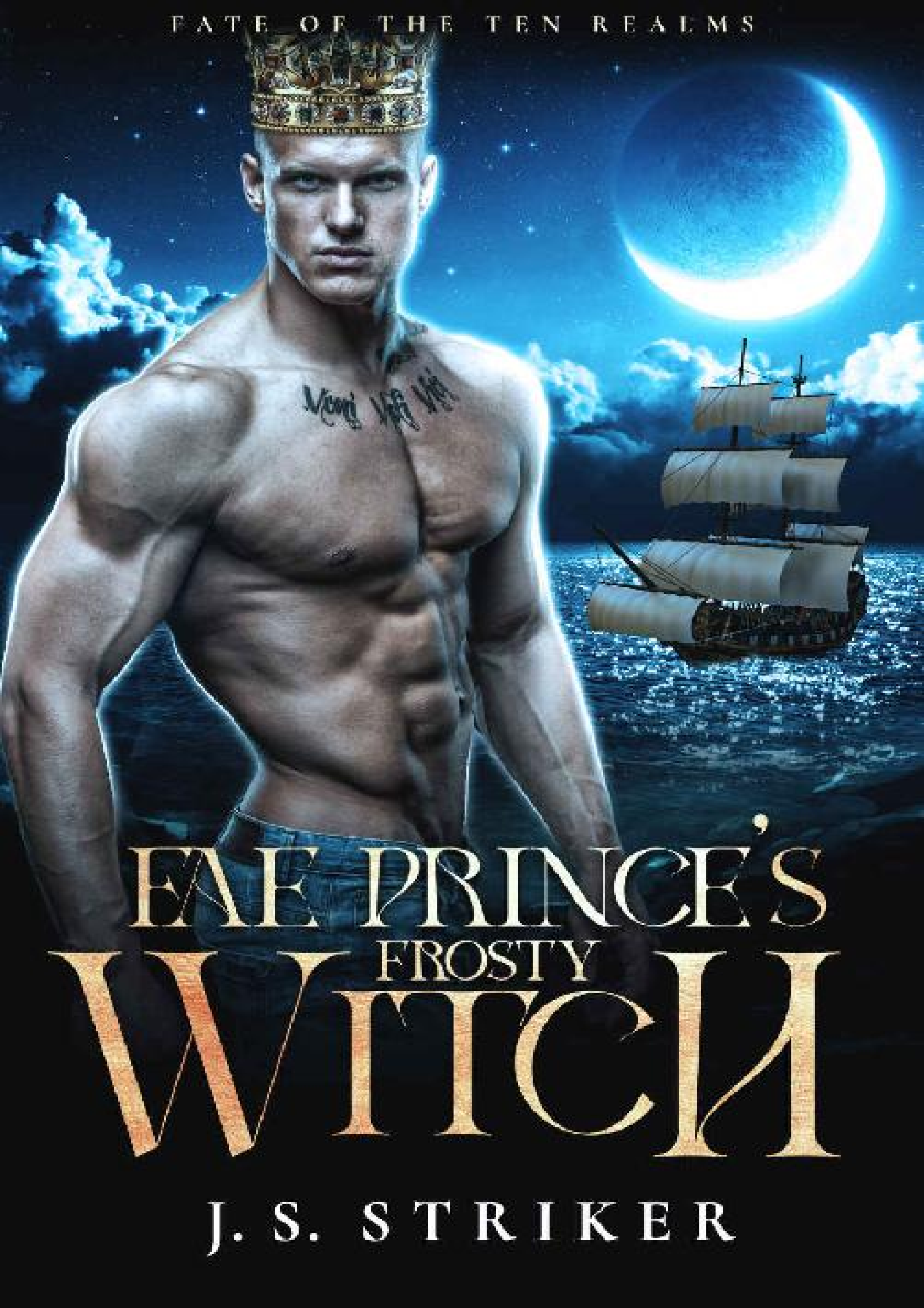


FATE OF THE TEN REALMS



EVER PRINCE'S  
FROSTY  
WITCH

J. S. STRIKER

*Fae Prince's  
Frosty Witch*

Fate of the Ten Realms

J. S. Striker

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# Chapter 1

The wind picked up speed as Emerald Sutton stood on the ship's bow, where she had a clear vision of where she was headed. To be honest, all she could see was water stretching for miles in all directions, which was mostly the case, anyway: the Otherworld consisting of vast, dangerous seas, scattered with secret islands here and there, with a multitude of creatures that didn't mingle with each other...hidden from the human world. That included her island, Broom's Island, home to warlocks and witches. It was her home, too, and normally she would be thrilled to return to her cottage and reacquaint herself with village life. But today wasn't normal.

“It's going to be all right. I just have to explain to them that things didn't work out and there was nothing I could do. They will understand.”

Even saying it out loud didn't sit right, and the wind gaining even more speed felt like a wordless agreement. She had one task at hand when she left Broom's Isle: retrieve a valuable gemstone from Centro, the island of the merchants, and get it back to the Lyras—aka the family of the ex-fiancé who had dumped her after her family's reputation had gone up in flames. Her volunteering for the task and personally giving them back the gemstone would have done a lot to soothe her ego and the hurt that had been pricking her heart for years. She could have looked them in the eye and calmly walked away knowing she was just as capable as they were. Or better.

Unfortunately, a Fae had taken the gemstone to La Fleur, where they resided, and she was wiser than to follow. That meant the gemstone was lost forever—and going home meant having to face her people with her failure, which filled her with trepidation.

“The wind energy has increased and will power the boat through the rest of your trip. Please brace yourself while we cross the torrential waters ahead.”

The built-in voice system jolted her from her reverie. Still not used to the magical boat that one of the inventor warlocks had lent to her, she frowned at the cabin visible from where she was standing.

“I don’t see torrential waters, and you have to warn me before you speak.”

The boat beeped. “I will warn you with a beep.”

She bit back a smile, then looked around. “Is the invisible shield still up?”

*Beep.* “Yes. Please brace yourself.”

“Good.” That meant pirates were the least of her problems. She sighed in relief, holding on to the pole connected to ropes and other parts that held the boat afloat. While she did have ex-pirate acquaintances who would happily let her board their ship and take her where she wanted, this was far more convenient and far less imposing. “If you spot a pirate ship, let me know first, and don’t attack them. I need to check if we’re allied with them or not.”

*Beep.* “I’m not set up to attack anything or anyone. I’m in charge of carrying passengers to safety. Please brace yourself.”

“I’m already bracing myself.”

*Beep.* “We are crossing torrential waters.”

She couldn’t see anything except the clear waters and the gray clouds to her right, indicating it would rain soon. “What torrential—”

*Beep.* “Please step down from the bow. Please stay in the cabin in the meantime.”

She opened her mouth to argue, then peered ahead. The gray clouds that had just been to her right had spread in the span of a few seconds, encompassing the rest of the horizon in front of her. Her mouth went dry when she realized what the voice system meant.

“Water as in rain. You meant torrential rain.”

*Beep.* “Please step down from the bow. Please stay in the cabin in the meantime.”

She was already stepping down before the voice was speaking, already feeling the first drop of water hit her arm. Emerald lurched back when lightning flashed from the sky and shot a streak down to where she should have been: the cabin, which crackled with energy before alighting with a luminous, intense fire. Her energy pushed out on instinct, the magic forming into a ball that raced toward the fire to blanket it. But all it did was bounce back, a skidding dance that filled her ball with something she recognized all too well. Who was out there producing magical rain and lightning?

*Beep.* “Please step down from the bow. Please stay in the cabin in the meantime.”

“There’s no more cabin,” she snapped back. “And that’s not ordinary fire—”

*Beep.* “Please step down from the bow.”

“Would you listen to me—”

*Beep.* “Please step down from the bow.” *Beep. Beep.* “We are entering deep—rough—torrential—” *Beep. Beep.*

Realization sank in that the lightning might have struck more than the cabin, but she scanned the area, anyway, to check what the voice was warning her about. Horror bloomed when the once-still waters were no longer still but churning from all directions. White foam lapped and waves crashed into each other, pulling her boat in all directions.

*Shit, I’m going to need to pay for the damages,* her mind barged in before lightning burst down again, this time headed straight for the bow. Emerald had a split-second decision of where to go before she glanced at the dancing fire and the decision made itself for her. The boat exploded and sent her flying, but she had enough presence of mind to use the momentum and continue downward. From under the water, she watched the orange glow above and counted the seconds until it would end.

*The damages, her mind continued moaning. How long do I have to work to pay for that fancy thing?*

It didn't occur to her that the orange glow would never end, not when water alone wouldn't have put it out. She tried magic once more to help her stay underwater longer, but it proved useless when the weird, magical weather seemed to block it from here too. When she was starting to lose air, her arms and legs snapped into motion as she swam away from the fire. At the first sight of non-orange, she shimmied up, lungs bursting for air and gulping it down gratefully. Then she blinked repeatedly and surveyed the scene once more.

