupid in front of Rose?"

"I already told you there is no me and Rose." He muttered a curse and stomped around my room before circling back and hissing in my ear. "So if you're not going to go for the pixie, do us all a favor and make your move on the she-dragon. You two would be perfect together."

My lips pressed into a tight line as I thought about the gorgeous female. I would have completely agreed with Slade just a week ago, but now, things were different. Not only wasn't I sure how she felt about me, but I also wasn't entirely certain of my feelings for her. Besides that, I knew how much the demon dickhead liked her despite his relentless denial.

Dawn appeared from the bathroom, carrying a duffel bag on one shoulder and a big black case clenched in her petite hand, perfectly manicured pink fingernails curled around the handle. “Well, you’re all set, Deac. Enjoy your date.”

I lurched forward and reached for the big bag on her shoulder. “Let me help you with that.”

She shook her head with a sad smile. “Nope, I got it. Besides, the girls are already waiting for you downstairs.” She eyed the clock over her shoulder on the wall. “Time’s up.”

Right. Gods, I knew everyone was right. I needed to get over Dawn already. If I wasn’t willing to give it all up for her, I didn’t deserve her, and she sure as hell didn’t deserve to be strung along.

“Thanks for making me bangable, as always.” I threw her a smirk.

“And on that note,” Slade blurted, “I’m out of—”

I slapped my arm across his chest, cutting him off.

“No, don’t go,” said Dawn. “I’m leaving now anyway.” She wagged her fingers at me before marching out the door. “See you later.”

As soon as she was gone, I released a frustrated breath. “Why did I sleep with her again?”

“Because you’re a mushy idiot with zero self-control.” Slade shot me a wink, and I countered with my middle finger. He straightened out the collar on his linen shirt and the amusement in his eyes faded. “But all joking aside, you should keep an eye on Arista today. She was acting off on our last date.”

“Because she threw herself at you?”

He nodded. “Well, yes.”

“I thought that was normal for a sexy demon beast.”

Slade’s eyes rolled back so far all I could make out was the white. “Just do as I say, tiger tool.”

“Fine.” I walked toward the door, already dreading this date after Slade’s vivid description of the icy conditions. “Maybe if I’m lucky, she’ll throw herself at me too.”

Slade chuckled. “It might be worth it if it gets your tiger out of his funk.” He slapped me on the back and walked me toward the door. “Have fun and do everything I would do.”

Shaking my head, I followed him into the hallway then turned toward the stairs. Maybe I should take a page from the demon’s playbook today. I had a date with four beautiful women, so why shouldn’t I have some fun?

The sled slid to a halt amidst the towering snow-capped mountains, my fingers wrapped so tightly around the reins, I was sure I’d have blisters for days. Everly slipped forward on the seat, and I barely got my arm across her in time.

“Well, that was some ride.” The sweet Nephilim grinned at me, her long blonde hair windblown beneath the knit woolen cap.

“Sorry about that. I can safely say driving a djingo sled was a first and a last for me.”

“Oh stop, you did great.” Harper’s hand closed over my shoulder from the back seat.

“Speak for yourself, I’m about a second away from throwing up.” Arista leapt out of the sled and trudged across the snow. For a mermaid, she was surprisingly nimble on the soft powder.

“Look, an igloo!” Harper pointed across the sea of howling wild dogs.

“I hope it’s warm.” Everly ran her gloved hands up and down her arms.

“Iris said she hid out in there for the entire date,” said Roxy.

The crew had given us all the necessary gear and still the ride across the mountain had been frigid. No wonder the demon bachelor had been so grumpy.

“I don’t know about you ladies, but I could use some of that warm mead right about now.”

“I’ve heard it’s heavenly.” Everly’s trembling lips melted into a smile.

“Let’s go then.” I wrapped my arm around the angel, Harper and Roxy. Arista was already well ahead of us, making a beeline toward the golden globe surrounding the igloo.

The minute we crossed the gilded sphere, a groan escaped through my chattering teeth. “Oh yeah, definitely heavenly.”

Arista stood at the back of the ice cavern, digging through a wooden chest. She pulled out a bottle of mead and began pouring. A pile of animal furs lay in a heap in the middle of the space, surrounded by furry bean bag chairs. Harper bellyflopped onto the fluffy pile, and Everly and Roxy each plopped into a surrounding soft chair.

As the girls' lips began to thaw, their happy chatter filled the large space. Okay, I supposed this wasn't horrible. Arista sauntered over and offered me a goblet of the warm mead. Clinking her glass to mine, she gave me a smile. "This is much better."

"Agreed." I eyed the mermaid, Slade's earlier words echoing through my mind. She seemed like she was acting normal to me. "So I take it you don't spend much time in the cold in the Ocean Realm?"

"Not at all." Her pert nose wrinkled. "The water is always a perfect eighty-one degrees in our kingdom."

"But isn't it difficult living under the sea all the time?"

"We're not below all the time, and besides there is a bubble much like this one that surrounds the city of Atlantis so that residents may come and go on legs through the streets of the capital."

I'd heard of the mystical bubble below the sea, but it was one of the few realms of Azar I'd never explored. "Maybe I'll come visit you one day."

She offered a tight smile and took another sip of mead.

"Come sit with us, Deacon!" Harper called out.

"Excuse me." I ticked my head at the mermaid and plopped onto the pile of furs beside Harper in the middle of the sitting area.

The girls each had goblets of mead in their hands, and the warmth of the igloo combined with the hot beverage tinged their cheeks a faint crimson. I watched them as they laughed and joked about the crazy ride down the mountain. As each one spoke, I searched for that spark, but there was something missing.

Harper was sweet and kind, and despite knowing she had a major crush on the demon bachelor, there was just nothing there but friendship. My gaze flickered to Everly. The Nephilim was gorgeous and shy, but still, I could see her determined nature, and yet, felt nothing.

There was one other female I'd been interested in from the moment I saw her. My heart sputtered out a beat as the image of a golden-eyed Rose filled my vision. I'd pushed romantic thoughts aside for a while now because of Slade, but if he really wasn't going to pursue her, should I try again?

No, definitely not.

Then there was Chance, of course. I'd felt an instant connection with the sweet shifter when I met her overzealous unipeg on the first day. I needed to explore those feelings before I lost my chance. No pun intended.

The girls chattered on, gulping down mead as my thoughts swirled. I jumped in and out of the conversation as the minutes passed.

"What do you think about a group midnight swim, Deacon?" Everly asked, drawing me from my inner ramblings. "You know, when we don't have any dates planned."

"Sounds lovely."

"You know what else would be lovely?" Roxy patted the bean bag chair beside her. "If we could each get some alone time with you?" Her lively light green eyes sparkled under the mystical golden glow.

"Sure." I took a final sip of the mead and sank into the furry chair next to her.

The other three girls moved to the opposite side of the space, gathering around the wooden chest. I could only

imagine what sorts of beverage options they'd find. I'd already had a few glasses of the honey mead and was feeling it. The girls were half my size, and they'd kept up with each sip.

"How are you feeling, Roxy?" The color had returned to the shifter's cheeks, the soft pink aglow.

"Good as new." She inched the bean bag chair closer and weaved her fingers through mine.

As her fingers glided between my own and a flicker of heat ignited down below, I was suddenly very aware I'd been kissing her half-sister only two days ago.

She leaned closer and pressed a kiss to my cheek. I must have twitched or made a face because she pulled back, pale green eyes scrutinizing. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, it's just, I guess I'm still getting used to playing this game."

"You mean because you kissed my sister?"

My eyes widened, mouth curving like I'd been caught with my paw in the cookie jar. I nodded like an idiot.

"She already told me. We promised each other we'd be completely honest with each other." She trailed her finger up and down my forearm.

"That's smart and surprisingly level-headed of both of you."

She shrugged. "We'll always be sisters. Men will come and go."

Ouch. I knew she hadn't meant that as an insult, but still. I guess the little fox shifter really was all better, and I didn't have to keep treating her like she'd break.

She fixed her eyes to mine and ran her tongue across her bottom lip. “Remember how everyone thought I’d hooked up with Slade the night I went missing?”

My head slowly dipped.

“Do you know why I didn’t?”

“No idea.”

She kneeled between my legs and brushed her nose against mine. “Because I’m not interested in Slade. I want you.”

AN UNEXPECTED THANK YOU



Deacon

Roxy inched closer, her arms lacing around my neck. I hazarded a glance over my shoulder and found the igloo empty.

Well, wasn't that convenient? Also, how had I missed the other girls leaving?

Her mouth brushed mine, and a soft moan parted her pretty pink lips. "You know how long I've been waiting to do that?"

I shook my head. I'd had no idea the fox shifter was interested in me. I just assumed most of the bachelorettes switched to team Slade the moment he arrived. She wrapped her hands around mine and moved them to her waist.

"I'm okay, Deacon, I swear. I don't even remember most of what happened when I was kidnapped. I simply want everyone to treat me like I'm any of the other bachelorettes, and most of all I just want to forget all about it." Her tongue flicked out, and she dragged it across my lower lip. "Will you help me do that?" she whispered against my mouth.

My hands slid down to her ass, cupping her cheeks through the thick denim. She spread her legs and straddled me,

winding her thighs around my waist.

My tiger let out a growl at the invasion of his space.

Roxy continued kissing me, ignoring my beast's snarls of displeasure. A faint sound vibrated her throat, and I recognized the raspy bark of her fox. The little rascal wasn't even slightly intimidated.

Her hands moved beneath my shirt, and she tugged at the hem until she had it over my head. Her curious eyes scanned my torso, then the swirling tattoos along my arms. "They're beautiful," she murmured against my lips.

"Thank you, they're symbols from my streak." Few Azarians were familiar with the technical names of each shifter groupings, so for ease, most referred to them as packs. A tiger streak, a skulk of foxes, a sleuth of bears were terms only the residents of Marlwoods were familiar with.

"My dad was a beta, according to what little Mom used to talk about him."

"I swear we're not all bad." I'd heard enough of the story from Iris to know her father had abandoned her before she was born.

"I know." She settled deeper into my lap, and my cock instinctively hardened between her thighs. "Growing up in the Fae realm, I haven't had much of a chance to get to know many shifters. It's one of the reasons I came on this show."

"Well, I'm glad you did." I kissed her again, my tongue gingerly exploring. At least my beast had settled down.

She nibbled on my lower lip, her body pressed tight against mine and desire pooled down low. If she kept this up, I'd need to go outside to cool off. She rocked her hips against mine, and the unmistakable scent of arousal flared my nostrils.

Even my tiger's irritation subsided, giving way to something else entirely.

I cupped her ass, rubbing her harder against my growing erection. She let out a mewl, and her head tipped back as she continued to grind against me.

Gods, that felt good. Maybe Slade had been right, and I just needed to get under someone to get over Dawn.

Roxy's hand slid between our bodies and found the button of jeans. She made quick work of it and the zipper, then her hand slipped beneath my boxers and around my dick. I let out a hiss as her fingers closed around me.

Shit, I was hard up. I'd been so careful about not letting loose and now, it was all I could think about. Her hand slid up and down as her tongue teased and teeth nibbled on my lower lip.

"Roxy," I whispered. "You have to slow down."

"But I want you to..." Her eyes met mine and she slid down my body until she was between my legs. She freed me from my jeans and ran her tongue over her lips.

Anticipation sent fire shooting through my veins.

She took me in her mouth, and my hips bucked from the unexpected wave of pleasure.

"Roxy," I groaned again. She'd barely started, and already I could feel myself close to the brink.

She released me, licking her lips, my arousal dripping down her chin. "I want to do this, Deacon. You guys saved me, and this is my little way of showing my appreciation."

Damn, if I'd known that... I shook off the thought with an evil smirk. Gods, I was getting worse than Slade.

She pushed me down onto the furs and slid down my body. “You just relax and let me take care of you for once.” Her head dropped between my legs, and I closed my eyes and let the pleasure consume me.

Harper

“Whatever Roxy did to Deacon in there has the guy smiling more than I’ve seen all week.” I laughed as Everly and I skated across the ice.

“She must have screwed him.” Arista whizzed by, her pointy nose in the air sniffing.

Like me, the mermaid had made it clear she had no interest in the tiger bachelor. I wondered until when they’d make us go on these pointless dates. Would we ever get to officially choose which guy we wanted?

I watched Everly beside me, the steady smile on her face giving nothing away. “So which bachelor is your favorite?”

Her cheeks rosied, and she fixed her gaze across the lake. “Oh, I don’t know yet. They both seem great.”

“But what if you had to pick one? What if the producers came to our rooms tomorrow and said, ‘Everly, pick a bachelor or you’re out!’” I did my best imitation of Shep’s gruff tone, earning a giggle from the nephilim.

She chewed on her lip for a long minute before blurting, “I guess I’d choose Slade.”

“Really?” My brows jumped up so high I thought they’d leap right off my face. I never thought the angel would go for the demon. Was that even allowed?

“Yeah.” She shrugged. “I think there’s more to Slade than he lets on. I’d just like to find out more about him.”

“That’s totally how I feel!”

She offered me a sad smile. “At least you’ve kissed him. I see the way he looks at you, and there’s something genuine there.”

Now my cheeks were burning. I liked Slade so much, but I wasn’t stupid, I didn’t think I really had a chance with the demon dark lord. Not to mention that if things ever worked out which was a *huge* if, I’d have to live with him in the Underworld. I wasn’t sure I’d survive that.

“I really do like him,” I admitted.

“I can tell.” She smiled again.

“But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t go for him too. I’m not about all that mean girl stuff.”

“I can tell that too.” Everly laced her arm through mine. “Luckily, the producers haven’t made us choose just yet, so I’m going to keep my heart open.”

“I wish I could, but golly, I just love everything about Slade.”

She laughed as we glided along the ice. “Then I’m sure everything will work out as it should.”

As we skated, I couldn’t help but think of Slade and what he was doing right now. Most of the time when the others were out on dates the remaining bachelor hid out in his room. Especially Slade. Sometimes I wondered why he’d agreed to this show at all.

Deacon and Roxy skated up, hand in hand, and I wished I could have that with Slade.

“Sorry to intrude, ladies,” said Deacon as he slid to a stop in front of us, “But Everly, would you do me the honor of a skate around the lake?”

“Sure, I’d love that.” Releasing my arm, she glided toward Deacon. His gloved hand wrapped around hers, and they took off.

“You sucked him off, didn’t you, you sly little fox?” Arista called out from a few yards away. She skated toward us, a sneer on her lips.

“Arista!” I squealed.

“What? Everyone’s getting some, except for you, little virgin.”

“You don’t have to be such a bitch,” Roxy snarled.

Arista shrugged and twirled in a circle. “I’m just trying to get a feel for the competition.”

“Let me guess, you want Slade?” The question popped out before I could stop it.

“Maybe,” she singsonged. “Or maybe I’ve already had him.”

My stomach twisted at the thought. Gosh, I hated the idea of anyone’s hands on Slade, but especially the evil mermaid’s. I still couldn’t shake the eerie feeling from the other day. There was something weird going on with that girl. Sure, Arista had never been overly nice to me, but the girl standing before me didn’t even seem like the same one who had arrived two weeks ago.

“Why do you have to be like that?” Roxy bit out. “You know she likes him.”

“She has no place liking a demon dark lord. The cute little human doesn’t belong in the Underworld; she’d get eaten alive.”

“Oh, like you know him so well?” I squeaked, super annoyed at the sharp sound.

“I know him much better than any of you can imagine.” Arista twirled around and skated off before I could get another word in.

“What a total bitch,” Roxy snarled again.

“She’s been meaner than normal, right?”

“Totally.” Roxy’s head bounced up and down. “I guess that’s what happens when the competition heats up.”

Great, I’d barely made it through the first two weeks, I was so not looking forward to the rest.

SABOTAGE, ANYONE?



*S*lade

“What do you think this is about?” I eyed the tiger pacing the glass walls of the modern great room. We’d all received notes to convene here after breakfast. Already, a few of the bachelorettes had started to trickle in.

“Nothing good, most likely.”

“You seem oddly chipper this morning.” I’d watched the smiling bachelor from across the dining room table as he chewed syrupy waffles and chatted with Roxy and Chance. The brooding shifter from the day before was gone, and I needed to know his secret. Despite the tasty snack Crystal and Iris had offered the day before on our frigid date, it had done nothing for my mood. Typically, after a feeding I felt phenomenal. Not this time.

My gaze lifted over my shoulder to meet a pair of golden irises darting in my direction. And there it was. The reason I felt like shit. Damned that she-dragon for getting under my skin. And for nearly turning me into a demon popsicle in that icy tundra.

“I hate to be the one to say it, but maybe you just need to get laid, Slade.”

I spun at the smirking tiger. “Oh gods, Deacon, you didn’t.” I dropped my tone to a hiss. “You slept with Dawny again?”

“No,” he rasped out.

“Then who?”

“I didn’t *sleep* with anyone.” He inched closer and tilted his head to my ear. “I did however release some *tension* on the group date yesterday, if you know what I mean.”

“Who?” My voice hitched. Gods, I couldn’t believe I was actually jealous of the goody-two-shoes tiger. How was he getting more action than me?

“Roxy,” he whispered.

“That little fox...”

“I’m not giving you any dirty details so you can get off on my sexual energy or whatever, so don’t even bother asking.”

“I wasn’t going to.” My mouth puckered. Roxy had been very clear she was into the shifter that night she dragged me into the bathroom before she’d been kidnapped. “So that’s it? You’re over the little pixie?”

He shrugged. “Are you over Rose?”

I blanched, my eyes inadvertently chasing to hers. They still watched me from across the room, those inquisitive golden orbs tapered at the edges. Yup, she was still pissed. And she had every right to be. I’d done my best to stoke the flames.

“Your silence speaks volumes,” Deacon muttered.

Tearing my gaze away from Rose, I speared the tiger with a glare. “Why are you messing around with these other girls? If you’re trying to get over Dawny, just go for who you really want. Rose. We all know you’d be perfect together.”

“Stop pawning her off on me!”

“Why? I know you like her.”

“I *liked* her. But... damn it, Slade, it’s obvious to anyone with eyes that she wants you.”

“You afraid of a little competition?” I shot my friend a wicked grin.

“Of course not. But I also don’t like sloppy seconds.”

“Rose and I haven’t—” I bit my tongue to keep from spouting out a blatant lie. Sure, we hadn’t slept together but we had done *stuff*.

“So you have or you haven’t?”

“No,” I hissed.

“Are you holding out on me? I haven’t even heard so much as a peep out of you in regards to the beautiful dragon. If you haven’t slept with her, have you at least kissed? Hooked up? Done other things?”

Only in my dreams. “I’m not talking to you about this,” I whisper-hissed. More of the bachelorettes filled the room with each passing minute, and this was not the time or place to be having this conversation.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Methyss’s high-pitched voice filled the room an instant before he materialized in his finest white tuxedo and top hat. “Please, please take your seats.” He clapped and everyone filled in the couches and chairs around the great room.

I slumped into an empty love seat, and Deacon was beckoned onto the cushion beside Roxy. Damn, that little fox had it bad for the big guy. Rose sauntered past, searching for an empty seat, eyed the one next to me and couldn't get away fast enough.

"Ms. Rose, please, sit." Methyss motioned at the empty half of my love seat.

She rolled her eyes and folded down beside me without sparing me so much as a glance. We hadn't spoken since she saved my ass after nearly flambéing it. I'd done my best to avoid the fiery she-dragon because being near her without being able to touch her drove me mad.

What was it about this woman that had me so twisted up?

She squirmed beside me, and her bare thigh grazed mine. My dick twitched at the near touch. Shit, I was like a horny teenager around her. I inched away, crossing my leg over the other to stifle those unwanted urges.

Methyss clapped his hands again, drawing my attention to our flamboyant emcee. His grin was too wide to deliver anything but bad news. He was crazy like that. "I hope you all enjoyed your dates. I know the audience certainly loved watching them. There seem to be some clear front-runners in the group. We've also had a few unexpected audience reactions..." His words fell away, and a mischievous grin curled his lips. "More on that a little bit later. For now, I hate to say, it is nearly that time again! The next elimination will be tomorrow."

Gasps ricocheted around the room, and a snarl echoed through my own chest. Already? It seemed like we'd only just done this dance a few days ago.

“How many will be eliminated?” Arista asked.

“Four ladies will be leaving Mystic Cove tomorrow evening.”

Another wave of gasps.

“That means, bachelors, you must each eliminate two women. And this time, the elimination will be a blind one. Which means Slade will have no idea who Deacon will eliminate and vice versa.”

“What?” Deacon barked. “That’s not fair.”

“Let’s just hope you know each other well enough not to eliminate a frontrunner for the other. Or perhaps, that will only add to the unpredictability. Sabotage, anyone?” He grinned maniacally.

“We’d never do that to each other.” The words slipped out before I could stop them. Then again, I wasn’t even sure who was Deacon’s favorite right now. Besides Dawny of course. He was certain of my preference though...

I hazarded a quick glance at the female beside me. She sat straight up, her entire body stiff. I could practically feel the tension radiating from her slim shoulders. Surely, she had to know there was no risk of her being sent home.

“Yeah, never,” Deacon echoed.

“I suppose we’ll see when push comes to shove.” Methyss threw me a completely unhinged grin. “On that note, you’re all free to enjoy the day. A buffet will be set up along the pool deck for lunch, so relax and take advantage of the final full day on the island for some of you ladies.” Our host snapped his fingers and two slim gilded bracelets appeared in his palm. He marched toward Deacon and held one up an inch from his nose. “Just a precaution. We want to make sure you and Slade

stay away from each other until the elimination. We simply can't have you conferring on your choices."

"This is bullshit," he growled.

Ignoring his comment, Methyss continued undeterred. "Should you get within three feet of each other, an alarm will sound alerting the production team. So don't try anything."

"And if I refuse to put on the stupid bracelet," I barked.

"Then this whole process will be much simpler with only one bachelor."

Rose drew in a sharp breath, and the amount of satisfaction that little sound brought me was entirely unhealthy.

"You may still enjoy the poolside festivities together, just be sure to remain a good distance apart." He scanned each and every female in the room. "And don't even think about helping them pass messages, ladies. We'll be watching you."

"Well, this is insane," Rose mumbled under her breath.

"Don't worry, precious, Deacon would never eliminate you."

She spun at me, those golden orbs like molten lava. "And you? Wouldn't it make things easier if I was gone?"

Her words were like a sucker punch to the gut. My lungs flailed for a second, momentarily having forgotten how to function. Would they be easier? Monumentally. Could I bear the thought of eliminating Rose? Unlikely.

I stared at her, my lips unmoving, my brain in a strange fog. By sending her home, I'd be protecting her. She'd probably hate me for it, but at least she'd be safe. Shouldn't I do the same for Harper then? What I felt for the sweet human wasn't anywhere near the barrage of emotions that

overpowered me when I was around Rose, but still, I couldn't deny I cared for her.

"I guess I've got my answer." She pressed her palm to the cushion between our legs to push herself up but before she could, my hand wrapped around hers.

"No," I gritted out.

"No what?" Her brows knitted as she regarded me.

No, I can't bear to lose you. No, the thought of spending a day without you here sends fear racing through my body. No. No. No. "No, I'd never do that to Deacon," I muttered. "You know the tiger adores you." I forced a smile to my lips, despite the lies burning my throat, and slowly released her hand.

"Thanks, I feel so much better now." The irony in her words was palpable. She rose, and this time I didn't stop her.

BACHELORETTES AND A BODY



Deacon

“Aww, you miss your buddy, don’t you?” Chance folded down beside me on the edge of the pool and handed me a beer.

“Thanks.” I popped the cap and guzzled down the human beverage. “I’d never admit it to him, but I kind of do.” I smirked, the irritating demon’s never-ending snark echoing through my mind. I hated making this decision without him.

Slade sat at the opposite end of the pool with Harper, Everly and Iris in a semi-circle around him. I couldn’t help but notice who wasn’t anywhere near him. Rose stood by the veranda, staring out onto the rolling waves of the Manta Sea. Obviously, I wouldn’t be sending her home, and Slade wouldn’t—Oh, that idiot better not eliminate her in some stupid attempt to protect her.

Chance must have followed my line of sight because a sad smile curved her lips. “I hope those two work it out.”

“Huh?”

“Slade and Rose. It’s so obvious they have feelings for each other. I think if it weren’t for all the drama on the show, they would’ve gotten together by now.”

“Maybe.” I shrugged. “Slade’s got a lot of baggage he’s been toting around.”

“Don’t we all though?”

“Hmm.” For the first time since I arrived on the island, my thoughts drifted to Alma. I’d been so torn up about leaving her, and the moment I set foot on Mystic Cove, she’d practically vanished from my thoughts. Gods, men were fickle beasts.

But Chance was right, we all had baggage.

She inched closer and leaned her head on my shoulder. It was the most forward the sweet shifter had been since I’d met her. And damn, I really did like her. Why did she always get shoved to the back of my mind when I was with the other bachelorettes?

“This is nice,” she whispered.

“It is.” My hand found her knee, and my fingers closed around her warm skin. “I’m really sorry we haven’t gotten more time to spend together like this.”

“Me too.”

We sat in a comfortable silence, watching the steady rise and fall of the sea down the beach. I sipped my beer, and Chance drew in a contented sigh. I wrapped my free arm around her shoulder and dropped the empty bottle beside me.

Tilting my head toward her, I reached for her face, running my thumb over her soft cheek. She’d been one of the girls I’d liked from the very beginning and yet for some reason or another, we’d never quite connected.

She leaned in, closing the distance between us until only a heartbeat separated our lips. “There’s something I’ve been

wanting to do for a very long time.”

“Me too.” I erased the final breath of space and pressed my mouth to hers. Her lips were soft and sweet, much like the unipeg herself. She tasted like cherries, and a warm vanilla scent coated her skin. Kissing her softly, my fingers slid into the silky hair at the back of her neck. I tilted her head, and her lips parted. Her tongue glided over mine, tentatively at first, before gathering some steam.

My free hand slid down her shoulder and found her curvy hip, settling in quite comfortably. Kissing Chance felt so natural, so easy.

A splash of cold water crashed over us, and I let out a growl as Chance screeched. Blinking the water from my eyes, I searched the pool for the demon prankster. But there was no Slade in sight. He still sat at the opposite ledge, completely consumed in conversation with the girls. In the middle of the pool, Arista swam underwater, and Crystal floated by on a pink flamingo float. Where in all the realms had that rogue wave come from?

“You okay?” I swept a lock of rainbow hair behind Chance’s ear.

“Yeah, just a little wet.”

That one word went straight to my dick. Shaking off the lusty thoughts, I focused on Chance’s soaked rainbow locks. “That was weird, right?”

She scanned the other bachelorettes, her curious gaze landing on Arista. “It was.” She nibbled on her lower lip then turned back to face me. “Have you noticed Arista’s been acting a little strange?”

“It’s funny you mention that because Slade said the same thing.” I eyed the mermaid princess as she swam laps beneath the surface. “Anything specifically strange you’ve noticed?”

“Just a weird feeling.” She shrugged. “Anyway, I don’t want to talk about Arista or Slade.” A hint of mischief streaked across her pale blue irises. “Since we’re already wet, you want to get in?”

Oh gods, the wicked innuendo flying through my mind. Mentally chastising where my thoughts had instantly gone, I slipped my fingers through hers and tugged her into the pool. “I would love that.”

She smiled and cupped my cheek. “That kiss was really nice.”

“Damn, I hope it was better than just nice. I’m going to have to up my game.” I leaned in and claimed her lips, not holding back this time.

Her body pressed against mine, the damp chill tightening her nipples to sharp peaks. My tiger surged to life. For a one-female kind of animal, he sure was enjoying this. We dropped down beneath the water so only our heads broke the surface, and I wrapped her long legs around my waist as I deepened the kiss.

It went from sweet and tame to hot and fiery in seconds once we were hidden beneath the tepid depths. My hands slid down to her ass, pressing her against my hardening erection. She gasped in my mouth, only urging me on. My tiger let out a contented growl as her hips rocked against me.

Damn, I’d never seen this side of the quiet unipeg.

Her eyes met mine, a sparkle igniting the tranquil blue. I held her gaze as my lips continued their assault.

“Hey, hey! Get a room down there!” Slade’s deep voice rang out over the increasing tempo of my pulse.

Without releasing Chance’s lips, I shot my friend the middle finger.

His dark chuckle echoed across the patio.

Slade

Well, at least someone was having fun. I glanced at the circle of females surrounding me and forced a smile. Harper had left a few minutes ago in search of Rose, which left me with Crystal, Arista, and Iris. It wasn’t that I minded the women fawning over me, it was that I felt nothing.

Not even hunger.

Which was completely unlike me.

I had to be sick or something. I slid off the ledge of the pool and into the lukewarm water. Maybe I just needed a swim to wake up.

Arista followed me into the water and swam closer, leaving Crystal and Iris along the ledge sipping their frozen daiquiris. “You know, you still owe me after the other night.” She crept right up and ran her nose across the shell of my ear, inciting a wave of goosebumps.

I was shocked the woman was still speaking to me after what I’d done to her that night. Leaving her bound and naked in the red room should’ve sent her racing for the hills. After Rose left, I was so pissed off at myself, I’d practically kicked her out of my room. It had not been my finest moment. And still here she was...

“Yeah, about that—” My thoughts were cut off as her hand snuck between us and slid into my bathing suit. “Whoa,” I barked as her fingers closed around me.

Crystal and Iris were just a few feet away and everyone else was *everywhere*.

“I appreciate your enthusiasm, Arista, but now is not the time.” I scanned the pool deck for Rose and Harper. I may have been an ass, but neither deserved to see this.

“Then let’s go inside.” She tightened her hold around my dick, and the stupid thing hardened. I might not have been hungry but apparently my cock was. She started moving, up and down along my shaft and I clenched my teeth together to keep the moan from breaking out.

Good gods, what was it with these women and my dick?

“Arista, no.” I snatched her wrist and gently tugged it away.

“Why the hell not?” She stuck out her lower lip into a pout, and I almost felt guilty. “Why’d you let Iris do it? Suddenly, I’m not good enough for you?”

My jaw dropped, and I was fairly certain it would hit the bottom of the pool. Damn, guess the whole no kissing and telling wasn’t a thing anymore. “I didn’t...” I muttered.

Okay, maybe I’d let her jerk me off for a few minutes, but not like this. Not in such a public display.

She rose to her tiptoes, rubbing her breasts against my upper arm and whispered, “I want you inside me.”

My dick twitched at the rough edge to her tone, and a battle raged in my conscience, which apparently, I’d just grown. Wasn’t this what I wanted? Something to take the edge

off and a sure-fire way to piss off Rose? I didn't want her witnessing it of course, but just hearing about me screwing the betrothed mermaid should've been enough to repulse her for good.

So why couldn't I force my lips to form the words to agree?

I scanned the pool deck just over her head, searching... searching for what or whom I couldn't even say. Did I want Rose to see me? To shoot me a narrowed glare? To ignore me? Something, I needed something, a sign, so I could figure out what the hell to do.

A scream broke through the internal torment, and ice shot across my veins. I knew that voice. It haunted me in my dreams and echoed through my mind during every damned waking hour. *Rose*. I leapt out of the pool, leaving Arista shouting after me. Darting to the edge of the deck, I spotted Rose and Harper down the beach.

A few of the other bachelorettes scurried out of the pool, Deacon included. "Who was that?" he called out, but I was already racing down the wooden steps toward the shore.

I could clearly see Rose was unharmed even from this distance, but still my heart smacked against my ribcage in time with my footfalls on the soft sand. When I finally reached the bachelorettes, they had their backs to me, heads down staring at something that had washed up along the shore.

"Is everything all right?" I rasped out as I reached them.

Neither looked at me, but Rose pointed at the oversized trash bag rolling back and forth along the shore.

I stepped between the females and crept closer as the hair on the back of my neck lifted. A wave rolled in, toppling the

bag over and revealing a slender arm and a freshly manicured hand.

Another shriek sent my heart catapulting up my throat.

“It *is* a body!” Harper cried.

PLEASE BE OKAY



Deacon

No. It couldn't be. My pulse spiked at Harper's cry as I raced down the beach with a handful of bachelorettes behind me. It had to be a mistake. I scanned the women trailing me and did a quick count, adding in Rose and Harper standing with Slade along the shore.

All the bachelorettes were accounted for.

"Slade, don't touch it!" I shouted as the demon bent down by the oversized garbage bag rolling along the shore.

By the time I reached him, my heart jackhammered at my ribcage. I slid to a halt beside the girls and stared at the arm peeking through an opening in the black plastic.

"Who is it?" Harper stammered.

"None of the bachelorettes," I confirmed. "Everyone's accounted for." The rest of the girls encircled us, gasps resonating throughout the semi-circle as they stared in horror.

"It sure looks like a female arm." Slade's brows furrowed.

He was right. It was slender and petite, with faint, light hairs on the forearm. Not to mention the bright pink nail

polish. “Excellent assessment, Captain Obvious.”

Slade shot me a glare I totally deserved. “So let’s open up the bag.”

“Eew, no!” Arista cried.

“We should really wait for the SIA.” I glanced skyward searching for the familiar drone. One bobbed in the air a few yards away. “We don’t want to disturb any evidence.”

“You really think Shep is going to let the SIA come in on this?” Slade snarled. “They’ll shut down production again for weeks. The smarmy producer would never let that happen.”

“He has to,” Rose murmured. “Someone’s clearly been murdered.”

“We’re jumping to conclusions here,” I bit out. “The body could’ve washed ashore from anywhere.”

“Or it could be one of the crew.” Everly’s shoulders shuddered, sending a chill up my spine.

Dawn. Panic gripped my lungs, squeezing the air out. The petite form would fit and the nail polish... Oh gods, what color had she been wearing last I saw her?

I dropped to my knees and started tearing at the black bag.

“Deacon, what are you doing?” Slade shouted. “What about the evidence?”

“I don’t give a fuck,” I growled. My nails sharpened to claws, and I shredded the plastic in seconds.