“You have got to be kidding me.”

The relief was short-lived at the glimpse of the dancing waves, closer than ever and more massive than she had anticipated. Emerald only had a second or two to form a clear statement in her blank mind.

*Mr. Voice, I'm sorry for doubting you.*

Then the first wave was dragging her under.

*Wake up and check out this magical world, where all your dreams will come true.*

A dreamy haze filled her senses, matching the words that seemed to float endlessly. Emerald engrossed herself in it, feeling like she was lying down on the most comfortable feather bed. She didn't want to stand up. She didn't want to leave it, not when it hugged her like a lover and made her feel safe, protected, loved...

*Wake up.*

A prickle came, then another. It formed into pokes, putting holes in the dreamy haze until she heard the voice more clearly.

*Wake up!*

Emerald's eyes snapped open, but her vision didn't grow steady until after repeatedly blinking and shaking her



head. The comfortable place became reality as she found herself lying on a mound of dried leaves, with the thick branches and leaves above serving as shade. It was a pretty array of leaf colors, too, and she could admire it forever...but wasn't she supposed to be drowning at sea?

The poke returned, then another, stemming from her back. She sat up abruptly, shock punching her hard when it dawned that something was poking her insistently. Her magic surged to her hand as her mind already flew to thoughts of body invasion and monsters—and then the poking object popped out and bumped against a tree trunk, allowing her a view of what she had been about to attack.

“Oh, my heavens.”

She gaped, then gaped some more. She watched the flying thing regain his senses as he shook his little body and blinked his little orbs, black as night and peering at her with curiosity. Belatedly, it occurred that she might have almost smothered him if she hadn't woken up sooner.

“Oh, my heavens,” she repeated, unable to take her eyes off him. “Are you...?”

It was a pixie if her books at home were right: a small creature that could fit in her hands, with flimsy-looking wings that held more strength than expected and a slim, bony body wrapped in glitter to cover the private parts. There was more she had read about them: that they liked to stay in groups to protect themselves from bigger, more dangerous creatures. That they were dangerous as a group, especially when they considered something a threat...and that they lived on an unknown, unexplored island in the Otherworld that other more established creatures didn't dare seek out, especially with the rumors that no one came out alive.

Her blood ran cold, but she swallowed the initial glimmer of fear and focused on the creature. The exposed chest and short hair indicated a male of his kind, and his expression was more a study of curiosity than a threat. When he didn't move forward to attack and didn't fly away, she cleared her throat.

“You were stuck on my back,” she said slowly, waiting for a reaction to the sound of her voice. When the pixie still didn’t move, she continued. “Or I was trapping you with my weight. You were poking me to wake me up. And the only reason for that—and why I am here instead of the sea—is because you probably dragged me here. You dragged me here, didn’t you?”

The pixie didn’t reply, tilting his head in confusion. Deducing he didn’t understand her, Emerald frowned. It was a miracle that she had survived that magical storm and had somehow landed here, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t still on a precarious course. If she was on the infamous mystery island, then she needed to leave. Now.

“What’s your name?” she asked, trying a different tactic. She patted her chest repeatedly. “I’m Emerald. Em. Emerald. Em.”

His eyes lit up in understanding as he pointed at her. A tiny voice came out and spoke in a soft, lilting tone. “Em?”

*Progress*, her mind rejoiced. She nodded eagerly, then pointed at him until he pointed at himself.

“You?”

“Yu,” he replied.

The eagerness deflated. She repeated the process, saying her name again and again and getting the same answer each time.

“Yu. Yu,” he insisted.

Emerald sighed. “Okay. Yu?”

He nodded, then waited.

“Can you take me to the ocean?”

She added gestures and pointed, waiting until the pixie seemed to catch up. Then it was her turn to catch up as the pixie flew away in a jiffy, his gestures indicating that he wanted her to follow him. Hope sparked when he led her out of the forest and into another one, less thick, and signaling that

the ground might have been sandier. When the next forest came into view, the leaves were barely there.

“Yu, how far did you drag me away from shore? And why would you drag me away from shore?”

The pixie didn't reply, already set on his goal. It occurred to her that maybe she hadn't come from the shore but somewhere else—an opening that remained a mystery, taking her straight from the ocean to that forest.

“Yu, stop. I know you can't understand me, but maybe you can answer my questions with some gestures. Yu?” At the lack of response and continuous motion, she raised her voice. “Yu, stop!”

The magic already gathering on her palm made its way toward him, poking twice until he finally did halt. Yu whirled to face her, stunned, as she finally caught up and heaved a breath.

“You fly too fast. I can't use my magic too much because I might need it later.” She gestured. “Where are we?”

A cold sensation pricked her neck and fluttered downward. She turned her back on Yu...then, froze when she noticed that he was floating away from her. A second later, she saw it: shadows moving from the trees, but only on the upper side in line with her sight. Which meant...

“Em,” Yu sang out. “Yu.”

The pixies circled her, some smaller than Yu but the majority as big as her head. Not that she had a big head, but... this wasn't good.

*Danger*, instinct warned, crystal clear and insistent. *Dangerous in groups*.

As if the books weren't clear enough, their narrowed eyes cemented that conclusion. Only Yu and a selected few remained confused despite joining the circle seamlessly. She swallowed. She opened her mouth and fisted her hand behind her.

“Hello. I'm Emerald. Em.”

She patted her chest again and repeated what she did with Yu, but the group was unresponsive. Giving up, Emerald took a step back—and just like that, felt the air shift until she felt positively chilled with tension.

“Well, it was nice meeting you and—”

At the first hiss and baring of sharp teeth, Emerald ducked and threw her magic in the air. It lit a brilliant green and gave her a head start as she scrambled away from their circle. She stood up—and ducked once more when something zoomed and hit the tree beside her, shattering into powder form. Immediately, she closed her eyes and held her breath, then lunged for the exit as more of those things whizzed her way, intent to catch her.

Magic became her ally as she willed some into her legs, lightening them so she could run faster. Frustration brimmed that she couldn't use that magic to create a shield around her—her one weakness, just as all her siblings also had one specific weakness. At the sound of more hissing, she glanced back and felt her stomach drop when she glimpsed the pixies going after her like a tornado.

“Oh, no. Oh, Yu, why did I think I could trust you?”

She was so preoccupied with getting away from them, she didn't even bother looking at where she was going. Her frantic escape jerked to a stop when she slammed into a hard, solid object and tumbled down. Then she was rolling to the ground that sloped downward, too fast for her magic to react and reach for something—

“Damn it.”

The falling sensation stopped and an arm banded around her waist. The voice registered, deep and masculine, with just a hint of melody that piqued her attention. She looked up.

Magenta eyes framed a face of perfect angles, with only soft lips stopping all that sculpted hardness. Black hair streaked with gray curled and fell all over his forehead and ears, covering them.

“Bad word, I know,” those lips mused, the melodic hint growing stronger. Mesmerizing. “Or I heard. We don’t use it, but it feels like the best words to use given the situation.”

*Fae*, her mind screamed as she took in the rest of him in fancy silk clothes that couldn’t quite hide lean, well-formed muscles and an ethereal quality. Maybe it was his paleness. Maybe it was the way he talked. But one thing she was sure of when it came to Fae was just how dangerous and manipulative they could be—a fact that couldn’t be hidden as La Fleur was commonly known as a magical, deadly island.

*And a Fae beat you from getting that gemstone.*

She pushed his chest out of instinct, then clutched his shirt hard when she started to fall. The arm around her tightened as he eyed her in confusion.

“You don’t speak, little creature?” he asked.

*Run*. But her mind was working a mile a minute, surmising that *he* was the solid object that had just jeopardized her escape before preventing a possibly deadly fall. Trapped, she looked down, the darkness seemingly endless. Then she glanced up and felt the dread building again.

“Can you fly?” she blurted out.

Magenta orbs blinked in confusion. He shook his head. “What? Why are—”

“Let go,” she commanded, a second before she heard the thrum of hissing again and spotted the flurry of wings above.

“Are you insane—”

“Let go!” she yelled, then pushed at him again—this time, with energy infused in her strength.

Astonishment spread over his features as he registered the magic and what she was. He sputtered when she slipped, then hissed when she grabbed his ankles and kept pulling aggressively. Just as she was about to give up, the rock he was holding on to broke.

“Don’t breathe it in!”

But her warning was too late, as the next shot from the pixies went straight to his face, covering him with shimmering powder. Then they were both plunged into a continuous fall that choked her senses. Emerald reached up, hands calling her magic, but it was stuck in her body. She closed her eyes, willing herself not to die a gruesome death...then preparing herself for the hard impact.

An arm caught her and swung her upward, changing her direction until she was eye-to-eye with the male Fae. She watched the powder take effect as those magenta eyes lost focus. She felt his body struggle with it as he locked her in place. Then she was bouncing on some force—a magical one—just as his arm went slack and his body slumped against hers.