Another round of gasps, shriller this time echoed around me as I tugged the ashen body from the dark shroud.

“Good gods,” Slade hissed.

Deep cuts, gashes and dark bruises covered the female's pallid body. Her face had been completely mutilated and not a single strand of hair remained. If it weren't for the feminine organs, it would've been impossible to decipher anything.

"Did someone shave her hair off?" Rose cried out.

"And her face... Oh no, I think I'm going to be sick." Harper spun around and gagged.

I gently rolled her over, terror seizing my heart. Wings. Dawn had, no, *has* wings. Her backside was just as destroyed as the front, a series of lacerations all up and down her shoulder blades. What if they'd been cut off?

I leapt up and glanced at Slade, blinding fear consuming every inch of me. "I have to go see someone. I have to check ___"

He nodded slowly. "I'll let the producers know what we found. Go!"

With one last glance at the grisly body, I spun toward the villa. Each panicked step was agonizing. It couldn't be Dawn. Why would it be? Who would kill her? It made no sense. My thoughts spiraled as I raced up the steps to the main level.

Once I reached the deck, I darted around the villa toward the staff quarters. *Please be okay, please be okay.* I prayed to all the gods as I pushed my legs faster than ever before. My ribcage felt too tight with the mad hammering of my heart and desperate inhales. A cold sweat coated my bare chest despite my still damp swim trunks.

The pink door on the second floor of the staff building materialized at a distance, and I pushed myself harder. "Dawn!" I shouted. "Dawn!" If something had happened to her, I would never forgive myself. I'd been so stupid not to tell

her how I really felt. I should've just quit this stupid show. She was everything...

I sprinted up the stairs still screaming her name like a lunatic. If the producers were in their rooms, I'd be screwed, but I didn't care. I couldn't think about anything else but Dawn being safe right now.

The pink door at the end of the hallway was like a beacon in the maddening darkness. I raced the final yards and practically slammed into the rosy timber. "Dawn! Dawn, open the door!" I slammed my fist over and over again. "Please, Dawn, please."

That paralyzing fear laced around my heart, tightening like a noose with each passing second.

"Dawn..." I murmured, emotion clogging my throat and heat burning my eyes. My knees gave way, and I sank to the floor, my palms pressed to the pink timber.

The door whipped open, and I fell forward.

"Deacon?"

Somehow, I managed to get my arms out and wrapped them around Dawn's bare legs so I didn't fall flat on my face. I clung onto her with every remaining ounce of strength.

"Deacon, what are you doing? You're going to pull my towel off."

I glanced up, finally taking Dawn in. She had a fluffy pink towel draped across her chest and beads of water clung to her skin. Her brilliant hair draped across her slim shoulders, and gods in that moment, she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

“You’re okay.” I held her tight against my bare chest, still kneeling on the floor. I was too scared to move, to let her go for even a second. I buried my nose in the towel, inhaling her sweet, cotton candy scent.

“Yes, of course I’m okay. I heard you screaming when I was in the shower. What’s going on?” She closed her fingers around my chin and pried my face from the soft terry cloth. “What happened?”

“A body washed up on the beach.” My voice still trembled, not fully my own.

“Oh gods, that’s awful.” She stared down at me, lips puckered. “But why did you think it was me?”

“I—I just had the most terrible feeling.”

She offered me a hand, and I forced myself up, wrapping my other hand around her free one. I still couldn’t quite let her go.

“The body was completely mutilated. It was impossible to make out the face. For a horrible second, I thought—”

A gasp parted her pretty pink lips. Lips a minute ago I was certain I’d never see again. Never taste, never feel against my own. My head dipped forward, and my lips crashed against hers.

I trapped her against the door, fully expecting her to shove me away, but instead she sank into my embrace. I claimed her mouth with the overwhelming fear that had swept over me. I devoured her, my hands moving possessively over her body. Her towel fell to the floor between us, and I continued my assault. I needed her so badly it hurt. The idea of never having this again had scared the shit out of me.

I palmed her bare ass, and she let out a whimper as I pressed her tight against me. I was so hard, my dick strained against my swim shorts. They were wet and sandy, but none of that mattered. All that was important was that Dawn was alive and she was kissing me. More than just kissing me. She pawed at my bare torso with as much desire as the overwhelming sensations pounding through me.

Her hands slid beneath my bathing suit and drew it down my thighs.

“Dawn, I—”

She pressed her fingers to my lips, cutting me off. “I don’t want to talk right now, okay?”

My head bounced up and down. The idea of claiming her right here against the door had my tiger surging to the surface.

My swim shorts pooled at my feet, and she reached between us taking me in her petite hand. My tiger let out a contented growl as she slid her hand up and down my arousal. I couldn’t take another minute of this. I’d explode in her hand in a second. My fingers dug into her hips and lifted, wrapping her legs around my waist. My cock rubbed at her center, and her head fell back with a moan.

“You sure?” I murmured against her mouth.

“Yes, one hundred percent.” I could feel her smile against my lips and gods, it had me harder than hell.

Positioning myself at her entrance, I thrust inside her.

“Deacon,” she groaned as I filled her. In and in and in.

She was so perfect for me. I rocked against her, pressing her into the door as her moans filled the minute space between us.

“Don’t stop,” she breathed as I plunged deeper still.

“Gods, it’s been too long,” I whispered against her lips.

She clung onto me like I was her only lifeline, slender fingers digging into my back as I lifted her up and down, up and down. Every thrust had me closer to the cliff. I didn’t know what it was about the fear of losing this woman, but it had made everything so raw, so intense.

“Dawn,” I murmured, fixing my eyes to hers.

She blinked quickly, her pupils blown out, wings folded behind her back.

“I’m crazy about you. I have been since the first day we met.”

“Deacon, please don’t—” She rolled her hips against mine, urging me to move.

“I have to. I have to tell you how I feel...”

She swallowed up my words with her demanding lips. Her hips rocked harder against mine, and I could feel her tightening around me. She was close.

I increased the tempo, thrusting harder and deeper. Her head fell back as she grinded against me. I slid my finger between our bodies and found the tight bundle of nerves at her apex. She let out another moan as I circled.

“Oh, Deacon!” she cried out as she constricted around me and sent me over the edge with one more thrust.

Her head fell to my chest, our haggard breaths mingling between us.

“That was incredible,” I murmured against her damp hair.

“Mmhmm.” She lifted her head and pressed her lips to mine. “I can’t feel my legs.” A giggle spilled out, and I couldn’t help but join in.

Shifting her legs, I cradled her against my chest and carried her to the sofa. “I’m not sure why I didn’t do this earlier.”

She laughed again, those bright eyes alive with amusement. “Against the door was definitely more exciting.”

“And more of a workout.”

She shifted in my lap, straddling me and her wings began to flutter leisurely. I could feel her wetness across my thighs, rekindling the fire below. “Are you too tired for another round?”

“After thinking I’d almost lost you forever?” I shook my head. “Never.”

A MISSING TIGER AND A SNEAKY DRAGON



*S*lade

“Everyone relax,” Sheppard shouted over the steady murmur of panicked whispering. “The production team is handling the situation. I need all of you to hang tight while I assess the situation.” He stomped off, jabbing his thick fingers into the keypad of his phone. Would we be getting another visit from Detective Rizin? Not like she’d been super effective the first time around.

Dax’s assistant, Sam, had ushered us all to the pool deck a few minutes after Deacon took off to find Dawny. Gods, I hoped it wasn’t her. I was starting to get worried since he still hadn’t returned. But if it had been me, and I’d just discovered the girl I was falling for was alive, I sure as hades would’ve been making up for lost time.

I glanced over my shoulder to the group of bachelorettes huddled in the corner. Rose’s golden gaze latched onto mine like she’d somehow overheard my thoughts.

Yes, I’d definitely be fucking her senseless right about now. If I hadn’t turned so unexpectedly noble. Noble sucks. Devils, the thought of losing her had my heart in a chokehold.

Just imagining the light in those brilliant golden irises forever dimmed had my lungs struggling for air.

Get it together, Slade.

No matter what you feel for this girl, acting on it would be reckless. The moment I saw that body, my first thoughts were that it was somehow my fault. Nothing had been confirmed, but still that niggling fear had wormed its way into my gut.

I squeezed my eyes closed and pivoted my gaze to Harper. She offered a sweet smile and beckoned me over. Joining the group of panicked bachelorettes was the last thing I wanted to do, but disappointing that little human just didn't sit well.

So, I forced my feet forward and joined the circle of females. Harper, Rose, Iris, Roxy, and Everly all chattered about the mysterious body. Across the veranda Arista stood by herself, her gaze intent on the sea, while Crystal and Chance talked in hushed whispers a few yards away. Everyone was on edge, and I couldn't blame them. As usual, this season of *Hitched* was a total shit show. Sometimes I wondered if Shep and Dax would just give up and call it quits.

Nah, too much money.

"Oh, golly, Slade this is just awful, isn't it?" Harper weaved her arms around my waist and stared up at me, those big, doe eyes melting the icy barrier around my heart.

"Just terrible," I muttered.

"Who do you think it is?" Roxy asked.

"No idea."

"It's gotta be someone from the crew," said Iris.

Again, my thoughts flitted to Dawny. I crossed my fingers and toes, then prayed the god of death hadn't stolen her away

from us.

Rose's eyes lifted to mine, and her lips pursed as if there was something perched on her tongue she couldn't quite spit out.

"Yes, Miss Rose?" I cocked a dark brow. "Do you have a guess as to the mysterious body?"

She crinkled her nose and squeezed her eyes closed for an instant before refocusing on me. "There was something familiar about her scent. Beneath the smell of decay and seaweed."

Great.

"You don't think this is about you, do you?" Her dark brows puckered as she regarded me. Of course, she had to say that.

"I don't know," I muttered as a new wave of guilt tossed my innards around. But if it was somehow because of me, I was out. I wouldn't continue to put these women at risk. Deacon would just have to manage without me.

"Why would it be?" Harper turned her anxious gaze in my direction.

"I'm sorry to say that in my time as dark lord of the Underworld, I've acquired a few enemies." I turned to Roxy and gave her a sad smile. "I'm afraid that those enemies may have found me here."

"But you have no idea if that's really true..." Rose interjected.

"Correct, but what other explanation could there be, precious?"

Rose's hopeful smile faltered. Gods dammit, she still hadn't lost all faith in me. I knew I shouldn't have admitted my feelings. It was a stupid decision, in a moment of weakness. Cuddled in her arms as she flew us across the frozen lake, I'd wanted to confess everything.

"Attention, please!" Sheppard appeared at the foot of the steps that led up from the beach. Dax and Sam stood on either side of him. He clapped his hands, and all eyes pivoted in his direction. "I'm sorry to say all filming will be suspended for the next few days."

A chorus of groans echoed around us.

"Due to the heinous nature of the crime, we have no choice but to bring in the SIA. After speaking to the director of the agency, we've been warned to halt all production. The SIA agents will be here shortly and until they arrive, they've asked for all contestants and bachelors to remain here." Shep's squinty gaze razed over each one of us. "Is everyone accounted for?"

Chance raised her hand. "Deacon's not here."

Shep's eyes narrowed, and he searched the pool deck once more. "Where is our tiger bachelor?"

"He was here a second ago," I blurted. "I believe he had to make a run to the little cubs' room."

"Sam, go find him," he hissed at his assistant.

Shit. There was no way she'd find him in the house, and then the idiot production team would start to get suspicious. And if I had to put money on it, they'd find him butt-ass naked in the arms of a certain pixie stylist. Assuming she was alive, of course.

“Hey, Shep.” I flicked my wrist at him with the golden bangle. “I take it these snazzy things will be turned off until this has been settled.” The last thing I needed was the crew following my every move.

“Yes, yes, of course,” he grumbled. “They’ve already been inactivated.”

I ducked within the circle of girls, my thoughts spinning. I had to get over to the staff quarters before Sam came back empty-handed.

“Psst, Harper, I need your help.”

Her warm hazel eyes widened. “Sure, anything, Slade.”

I could feel Rose’s nosy stare burning into the side of my face. Damned dragon hearing. “I need you to make sure no one notices I’m gone while I go find Deacon.”

“Why, where is he?”

“I’m not sure, but I think I know. I don’t want the SIA to get the wrong idea if they arrive, and he’s MIA.”

Her head dipped quickly. “Okay, sure, I’ll cover for you.”

“Thank you, you’re the best.” I pressed a chaste kiss to her forehead and darted around the back of the villa.

Racing across the front driveway, I cursed the tiger left and right. I sure as hell hoped their reunion was worth it. Dawny had to be alive, she just had to be. It was the only explanation for Deacon’s absence. Unless he hadn’t found her and had run off to grieve somewhere by himself. *No*. I had to stay positive.

The crackle of fresh grass spun my head over my shoulder and landed on a nosey she-dragon. “Rose!” I hissed. “What are you doing?”

“Following you, what does it look like?”

“It looks like you’re trying to get Deacon and me into more trouble. Go back there before they notice we’re all missing.”

“Relax, I already told Harper if anyone asks to tell them you and I—” Her words fell away, and a brilliant crimson coated her cheeks. “You know, went to do things... together.”

“Mmm, precious, you could have just asked.” I inched closer, a mischievous grin on my lips.

“Oh, shut up and just keep going. Like you said, we need to find Deacon.”

I lifted a finger. “Correction, I need to find Deacon, and you need to stay right here and keep watch.”

“No way.”

I spun around and the infuriating female followed behind me. I stopped when I reached the entrance of the staff headquarters. “I’m serious, Rose. You have to wait down here.”

She stared over at my shoulder and the beige building. “Why would Deacon be over here?”

I gritted my teeth together, torn up about spilling the tiger’s secret. “It’s not my place to share,” I finally murmured. “Can you please just wait down here? For Deacon?”

She crossed her arms over her chest and shot me a glare, but at least she didn’t move. “Fine,” she hissed. “But if you don’t come out with him in five minutes, I’m going in there after you guys.”

“Deal.” I held my hand out and her soft fingers closed around my palm. Gods, that touch went straight to my dick,

shooting sparks down my lower half. Ignoring the unwanted fiery sensations, I released her hand and darted up the steps to the second floor.

Once I reached the upper level, the pink door was just down the hall. As annoyed as I was at the tiger tool for leaving me to deal with the dead body and the producers, I hoped to all hell he was in there screwing the shit out of that cute little pixie.

I stopped at the door and slammed my fist into the pink timber. “Come out, come out wherever you are.” I knocked again just for good measure. “It’s important, so you better hurry up.”

A second later, the door opened a crack and Dawny appeared, cheeks flushed and hair in a wild tangle. I released the breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding since my race up the beach. “Oh, thank the gods, you’re alive.”

Her lips screwed into a pout. “I’ve been getting that a lot lately.”

“Good, now tell that tiger to get his ass out of there before the SIA gets here and tears the place apart looking for him.”

A muttered curse echoed from the back of the apartment.

“Yeah, that’s right, Deac,” I called out, “they’re coming.”

An instant later, he appeared behind Dawny in only his bathing trunks. At least the staff had brought us dry clothes while we waited on the veranda for Shep’s big announcement. “Thanks for coming to get me.”

“You owe me for this, tiger tool.”

He spun around and pressed a kiss to Dawny’s lips, and the tiny pixie let out a soft groan. Hunger unfurled in my core.

There was enough sexual energy in this little apartment to keep me satisfied for the week. Maybe I could convince them to let me watch next time.

“Stop drooling and let’s go.” Deacon’s hand curled around my forearm.

“Oh sure, now you’re in a hurry.” I whirled around and waved at the flushed pixie. “Later, Dawny. Glad you’re alive.”

“Thanks, Slade, me too.”

When we reached the bottom floor, Deacon nearly barreled into the dragon princess. “Gods, Rose! What are you doing here?” He shot me a sidelong glance.

“She followed me,” I bit out. “The woman has no boundaries.”

“Screw you, Slade. I was worried about yo—Deacon.”

The tiger let out a frustrated sigh and tugged her by the arm. “Come on, I’ll explain on the way back.”

“You will?” I blurted. That must have been some good lay.

“Let’s just get back to the deck before anyone notices we’re gone.” Deacon took the lead, dragging Rose along behind him. I followed a few steps behind. With his hand entangled through hers, irrational jealousy filled my heart. Despite knowing he’d just boinked the faery, I hated the sight of it.

After we circled the house, Harper’s voice rang out across the breeze. “Um, yeah, they were here just a second ago.”

“Shit,” Deacon muttered.

“Let’s split up.” I pointed at the tiger bachelor. “You and Rose go that way, and I’ll go around the other side.”

“No,” Rose snapped. “Harper told them *we* were together, remember?”

I muttered a curse before hissing out, “Fine.”

Deacon crept around the side of the house, and I ushered Rose along the front, racing by the entrance. Once we made it along the outer wall, footsteps echoed along the coquina.

Damn it. We were so busted.

Rose spun around, eyes wide. The footsteps drew closer, and she sprang, trapping me against the wall of the villa. Her lips crashed into mine, and all logical thoughts escaped. Her mouth captured mine, her tongue tangling with my own so naturally, one would think we were made for each other. My hands moved to her hips, fingers digging into the warm flesh between the hem of her top and jean shorts.

“Oh, there they are,” a male voice grumbled.

A part of me knew what this was even before the hushed voice reached my sensitive ears, but I fully took advantage of the moment all the same. Because let’s be honest, I wasn’t *that* noble.

“Mmm, Slade.” Rose’s groan went straight to my stupid cock. Damn, she was a fantastic actress.

“Let’s give them a minute alone,” said the voice before the footsteps fell away.

I fully expected her to pull away the moment the crew left, but she didn’t. She kissed me harder, pressing her perky breasts against my chest. Oh, realms, what I wanted to do to this woman.

A long minute later, she pulled back, chest heaving. Her golden irises settled on mine, and something unreadable

flashed across those brilliant orbs. “You know, Slade, I’ve thought a lot about what you said the other day on the ice.”

“You have?” Gods, my voice was so embarrassingly breathy.

Her head bounced up and down, gaze never deviating from my own. “I thought about all the stupid things you’ve done, all the other females you’ve hooked up with just to piss me off—”

“Oh, you figured that out, did you?”

Her eyes narrowed. “And I decided I don’t accept it.”

“You don’t accept what?”

“Whatever stupid fears you have... Trust me, Slade, you’re the last man on earth I ever expected to fall for, and if you think I’m not scared out of my mind, then you’re dumber than you look.”

“Ouch.” A rueful smile pulled at my lips. That damned flicker of hope bloomed in my chest, and my heart practically grew dragon wings. I pulled her closer, tightening my arms around her waist. “I fully intend to fight you on this.”

“I figured you would.”

“But not right now.” I captured her lips, devouring them as if they truly belonged me. Because for this one beautiful, heated moment, I could pretend they did.

MIDNIGHT RENDEZVOUS'



D *eacon*

My tiger growled deep in my chest as my lips brushed a final goodbye. Dawn's arms laced around my neck, her bare form pressed against me. It had been sheer willpower forcing myself out of her bed and back into my clothes.

"I gotta go," I mumbled against her mouth.

"I know." She kissed me again before finally releasing me and taking a step back.

"I'll try to come back again tomorrow night."

"Okay, be careful." She squeezed my hand, stood on her tiptoes and swept her soft lips against mine. "Go before we get caught."

"Or before I drag you back to that bed and ravage you all over again."

She giggled, her cheeks rosy. "Or that too."

Forcing my feet to move, I pried my fingers from hers and ducked out into the quiet hallway.

"Goodnight," I whispered before closing the door behind me. I crept down the dark corridor and darted down the steps.

Once I passed the staff building, the panic lessened a smidge. I'd get in trouble for being out, but at least I wouldn't take Dawn down with me.

A shadow caught my eye, and I slid to the ground behind a tall hedge. A trickle of sweat raced down my back as I ducked behind the bushes, barely avoiding a passing security guard. Gods, this was bad, so bad. If I got caught coming back from the staff quarters in the middle of the SIA investigation, I'd be screwed. And Dawn, she'd lose her job, the one she'd made clear she desperately needed.

But my tiger was an animal. Now that he'd had that sweet reminder of the pixie, he couldn't get enough. And I couldn't blame him.

After weeks of denying my feelings for her, it was like a dam had exploded. I'd been sneaking off to see her every chance I got. Which was so risky. The SIA was crawling around the villa, conducting interviews, taking fingerprints, bloodwork, the whole nine yards.

And still, no one could figure out the identity of the body. No one was missing, no crew, no bachelorettes. Whoever had killed the poor girl had not only mutilated her face and body, but also cut up her fingers so badly, the SIA couldn't get a match in the system.

Not even magical methods had worked.

Someone sure as hell was trying damned hard to keep the woman's identity a secret. But why? None of it made any sense.

When the guard passed, I slowly rose, and staying behind the cover of the trees, crept along the back side of the villa. Since the arrival of the Supernatural Intelligence Agency

yesterday, we were supposed to remain in our rooms when we weren't supervised in a group setting. We'd each been questioned yesterday, and then sent to our respective chambers. I'd snuck back out to see Dawn later that night. And then again, this evening.

Slade would kill me if he found out I was being so irresponsible.

I snorted on a laugh. It was as if the two of us had switched roles this season. The demon had surprisingly been on his best behavior lately. And when he and Rose came out of hiding yesterday, the guy was grinning so wide something had to have happened with the she-dragon. But when I'd pumped him for info, he'd been shockingly evasive.

The old Slade would've bragged for hours about his conquest, not to mention providing every single dirty detail. Could the demon dark lord really have fallen that hard for Rose? Enough to change him that completely?

My thoughts flickered to the current alpha of the Brotherhood of Dragons. I didn't know Fenix Skyraider that well, but I could only imagine how he'd feel about his eldest child and heir falling for a demon. Probably the same way Pop would feel about me and a pixie. I blew out a breath and stared up into the night sky. Thank the goddess my grandfather had company while I was gone. He loved my ex, Alma, and I only hoped they'd both understand. I hated to hurt my first love, and I never expected to find anything serious on this show, but here we were... Things with Dawn were so new, and there were still the other bachelorettes to contend with, but—my lips curled into a smile at the idea of introducing her to my crazy old grandfather.

But gods, I wanted to.

I reached the back door and gingerly twisted the knob. Poking my head through the crack, I searched the quiet hallway. All clear. Walking on my tiptoes, I traversed the corridor and headed toward the staff stairwell which led straight to the bachelors' wing. I'd been using it as my escape route for the past two days and had never encountered a soul.

Taking the steps two at a time, I reached the third floor in seconds. It was just past midnight, and everyone should've been safely tucked in their beds by now. I crept past Slade's room, and light seeped through the doorway.

I briefly contemplated a late-night visit with my friend, but he'd surely catch a whiff of me and know exactly what I'd been up to. I didn't feel like dealing with his comments or worse, what if he tried to devour some of that lusty energy still clinging onto my aura?

Nope, not going there.

I picked up my pace as I passed his room, hoping his sense of smell wasn't *that* good. A light flicked on down the hallway, illuminating a figure at the end of the corridor.

Rose.

I nearly jumped out of my skin before I remembered it was perfectly acceptable for me to be wandering around on the bachelors' side at this time of night. Not so much for the beautiful bachelorette.

As if she realized the same thing I had, she wrapped her robe tighter around her middle and a coat of crimson blossomed across her cheeks.

"Hey, what are you doing over here?" I whisper-shouted.

Her eyes widened, the gold blazing a brilliant hue. "Um, I was actually coming to see you."

“You were?”

She nodded. “I couldn’t sleep, and my mind just started spinning, and then I remembered with all the excitement yesterday, you never did explain what you were doing in the staff’s quarters.”

I swallowed hard as curiosity sparked in those bright eyes. “So you thought midnight would be a good time for a chat?”

She smirked. “Seems like you’re awake anyway.”

Great, now what would I say?

“But if you really don’t want to tell me, I understand.” She offered a sweet smile and started to turn back toward the bachelorette wing.

“Really? That’s it? You came all this way and are giving up that easily?” The little I knew of the she-dragon she did not seem the type to be thwarted like that. Unless she wasn’t here for me at all.

“Everyone’s allowed some privacy.” She shrugged. “I shouldn’t have overstepped, so my bad. You really don’t owe me an explanation.”

My brows furrowed as I regarded her, trying to sniff out a lie. “So you weren’t looking for Slade by chance?”

“Slade!” she snapped. “No, of course not, why would I ever do that?”

The lady doth protest too much, me thinks.

“So yesterday, when we split up, where’d you and Slade go? It took you a while to get back.” I’d ended up being the one having to cover for the demon dark lord when the SIA showed.

“I ripped my dress on a thorny vine when we were creeping along the side of the house, so Slade accompanied me back to my room to change.”

“Hmm, I see.” A grin pulled at the corner of my lip. I bet clothes were coming off all right.

“Maybe we can just leave it at whatever happened yesterday should remain between the three of us?”

I nodded. “Sounds like a deal.”

A door whipped open behind me, and I whirled around so quickly my head spun.

Slade appeared in the hallway, shirtless, of course. Rose’s pupils distended as they locked on his bare torso, and I didn’t need to be an incubus to scent the thick arousal in the air.

“Hello, precious, and tiger tool, what are you two doing making noise just outside my room at this ungodly hour?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” Rose blurted as I said, “Thirsty.”

“So you just bumped into each other in the hall?” His dark eyes razed over Rose then darted in my direction.

“Exactly.” My head bounced up and down.

“And where’s your water?”

I jerked my thumb over my shoulder. “I was on my way to get it when I ran into Rose.”

“And what were you doing on the bachelor’s side, precious? You weren’t trying to sneak into Deacon’s room for a late-night rendezvous, were you?” Slade’s lip twitched, but an undercurrent of violence laced his tone.

Gods, he really was crazy for her.

“No,” she snapped. “I was out on the foyer and heard footsteps, so I came to see who was up.”

I pressed my lips into a tight line to keep from grinning. Someone was clearly lying here.

“Were you hoping it was me, precious?” Slade tossed her a smirk and was gifted a glare in return.

“I think I’ll leave you two to fight about this.” I ticked my head down the hall. “I’m pretty tired.”

Slade’s nostrils flared. “I bet you are, tiger.” He shot me a wink, and I flipped him the middle finger. Of course, he could smell the sex on me from this distance, even after having showered. Okay, sure, Dawn showered with me, but still.

I was getting hard again just thinking about it.

My tiger really was insatiable once he was let out of his cage.

“Any way, goodnight, Rose.” I dipped my head at the bachelorette and marched to my room. I’d have to grill the demon about his night with Rose tomorrow. I had a feeling she’d come to see a bachelor, all right, but it wasn’t this guy.

TO TASTE HER



*S*lade

“Are you just going to stand there, or are you going to come here?” I eyed Rose from across the hallway, a few yards between us and still I could feel her presence so acutely, my ribs were like a cage around my frantic heart.

“Cocky, aren’t you?” The hint of a smile tugged at her lips despite the narrow slant of her eyes. “How do you know I didn’t come to see Deacon?”

“Because he’s never made you moan like I have.”

She crossed the distance between us in a heartbeat and clapped her hand over my mouth. “Slade!” she hissed. Her breasts were pressed against my chest and gods, they felt so good. All I could think about was that silky robe slipping off her shoulders and puddling at her feet. “And how do you know that any way? For all you know, I could’ve been hooking up with Deacon this whole time. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

The idea of the tiger’s paws on Rose had my demon clawing its way to the surface. “No,” I growled.

She batted her long lashes, taunting me as she slid her tongue across her lips. “Why not?”

“You know why.”

Rose slid her arms around my waist, bringing her body flush against mine. Another few seconds of this and I’d be harder than hell. She stood on her tiptoes and whispered against the shell of my ear, “Tell me again.”

“Because *I* want you.” I trapped her against my body and slid my hands to her ass, tilting her hips to meet mine.

A soft groan parted her lips, and fuck, my dark, shriveled-up heart nearly doubled in size. “Let’s go to your room,” she breathed.

Oh, this was bad, monumentally bad. If I took this woman to my room, to my bed, I wouldn’t be able to control myself. Not after all the kissing and the touching yesterday. If we hadn’t been outside, I would’ve claimed her against the wall.

In the privacy of my own room? There would be nothing to stop us.

Rose’s arousal tinged the air, and we still had all our clothes on. If I took her into my bedroom, there was no going back for us.

“Rose...” I mumbled.

She claimed my lower lip, drawing it into her mouth. She sucked and teased, until my whole body lit up. When she pulled away, overwhelming need raged in my core. “No more chickening out, Slade.”

“I’m only trying to protect you.” I was thoroughly impressed with myself for getting the words out.

“I’m a big girl, dark lord. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’m pretty capable of taking care of myself.”

She had been. Which was insane. She wasn't anything like the spoiled, bratty she-dragon heir I'd expected. More than that, she had a hint of darkness too. And gods, it was so damned sexy.

Rose took a step toward me, backing us into my room. I stopped in front of the doorway and pressed my palm to her chest. Just above those beautiful breasts, spilling over the low cut of the silk robe. "Wait..."

"I don't want to wait anymore." She stood on her tiptoes and pressed a smoldering kiss to my lips.

"If anything were to happen to you—"

She cut me off with another kiss that had my cock straining against my sweatpants. "Nothing is going to happen to me, except I might explode if you don't take me to your bed right now."

Fire streaked down below and fuck it, noble was never really my thing.

I grabbed Rose by the ass and lifted her, wrapping her legs around my waist. With one hand, I jiggled the knob behind me and kicked the door open with my heel. She captured my lips, her tongue entangling with my own in a feverish tempo.

When we reached the bed, I dropped her onto the silk sheets and continued ravaging her mouth. My fingers made quick work of the tie around her robe, revealing a sexy negligee beneath.

"My, my precious, did you come here tonight with the intention of seducing me?" I grinned at her, my smile so big the corners ached.

"Maybe," she singsonged.

“You really thought you could use your feminine wiles to seduce me into changing my mind?”

She nodded with a shit-eating grin. Damn girl knew me too well already.

I slid the robe off her shoulders, revealing soft, tanned skin. I trailed kisses across her jawline, down her neck and across her collarbone. She squirmed beneath me, hips angling to meet my erection. I dropped down on top of her and rubbed against her center.

Another moan split her lips, and gods, it was the sexiest sound I’d ever heard.

Rose slid her hand between us and cupped my cock over my sweatpants. My hips thrust forward instinctively rubbing against her palm. Her naughty fingers slipped beneath the waistband and wrapped around my dick. Now I was the one moaning, like a fucking horny teenager.

“Precious,” I growled, my hips already moving against her hand. “If you keep this up, this will all be over very quickly.”

She grinned up at me, a wicked smile parting her lips. “I thought you were some sort of sex god, Slade.”

“Not with you, precious. You’re like my gods’ damned kryptonite.”

That smile melted into satisfaction. “Good.”

As her hand moved up and down my shaft, pumping harder, I gritted my teeth to focus. Demons. Ugly ass demons. Meetings with ugly ass demons. Dammit, anything to keep me from an early release.

Two could play this game. I trailed my lips down her chest, freeing her breast from the skimpy negligee and latched onto

her nipple. Drawing it into my mouth, I drew lazy circles until it rose to a sharp peak.

She arched against me, her movements slowing as she focused on her own pleasure. With my free hand, I traced the length of her torso, drawing the silky nightie up to her hips. With her lace thong exposed, I couldn't help the hunger clawing at my core. But this time, I was in control. And there was one thing I wanted more than to feed on her arousal.

I wanted to taste *her*.

Releasing her nipple, I crawled down the length of her body, licking my way down her torso. She wriggled beneath me, tantalizing moans escaping her pressed lips.

“Oh, precious, you have no idea how long I've dreamt of this moment.”

She lifted her head, but I pressed my palm to the flat planes of her stomach.

“Uh, uh, uh, you're not going anywhere.” I ran my finger beneath the flimsy waistband and tugged. The lace came apart in my hand.

“Slade!”

“Oops.” I grinned up at her. “I'll buy you another one.”

“You better,” she breathed.

“Or better yet, we can just have you running around the villa without any panties.”

Good god, that would be such sweet torture.

“You're relentless.”

“Oh, precious, you have no idea.” I hovered over her, the scraps of her lace thong on either side of those slim, muscular

legs. I wanted those legs wrapped around me as I drove into her and wrung out the best orgasm of her life.

I squeezed my eyes shut, focusing. Not yet. We had all the time in the world now, and I wanted to enjoy every second.

My heated gaze focused on a shimmering tattoo on her hip, just above her sweetness. A fierce golden dragon rippled with her movements.

“It’s the alpha mark,” she rasped out. “We can talk about that later...”

A chuckle slid out, and I refocused my attention on what I was really here for. Wetting my lips, I dipped my head to the apex of her thighs.

She let out a whimper as I dragged my tongue across her warm center.

“Oh, Slade,” she groaned, her fingers digging in my hair.

“Mmm.” I licked my lip, tasting her. “Just as delicious as I’d imagined.”

Her eyes widened, the lusty haze receding. “Wait, are you going to...”

“I would never feed from you without asking. And trust me, this is a true testament to my willpower because you are so damned tempting, Rose.”

“Okay.” She swallowed hard, her pupils so blown out they nearly eclipsed the gold.

“May I continue?”

“Please,” she purred. I smiled against her, a laugh vibrating her sweet core. Her free hand dug into my hair, pulling at the roots. “Don’t stop.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I dipped my tongue inside her and circled the tight bundle of nerves, again and again. Her hips bucked against me, her hands tangled in my hair forcing my mouth closer. I claimed all of her, tasting and lavishing her sweet flavor.

Gods, only one time and already I know I’d never have enough of this woman. And I hadn’t even buried myself inside her yet. Once I did, I’d be hopelessly addicted.

“Slade,” she moaned.

“Let go, precious.” I dipped a finger inside her, my tongue continuing its lavish circling. Her hips bucked and rolled as she squirmed and tightened around me. “Come for me.”

A cry tore from her lips as her insides constricted around my finger. I watched every second, memorizing the flush of her cheeks, the curve of her mouth, the brilliant golden hue of her eyes. I wanted to remember this moment forever.