They bounced a second time, then twice more before skidding to a halt and landing on some invisible cushion. She lost her breath when his body crushed hers completely, smothering her until she forcibly pushed him out of the way. She sat up, dizzy...and still felt her neck prickling. She looked up, convinced that they hadn't given up yet. The urge to keep running pounded in her head until she glimpsed the crumpled figure and cursed.

“Hey, wake up. Wake up.”

Emerald kept shaking him until he stirred, the first sign that he was still alive. She slapped a hand over his mouth when he groaned, then leaned in to whisper.

“Don't talk out loud. We're still in harm's way.”

Those mesmerizing eyes opened and locked onto her, but the awareness from earlier was gone as he was shrouded in dreamy blankness. Realizing she needed to do this alone, she lifted him to his feet, gritting her teeth when his weight swayed and nearly toppled them back to the ground. Left with no choice, she used magic once more to steel her body and give her support, the relief pouring when it held. Carefully, Emerald dragged them away from the cliffside, then closed her eyes when the hissing came back.

“Oh, no,” she moaned. “Oh, boy.”

“That’s it, baby. Moan it out. Feel me.”

She opened her eyes to glare at him, but he was still out of it. When she dragged him away faster, she noticed that he was staring at her and glowered again.

“What?”

“You’re very pretty. Baby…”

“Don’t baby me.”

Great. She was stuck with a dazed, confused flirt, who would probably kill her the first chance he got once he was sober. But she didn’t let go, her conscience unable to bear the guilt of leaving him to his helpless death, even when she couldn’t run while supporting him. At the corner of her eye, she spotted flimsy wings and ducked—but the wings slammed into an invisible force and bounced backward.

“You’re more than pretty, actually. Beautiful. That’s what you are. You must be from a nice court that our court covets. Or you must be from one of those deadly ones, using your beauty to trap the likes of me and my helpless kingdom.”

“Shut up.”

“My father always warned me about those courts and those folks. They will seduce us first before killing us in our sleep—or during sex. They will kill our king and queen just because they can.”

“Please stop talking. I don’t want to learn any more about your court.”

But she was already intrigued, her mind forming a few reluctant thoughts. One, he was from a court with a proper king and queen, and that court was weaker than other courts if he could admit that his kingdom was helpless—which meant he wasn’t from one of those formidable big courts she kept hearing chilling stories about. Two, he was of a lower status if he talked of their king and queen with this kind of reverence. Three…

“Are you sure? I was just getting to the good part.”

A pixie came charging toward her, then another. They bounced back and a rippling shimmered before her, then around her as more tried to hit them with powder but couldn't penetrate. She looked at the Fae, then at the continuous rippling every time a pixie tried to come for them.

*Three, it's him. He's the one protecting us from this.*

"Keep talking," she blurted out. "Keep doing whatever you're doing while I get us out of here."

But get them where?

She scanned her surroundings while his voice washed over her senses, the words a lull that urged down her panic every time it tried to rise. She couldn't remember what else the books said, her mind terrifyingly blank. Refusing to give up, Emerald gathered her magic instead, deciding she could use up all her energy and try for a big blast in case the invisible shield broke down.

"We are fairly peaceful, really, but everything's just a mess lately and I don't know how to fix it. It doesn't help that someone has an agenda against me and threw me here before I could solve the mystery of why we keep having deaths in our court."

Great. Was he a hunted man too?

"Hmm."

"Then there are my friends, who refuse to see reason and just want to have fun and cause mischief. Admittedly, that was also what I did before...I'm hot. It's really hot."

That he was, his body already heating her skin as they rubbed against each other while they walked. She rubbed his hot back, trying not to let the alarm sink into her voice.

"We'll get you somewhere colder."

"I'm thirsty."

"Okay. Let's get something for that too..."

Emerald's eyes widened as it clicked, her blank mind parting to reveal what she had been searching for all along.



And just like that, she already knew what they needed to get away from the constant assault of pixies.

## Chapter 2

It was all a blur in Rickavior Aviel's mind, mostly because his mind wasn't in its right state at the moment. Despite the constant buzzing in his head, a few things still managed to flit through: one, the blurry state wasn't of his doing and he was actively struggling to get out of it. Two, there was a weight plastered against his side and urging him to walk, even if walking was a pain and he would rather lie down and sleep the dizziness off.

Three, a voice was ringing in his ears and repeatedly telling him words that didn't make sense.

*Keep going. Walk faster. Don't you dare fall.*

Why would he fall when he had never fallen in love with anyone in his entire life?

"I can't support your weight. Please keep up with me. We're close. We're so close."

They were sexual words, the ones he was used to saying in bed or being on the receiving end of. But her voice was all but sexual. It was prim and filled with determination, as well as a rising frustration every time they paused from walking. Some dim part of his still-functioning mind told him he was holding them up, so he loosened his fingers and began to let go.

"Don't you dare give up on me or I swear I will drop you myself."

His body prickled at the sense of command, unused to being told what to do. He opened his mouth to retaliate—and was thrown forward with sheer force, one he couldn't stop for the life of him. A second later, his lungs were on fire and he was drowning, the water glissading into every open pore he possessed. He struggled to push off it—and was immediately jerked backward with just as much aggression before he was let go.

He tried to catch his bearings as his heart raced hard and the dizzying effect faded away. A second later, the memory of the pixies and the dust came flashing back and he straightened, blinking even more dizziness away—

“Stay where you are.”

He was drenched to the bone, tied up, and no longer hot from the pixie dust taking its effect on him. Who knew if it was going to burn him in the long run? The water probably stopped that from happening. Belatedly, it occurred that the string around him wasn't ordinary, the glowing green indicating it was infused with magic. Not Fae magic, but one probably far worse. Either those pixies finally got scared of her or the water did that, too, but...

Rick looked up and found the woman standing ankle-deep in the small bank of water, her hands matching the glowing green of the string. She tensed when he tugged at it. When there was no give, he gave up and settled for studying her, a couple of things fluttering through his mind.

*Witch. Danger. Need to stay away. Except...*

“You saved my life. I think,” he declared, then paused as he tried to recall the rest. “Not that I didn't save yours first from what would have been an awful fall.”

The woman scoffed as if not quite believing his audacity. Green eyes seared him with a look, one that shriveled his balls and tightened his gut at the same time. The rest of her was a sight to behold: a tall, willowy frame, an aristocratic nose, pink lips, and blonde hair that still gleamed despite all the bumps they had endured. Sure, it looked like a scary bird's ass at the moment, but it did nothing to hinder her beauty. Noting his perusal, she turned that nose up at him.

“State your name, affinity, and purpose.”

There was a threat in there somewhere, but he needed to snap out of absorbing that distracting face of hers first. When he did, her smooth tone and cool confidence ticked at his awareness and he remembered just who—and what—he was dealing with.

“Damn it,” he said out loud and didn’t miss her shoulders tensing. “Are you some kind of territorial witch who controls this island and the creatures living here?”

“What?”

At her clear-cut confusion, he relaxed while she tensed further.

“Never mind that. Anyway, my name is Rickavior Aviel. You may call me Rick.”

The offer was cautious but friendly as he toed the line that wouldn’t upset her. Instead of taking the hand as a truce offering, she lifted her chin.

“How do you know how to speak our language? Fae folks speak their language.”

He shrugged. “Fae folks adjust and my court just happens to be very adept at multiple languages, including yours. And I still don’t know your name.”

She looked at him like Fae folks and adjusting shouldn’t be put in the same sentence but didn’t say a word. The silence stretched on.

“Emerald. Em for short.”

*Emerald.* Like her eyes. The name fit. He waited for a last name, then nodded when he deduced that she wasn’t going to give it yet. He studied her for a bit and felt a kinship...then, an understanding.

“You’re lost too. This isn’t your island and you don’t know how to get out.”

Emerald tensed again, then absorbed the rest of his deduction. Her brows furrowed.

“Too?”

The next part was tricky as he wasn’t sure how much he should reveal yet—or if he should even reveal anything at all.

“I was thrown here by magic. And I don’t know how to get out.”

It was the truth, but not the whole truth. She tilted her head, still wary of him. But there was curiosity there now, too, even while the string maintained its hold.

“Whose magic?” she asked.

“Just some enemies,” was his offhanded reply, swallowing the names. In his mind, they were enemies now. “You know how it is in our world.”

“When did you get thrown here?”

“I don’t know what’s with all the questions, but...” He trailed off when he noticed her expression and things clicked. “Today. Just before I saw you.”

Her eyes widened and her cheeks turned ashen. She didn’t have to confirm for him to know that she had been thrust here at the same time. Was it an aftermath of the magic that had gotten him here or did she come here on purpose? Instinct pointed at the former.

“But you want to get out?” she probed.

“Obviously. As do you,” he said slowly, seeing the answer on her face. “Now, please let me go and we can talk about this.”