Because as much as I hated thinking about it, I knew. I knew this wouldn’t last. Rose was too good for me, and I didn’t deserve her. But I was too much of a bastard to stay away. Like all good things, this too would come to an end. For now, I’d enjoy every last minute of it.

GREEDY LITTLE DRAGON



Rose

My gods, that tongue. I chomped down on my lip as the heated memories of Slade's head bobbing between my legs rose to the surface. It had been over twenty-four hours ago and still, I couldn't get it out of my mind.

He really was a sex god.

A swirl of irritation eclipsed the heat unfurling below. He was also stubborn as hell. He'd given me a mind-blowing orgasm with his wicked tongue but refused to do anything more. My dragon was a greedy little thing around that demon, and she wanted to possess every part of him.

Slade claimed he wanted to take it slow, but I couldn't help the niggling fear that he was still trying to keep me at a safe distance. Though, I had to admit the cuddling all night had been nice and completely unexpected.

"What's got your brows all bunched up?" Harper crept out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her, banishing all thoughts of the dark lord.

Oh, shnike's, I had to tell her the truth. Well, not all the dirty details, but I had to come clean about my feelings for

Slade.

“Um, well...” I snagged my lower lip between my teeth again.

“Are you nervous about the eliminations?” She sat down beside me and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “You shouldn’t be. Deacon adores you; there’s no way you’d get eliminated.”

Guilt speared me in the chest, an arrow straight to the heart. I had to tell my friend the truth.

“No, it’s not that, Harper.”

“Is it the body? Are you scared? Because I sure was. To think that some poor girl was mutilated like that.” A shudder raced up her spine, her entire body trembling against mine.

Poor Harper. Not that humans weren’t capable of incredibly dark and depraved things, but I had a feeling she’d never been exposed to anything like that. She was so sweet and naïve. I kept telling myself that even if I didn’t stand between her and Slade, the Underworld was no place for her.

Hell, I wasn’t even sure I could stand it. Luckily, it wasn’t something we’d have to deal with just yet...

“It really is terrible what happened, but that’s not it either.”

“Then what’s wrong?” She looked up at me with those big brown doe eyes.

Oh gods, I was the worst person. How could I tell her I’d spent the night with Slade? How could I admit I even liked him? I’d done such a good job trying to convince myself I hated the demon, I’d convinced everyone else.

Just spit it out, Rose. Steeling my nerves, I fixed my eyes on my friend’s. “Harper, there’s something I need to tell—”

Two sharp knocks at the door sent my words sailing out the window. “Come on ladies, get moving.” Sam’s voice seeped through the thick timber. “The director of the SIA is here, and he wants to talk to everyone.”

“Eek!” Harper raced to her closet. “Okay, we’ll be down in a minute!” she called out.

I was already dressed, had been since I snuck back into our room before dawn. Tearing myself out of the warmth of Slade’s arms was much harder than I thought it would be. A part of me still hoped this thing with the demon was only lust. There was just something about the forbidden fruit... But now that I’d had a little taste, I needed more. So much more.

I watched Harper as she rifled through her closet, tossing tops and skirts all over the floor. I huffed out a breath and crossed and uncrossed my legs five times before finally giving up. I’d have to tell her later.

Harper and I followed the crowd of girls heading toward the great room, and a prickle of unease skated up my shoulder blades as I took in the imposing form of the director of the SIA. Maxim had been leading the Supernatural Intelligence Agency for as long as I could remember, and the man still looked like he could take down every other male in the room. He was a tiger shifter, if I remembered correctly.

I wondered if Deacon knew him...

I scanned the room for the bachelor, but he was nowhere in sight. Actually, I hadn’t seen him around the villa much at all lately, except for that run in the other night. I still wanted to know what he’d been doing in the staff’s quarters the day we

found the body, but at this point, I had my own secrets to worry about.

A piercing gaze lanced into the side of my face, and my head instinctively pivoted to find Slade lingering in the far corner of the room. It was insane how attuned to him my body was. The demon dark lord may not have been my fated mate, but my she-dragon sure wanted to claim him as her own.

Heat flushed my cheeks as those eyes locked on mine. My mind instantly traveled back to the other night, to that dark head of hair popping up between my thighs and those midnight orbs searing into me. No one had ever made me feel as exposed as this man.

And the craziest thing was how much I wanted to show him all my deepest, darkest pieces. My entire life I'd played the role of the good girl. I was my dad's pride and joy, the heir to the dragon throne, but I'd always felt like an imposter.

But with Slade, I felt free.

He sauntered over, a feral grin on his lips, and my entire body lit up.

"Slade!" Harper darted in front of me, cutting off our intense stare down and flung her arms around his neck.

A deep growl vibrated my throat, and I barely covered it up in time with a lame cough. Slade's gaze flickered in my direction, a smirk tugging at his lips. He'd totally heard my jealous beast rising to the surface. Thank the gods, Harper hadn't.

She towed Slade toward me, and my heart punched at my ribs with each step closer.

"Good morning, precious," he purred.

“Morning,” I forced out. What I wanted to ask was where were you all day yesterday? After our amazing night, he’d spent the entire day holed up in his room. Or at least that’s what I assumed because he hadn’t emerged from his wing, and I knew this because I’d been stalking him like a total psycho.

Oh gods, this demon was going to ruin me.

Harper tugged Slade past me, and the pair settled down on the couch at the back of the room. “Come sit, Rose.” My roommate patted the empty spot on the other side of Slade. I eyed her hand like it was a ticking timebomb. I didn’t think I could sit that close to him and be able to control myself.

“Don’t be shy, precious.” His lips melted into a wicked grin, amusement sparkling in the dark depths of those piercing orbs.

I folded down beside him and crossed my arms over my chest.

On the other side of Slade, Harper and Crystal chattered on about what the SIA could have discovered.

Slade leaned in, his warm breath across the shell of my ear sending goosebumps down my arms. “Mmm,” he murmured. “You better keep that lusty dragon of yours in check, precious, or I won’t be able to keep my demon from devouring the waves of sexual tension pouring from your skin.”

I sucked in a sharp breath, and his dark chuckle resonated all the way down to my center. “Is it that bad?” I squeaked.

“It’s like a lust buffet.” His nose brushed my earlobe, and a shudder darted up my spine.

Sam appeared in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows and clapped her hands. “Sorry everyone, but Maxim got pulled

into an important call. He'll be down in a few minutes. For now, just relax and talk amongst yourselves."

Slade's head twisted toward Harper's before spinning back to face me. She was still deep in conversation with Crystal. "What shall we do for the next few minutes?"

I shrugged. "You can tell me what you did all day yesterday."

A panty-dropping smile curled his lips. "Did you miss me, my lovely Rose?"

He inched closer, the feel of his thigh beside my bare one sending heat coursing to my lower half. He had to have been using his incubus powers, right?

"No," I snapped.

A wicked gleam flashed across his eyes. He angled his body so I could no longer see Harper behind him, then reached his arm around me and snatched the blanket from the arm rest. "I think you're lying," he singsonged. Draping the soft blanket across my bare legs, he kept his eyes pinned to mine.

"What are you doing?" I whisper-hissed.

He nuzzled my ear, and panic heated my veins as his hand crept beneath the furry coverlet. "Just checking something."

His fingers danced up my thighs and pried them apart.

I let out a sharp hiss as they found my center.

"You sure you didn't miss this?" His finger streaked across my panties.

I gasped at the unexpected invasion.

"Because it sure feels like you did." His smile was downright sinful.

I cast a hurried glance over his shoulder to Harper. “You can’t do this here,” I gritted out.

His finger started to move, circling that tight bundle of nerves over my skimpy thong. “Can’t do what?”

“Slade,” I murmured, my tone embarrassingly rough. We were in a room full of bachelorettes. Granted, no one was paying any attention to us, but *still*.

If he kept this up, I’d be a writhing, squirming mess in a second.

He shoved my panties to the side and dipped his finger between my folds. A groan slid out, despite my best efforts. Thanks to a well-timed cough by the devious demon, no one heard my moan of pleasure.

Slade’s finger began to move inside me, curling to reach *the* spot. All the while, his expression remained perfectly calm and collected. I could already feel the heat burning my cheeks, my hips struggling to remain still as he plunged deeper and faster.

I glanced down at the blanket hastily tossed across my lap, and somehow it remained perfectly undisturbed despite the quickening thrusts. All the sounds blurred around me, like we were locked in our own private bubble. A mixture of excitement and fear tumbled in my chest.

“You really want to know what I was doing yesterday?” Slade whispered.

“Yes,” I rasped out.

“I spent the entire day in my room trying to convince myself why this was so wrong. I counted all the ways I was so terribly bad for you. Told myself I’d only end up wrecking you and myself in the process.”

That fear ignited, replacing the fire streaking through my core. “Slade...”

He pressed his finger to my lips. “I’m not done, precious.”

His thumb moved to my clit, circling as his middle finger plunged deeper. My hips bucked, rubbing against his palm. “Mmm, you better slow down, precious, or everyone in this room will know just how naughty you are.”

I forced my hips to still despite the building fire. I was close, so close. Was I really going to let him work me to an orgasm in the middle of this meeting?

His finger hit the spot, and my head fell back, eyes rolling to the back of my head. Oh gods, yes, yes, I was.

“After all that internal musing, do you know what I decided?”

“What?” I panted.

“That despite all the countless ways I’m so wrong for you, I’m too much of a bastard to stop.” He plunged a second finger inside me, and a cry tore from my lips. Slade clapped a couch pillow over my mouth before it escaped, and I rode the raging waves of pleasure as it smothered the remaining oxygen from my lungs.

“Slade, what are you doing to Rose?” Harper’s shrill cry sent me plummeting back down to earth as his fingers retreated.

He dropped the pillow, and I elbowed him in the side, playfully. I was sure my cheeks were flushed, my breath uneven but I spat it out anyway. “Slade was just messing around,” I panted.

A smile melted across Harper's sweet face. "I'm so glad you two are finally getting along."

A dagger in the gut would've hurt less. That damned guilt reared its ugly head, chasing away the high from the toe-curling orgasm.

"Oh, we sure are, aren't we, precious?" He wrapped his arm around me, then brought his middle finger to his lips. The finger that was just inside me. He sucked it into his mouth and groaned.

My insides clenched and despite the mind-blowing release, I was so ready for another round.

"Can I have your attention, please?" A deep voice tore my wayward thoughts back to the present. The beast of a man stood beside Sam and Sheppard. His amber eyes razed over the entire room. "Some of you may know me already but for those who I haven't met since my arrival, I'm the director of the SIA, Maxim Rainier. I wanted to be here personally due to the heinous nature of the crime. However, I regret to inform you all that the identity of the body has still yet to be discovered."

A trickle of gasps ricocheted across the space.

"We've performed a thorough investigation, questioned all the cast and crew, and have determined at this point, there is no evidence that this female had anything to do with the show. As such, we have no choice but to allow Sheppard and the crew to continue filming."

A broad smile stretched across the smarmy producer's face. He stepped in front of Maxim his grin so wide it put Methyss' maniacal ones to shame. "Which means, the elimination ceremony will be tomorrow."

FICKLE BEASTS



D *eacon*

“Stop, Deac! You’re going to make me mess up your hair!” Dawn grinned down at me from the bathroom countertop, her fingers digging into the hair at my nape. Her pink wings fluttered behind her back, seemingly a second away from taking flight.

I pried her thighs apart and fit myself between them, cupping her ass and dragging her closer to the edge of the vanity. A growl vibrated my entire chest.

“We can’t!” she hissed. “Sam is going to be here for you any minute now.”

“So let her wait.” My fingers played with the button of her jeans.

She pressed her palms to my chest and shoved me back. “No, you can’t be late again. You were already late for the meeting with the SIA earlier today.”

“It was five minutes,” I groaned. Because I just couldn’t get enough of the little pixie. I’d had her in every position, all across her little apartment in the staff quarters. But I’d never had her here, in my room. I glanced over my shoulder at the

camera in the bedroom, nor could I ever. The bathrooms were the only private places in the villa.

“Yeah, and if anyone had seen you sprinting across the front lawn from the crew’s building, we both would’ve been toast.” She hopped down from the vanity and wagged a cute finger at me. “We need to be more careful now that filming has restarted.”

“Fine,” I grumbled.

Her arms crossed over her chest, and she glanced up, a rueful smile curling her lips. “Do you know who you’re eliminating tomorrow?”

“Does it really matter?” I moved toward her, my feet propelling me forward of their own accord. “There’s only one female I want.” I pressed my lips to hers, and she melted into me, despite her earlier warning.

Too soon, she pushed out of my embrace and fixed those light silver orbs to mine. “It does matter if you want to keep playing the game. Shep may be a lot of things, but dumb isn’t one of them. If he sees your lack of interest in the bachelorettes, he’s going to know something is wrong.”

“So what are you saying? You want me to hook up with the other girls?”

Her lips screwed into a pout. “No, of course I don’t *want* you to, but how else is this going to work? I need this job and you need the money for your streak.”

The correct technical term for a group of tigers on her lips sent my heart aflutter. She really was paying attention. She *was* all in.

“Okay,” I muttered.

“It’s only a few more weeks. We can do this.” She rose to her tiptoes and dropped a chaste kiss on my lips.

It took all my willpower to keep from mauling her.

“Now fix your hair, it looks like some hussy was running her fingers all over it.”

I snorted on a laugh as I followed her to the door. Before her hand twisted the knob, I snatched her free one. “I’m still coming over tonight.”

Her cheeks flushed an enticing bright pink, matching the brilliant shade of her hair. “Okay, but please, be careful.”

“Always am.” I shot her a wink, and she darted out the door.

Just before it slammed shut, a hand shot through the opening. Then a pair of devious dark eyes met mine.

“What are you doing here, Slade?” I eyed the golden bangle they’d forced back on each of us. I thought it was supposed to go haywire if we were near each other. Maybe they were busted.

“Just came to check in.” He waggled his brow down the hall, in the direction in which Dawn had vanished. “She sure took a long time to make you pretty today.”

I threw him a good eyeroll. “Yeah, well you know, we can’t all be as naturally attractive as you, demon dickhead.”

Slade chuckled and ran his hand through his wild hair. “Do you know who you’re eliminat— son of a bitch!” He glared at the golden cuff around his wrist. “This damned thing just shocked me. Eliminate,” he tried again and again a curse burst from his lips.

“So that’s how they’re doing it.” I eyed my own cuff. “Guess it’s better than forcing us to stay twenty feet away from each other.”

“Aww, I’m honored, tiger tool. You miss me, don’t you?”

Shaking my head, I threw the insufferable demon a scowl. “No, I just don’t like the idea of not being able to confer—” A curse split my lips as an electrical charge raced up my arm. “Shit! That hurt.”

“Told you.”

Apparently, we were really on our own on this one. “This should make dinner fun. What if one of the girls asks about the E word? Will we still get shocked?”

Slade shrugged. “Guess we’re about to find out.”

In retrospect, sitting between Chance and Roxy probably hadn’t been the smartest decision ever. I liked both bachelorettes, but I’d gone decidedly farther with one than the other, and with Chance’s freaky senses, I hated the idea of her finding out what I’d done with the little fox shifter. Or actually what she’d done to me.

It seemed like so long ago after the last few intense days with Dawn. I wasn’t sure I could keep pretending to be invested in this game when my thoughts were totally consumed by the pixie.

Roxy’s bare foot skimmed the inside of my leg, moving towards my inner thigh. I nearly choked on the beer I was chugging down. My eyes darted to hers, and a naughty grin crossed her face.

Clearing my throat, I reached for her hand and squeezed, leaning in close to her. “This probably isn’t the best—” Her toes found my dick, and all the air rushed out through my clenched lips. “Roxy,” I hissed.

“What?” She batted long, sooty lashes at me. “I just want to give you something to remember me by.”

“That’s not going to be a problem.” I gave her a reassuring smile as I removed her foot from my crotch. I still couldn’t get the image of her down on her knees in that igloo out of my mind. I wasn’t planning on eliminating her, not because I expected that to happen again, but because I actually did like her. That was the problem, I liked a lot of these girls, but no one lit up my tiger like Dawn.

I’d just have to find a way to fake it until the show was over.

That didn’t sit well with me either. How could I lead one of these girls on like that? Let her believe I was falling for her when I had every intention of ending it once the show was over.

Shit. This really sucked. How was I going to get out of this mess?

“Are you okay, Deacon?” Chance’s sweet smile drew me from the swirl of impending doom.

“Yeah, just thinking about the elimination tomorrow.”
Hmm. I guess it was just around Slade that I couldn’t use the E word.

She winced, the natural light from her pale blue eyes dimming. “I think we all are.”

Gods, I really liked Chance. If I hadn’t met Dawn first, there really could have been something between us.

“You know how I feel about you, right? I mean, you can tell?” I took her hand between my own and squeezed.

She nodded. “But I know there’s someone else. Someone you feel guilty about or worried?” Her light brows twisted.

I huffed out a breath. “This game is just a lot harder than I thought it would be.”

“Yup.” She popped the P and glanced across the table. Rose and Slade sat close, their heads practically touching as they whispered. “At least, it seems like those two have figured things out.”