More silence. Then her face slipped into a mask, one that didn’t show him any answers.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” she stated. “Not when you called me baby.”

The string was released, sucked back into her fingers, and disappearing a second later. Her hand still glowed, but she tucked them at her sides. He inwardly sighed in relief, then winced.

“That’s because I didn’t know your name,” he argued. At her lack of response, he stepped forward. “I would like to apologize for that incident. I wasn’t myself, as you witnessed.”

There was no need to tell her that baby was a pet name for most women, back when his life wasn’t a complete mess and he didn’t know any better. The past was the past and he didn’t like dwelling on it.

“Hmm. Apology accepted. Now leave me alone.”

Before he knew it, she was turning around and walking away. Confusion had him trailing after her.

“But we work better together.”

“No, we don’t.”

“But—”

“Take another step closer and you’re going to know what it’s like to mess with a witch.”

Her words abruptly stopped him in his tracks, along with her hands that sparked with a threat. When she was satisfied that he wouldn’t follow, she resumed walking...then, whirled back to face him again.

“Thank you for providing us with your shield until I could get us to a water bank. I suggest you stay out of that pixie area and run at the first sight of one. They always come in droves and the next attack might be more vicious.”

He raised a brow, then nodded when she remained serious. “Noted.”

“And you talk too much. You just revealed a lot of things about yourself to a stranger. I suggest keeping some secrets to yourself.”

Rick blinked in disbelief, then gaped as she finally turned for good. The determined set of her shoulders told him she already had a path set and would do anything to get there. He supposed that was good. He would be clear and could do things on his own without her interference. He could get back to his home in no time and get the answers he needed. He could seek justice.

She was a witch, a stranger—inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. But she had saved his life and had probably scared those pixies witless enough to not look for him or her anymore. Even then, the woman didn’t know what else was in store for her on this island, considering witches and warlocks never really mingled or explored outside their business transactions.

And he knew what was in store and the possible dangers that could hit her right in the face when she least expected it.

“Damn it.”

Call it a sense of heroism—a weakness that had always plagued him—but he couldn’t just leave her alone. He weighed the pros and cons in his mind, then discarded them with an imaginary sweep of a hand. He cursed under his breath, a habit learned from the adventures he indulged in, which his elusive kind wasn’t even supposed to partake in.

Then Rick was racing after her.

It was a tricky thing to fool a witch into thinking she was alone and no one was shadowing her, but Rick managed as he kept his distance while still keeping an eye on her. To be fair, she was distracted, her mind seemingly elsewhere. But he had no doubt those hands would move with speed and instinct once she sensed the nearest threat.

From the way she avoided thick forests and even thinner ones while forging her path, he knew she was trying to find a shoreline as fast as she could. He climbed a tree and found it far ahead, indicating she was on the right path. Amusement glided in when she climbed a tree minutes later, mirroring his action and hopping down with even more determination. Then Emerald was plowing her way through the rest of the path, her strides eating up the ground and her excitement slipping through the cool façade.

“Easy, now,” he murmured. “Clear your head. Don’t let anything catch you here.”

So far, the rumored dangerous island that no one had escaped alive from hadn’t presented any threats other than those pixies, and he didn’t trust it one bit. He kept glancing around expecting a jump scare, then switched to climbing a tall branch to survey further when she finally reached the

shoreline. When there was still no threat, Rick watched her instead as she visibly took a deep gulp of air.

“You have a plan, don’t you? A way out of here. I might have to follow you in that too.”

She didn’t hear him, still basking in the fact that she had found the ocean. Emerald studied it for a while, then stripped down to a thin layer of clothes that billowed around her figure. She wrapped the outer layer around her legs as if to add weight to them, then waded in without hesitation. Waist deep, she looked around, closed her eyes...chanted words he couldn’t hear that added a ring of light around her.

It was a long, slow series of chants, meticulous and organized, the circle so perfect even from his point of view. Deciding he might as well protect her without disturbing her, he hopped down from the tree and circled the edge of the forest until he was certain that there were no eyes on them. Satisfied, he returned his attention to her...and froze.

The ring maintained its size and brightness while the magic thickened to a point that even he could almost taste it. But that wasn’t the problem. The problem was the sharp, majestic fin behind her, still at a fair distance but swimming its way toward her.

“Em, watch your back!”

She didn’t notice, still engrossed in her chants and swallowed up by her magic. He raced to the shore, repeatedly calling her attention. When she floated further into the ocean, already shoulder-deep, he dove under to speed up his movements. The dark water made it difficult to see, but all he needed was a glimpse of those cloth-wrapped legs before he was pushing the last few feet toward her.

The energy hit him hard as he wrapped an arm around her legs and yanked her out of the way, cutting off whatever she was doing. Horror rocketed when the fin became visible, too, already under the water. It connected to a long, gleaming creature with spikes under its belly and a teeth-filled jaw large enough to swallow them whole—and it wasn’t alone.



A force strong enough to shake him seized him out of the water just as he slammed up his shield, as natural as breathing air. The water around them tossed violently as he was hit from all directions, and he gritted his teeth when it kept coming. Then disbelief coursed in when she started thrashing and swimming out of the shield, unaware of the dangers of it.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” she hissed.

“Get back here,” he growled, grabbing her elbow and hauling her back in. Naturally, she thrashed more fiercely, even swinging an energy-filled punch to his stomach. He evaded it and grunted. Impatience flared as their tug-of-war extended, and an idea popped in. At her next attempt to get away from him, he took her shoulders and plunged her straight down, then joined her underwater.

Bubbles formed around them as she struggled. Then her eyes flicked away from him and her body went slack as she finally took in their surroundings. He did the same, his gut tightening every time one of the creatures hit his shield and jarred his senses. The worst thing was how blank their eyes were, cloudy orbs that attacked coldly. When they had their fill of looking, they swam back up and gaped at each other.

“You could have left me behind but didn’t,” he reasoned before she could argue. “I’m just returning the favor.”

“What?” She blinked, then focused on his shimmering shield.

“The shield protects me, not you,” he clarified. “In order to be protected, you have to stay inside it—unless you want to be those creatures’ dinner.”

Dazed and speechless, Emerald didn’t seem to know how to respond but was no longer fighting it when he gently nudged her back to the shore. He dropped the shield immediately, switching back to conserving his energy. They stood wet and dripping, watching the last of the waves die down and the fins swim out of sight.

“You just messed up my way out of here,” she mused.

“And saved your life. Again,” he reminded, smirking when she looked chastised. Then her words registered. “Was that the way out? Would it have worked?”

The frustration on her face was locked down into smoothness, but he saw enough. The shake of her head confirmed it. “No. Normally I could have made the whole ocean glow and created a portal by now.”

He didn’t know much about portals, but he knew witches and warlocks were the most adept at them. The older Fae folks could create them on a whim, too, which begged the question...had an older Fae helped get him here?

“I suspect I was thrown here by friends. Or ex-friends now. And a family member. They might be part of the corrupt system and those deaths, and they may have had help from an older Fae to get rid of me.”

“Oh.”

“And I suspect you were a bystander who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“I was on a ship on my way home,” she confirmed. “And you still talk too much. I’m still a stranger, remember?”

“One who wouldn’t kill me,” he shot back. “If you planned to, you would have already.”

She grimaced, not contradicting his statement but reluctant about it. The tension from the water discourse eased a bit from his shoulders as he scanned the horizon.

“The sun’s going down,” she observed in worry.

He nodded, mirroring the sentiment: that nightfall in an open area wasn’t a good idea. Without a word, they trudged away from the shoreline. Her hand glowed and patted her clothes, then hesitantly touched his shoulder. A second later, he felt warmth enter his skin, then travel outward until his clothes were dry too.

“I don’t have enough energy for more,” she explained. “Chants take up a lot, especially coming from a place I don’t

know. I'm not drained, but..."

"I get it. I have to conserve my shield too. And look at you."

"What?"

"Talking too much. Sharing with a *stranger*."

She eyed his grin distrustfully, then stared ahead without commenting. Since she looked like she already knew where to go, he let her lead the way and kept up with her quick, steady pace.

"Are you some kind of investigator or something?" she asked after a while.

Rick tilted his head, then deduced that she was still trying to decide if he was an enemy. "Or something. Let's just say I have some authority and the royal family might listen to me if I convinced them enough—or trapped them in a room until they either killed me or listened to me. Of course, I need something to convince them."

"A suspect to the murders."

"Natural deaths for now, but lately I've been convinced they aren't. Me being here just cements that. Anyway, yes. I either need a suspect, a confession, or evidence to expose that everything's connected, including the attempt to get rid of me."

"It sounds like a violent court."

"All courts have their pros and cons. Mine happens to not be one of those that savor killing sprees and torturing others just for the fun of it."

"So, you torture for other reasons."

"If it's enemies or an attempt to track down kidnapped Fae. Believe it or not, it's a common occurrence...wouldn't you?"

"Wouldn't I what?"

"Torture for those reasons?" he prompted.

Silence.

“It depends,” she finally replied. “But torture should be the last resort and should still be merciful.”

“Have you done it?”

“A mild one. Only because my brother needed help against a...difficult creature.”

“Right. We all have our reasons.”

Emerald mulled over this, then hesitated. “You said you think your friends and a family member might be involved in your attempted demise?”

Thinking about it and talking about it was one thing, but hearing it from another person had his chest tightening in betrayal. He brushed it off.

“Yes.”

“Don’t assume. Sometimes things are not what they seem and the people you think are the culprits are innocent. You might end up sentencing the wrong person to a hellish life.”

This time, she looked him in the eye, jolting him with how clear and dark they looked in the night. They were also very sincere in trying to get her point across as if she had experienced it first-hand. The abrupt intimacy of it had him looking away first.

“Obviously. That’s why I need to investigate...if we can get out of here.”

He waited for her assurance that they would, but even the woman with the powers didn’t seem to have concrete answers. Rick let it be since he didn’t have any either. They walked the rest of the way in almost companionable silence, senses perked for any sign of buzzing wings or hissing little mouths. When they arrived in a bushy area, she stopped.

“There it is. I saw it earlier but didn’t think to explore it since the ocean was my main goal. But now...”

Rick narrowed his gaze until he spotted the cave opening sitting snugly at the side of yet another cliff. Understanding, he blocked her before she could enter, clearing his throat.

“Let me do the honors.”

“Of checking a cave without any weapons?” she asked skeptically.

He smirked and showed off his shield, letting it hum before turning it off. “This is all that I need.”

He entered without waiting for her response, checking the walls first to make sure there were no surprise openings or trap doors. When he spotted a bank of water that was waist-deep and also held no surprise openings, he sent a signal until she ambled in.

“Water,” he said triumphantly. “Our best weapon against those violent little things.”

No sooner had he said it, one violent little thing fluttered toward them, delicate wings glittering in the dark. Rick put his shield up...and Emerald cleared her throat and rushed forward.

“Yu!”

## Chapter 3

“You have names for them?”

Emerald couldn't blame Rick's incredulity, even while she hesitated between shutting Yu out and asking the Fae to lower the shield. Instead, she answered his question.

“I didn't name all of them. Just him. He told me his name.”

“They don't speak our language,” he pointed out.

“He doesn't have to. We can communicate through gestures.”

“Oh. And you and...he couldn't gesture at his peers not to attack us like little shits?”

The man had a point, but she couldn't help focusing on the words he used. Fae folks and vampires from prestigious houses spoke formally and wouldn't be caught dead using crude language, while this Fae spoke like he was used to it. It piqued more curiosity about his past, but she set that aside and scrutinized Yu.

“Yu, are you alone?”

She gestured with her hands and body, ignoring Rick's raised brow. After some nose wrinkling and visible confusion, Yu's black eyes lit up and he nodded frantically. Something about the movements called out to her and threw her hesitation out the window.

“Let him in.”

Rick gave her a wary look. “It could be a trap.”

“Then I'll handle it if it is. You can raise your shield back up the moment he enters.”

The man still didn't want to, but he gave in and lowered the shield, then glared at Yu when the pixie rushed in. The shield was back in place in no time, still invisible, and no other pixie came in sight. She sighed in relief.

“I don’t think he meant to lead me to his folks, and I don’t think he knew they would attack me. He and a few others stood back. I saw it.”

“Hmm.”

“Everything happened too fast, including you crashing into me. I don’t think he had time to react.”

“Hmm.”

Rick watched in distrust as the pixie flew toward her, perusing her as if to search for something. Realizing what it was, she twirled and showed Yu her arms and legs.

“No wounds. I’m okay.”

Yu understood her gestures and circled her excitedly, then wandered over to curiously study Rick. The two had a stare down, so laughably familiar between men that she couldn’t help rolling her eyes. Remembering she still had her outer clothes wrapped around her legs, Emerald sat on a rock to unwind them, then settled in to watch how the two dealt with each other.

They walked around the cave, circling each other, their sharp gazes never breaking contact. When Rick growled, Yu hissed, but there was no baring of teeth or surge of power. Yu gave up first, fluttering around Rick now while the man stood still. After three aimless but excited flying circles, Rick’s expression softened and a smirk shadowed his lips.

“You’re not quite as harmful as your peers, are you?”

Yu didn’t understand, but he noted the questioning tone and nodded solemnly. The pixie gestured wildly, then grew frustrated when Rick couldn’t understand it.

“You want me to...poke my nose with my finger? That’s revolting.” Rick lit up. “Oh? Wait. Do you mean that I have a pretty nose? There’s no need to tell me. I know. I’ve been told plenty of times that everything about my face is pretty.”

A snort came from her throat, too late to stop. She put a hand over her mouth, her cheeks burning. To her relief, they

were so attuned to each other that they ignored the sound, playing with more gestures until Rick gave up and laughed. The sound was deep and melodic, as mesmerizing as the rest of him. Yu was mesmerized, too, finally floating so close that Rick could bump the pixie's nose with a thumb. Yu did the same, emitting powder. Rick blinked, then grinned.

“That tickled me. It's...a cute feeling. Either you're a baby or you just don't mean us harm.”

The openness of the Fae to the pixie caught her off guard, especially when Rick had no reason to be this nice to someone so small and harmless. But he was, paying attention to Yu as the pixie tried to communicate some more, then becoming amused when the pixie began to grow sleepy.

“Yu,” Yu said, pointing at himself. “Yu.”

“Rick,” Rick replied promptly, then patted the flat space on another rock until the pixie curled on top of it and yawned. “Just Rick. Goodnight, little bub.”

Silence encumbered the space. She looked away and slid from her rock to the ground, wriggling until she found a sufficient spot to lay down her outer clothes. Then she pulled some energy from inside her and washed it over the ground, including the water in case they needed to jump in it. Just as she rested her back on the rock, her senses fluttered and a shadow fell over her.

“If I hadn't heard it myself, I wouldn't think you were capable of laughter.”

Emerald closed her eyes, realized he wasn't leaving, and opened them.

“What did you think I was capable of?”

“Death. Destruction. All with that cool expression you always tack on to hide what you think and how you truly feel.”

He was so sure of it as if he didn't doubt her magical abilities for a second. Agitation surged that he could surmise beyond that, too, putting her in defense mode.



“Says the person hiding under this relaxed, easygoing persona when he’s a ruthless Fae.”

She had meant to intimidate him, perhaps shake that easy acceptance of everything. But the man was unperturbed, tilting his head and mulling over her words.

“I wouldn’t say ruthless throughout. It depends,” he corrected, repeating what she said earlier. He held out a hand. “Truce?”

She peered at his hand, veined and not as smooth as most Fae’s were drawn like in those books. They were supposed to be lithe, ethereal all over, and untouched by physical labor. Everything about him was not like in those books, and she narrowed her gaze.

“Didn’t we already have one?”

“A handshake confirms it.”

“Confirms what?”

“That you won’t leave me in the middle of the night. It’s your loss, but I meant what I said about two heads being better than one.”

“I don’t recall you saying that.”

He frowned, then smirked sheepishly. “It must have slipped my mind, then, but the thought was there.”

He was so ridiculously charming, it should be illegal. Emerald swallowed, refusing to be charmed. The man couldn’t think that he could just wrap her around his finger like that as he did everyone else, including Yu. Needing this conversation to end, she extended her hand to shake his.

Sparks flared to life, awakening something inside her. She bit back a gasp at the electric charge that thrummed under her skin, then snuck its way to their connected fingers until she was struggling not to quiver. Magenta eyes flew to hers, the warmth fading and his irises darkening—a confirmation that he felt it too. She snatched her hand away as if burned, then cleared her throat.

“Truce it is,” she said lightly, keeping herself busy as she pretended to arrange her outer clothes. Minutes later, she was tucked in and turned away from him...a bad idea, but so was being in this cave with him and a pixie. Emerald knew she had to pick her battles at this point.

“Were you alone out at sea before you were dragged here?”

His question was mildly curious but not insistent. She stayed in her silence for a while, then decided that maybe talking would erase the weird tension from earlier.

“Yes. I was renting an acquaintance’s ship and headed home from a mission.”

“Mission?” he echoed.

“A retrieval mission. I needed to retrieve something for someone important.”

“A higher-ranking warlock or witch?”

“Hmm.” The truth clutched her stomach hard and wouldn’t let go, and her mouth opened before she could stop it. “An ex’s family.”

“I take it I just made you fail your mission.”

“A Fae beat me to it in Centro, so it was already a failed mission before this little detour.”

“Ouch. I should say way to go, Fae, but I’m not friends with all of them. Was the mission’s success correlated to you getting back together with your ex?”

“No.” There her stomach went again. She gritted her teeth, then stopped resisting. “It was about pride, and showing them that I wouldn’t take their judgment with my head down.”