“Hmm.” That sneaky demon still hadn’t spilled on what was going on between him and the beautiful she-dragon. I’d have to pump him for info once these damned bracelets came off after the elimination.

“I just hope you follow your heart, Deacon.” Chance’s smile was like a hot knife through butter. “That’s why we’re all here, right?”

I nodded and took a long pull of my beer. Somehow, I had to figure out how to make this messed up situation right.

The clinking of metal against glass sent my gaze to the center of the table. Arista stood, her flowing azure hair cascading across her bare shoulders. She raised her glass, and everyone followed suit. “To all the bachelorettes: those that were already eliminated, to those who will be tomorrow, and of course those that are lucky enough to continue playing the game.”

“Cheers!” The chorus rang out around the table.

Everyone smiled, and an odd tranquility blanketed the space. It was odd. Dread unfurled in my gut as I glanced around the table. Tomorrow, four of these women would be

gone. And if I was being honest, I had no idea who I'd eliminate. A part of me wanted to send home the bachelorettes I liked best, if only to spare them from whatever act I'd be forced to put on for the remaining weeks.

But what if this thing with Dawn was only a temporary obsession because I couldn't have her? Now that I had, would my feelings for the cute pixie lessen? I didn't think so, but then again, six months ago I never thought I'd be over Aspen, or a year ago that I'd survive Alma's betrayal.

Men were fickle beasts.

I chugged down the remainder of my beer and forced a smile to my face. It was going to be a *long* night.

A PSYCHO SIREN



*S*lade

“Nope, not her, can’t do it.” I stared at the bachelorette dossiers and released a grunt of frustration. I hated this part. “No, not her either.” Choosing two females to go home was torture and not knowing who the tiger tool was picking only made it worse. Tossing the glossy images on the bed, I stood and stalked toward the balcony.

The full moon glistened across the dark water of the Manta Sea, the soft whoosh of crashing waves doing little to settle my frazzled nerves. I knew what else would calm my nerves, but going to see the sexy she-dragon would only get us into more trouble. Already, I couldn’t get enough of her, and I still hadn’t even plunged my cock into the sweetness between her thighs. And gods, did I want to. The only reason I’d held back the other night was because I knew that would be the end for me. I’d be hopelessly addicted.

And dragons were jealous, possessive beasts. I’d already seen a hint of Rose’s dark side, and damn it was hot, but an out-of-control dragon in a house full of females could have disastrous consequences.

A sharp knock on the door had my head spinning to the entrance. I glanced at the clock on the wall before creeping toward the door. It was nearly midnight. Had Rose heard my lusty thoughts? A hint of excitement kindled in my chest as I quickened my steps.

Before I turned the knob, I sniffed the air, searching for Rose's tantalizing scent. My nose twitched, the fragrance decidedly not the one I was expecting. Twisting the handle, I opened the door a sliver and met a pair of piercing blue eyes beneath a curtain of azure hair.

Arista shoved me inside and slammed the door closed before I could get a word out. The silky robe fell from her shoulders, revealing skimpy black lingerie barely hiding milky white skin. Well, shit, this was unexpected. She walked me backwards until the back of my legs met the mattress.

"What are you doing in my bedroom?" I finally managed.

"I'm here to ensure you don't make a stupid decision tomorrow."

My brow arched as she pressed closer, and her hands found their way to my chest. "Are you asking in your not-so-subtle way if I'm planning on eliminating you?"

"Of course not," she purred. "I know you're not stupid, Slade."

She doesn't know me that well after all. A smirk curled my lips.

"I'm here to show you exactly what you'd be missing if you sent me home." She dropped to her knees and slowly ran her tongue across her lips.

Well, damn, this was getting interesting...

Her fingers latched along the waistband of my sweatpants, and she started to inch them down my hips. Her touch burned my skin, and *not* in the good way. “Wait...” My hand shot out and wrapped around her wrist, stalling her movements. My head shook back and forth, the idea of letting this go any further felt wrong. Monumentally wrong.

She glanced up at me, eyes wide.

“Trust me, I’m pretty surprised myself,” I muttered. Lifting her to her feet, I attempted to decipher the odd tangle of sensations in my gut. Good gods, had I become a one-woman demon overnight?

“You seriously don’t want this?” Arista inched closer, pressing her body against mine. Her peaked nipples rubbed against my bare chest, and I felt *nothing*. Not even hunger. She slipped her hand further down, trailing across my abs and finding the waistband again. A finger dipped below, but I jerked it away, again.

“No,” I ground out.

“You really don’t want my mouth wrapped around your cock?”

“No.” The image flashed across my mind and instead of excitement all I felt was disgust. There was only one female I wanted, and I’d be the one on my knees for her. I took a big step back, freeing myself from her hold. “I’m sorry, Arista, but you should go.”

“Are you fucking kidding me, right now?” Fury flashed across her blazing irises. “What’s gotten into you? You’re nothing like the demon I remember—” Her mouth snapped shut.

“What demon you remembered?” I fixed my eyes to hers.
“What are you talking about?”

“Who is it?” she barked, ignoring my question. “Is it that little goody-two-shoes Harper? It can’t be Roxy, not after her special time with Deacon. There has to be someone... Why don’t you want me?” A crazed look sparked in her eyes, and a pit of dread blossomed in my gut.

Harper had mentioned how weird she’d been acting. If she hurt my sweet human because of me, I’d never forgive myself.

“Arista, please.” I shook my head again, trying to buy some time. There was something definitely not right with this girl. I’d been so caught up in Rose lately that I’d ignored it for too long. I had to tread lightly. “It’s not that I don’t want you, you’re beautiful. It’s just that it’s the evening before eliminations, and I want to be fair to all the other bachelorettes.”

“Like Harper?”

“Harper has nothing to do with this,” I bit out.

“If you eliminate me, Slade, I swear to you I’ll kill the little naïve virgin. I’ll find a way back to the island, or I’ll just wait until the show is over. Either way, she’s dead.”

Fear lanced into my chest, tearing at my black heart. “You can’t do that,” I snarled.

“Of course, I can.”

Gods, what had I gotten Harper into? I had to protect her at all costs. And Rose... if this crazy siren had any idea how I felt about her, she’d be her next target.

“And don’t even think about ratting me out to the producers.” She eyed the camera in the corner. The blinking

red light was off. Damn it. How had she managed to pull that off? “You might get me kicked off the show, but I’ll catch up with Harper somehow, somewhere. You won’t be able to protect her, Slade. Not from me.”

“Why are you doing this?” I growled.

A flicker of amusement brightened her eyes. “Because I want you to be mine, dark lord. We were meant to be together.”

My mind spun, that spine-tingling fear consuming me at the thought of this clearly insane siren hurting anyone I cared for. “Deacon,” I spluttered. “Our votes aren’t cast together this time. I have no idea who he’s eliminating.”

“Well, you better find a way to warn him. Even if he’s the one to eliminate me, my promise still stands. Harper *will* die.”

“I can’t. I’ve tried passing a message to him through our stylist. It didn’t work. There’s some sort of magic preventing us from discussing anything about the elimination.”

“Tick-tock, dark lord. You better figure it out if you truly care about that little human.” A murderous glimmer filled her eyes.

I raised my hands, a battle raging in my gut. I had to find a way to appease this lunatic somehow. I’d figure out the rest later. “Relax, Arista. I’ll do whatever it takes, okay? You want me to fuck you? Done. Just leave Harper and all the other bachelorettes out of this.”

A wicked smile split her lips, and she ran her finger down my torso. “That’s exactly what I like to hear, my dark lord. Now take off your clothes.”

Nausea crawled up my throat as she watched me. For the first time in my life, I understood how prey felt. I hoped to all

the gods I'd never made a female feel like this when I'd fed from her. I liked to think all of my encounters had been consensual, hell, enjoyable even.

This was not.

Heat bristled across my body as Arista's hungry gaze raked over me. It lingered at my crotch, and her lips twisted into a scowl. "You're not even hard."

No, shit, psycho. "I'm under a lot of pressure here."

She inched closer and cupped my dick over my sweatpants. "I thought you said I was beautiful." Her fingers closed around me and squeezed. Hard.

I bit off the urge to scream like a baby. I could scream... why hadn't I? Surely, someone would hear me. But who would believe I was getting sexually assaulted by the gorgeous siren? Worse, how could I admit that?

A part of me knew even if I did this Harper wouldn't truly be safe. There was only one way to ensure that, and the idea of it made me sick. But I had to protect her.

"Come on, Slade. Don't you want me?" She slid her hand up and down my flaccid dick.

Nope, not even a little. Damn it, there was no way I'd be able to fake this. "Of course, I do." The words tasted bitter on my tongue. "I'm just tired, Arista, and stressed out with the eliminations." I ticked me head at the pile of headshots scattered across my bed. Then I forced my hand to her cheek and brushed my thumb across her skin. "Is there any way I can convince you to postpone this until tomorrow night? Then we can celebrate the departure of four bachelorettes."

Her lip jutted out into a full pout. Too bad the girl was so psychotic; she really was hot.

“Well, I know you’re not stupid enough to break your vow and risk Harper’s precious life, but how do I know you won’t back out on this again, tomorrow? I need you to put a baby inside me, dark lord.” She rubbed her belly, eyes brimming with insanity.

“A baby?” I sputtered.

“That’s right, Slade. Then together, our perfect family will rule the Underworld.”

I blinked quickly trying to maintain the façade. This woman was certifiable. Who approved the background check on this nut job? I was going to ring Sheppard’s neck when this was all over.

“Um, sure, that sounds lovely, Arista. I’ve always wanted kids.” I forced a smile. “But tonight is really not a good night. Plus, I have to figure out a way to sneak a note to Deacon, right? I’d hate to have him accidentally eliminate you.”

“But I want you now.” She leaned closer and pressed her mouth to mine.

Disgust ravaged my insides as her lips brushed mine. “Mmm, me too, baby.” I jerked back, the need to spit overwhelming. “But I want to take my time with you. Really enjoy every second as I make love to you.” I nearly choked on the L word. I’d only been in love once, and she’d nearly destroyed me. This woman was trying to destroy me in a completely different way.

I thanked the gods Rose and I had done such a good job at playing the enemies to lover’s game. At least, this lunatic had no idea how I felt about her. Hades, if anything ever happened to Rose...

An unfamiliar pang jabbed at my chest as I thought about the brunette beauty.

“Fine,” Arista huffed.

My eyes nearly bugged out of my head. I’d been so distracted with thoughts of Rose I’d nearly forgotten what we’d been arguing about.

She picked up her discarded robe and wrapped it around her shoulders. “Go tell the tiger not to eliminate me, and I’ll make sure Harper lives. But tomorrow, you owe me the best sex of my life.”

My head bounced up and down. “Of course, absolutely. I can’t wait.”

Arista laced her arms around the back of my neck and drew me into a kiss. I squeezed my eyes shut and pretended it was Rose’s mouth devouring my own. It was the only way to keep the vomit at bay.

When she finally released me, I drew in a haggard breath. She twirled toward the door and scampered out of my room like nothing. Like she hadn’t just threatened another bachelorette’s life or tried to sexually assault me.

The moment the door slammed shut, I sank onto the mattress. Shit, I was totally screwed.

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH



D *eacon*

Gods, I hated elimination day.

I paced the length of my chamber, staring at the clock as the minute hand ticked by impossibly slowly. Dawn had left just five minutes ago and already it felt like an eternity. She'd helped me work through the guilt of eliminating the two bachelorettes I'd chosen. At this point, choosing favorites was futile. There were so few of them that interested me. The two I'd chosen were the ones I'd had least contact with. As I marched the slow circle, I wondered who the demon had selected.

I'd tried asking him about that late night rendezvous with Rose, but he'd been as tightlipped as ever. There was definitely something going on with those two I just wished I knew what. Regardless, I wouldn't be sending the dragon home.

Shrugging off the thoughts, I focused on my own disastrous but oddly amazing love life. The past few days with Dawn had been heaven. I couldn't remember the last time I was this happy. My thoughts drifted to the past, to my days

with Alma before her mate bond clicked into place, and I'd lost my fiancée.

Nope, not going there. Not today.

My past with Alma was way too convoluted. There was too much baggage to unpack right before an elimination.

A sharp knock sent my head spinning. "It's time." Sam's voice seeped through the cracks in the door.

It was show time.

With one last, quick glance in the mirror, I adjusted my monkey suit and marched to the door.

Slade already stood in the hallway, his jaw clenched so tight it looked like it was made of stone. "What's up, demon douche?" I shot him a smirk. It was rare to see the easy-going dark lord strung so tight.

He closed the distance between us, the tendon in his jaw twerking. "You can't—" A sharp screech hissed through his lips, and he cursed the golden cuff around his wrist.

"Tsk, tsk, Slade you know we can't talk about the E word."

"This is a matter of life and death, tiger tool," he gritted out.

Dread unfurled in my gut as I followed him down the stairs. "What do you mean?"

"I wish I could tell you, but this damned bracelet is making it pretty damned impossible." He shook his head, lips pressed in a tight line. "By the way, you sleep like the dead. I tried knocking a dozen times last night. I thought you were with... you know."

I nodded. I had been. “Right, super deep sleeper,” I lied. “So what are we going to do about these?” I held my arm up and pointed at the bangle.

“I don’t know, but I need you to follow my lead in there.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

Slade shrugged, the fear in his gaze so palpable it stole the air from my lungs. “If my plan works, hopefully you’ll figure it out.”

Just great. The demon’s plans always had such wonderful results.

I rubbed my sweaty palms together as I waited for the ballroom doors to open. Unlike the last elimination, they’d sequestered Slade and me just to make sure we couldn’t confer on our chosen bachelorettes. Sam had met us in the foyer and ushered the dark lord to the opposite side of the ballroom where he presumably now waited for the announcement of our grand entrance.

Damn, these things never got easier. The faces of the two women I’d chosen bounced around in my head and guilt seeped through my bones. What if Deacon and I picked the same girl to eliminate, then what? I felt like the producers hadn’t really thought this one through.

The click of the doors unlocking sent my heart ramming up my throat. They slowly swung open, revealing the opulent ballroom. Vibrant red rose petals lined the marble floors and rose-covered trellises climbed the upholstered walls.

Enormous candelabras floated across the space, bathing the elaborate room in a golden glow.

At the opposite side of the chamber stood Slade, eyeing the elaborate décor with a twist of distaste. I wished I knew what the hell was going on with him. Even from all the way across the room, I could feel the tension vibrating from the demon's form. Not many things riled that man up which had every nerve, tendon and muscle in my body on full alert.

He'd said it was a matter of life or death... what had the demon gotten himself into this time?

The spotlight crawled up my body, starting from the tips of my patent leather shoes before skimming up my body and lingering, blindingly, on my face. I forced a smile and compelled my feet forward. The bachelorettes stood on a raised dais in the middle of the room, their eager gazes darting between the demon bachelor and me.

Just across from the platform stood a long, banquet table with two cages perched atop the crimson tablecloth. Oh, great, our enthusiastic little assistants. And between them, the dreaded tray of pins: infinity symbol, creepy cupid and skull and crossbones. A chill skittered up my spine, and I wrapped my arms across my chest. The balla demon fluttered around the gilded cage, its wings pinging against the metal. Garfield, on the other hand, sat in the middle of his enclosure and let out a bored yawn.

“Welcome, welcome, bachelors and bachelorettes!” Methyss materialized from the ether in his signature gleaming white tux and top hat. He motioned for Slade and me to join him in the center of the room. I forced my reluctant feet forward. As soon as we reached our flamboyant emcee, he swung an arm around each of us, his smile so enormous it

hinged on insanity. “We have another super exciting night planned for you all! Who’s excited?”

A chorus of groans erupted from the bachelorette stand.

“Oh, come on, people. You can’t tell me you’re not at least a little excited? With four of you going home, that means less competition for the other lucky ladies.”

Slade’s gaze locked on Rose, and her cheeks blushed a light crimson. She held his stare for a long moment before finally pivoting toward me to offer a smile. Yeah, they were totally doing it. I hadn’t seen either of them this happy since we arrived. If you would’ve told me a few weeks ago I wouldn’t have been jealous as hell of the demon for bagging the gorgeous dragon, I would’ve laughed in your face. But right now, with how crazy I was about Dawn, I couldn’t care less.

There was only one bachelorette I felt the slightest bit guilty about deceiving. My eyes flitted across the room to meet Chance’s. She offered a sweet smile, and that guilt reared its ugly head. I pasted a smile on my face and waggled my fingers at her from across the room.

“Now, ladies and gentlebeasts, I will quickly go over the rules before we begin.” Methyss tipped his hat at the bachelorettes. “In case you’ve forgotten, the males will each choose two women to go home tonight.” He stuck out his lower lip in an exaggerated pout. “Ladies, if you are one of the eliminated, please move directly toward the door. The goodbyes in eliminations past seem to only aggravate the situation so we’ve decided to forgo them this time around. That may or may not change in the future.”

My shoulders sagged in relief. Facing the woman you’d just rejected was horribly awkward. It would be much easier

this way. I was feeling slightly better already especially given one of my choices. The female was kind of a wild card and after all Slade's warnings about her, I'd finally decided it was time to let her go. I was fairly certain the demon would choose the same, so I was really curious to see how that would turn out.