Silence.

“I take it it wasn’t a nice breakup.”

“No breakup is nice,” she shot back. Then, “He dumped me after my brother was accused of delving into dark magic, which is forbidden to us. My brother didn’t...at least, not willingly. He was manipulated.”

The truth was more severe: Silver Sutton being controlled by black magic and forcibly made to burn houses and kill their villagers, all because Silver's best friend was jealous of his power and angry when Silver threatened to expose his illegal business—selling dark magic—to their Council. The aftermath had been Silver getting put down and the entire Sutton family being ostracized by their society.

“He dumped you just like that? You weren't at fault.”

“He was a member of an affluent, influential family and I was linked to a murderer. A lot of the villagers believed we were in on the bad things my brother did.”

It used to hurt until she couldn't breathe, but Emerald had kept those emotions in the dark when she was in her bedroom and no one could see her. Then she just grew better at hiding them. The heartache was gone now, but her pride still smarted whenever she bumped into that family and was looked down on—like she was a piece of trash stuck on the bottom of their shoe and they couldn't quite believe that she was still there. The ironic thing was that the family didn't even know she was sleeping with their son because their relationship had been a secret.

“I'm sorry to hear that.”

She blinked the memory away.

“There's no need to be sorry. My brother's in the clear now and happy.” After being thrown in a hellish prison and miserable for years. She swallowed, trying to brush that away too. “You talk too much.”

“And you're responding now, so I think the right wording is we both talk too much. But that's what a truce is for.” She heard him move around, finding his comfortable spot. She heard him sigh. “Goodnight, pretty Em.”

Emerald listened to his breathing while she curled in on herself, imitating Yu's position. The pixie was dead to the world and exhausted. After a while, a soft snore escaped Rick's lips and had her fighting back a snort...then, a smile.

One more thing the books didn't tell her: that Fae folks weren't regal in their sleep and snored like regular folks.

Sleep was elusive, but she tried, tiring her mind with escape plans that felt futile and bearable ways to co-exist with the Fae and the pixie. The more she thought about the truce, the more she was convinced it was for the best, especially since they could team up to get out of there faster. That lulled her into sleep—a restless one with pixies throwing their glitter bombs everywhere. They hissed with their lips pulled back and shook her with their anger. Then she was being shaken for real, a sensation that had her sitting upright and ready to blast away with her magic.

“Wake up. Come quick.”

She paused, the voice familiar. Then she gasped when it registered who was speaking. Yu alternated between shaking her shoulder and frantically flying around.

“Yu? You can talk now?”

“Rick. Help.”

“Rick helped you?” she deduced, still incredulous. “With Fae magic, I presume, since no one can learn a new language that fast.”

“Rick. Help.”

It clicked when her gaze finally fell behind her and found the spot empty. Emerald whirled back to face Yu, then looked around. She froze when she heard something flit in her ears...music, but why would there be music in the cave?

“Yu, where's Rick?”

The pixie understood and pointed repeatedly to their right, where the bank of water was located. It was dark just like the rest of the cave, but Yu's expression had her crawling toward it. When she did, the music became clearer and transformed into a woman humming a melody, her voice like magic and temptation rolled into one. Just as it faded, a

warning crawled down her spine. Yu flew closer to the water

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“No!” she yelled, grabbing the pixie and heaving him down with her. A human-shaped head popped out of the water and bit the spot where they would have been, serrated teeth glinting gold and reddish eyes glaring. Darker red tresses fell all around that face, framing it to look hauntingly beautiful. The creature took one look at her glowing hands before descending back into the water.

Emerald leaped to the edge again, glimpsing a scaled golden tail that only meant either of two things: mermaid or siren. The voice leaned on the latter. Then her gaze locked in on what the siren was dragging under and her heart stopped.

“Yu, stay here. Watch the cave entrance for trouble and stay away from the water.”

She didn't hear his response, but she saw his nod just before she threw herself into the bank. What should have been waist-deep water changed now, some hole opening up below that led to a body of water so deep, it stretched on for miles in all directions. She chanced a glance above, noting the visible opening, then followed the tail that was moving too fast. Just before she lost sight of it, her magic shot out to wrap around its tail—and it sent her careening into a frenzied ride as the siren tried to get away from her and ended up dragging her.

Dizzy and overwhelmed, it took Emerald a while to gather her wits and infuse more magic into the string, then her arms. When she felt it was enough, she heaved with all her might and was thrown backward at the force of her pull. The good news was that it dragged the siren back...the bad news was that siren now went on the offensive and was bulldozing toward her with one obvious intention.

There was more good news: Rick visible now but unconscious as the siren clutched him in her long, webbed hands. Emerald only had a second or two to weigh her options before she stayed where she was, waiting for the siren's charge. The reddish eyes glinted, triumphant. Just before it

chomped on her, she twisted downward and gripped the siren's hair, transferring more magic into it.

The siren stilled, riddled with pain. The siren thrashed around when that pain traveled to its flat chest and bony arms. As soon as they reached the hands, Emerald snatched Rick out of the way, pushing the last of her offensive magic to her feet. It shot her up like a rocket, and all she had to do was position herself so she didn't crack her head on a closed ceiling. That was easier said than done as Rick's weight pulled her down and her neck prickled. The siren was coming in three, two—

They burst out of the hole and were thrown to the side, the siren following in their wake and heaving its body to the ground. When it could only get half of its body out of the water, Emerald continued dragging Rick away and knelt in front of him.

“I dare you to come here and attack me. I dare you to steal him again.”

Her hands glowed. The glaring reddish eyes changed, and she glimpsed real fear since their first encounter. Not taking it to chance, she lassoed a string around the bank of water until the siren backed fully into the water. Its screech echoed across the cave and rattled her teeth before it descended and the sound was cut off.

“Oh, heavens. That hurt my ears.” She glanced at Yu, who was nervously fluttering at the entrance of the cave. “No trouble?”

“No trouble.”

“Stay out of the water,” she warned again.

“Rick dead.”

Her heart stopped again before she comprehended that it was a question. Emerald scrambled to Rick, who had remained unconscious. He was also paler than normal, sickening her stomach. Willing her body to produce more energy and more magic, she flattened her palms on his chest, then ran them around his body to warm him up.

“Rick? Please wake up. Please don't die on us.”

She felt liquid inside him and cursed. Then she abandoned her magic and went for the human route: pumping his chest, blowing air into his lungs, and everything a few books taught her about first aid. The minutes were filled with the sounds of her pleading, pumping, and Yu's restless wings. Then he was retching the water out, sighing...and returning to unconsciousness.

"Rick, wake up. You're supposed to wake up now," she scolded.

Fear licked at her skin for the first time since she saved him, aware that she might have been too late. She shook him, her hands trembling, and straddled him to shake him further when there was no response. Yu wandered close.

"Kiss."

She looked up in confusion. "What?"

"Steal siren song from him."

She stared some more until comprehension dawned: she needed to get the siren's hypnosis out of him. Emerald opened her mouth to ask questions, then abandoned it as a waste of time. She offered a prayer of hope, nudged some energy to her lips, then leaned down and pressed them against his.

The kiss was chaste, perfunctory, perhaps necessary. His lips were cold, but they warmed at her energy until there was no more left. Frustration simmered when he still didn't move, her hope crashing into helplessness and her lips pressing harder...

"Alive."

Yu's voice faded away as Rick's mouth moved against her. She jolted away on instinct, but his hands were already locking her in place...and he was kissing her with a fervency that bordered on desperation. Shock skated in her stomach at how so into it he was, his eyes still closed. Then the shock transformed into something else as he just wouldn't relent, seemingly drawing on to her lips as if they offered something he wanted. Needed.

He was soft, demanding, and everything in between. Her response was inevitable as heat sparked in her system, then spread until her toes were curling and her body was on fire. When his hand cupped her cheek and angled the kiss deeper, the fire licked at her core. When he groaned against her mouth, a sound so masculine and aroused, she opened her mouth until his tongue was coasting in and burning her further. He groaned again.

Then images began to assault Emerald.



## Chapter 4

She kissed like she meant it and made him ache in places Rick didn't know he could ache again, or ache this hard. He knew, though, that kissing her was wrong, not when his senses were all a blur and he couldn't remember why they were kissing in the first place. But hell, she tasted so soft, so ripe...so delicious. The ice queen he had come to know and get used to had melted into a puddle of heat until he was hot and clammy all over, his blood thickening with it and his cock raging in his pants.

When Emerald moved, torn between jumping back and crawling closer, he solved it for her by locking her in his lap and splaying his hands on her ass. They tensed. They melted, too, when he kept massaging them and rocked once—slow, light, but enough to send him into a path of need ready to flatten her to the ground and...

*Fuck her. Do things to her. Taste every inch of her up.*

Before his body could give in, images floated in his mind, then began to form a massive collage. He froze as he watched them churn, roll, and ricochet around each other before settling into a story where she was front and center. At each revealed picture, stupefaction punched him in the gut and shook his core. Then they were gone as abruptly as they came, returning him to the cave where he had just been kissing the life out of the witch that he shouldn't be kissing.

Their bodies were no longer attached, no longer about to grind on each other. Whatever intimate moment there was, it was broken and he knew from her expression that she wasn't going to climb his lap again. That didn't stop him from noting her flushed cheeks and her pink lips, still swollen from his kiss. Belatedly, the rest of his memory came back and he barked out a frustrated laugh as he glanced at the glowing string around the water bank.

“I woke up and saw her, but then all I could hear was her singing. It was so nice and...”

“A trap,” she confirmed. “She dragged you underwater and that bank isn’t as shallow as we thought. Sirens tend to do that.”

“Sirens?”

“Yes.”

He grimaced, not liking how close to death they were for the nth time. When she didn’t elaborate and kept staring at him, he looked back and realized he couldn’t have been the only one to see images.

“What did you see?” he asked. “About me?”

There was a contemplative pause. “You were right. Someone was trying to murder you, but I couldn’t see the face. I saw the magic, though. It’s not familiar and it’s not like mine. I think your murderer knows about your shield and tried to catch you when you were...drunk.”

“I haven’t been drunk in a while,” he said, slightly defensive and shutting down the times when it was all he had ever been. “Fae folks don’t get drunk easily, but that’s beside the point. I stopped drinking a while ago, so someone must have spiked my water or something.”

“Hmm.”

“What else did you see?”

She hesitated. “Partying. Lots of partying. You being surrounded by your friends and women...lots of women.”

This time, he couldn’t help inwardly groaning because...well, his record when it came to women wasn’t very impressive. He had stopped in that department, too, as sleeping around just left him with a sickening, hollow feeling and he realized just how much of a selfish, arrogant bastard he had been.

“Oh.”

She didn’t judge, not like she used to every time she looked at him. Instead, she seemed to work up the courage to get to the next question.

“What did you see? About me?”

*You crying and your heart breaking. You ready to offer yourself to your secret fiancé before he dumped you and wanted nothing to do with you. Your damned Broom’s Isle folks talking behind your back and making fun of your misery and me wanting to pummel every single one of them.*

The memory felt raw, every emotion alive and clawing at him. It felt like a lifetime before he could wrangle them in, but he managed. Rick looked her in the eyes, struggling with calm. His hand fisted, his body ready to leap to that island.

“Who was your first? Obviously, it wasn’t your ex.” Was it one of the people who had made fun of her?

She paled. Just like that, the mask slipped back into place and her defense mechanism shot up like a wall—a far better sight than the defeated person she used to be. He knew that the defeated part had only been in the beginning as Emerald didn’t peg him as a person who let any kind of defeat last long. When she finally spoke, her voice was as cool as ever.

“An ex-pirate. He helped me navigate around the treacherous seas when I was still an inexperienced traveler and had to do missions for the council.” *To prove myself* was left unsaid.

“I see.”

Her chin lifted, green eyes studying him. The quiet sweep was thorough and made his body stand on attention.

“How did you teach Yu our language so fast?” she asked.

“Call it a Fae specialty. Em?”

“What?”

“The kiss...”

“I was taking the hypnosis out of you. That’s all it was.”

Shut down before he could even say anything, which was just as well. Rick swallowed down every argument that wanted to come out and nodded.

“Right.”

“And I don’t think this place is safe for us to sleep in anymore.”

As if on cue, Yu flew back into the cave, mouth splitting into a grin.

“Alive. Rick alive.”

Rick grinned back. “We need to work on how you phrase things, but yes. I’m alive thanks to you guys.”

Yu nodded, then pointed restlessly. “Dangerous outside. Go out morning.”

Emerald looked visibly disappointed but didn’t bother arguing, understanding that the pixie knew the layout of the land more. Rick shrugged.

“Well, I guess we’re stuck here.”

He tried to inject some cheer into his voice, but he wasn’t feeling it as he didn’t trust the cave any longer. Yu flew back and forth from his shield near the cave entrance before a distant howl outside sent the pixie scampering back inside. Emerald sighed and tugged her string from the water bank. Minutes later, Yu was back to sleep and Rick had positioned himself in a sitting position facing the water.

“She’s not coming back,” Emerald said. But there was a hint of doubt in her voice. “I’m pretty sure I scared her off.”

“I’m not taking any chances, especially since sirens are known to come back with twice the vengeance streak. Or so I heard.”

“Rick—”

“Go to sleep, Em.” Despite the firmness in his voice, he softened his next words and glanced at her. “At least one of us needs to be alert later.”

She still looked doubtful, but he watched the reluctance form before she lay down and got into a comfortable position. Rick would not have minded spending time just watching her.

Instead, he kept his gaze on the water as the hours passed.

The siren attempted a return, but one look at his steely gaze had the creature narrowing its red eyes before sinking back into the watery depths. Rick still didn't trust it one bit, so he stayed where he was until it was no longer dark outside. That was a couple of hours ago.

“Are you sure you don't want to rest?” Emerald asked for the nth time as they walked across a long expanse of the field leading to another forest—after Yu checked that it was safe and no creatures were lurking in the grass, waiting to pounce on them. The sun was shining brightly and relentlessly scorching, and he felt hot and irritable.

“No. I'm fine.”

“Flowers,” Yu announced. “Safe flowers.”

The pixie plucked one and offered it to Emerald, who graciously accepted and added it to the growing pile in her arms.

“Leave those behind,” Rick warned. “The pollen and petals might leave trail tracks.”

“Would they leave trail tracks, Yu?”

The pixie shook his head. “Sturdy. No tracks.”

Rick took the bundle from Emerald, then gave her a warning look when she tried to argue. She relented but kept accepting stems until her arms were full again. Rick took the next bundle, then placed his body in front of her when Yu kept going.

“Enough. You're cute and all, and I'm sure you find her beautiful and want to shower her with all the flowers in the world, but this is not a courting session.”

The pixie tilted his head, not understanding the last part. With a sigh, Rick pointed at Emerald. “She’s tired of carrying flowers.”

That one Yu got, his face scrunching up in concern. When Emerald opened her mouth to appease him, Rick gave her another warning look, then directed a cajoling smile toward the pixie.

“But you can honor her beauty another way. How about a little help burying these flowers and showing us the way to the mountains instead?”

“Mountains?” Emerald echoed. Then her expression cleared. “If a portal isn’t underwater...”

“It’s way up there,” he finished, pointing ahead. He could tell there were mountains, but they were covered by fog and other stuff he didn’t want to dwell on yet. “How about it, Yu? Em finds mountains very fascinating.”

That was all it took to get the pixie moving. He gave Emerald a triumphant smirk, then willingly handed the picked flowers back to the enthusiastic little creature. When she snatched one stem from him and tucked it in her pocket, Rick bit back a smile and marched ahead.

The hours went on while the sun beat down on them before clouds moved in to give them some reprieve. He didn’t trust those clouds one bit so he urged them to hasten until they were out of the field and back in the forest. When it was halfway through the afternoon, he felt his body lose its remaining energy and the lack of sleep numbing his brain, his steps becoming heavy. Quietly, he instructed Emerald to keep an eye on Yu while he stayed behind, battling the urge to sleep. There were scurrying sounds here and there, but nothing that warned them of the pixies’ return.

When he missed a step and stumbled, he bit back a curse and his shield turned off. Rick willed it back on...then, halted when he almost slammed into Emerald.

“Em, what—”

“You need sleep.”

Immediately, he straightened. “I can keep going.”

“No.”

“I swear I’m okay—”

“Maybe I need to rest too,” she cut in, then pointed at the pixie, who was hovering over them curiously. “And Yu. Let’s not make stupid decisions and venture into the night like Yu suggested.”

“But it’s not yet...” He trailed off, looking up in surprise when he realized the sun had gone down. The forest was quieter, too, as if the scurrying creatures knew better than to wander around at this time. “Right. It’s nighttime. I suppose it’s only reasonable to take a break.”

“No cave around,” she murmured, scanning the vicinity. “Yu, any suggestions?”

The two started a low discussion, one his foggy brain could no longer join in on. Surprise filled him when Emerald took his hand after and led him to...a tree.

“The pixies...”

“They can’t reach the highest parts,” she reasoned. “And as long as your shield stays on...”

*Safe.* They would be safe, depending on how his shield performed—which meant he needed to get some rest before he dropped dead. The thought of getting that rest shot a burst of energy down his body, renewing his senses as he brushed the two off and made the climb himself. When Emerald paused and struggled mid-climb, he reached out and seized her up in one long pull. She teetered on the edge of the branch, then gasped when he pulled her again toward him.

“I got you.”

Green eyes flickered up, meeting his gaze. His hand tightened around her when her lips parted.

“Thanks.”