"And you all remember our colorful assistants, right?" Methyss motioned toward the cages on the table and both little critters stood at attention. The balla demon chirped away as it flew around the cage, and even Garfield let out a lazy meow.

Slade and I both nodded and turned to the real stars of the show. The dark lord dipped his head and whispered something to the little flying demon. He spoke so silently even I couldn't pick it up with my enhanced hearing. The creature's head bounced up and down in rhythm with the mad flutter of his wings.

"Well then without further ado, let's begin." Methyss clapped, a maniacal grin stretching across his face. "Just to switch it up this time, let's get all the nasty eliminations out of the way first, hmm? Deacon, will you do us the honors?"

"No!" Slade snapped before I could open my mouth.

"Please, let me go first."

Methyss's furrowed brows bounced between the two of us. "Well, I suppose it's all right, as long as Deacon agrees."

I shrugged. I was in no hurry to send these girls packing. "Sure, no problem, go for it."

Slade whispered to the overgrown bat, and he grabbed a skull and crossbones pin from the tray.

Oh, shit. The dark lord wasn't messing around.

The tension in the air overflowed as the tiny demon flapped its wings toward the females. He finally stopped between Rose and Harper, and my jaw nearly unhinged. He was not eliminating the dragon in some misguided attempt to save her, was he?

The creature shifted to the right and dropped the pin into Harper's hand. A gasp escaped her pretty pink lips, and her eyes grew impossibly wide for an instant, spearing into Slade from across the room.

Damn, I did not see that coming.

Her lower lip trembled, and Rose wrapped her into a tight hug. The girls whispered something, and I turned to glare at the demon. I thought he was crazy about the cute human. What in the world was he doing?

After a few muttered goodbyes between the bachelorettes, Harper weaved her way between the females, avoiding Slade's look of pure misery. She swept at the tears rolling down her cheeks with trembling fingers, quickening her steps as she neared the door. Before her hand closed around the knob, Slade darted across the room.

I inched closer, desperate to hear what the hell was going on.

Slade tugged her into his chest, despite her protests, and whispered something in her ear. I was still too far to make out the exact words, but whatever he'd said seemed to have calmed the girl.

She nodded slowly, tears still streaming down her face, but a hint of understanding seemed to bloom. Gods, she was the only one, because I had no idea what the hell was happening here.

“Enough dear dark lord,” Methyss crooned. “You’ve made your choice, now let the young girl go.”

Slade pressed a quick kiss to Harper’s forehead, and she darted out the double doors.

Our host turned to me with a wicked grin. “It’s your turn, my dear tiger.”

AN ELIMINATION AND A TWIST



*S*lade

Please don't pick Arista. Please don't pick Arista, tiger tool.

Methyss chatted with Deacon, his inane blabbering lighting a fuse in my darkest depths. I felt like I was sitting on a powder keg and at any moment... *boom!* I stared at the door Harper disappeared through, guilt carving up my insides. I didn't think I'd ever get that look of betrayal out of my mind. Those big doe eyes, that pouty mouth and tear-filled gaze would haunt me forever. I hadn't even had a chance to explain, not really.

Our rushed conversation echoed through my mind. She'd fought to get away from me, was so damned upset, but I had to warn her.

"I'm so sorry, Harper, I never meant to hurt you."

"Let go of me, Slade," she hissed.

I only tightened my hold on her arms. "You're not safe here, and that's why I had to eliminate you. Promise me that you'll hide out for a few weeks? Don't go home. Go anywhere else and don't return until I contact you. I'm sorry, I wish I had more time to explain. Do you understand?"

She'd nodded, those eyes incredibly wide, but I thought she finally did understand. It was so incredibly fucked up. Arista's obsession with me seemed personal. She'd already alluded to having known me a few times, but for the life of me I couldn't remember the girl.

Methyss's wicked chuckle drew me from the dark musings. "All right, all right, Deacon, you've convinced me. Choose as you will."

What the hell did that mean? Was he eliminating someone or not?

Deacon's footsteps on the marble echoed in my skull like a hammer. My entire body vibrated with tension as he walked toward the gilded cage that contained the cat. I cursed all the gods for not making that creature a magical one. If he had been, this plan would've been so much easier. Now, I just had to pray Bally would be convincing enough to persuade the feline actor.

I inched closer to the table so I could hear the name Deacon whispered, then I nodded at Bally to get ready. The little demon had been surprisingly willing to help in this suicide mission. I'd been shocked it had worked really. I hadn't been able to discuss the eliminations with Deacon without getting magically zapped, but not so with my little flying friend.

The success of my plan hinged on the balla demon's ability to persuade the kitty not to follow Deacon's command. I didn't know much about animal actors, but I sure as hell hoped he wasn't an overly obedient one.

Deacon bent down and whispered into the orange feline's furry ear. I leaned closer and just made out the name. Chance. I released the breath I'd been holding since last night and took

a step back, finally lifting my gaze to the line of remaining ladies. I hadn't been able to meet Rose's eyes since my arrival. I was too damned scared that psycho siren would figure out who my heart really beat for if she saw even a passing glance. If I was as noble as I would've liked to have been, I would've sent Rose home today too. Then I'd beg her forgiveness and find some way to make it up to her once this disastrous show ended. But I couldn't stand the idea of the next few weeks without her.

I could barely focus on the smiling, rainbow-haired unipeg as she ran across the room and enveloped the tiger in a fiery embrace. I actually liked the girl and hoped Deacon didn't just string her along since he was obviously infatuated with the pixie. What a total clusterfuck this season has turned out to be.

"And now back to you, my dark lord." Methyss swung an imaginary mic in my direction. "Tell me, who is the next not-so lucky lady to receive the dreaded skull and crossbones."

"Why do I have to eliminate someone again?" I barked. "The tiger got to pick a gold pin."

Methyss shrugged. "I suppose he was better at convincing me."

Not like I could choose Rose first anyway. It would only make her a target in Arista's crazy head. But if I was allowed to choose the siren as a keeper at least Deacon wouldn't be able to eliminate her, and Harper would be safe.

"I'll do whatever it takes," I hissed. "You want me to do a little song and dance?"

The girls let out a whoop, and I hazarded a quick look in their direction. Sweeping my gaze over Rose, I only let it linger for an instant before moving on. She looked radiant in

an emerald-green gown with a plunging neckline that dipped nearly to her navel. Gods, I could just imagine running my tongue—*Focus damn it, Slade.*

“As enticing as that sounds, dark lord, I’d like another elimination please.”

I grumbled a curse and marched toward Bally. At this point, it was about protecting the innocent, and if I wasn’t man enough to send Rose home, there was one other female who’d already been attacked and who’d proven to be vulnerable in this mess.

Clenching my teeth, I whispered, “Crystal.”

My faithful companion darted to the tray of pins and picked up the black one in his tiny hands. He zipped across the room and dropped it into Crystal’s open palm. She muttered a curse as she eyed the ominous trinket.

That damned guilt rose to the surface again as her eyes met mine. I mouthed an apology from across the room, but a hard eye roll was my only response. I convinced myself it was for the best as Crystal marched out of the ballroom with her shoulders pinned back and head held high. The humans were safer far away from all this insanity.

Deacon eyed me, his brows furrowed. He had to be wondering why I hadn’t eliminated Arista. The tiger was smart and knew I’d been suspicious of the girl for a while now. Maybe he’d put two and two together.

“And now, for your first elimination, Mr. Deacon.” Methyss sketched a bow, eyes wild with excitement.

I crept closer to the table, every nerve-ending strung tight. This had to be it. I swung a quick glance at the remaining

bachelorettes, Rose, Roxy, Iris, Everly and the evil bitch Arista.

“I have a question.” Deacon paused in front of Garfield who sat at the table, licking a paw. “Since we weren’t allowed to confer this time around, what if we’d chosen the same bachelorette to eliminate?”

“Are you saying you’d chosen Harper or Crystal as well?”

Deacon’s eyes darted to mine, but Methyss wagged his finger at the other bachelor, stepping between us. “Uh, uh, uh, Deacon, no consulting with your friend.”

I slowly nodded, a barely perceptible dip of my chin, hoping he’d see it. That would work. If he just pretended he’d planned on eliminating the same women as I did, we’d be home free. Somehow, I didn’t think Methyss would let us get away with that though.

“Yes. That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

Methyss’s lips screwed into a pout, and I held my breath as our crazy host considered. Whoever came up with the rules this time really hadn’t put much thought into it. “How about this? You choose one more female to go home and we’ll call it even.”

I hissed out a curse. Although, I supposed it was better than two, less of a chance for the tiger to pick the wrong girl.

“Fine,” he gritted out and bent down to whisper in the cat’s ear. Ice crystallized across my veins as I caught the murmured name. Arista.

“Bally, now!” I whisper-hissed, and the little demon darted out of his cage after the cat. Garfield was halfway to the platform with the skull and crossbones pin clenched between his teeth when Bally caught up to him. He fluttered around his

ears, and the cat let out an irritated growl, nearly dropping the pin.

But man, the little demon was persistent.

“Slade!” Methyss barked. “Get your man back here.”

I shrugged nonchalantly. “Sorry, Methyss, I have no idea what’s gotten into him.”

The tiny demon was ruthless, tugging at the cat’s ears and whispering like mad. When the stubborn thing refused to listen, he wrapped his hands around its tail and pulled. Hard. The cat let out a hiss and spun around.

“Someone catch that crazy demon!” Methyss shouted.

A few members of the crew darted onto the stage and chased after the flying demon and the frenzied feline. If I wasn’t so damned tense, I would’ve folded over in hysterics at the scene.

Garfield sprinted between the legs of a big guy in black and darted up to the dais. Bally was hot on his tail, shouting. I just prayed the stupid cat wasn’t trained to only take directions from Deacon.

“Bally, the bearded balla demon,” a voice shouted from behind the cameras, “if you don’t stop this at once you’ll be removed from the show without your payment!” Damned Sheppard Hawke.

My winged friend halted mid-air and turned to me with a sad smile. He lifted his little hands and shrugged. The cat weaved past the front row of women and stopped between Arista and Iris.

My lungs constricted, refusing to function.

Come on, come on.

The cat let out an irritated meow and dropped the black pin at Iris's feet.

I drew in a haggard breath, my shoulders rounding. It worked. I couldn't believe it had fucking worked.

Deacon threw me a look of pure confusion, but I waved him off. I'd explain everything later once these damned cuffs were removed.

The pretty, green-haired Fae stomped off the dais, and that damned remorse surged to the surface. I swallowed it down with one big gulp. Better a pissed-off Fae than a dead Harper.

It took a second to settle my nerves before Methyss approached me again. My first golden pin went to Arista, and gods' damn was it bitter. Rose eyed me from the dais, her piercing irises shooting daggers as the siren crushed her lips to mine. It took everything I had not to vomit as she kissed me. I shoved her off when I couldn't take another second.

Again, Deacon eyed me when it was his turn. I knew exactly what he was asking, and I didn't need a pack link to communicate with the tiger. I needed him to choose Rose because I couldn't for her own sake.

The look of betrayal on Rose's face would be forever tattooed in my skull. But I'd suffer her irritation to ensure her safety any day. After this ceremony was over, I'd explain, somehow, and I just hoped she'd forgive me.

In the end, only five women remained: Rose, Arista, Roxy, Chance and Everly. I'd given Everly a cupid pin, hoping not to earn Arista's ire with an infinity one like hers. At least the angel could protect herself.

Methyss moved to the center of the ballroom and clapped his hands. "Well, well, we're nearly at the end of yet another

edge-of-your-seat elimination round. But before we say our goodbyes for the evening. We have a little surprise.” Our host’s wild gaze chased to the doorway through which the eliminated bachelorettes had just disappeared. “We can’t very well have an odd number of ladies, now can we?”

A groan rose up my throat, and a pit of dread hollowed out my gut.

“Are you ready to meet our newest addition?” The door swung open, and a vaguely familiar brunette filled the entryway. I recognized her from somewhere, but I couldn’t quite place the female.

Deacon’s jaw nearly hit the ground.

Guess he knew exactly who she was.

HERE COMES DRAMA



D *eacon*

No fucking way.

I stared at Alma standing in the doorway in a fuchsia, curve-hugging gown, and my heart tripped on a beat. Alma, my first love, the woman who'd broken my heart when a mate bond clicked into place with another tiger. A male who was now dead. She'd been there for me when Aspen had left me brokenhearted, and for a few months, we'd rekindled that fire we once shared.

It had been hot and intense, but it was only supposed to be a rebound.

Hell, this show was only supposed to be for fun too, and somehow, I'd managed to get sucked right back into a relationship. I was hopeless.

“Aren't you going to say something, Deac?” Alma fiddled with her clenched fingers. The sound of her voice did something to my insides. My feet propelled me forward, and the moment I was within a few feet of her, she leapt into my arms.

Alma felt so good, so familiar. Her soft curves easily sank into my hard planes, enveloping me in her soothing scent of rose petals and morning dew. We'd been together since we were just kids. She'd been my first everything.

"What are you doing here?" I finally mumbled, holding her out to arm's length.

"I missed you." Her slim shoulders lifted for an instant then fell. "When the producers reached out last week, I couldn't say no."

Slade hissed out a curse beside me. Damned producers always messing with us, trying to up the drama. No wonder they'd allowed us to only eliminate three females. Those conniving bastards must have planned this all along.

Methyss moved beside us, and I pried myself away from Alma. "Say hello to our newest contestant, everyone."

A wave of muffled groans rolled through the remaining bachelorettes.

"Oh, come on, now ladies, be nice." Our host threw them a wicked grin. "This will only make things more interesting."

Interesting my ass. I could already feel the battle raging in my heart. The moment I saw Alma all the memories, all the old feelings came rushing right back. Dawn against the other bachelorettes was no question, but against my first love?

I swallowed hard. Crap, how would I explain this to Dawn?

"All right, ladies and gentlebeasts, you're all free to enjoy the rest of your evening. Alma, welcome to Mystic Cove, please make yourself at home. A buffet has been set up on the veranda for your dining pleasure." He wiggled his fingers, grinning like mad. "Ta-ta for now." The walls of the ballroom

fell away, and we were magically transported outside, the rush of crashing waves echoing from below.

Faery lights lit up the terrace, and a banquet table had been set up in the center. The scent of roasted meat and vegetable clung to the air. If I wasn't still trying to process everything that had just happened, I would've sprinted for the food.

Alma took in the scene and pressed closer, tangling her fingers with mine. "So this sort of thing is totally normal?"

My head dipped. "Sure is around here."

"I missed you so much, Deac. I hope it's okay that I came."

Sweeping a lock of dark hair behind her ear, I caressed her cheek, needing to touch her to make sure she was real. I'd missed her too. I hadn't quite realized how much until this very moment. "I'm just so surprised to see you. I can't believe you're really here." I scanned the deck for the other bachelorettes and guilt fired up. "Are you sure you want to do this? Compete with these other females?"

Her head bounced up and down, warm hazel eyes locked on mine. "I've been watching the show religiously. I've seen it all." Her lips pursed. "But I don't really see a connection with you and any of these women. Am I wrong?"

The crazy thing was that she wasn't wrong. Because the one woman with whom I shared a connection wouldn't be found anywhere on camera. "No," I finally muttered. "But I've been trying," I added lamely.

"I saw." Her lips twisted in disgust, and I could only imagine what they'd shown on TV of my hook up with Roxy.

"I wish you hadn't."

She shrugged. “It was better for me to know what I was getting into.”

True.

Slade rushed toward us, and all the insanity from earlier surged to the surface. With Alma’s surprise arrival, I’d momentarily forgotten about everything else. “Hello, Alma, a pleasure to finally meet you.” He took her hand and pressed a quick kiss to her knuckles.

My tiger growled his annoyance.

“Mmm, well this is going to get awkward fast,” Slade muttered. “I’m sorry, but I must steal your handsome bachelor for just a minute.”

“Of course.”

Slade grabbed me by the arm and tugged me away but before we got far, he twisted his head over his shoulder and called out, “Save me a dance, Alma. I’d love to hear all about little Deacon.”

“Stay away from her,” I snarled, my tiger rising to the surface.

“Ooh, testy.” Slade shot me a smirk. “This is going to be super fun when your ex meets Dawn. Can’t wait to watch the drama unfold.”

“Shit,” I hissed.

“Anyway, there’s no time for that now.” He held up his hand and pointed at the spot where the golden cuff used to be. It was gone.

I searched my own wrist and heaved out a sigh of relief at finding mine had vanished as well.

He led me to the far corner of the deck, away from the group of bachelorettes who were circling Alma. “Now that we can talk freely, I need to catch you up on a few things. If you think you can focus, tiger tool?”

“Yes, I’m listening.” My gaze kept drifting over to Alma. I hoped the girls would play nice. Which reminded me... “What the hell happened back there?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you,” Slade snapped. “Arista has lost her mind. She came to my room last night and threatened me. She said if I eliminated her, she’d kill Harper.”

“Fuck...” He dragged his hand through his hair. “So that’s why you sent her home...”

“Yes.”

“And why you didn’t choose Rose?”

He nodded again.

“What does she want from you?”

“I have no idea. My hot bod, my huge dick?” He shot me a smirk.

How he could joke at a time like this was beyond me. “Be serious.”

He huffed out a breath and raked his hands over his face. “I don’t know what to do. I’m not sure the extent of her reach, but I can’t risk anyone else. I made Harper promise to go far away and not come back until I told her it was safe.”

Deacon’s gaze swung toward Arista who stood in the middle of the group of females. “We have to tell Shep.”

“We can’t,” the demon snarled. “She warned me if I told anyone Harper would die.”

“But you just said you sent her away.”

“I can’t risk it. If anything happens to that little human...”

Deacon released an exasperated sigh. “Then what are we supposed to do?”

“I guess I’ll play along for now until I figure out what she wants. If she believes I’m only into her, maybe, she’ll behave.”

“But what about you and Rose?”

“There is no me and Rose, do you understand, Deacon? No one can know that there’s anything between us, or it’ll only put a target on her back.”

“You should’ve just sent her home, Slade.”

A growl vibrated his throat, his dark brows furrowing. “Don’t you think I would have if I could have? I’m a selfish bastard. Gods, I’m crazy about her, and it’s going to get her killed.”

I shook my head and patted my friend on the shoulder. “We’ll get through this somehow. The first step is to figure out how to get rid of that murderous siren. I can call one of my buddies at the SIA...”

“No. What if she already has some devious plan set in motion? What if taking her in only sets someone else loose on Harper?”

“Then what do you suggest, dark lord douche? We can’t just sit here and be blackmailed by this siren.”

“I know,” he gritted out.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I don’t want Arista anywhere near Alma.” I ticked my head toward the circle of

bachelorettes. “So if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go break up that party.”

Slade nodded, his gaze intent on Rose. As if she’d felt his heavy stare, her head twisted in our direction. Their eyes met, and the tension in the air thickened.

“Go talk to her. You owe her an explanation.”

“Will you come with me? I don’t want to draw any extra attention to the two of us alone in front of Arista.”

“Okay,” I gritted out. “But I draw the line at any sort of sexual display. I will not be a party to that.”

A rueful chuckle slid out from his pressed lips. “No problem, tiger tool. I don’t like an audience anyway.”

GONE



*S*lade

Rose refused to even look at me, and gods it was worse than a kick in the balls. What killed me was that she was hurt. I'd prefer anger and rage a hundred times over the pouty lips and wounded gaze.

Deacon and I sat at opposite ends of the table set up beneath the flickering faery lights on the top deck. The six females sat between us. I'd managed to get beside Rose without being too obvious, but despite my best efforts she still rejected all attempts at conversation.

Luckily, I'd managed to sit as far away from Arista as humanly possible. The gold pin must have momentarily appeased that streak of fury, but I knew better than to let my guard down. Now, I just had to stick with the plan to skulk off with Rose without arising any suspicions.

And thanks to the tiger tool, I'd figured out a way how.

Dabbing my napkin to the corners of my mouth, I made a big show of standing. "Gotta use the little demon's room. Be back in a few minutes, ladies."

The moment I dipped into the villa, I caught Arista rising from the table to follow. As expected. I darted into the dark foyer and rushed toward the front entrance. Hopefully, the siren would never think to look for me in the staff's quarters.

According to the masterful plan, Deacon would follow with Rose in a few minutes. The tiger needed to have his own conversation with a certain pixie stylist before she came face to face with his ex.

Talk about an awkward threesome.

I sprinted across the lawn through the cover of darkness, the squat white building like a beacon in the night. When I reached the perimeter, I ducked into the corridor and perched by the stairwell as planned.

As I waited, I went over the speech I'd been working on all evening. A part of me wanted to tell her the truth about everything, but I feared it would only put her more at risk. Lying would be so much easier. She'd hate me, and it would be clear for all to see. There would be no reason to target the she-dragon that way.

But the idea of Rose hating me was simply unacceptable.

She'd captured my black, broken heart and having it tossed back in my face was too terrible to endure. I wanted her. Gods, I was falling in love with her.

The crackle of approaching footsteps on the lawn sent that battered, bruised heart surging up my throat. I lifted to my tiptoes to confirm it wasn't a psycho siren, and a smile melted across my face when I caught sight of the gorgeous female marching toward me.

Her lips were twisted into a scowl, irritation written across her face. I prayed it was from trudging across the lawn in those

heels and not the repressed anger toward me.

“This better be good, Slade,” she growled as she approached.

Anger was better than nothing. I could work with that. As long as she hadn't given up on me completely.

I reached for her hands as she approached, but she laced them behind her back. It stung like hell, but it was fair after what I'd put her through in the elimination. “Thank you for coming,” I murmured.

“Well, Deacon didn't really give me a choice.”

“Where is he by the way?” I peered into the darkness stretching across the property.

“He said he'd be here in a minute. He wanted to escort Alma to Everly's room, something about them hanging out tonight.”

Smart, tiger.

She crossed her arms over her chest and threw me a narrowed glare. “So why am I here?”

“You know, precious, you really have very little faith in me.” I inched closer, and she exhaled a sharp breath. “Do you really think I lost interest in you so quickly? Did you really believe I wasn't struggling with every impulse to race across that ballroom and drag you into my arms in front of everyone? I don't give a fuck about this show or the damned pins. You're all that matters.” I wrapped my hand around her neck and claimed her mouth. She resisted for only a second before her lips parted for my tongue.

I nipped and nibbled, tasting her in an eager assault. No, I could never let her go now. I was a total goner. Snaking my

free hand around her waist, I dragged her body flush to mine. We fit so perfectly it didn't seem real. Our lips tangled in a desperate tango for a few more divine minutes before she regained her wits and pressed a palm to my chest.

Her breaths ragged and pupils distended, she fixed her lust-filled eyes to mine. "What's going on?"

My first instinct was to lie. It would be easier to protect Rose that way, but I didn't want to be that man with her. So I forced the words out. "Arista is a psycho bitch, and she threatened Harper's life if I didn't keep her on the show. She thinks I'm in love with the little human, so that's why I had to send her home. She has no idea about us, and I need to keep it that way."

Her eyes were so wide they were brighter than a pair of golden suns.

"Also, she wants me, like wants my huge dick."

A laugh tumbled from Rose's lips, and I couldn't help my own mouth from curving into a rueful smile.

"What are you going to do?"

"Well, I'm not going to let her have it. Unless you're okay with it—"

She slapped her hand over my mouth. "Of course, I'm not okay with it. You're mine." Her dragon rose to the surface, its deep voice like gravel over Rose's soft, melodic one. "You know what I meant. What are you going to do about Arista?"

"I don't know yet. I have to tread lightly until I know she can't get to Harper." I huffed out a breath. "Deacon's going to help me. If we can get Harper in a safehouse or something, we can make a move on Arista without risking her life."

She nodded quickly. “Okay, that sounds like a good plan.”

“I hope so.”

The crunch of heavy footfalls turned both of our gazes toward the walkway. Deacon appeared, still wearing his fancy suit from earlier. I’d shed mine the moment the ceremony was over.

His head dipped briefly.

“Good luck up there,” I called out. He whizzed past us and headed to the second floor without so much as a glance.

“Where’s he going?” Rose asked.

“He has his own bad news to deliver.”

She cocked a brow and opened that smart mouth, but I cut her off with my tongue. She melted into my embrace as I spun her around and pressed her against the stairwell wall. “It’s better you don’t know,” I finally mumbled against her lips.

“You’re right.” She kissed me harder, wrapping her arms around the back of my neck.

Gods, I’d never get enough of this woman. I was certain I could spend an eternity just kissing her, and I’d die a happy man.

“Let’s go back to your room,” Rose whispered against the shell of my ear. My entire body lit up at the sultry edge to her tone. Gods, I wanted to say yes, but could I risk it? No, definitely not in my room anyway. The psycho siren would likely show up to make good on my promise of giving her the best sex of her life. *Ugh.*

“I have a better idea...” I took her hand and pulled her out of the hidden niche. There was a cozy little cave in the jungle

with our name on it. We'd be far from prying eyes, and I could finally claim this woman like I wanted.

The thunder of footfalls overhead halted my feet. I spun back toward the steps, dragging Rose with me and met a pair of frantic green eyes. Deacon braced himself on the landing, his chest heaving. "Dawn's gone."

Eek! Read on for a sneak peek of what's to come for Deacon, Slade and the girls! Book three, [True Love](#), will be out in February of next year and you can [preorder it now](#). I'm going to try my best to bring that release up. Don't forget to join my FB group, [GK's Supe Squad](#) or my [VIP mailing list](#) for a chance to win an ARC copy and all the insider, exclusive info!

SNEAK PEEK OF TRUE LOVE



C hapter 1 – A Complete Cluster

Deacon

“What do you mean Dawn’s gone?” Slade glanced up at me beneath hooded lids, his hand tangled around Rose’s. The scent of arousal tinged the air, and I knew I should’ve been happy for my friend, but nothing but bitterness flooded my insides. I didn’t even care that the dragon wasn’t supposed to know about my secret tryst with the pixie stylist. Unless Slade had already spilled the truth.

I trudged down the remaining steps, pushing the pointless thoughts to the back of my mind. “Her room is empty.”

“How is that possible?” The demon dark lord looked genuinely upset about it, only intensifying the guilt.

“I don’t know,” I growled.

“When did you see her last?”

“Right before the ceremony.” I dragged my hand through my hair and huffed out a frustrated breath. This was my fault, I just knew it. We’d been careless. What if the producers found out about us, and she’d been kicked off the show?

“Do you think they found out?” Slade’s question echoed my own dismal thoughts.

“Found out about what?” Rose’s bright eyes darted between us.

Honestly, I’d been surprised the curious dragon had kept quiet for this long.

Slade’s eyes met mine, shooting me a questioning glance. Guess, he hadn’t told her. The demon had proven surprisingly loyal.

“Dawn and I...” I couldn’t quite put it into words. How could I explain what I felt for her? We weren’t just hooking up. She was more than just one of the other bachelorettes. And now with Alma here, gods, everything was so screwed up.

Slade made a foul gesture with his pointer finger and other hand, and Rose’s eyes went full-moon wide. “Oh!”

“Thanks, demon douche,” I growled.

“Always a pleasure. It seemed like you were having a hard time with it.” He shot me a smirk.

If I wasn’t so worried, I probably would’ve laughed.

“So what are you going to do now?” Slade asked.

I heaved out a breath, my shoulders rounding. “I guess I confront Shep. If she’s gone because of what was going on between us, then no harm done.”

“And if it’s not that? You’ll be outing yourself for no reason.”

“What else can I do?”

“I can ask,” Rose offered.

I swung an incredulous gaze in her direction. “In the middle of the night? What reason would you have to be looking for our stylist?”

She shrugged. “I’m sure I can figure something out.”

“And then we can go to the cave and fu—”

Rose slapped her arm across Slade’s chest, immediately silencing the smirking bachelor. “Only if you behave.”

I did *not* even need to know what that was about.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yeah, it’s no problem. I don’t think the fraternizing thing is that big of a deal among the bachelorettes and female staff.”

“Well, unless—”

Rose clapped her hand over Slade’s mouth cutting him off. “In your dreams, dark lord.”

“You know me too well, precious.” Besides the silly smile curling his lips, I’d never seen the demon’s eyes so bright, so filled with happiness. Not since Aspen... The errant thought was at the same time worrisome as it was reassuring. Slade had become much more than a competitor, more than the *other* bachelor. He was my friend, and though I’d never admit it to the demon douche, I actually cared about him.

“So you’ll go right now?” The question burst from my lips, the anxiety eating up my insides.

She nodded. “Absolutely, just point me toward the producer’s room.”

Slade and I motioned down the hall in unison. Unlike Dawn’s bright pink door, the producer’s was the same dark brown wood of all the others.

“I’ll go with you,” Slade volunteered.

She shook her head and unraveled her fingers from his. “It’s probably better if you don’t. Stay with Deacon, and I’ll come get you when I’m done.”

Slade muttered an okay but didn’t move from the spot as the beautiful dragon marched toward the producer’s door. Before it opened, the demon wrapped his hand around my upper arm and dragged me into the dim recess of the stairwell. “Stay back,” he hissed.

Right.

Straining to make out voices, I flattened my back against the wall and waited. A long minute later, the door creaked open for an instant before slamming shut again.

Slade peered around the corner and released a breath. “Well, at least Shep let her in.”

“I guess that’s something.” Gods, this night had been a complete clusterfuck. With crazy Arista, Alma’s sudden arrival and now Dawn’s disappearance? What the hell was going on? The producers were certainly upping their drama game.

Slade turned to me, the usual sparkle in his dark eyes missing. “You really think they kicked her out?”

Hearing the words out loud was worse than a wooden spike to the sternum. I’d killed many a vampire in my life, and I’d seen the agony in their eyes as I pushed the stake through their cold, black hearts. This was ten times more painful.

More than simply missing Dawn, I knew how badly she needed this job, how much it meant to her and to her career. If I’d ruined that for her, I’d never forgive myself. I stopped, the words poised on my tongue. There was something weird about

the whole thing. The drama of us getting caught would've been much more powerful than sneaking her off in the middle of the night. Something definitely didn't add up.

"Hello?" Slade flashed his hand across my line of sight. "You still with me, tiger tool?"

"Yeah, I was just thinking... Wouldn't Shep want to capitalize on the drama? Outing us on live television sounds way more exciting."

Slade's dark brows knitted, lips twisting. "That's a good point. It does seem more his style."

"So not that I don't love speculating about the status of the woman I could've possibly been falling in love with, but what's up with you and the sexy dragon?" Anything to get my mind off things right now.

Slade cocked a brow, then squeezed his lips into a tight line.

"You're seriously going to hold out on me?"

He pressed his finger to his mouth. "A gentleman doesn't kiss and tell."

"Since when are you a gentleman?"

A deep chuckle rumbled in his chest as he regarded me. "I guess since I met my match."

"So that's it? You're all in? No more whining about how Rose is too good for you and you don't deserve her, blah, blah, blah?"

"Ouch, that was harsh, Deac." He chuckled again. "Not that I didn't deserve it for all the waffling."

“How you convinced that woman to put with you is beyond me.”

“Same here, buddy.”

That spark returned, the joy reflecting through those midnight orbs. “I’m happy for you, I really am, Slade.” I squeezed his shoulder and gave him a reassuring smile. “Just don’t fuck it up.”

“Ha! Easier said than done. Especially with the psycho siren on the loose.”

I released an exasperated breath. With everything that happened with Dawn, I’d momentarily forgotten all about the girl. “I’ll get word to one of my friends in the SIA. As soon as Harper is safe, we can gut the siren like the slimy, cold-hearted bitch she is.”

“Amen, tiger brother.” Slade bumped his fist to mine in a shockingly human move.

“Learning new tricks from your human friends?”

His smile faltered before slipping away entirely.

“Shit, sorry. I’m really sorry you had to eliminate Harper. I know you cared about her in your weird way.”

“I really did.” A hint of that smile returned. “I hated hurting her like that. She didn’t deserve it.”

“None of them do.” For the hundredth time, I internally cursed myself for signing up for this crazy ass show. Twice, nonetheless.

“We should probably head back to the villa,” Slade murmured. “We don’t want to get caught loitering around here when Rose comes out.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” I trailed the demon out of our hidden nook and crept behind the hedge that lined the dark driveway. We followed the path around the front of the villa, then cut across the lawn to the back entrance. I’d become so used to the trail in the few days Dawn and I had spent together, it was like second nature.

A twinge of regret pinched my heart. I’d wasted so much time pretending I didn’t have feelings for her, and now she was gone. Even if she had been kicked off the show, I’d see her eventually, but would she be pissed at me? Would she even speak to me by then? And now with Alma here, I couldn’t just leave and abandon her... Ugh, gods, this is so messed up.

By the time we reached the back door, my mind was spinning with dark thoughts. Slade took the steps up to the third level two at a time, and I rushed to keep up behind him. When he reached the third floor, he paused and slowly pulled the door open.

Before it had opened more than a crack, he hissed out a curse and spun back around. “Arista’s at my door!”

*** I hope you enjoyed that little sneak peek! Book three, True Love, will be out in February at the latest and you can [preorder it now](#). If you really can’t wait, you can always read it live as I write it on Kindle Vella. You would start with episode [#145 A Long Time Coming](#).

Don’t forget to join my FB group, [GK’s Supe Squad](#) or my [VIP mailing list](#) for a chance to win an ARC copy and all the insider, exclusive info!

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~ G.K.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



USA Today Bestselling Author, G.K. De Rosa has always had a passion for all things fantasy and romance. Growing up, she loved to read, devouring books in a single sitting. She attended Catholic school where reading and writing were an intense part of the curriculum, and she credits her amazing teachers for instilling in her a love of storytelling. As an adult, her favorite books were always young adult novels, and she remains a self-proclaimed fifteen year-old at heart. When she's not reading, writing or watching way too many TV shows, she's traveling and eating around the world with her family. G.K. DeRosa currently lives in South Florida with her real life Prince Charming and their little royals.

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