“Long fall,” he said. “And no problem.”

Heavens, she was beautiful, in a way most of his peers were but with an untouchable quality that appealed to him all the more. Before he could dissect it, a crack snatched his attention. Then the branch snapped.

“Oh—”

“I got you,” he repeated, arm shooting up and grabbing another branch on the way down. Pain raced down his shoulder, but he ignored it as his shield wrapped around them like a bubble, then reached up to other branches. Slowly, he cajoled it up until they were floating to the top of the trees. “I guess the best solution is multiple branches supporting our weight.”

“Right.”

Her voice so close to his ear had him registering that she was flat on the bubble with him on top of her. He gulped at the closeness, then bit back a groan when she wriggled to get away. When Rick locked her legs with his, she stiffened.

“Don’t move too much. I’m still...steadyng the shield.”

“Okay.”

There was no need to tell her that he was steadyng his hormones, too, before he made a fool of himself. But he also strengthened his shield, thickening it.

“How does that work?” she asked. “Me and Yu getting in while it blocks others?”

“Intention. You and Yu have no intention to kill me. The moment you do, the shield will kick you out.”

“Oh.” She made an envious sound. “I wish I had the same shield.”

“You have your magic, which is far cooler,” he pointed out. She wrinkled her nose, a cute gesture that drew him nearer before he remembered himself. “This will protect us for the night. Unless you want us to rest on separate branches.”

He watched her consider it, a brief moment as she looked down at the thinner branches covering them below,



then the night sky filling up with stars above. Slowly, she shook her head, her expression somber.

“That’s not a good idea.”

“It isn’t?”

“Sirens and pixies can’t seem to stay away from you, so I’m taking it upon myself to be your repugnant shield.”

It took him a minute to comprehend that she was calling him irresistible without outright calling him irresistible. Amusement punched hard and he threw his head back in laughter. She hissed and slapped a hand over his mouth while he brushed the hand off. Their quiet struggle bounced the bubble around, but it stayed intact. His body, however, was in tatters as every shift and slide sent their skin rubbing and his heating up.

“You could never be repugnant,” he said, trying to play it off as a joke.

Unaware of his inner struggle, she rolled her eyes. “I wasn’t kidding about the dangers, though. You need a companion. Besides, it feels better here.”

“But—”

“No buts. You took care of us in the cave last time. Let’s take care of each other this time.”

He tried. But there was no winning against her stubborn streak that shot up from time to time, and he knew she would argue until dawn if he kept it up. Rick swallowed the rest of his challenging words.

“Fine. If you insist.”

“I do.”

There was triumph in her tone, her face glowing with the victory. Unable to resist, he openly regarded each feature until a flush crept up her cheeks. But she didn’t move away, their bodies pressed in corners they shouldn’t be pressed together. Casually, he rested his head against her shoulder until she stilled.

“Rick?”

“Tired,” he admitted. “I didn’t want to say it, but I haven’t slept since before I got here.”

“Why?”

“I was close to answers. I know I was.”

“The killings?”

“Yes.” A pause. “Let’s just say partying has been the last thing on my mind when our court has a killer in it. And I grew up with these people.”

He couldn’t erase the bitterness from his tone, but he did try to lighten it. A hand tentatively rested on his back, then cruised upward to the back of his neck. Her fingers dug and started a gentle massage, one that removed all ruminations of his court and redirected his attention to her action. He closed his eyes at how good it felt, then bit back a moan when a particularly hard dig had the rest of his body charging with electricity. His breathing turned heavy when those skillful fingers skimmed up his hair and threaded through it.

“What are you doing?” he asked after a while.

“Taking the tension away from you.”

Cool, faint energy—her magic—glissaded from her hands and fought with the heat of his body. The push-and-pull had pleasure spreading in his senses and his insides trembling from it.

“Em?”

“What?”

“If you keep this up, you might have a problem on your hands.”

“What?”

He couldn’t continue speaking when he was so turned on, it was starting to consume him. He fisted his hands on her sides at another hard dig, then couldn’t keep the curse from spilling out. She paused. When she was about to massage

again, he flattened his hips against hers and ground once, letting her feel the erection that had hardened there.

“That problem,” he murmured, huskiness coating his voice.

Awareness bloomed on Emerald’s face as she gasped, then stilled once more.

“Oh. *Oh*,” she murmured back, her hand hastily dropping away. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m a horny bastard. I’m the one who should be sorry.”

“Oh.”

“So, none of this is your fault. Your massage is wonderful, but it’s...not a good idea.”

“Right. You’re right. Not a good idea.” But she still didn’t push him away, as if she trusted him not to do anything about his body’s response to her. Instead, her hands went to his shoulders. “Do you need...?”

Her. Her body against his, just like this. “Warmth?”

“Yeah.”

“Not a good idea, either.”

“Oh.” Her fingers squeezed his shoulders. “Then perhaps you should...”

“Get off,” he said, then realized his mistake when a small sound came from her throat. “I meant I should get off of you.”

“Right. I know what you meant.”

When he also didn’t move, she started moving, urging him to start disentangling from her. But their hips splayed together rocked her directly to him until desire blurred his vision. In the blink of an eye, he was rolling away before he could rock back against her, an action that would have guaranteed they would be rocking back and forth against each other despite all the reasons why it wasn’t a good idea.

The bubble drooped but supported the additional weight. Their shoulders and arms brushed, tingling, but maybe that was just him. He didn't bother hiding the bulge straining against his pants, knowing it would be more torturous if his hand did touch it. Instead, he watched out of the corner of his eye as Emerald stubbornly kept her gaze on the sky until all traces of her vulnerability were gone.

"Better?" she asked after a while.

"Better," he said, ignoring his body's protest. Instead, he fisted his itching fingers on his stomach, where he willed them to remain. With any other woman, seduction would have been underway now and their bodies would be writhing, but Emerald...

*Dangerous.* She was dangerous for his mind, his senses. She was a distraction he didn't need, and he knew she reciprocated the sentiment.

"Safe. Sleep while safe."

The voice was faint and came from somewhere below. They turned their heads to peek until they spotted the pixie sitting on a lower branch, content where he was.

"You can't fly up here?" she asked.

"High. Tiring. Can in a group."

He shuddered at the thought of the pixie horde returning while Yu was unfazed. Emerald bit her lip.

"Are you safe down there for the night?" she asked again.

"Safe," Yu assured. "Sleep while safe."

"I guess it means he's safe there too," Rick reasoned. "Yu, make a sound when you're in trouble. Wake us up."

"Yes."

Rick closed his eyes, listening as Emerald and Yu went on talking about their path tomorrow and Yu kept assuring her that he was fine where he was. Her voice was soft, trusting Yu

completely. He would have warned her if he didn't trust the pixie.

Instead, he continued letting her voice wash over him, a soft lull that weaved into his weary body and finally knocked him out. It was a seamless, dreamless sleep until shaking woke him up.

“Up! Wake up! Wake—”

The voice—Yu's voice—cut off in an instant while the bubble shook. But it wasn't just the bubble.

The whole forest was shaking.

## Chapter 5

Emerald woke up to a soft shaking on her shoulder, one that might as well have been a caress. Then there was a hiss, Rick's deep voice filling up her ears and her body reacting to it before she could stop it. Her nipples went taut under her clothes and her thighs squeezed together, aware that she was getting turned on before she had even woken up fully. The shaking continued, his body heat palpably close and hers wanting to lean into it...to bask in it after the heavy loss last night. Embarrassed and frustrated that she was reacting like this to a Fae, she tried to roll away—and was pulled back so fast with enough force to slam her against a hard, unrelenting body. His body.

“Em, please wake up or I will have no choice but to carry you out of here.”

*Out of here?*

Her gaze snapped open and zoned in on Rick's face, hovering inches above her. But he wasn't even looking at her, his expression riddled with concern. It had her sitting up straight.

“What?”

His hands continued pulling her up, already navigating her in his arms before she instinctively pushed him away. But he stubbornly held on.

“Rick, what on heavens are you...?”

The words died when her sleep-ridden mind registered she was still being shaken, even when his hands were no longer on her. Not just that but...everything was shaking.

“Earthquake,” he confirmed, noting her expression. “So, quit fighting me on this one, and let's get out of here before...”

Something drifted inside her, a warning that came from a recognizable source: magic recognizing magic. Her hand

shot out and covered his mouth, cutting off the rest of his words. When the magical force drew nearer, it was her urging him out of the bubble in haste. To Rick's credit, he didn't question it, grabbing her waist and jumping to the nearest branch, then tossing her to another one so their weights could be divided. She secured herself amid the shaking, then bent her body low and took a peek.

There was nothing in front of her, but the next warning in her head had her shooting back up—just in time, too, as a shadow passed below her branch. The distinguishable strand of hair overcame the need for caution, and she peeked again. Stupefaction hit her when she finally caught sight of what the hair was connected to.

*Giant*, her brain screamed, even while she was struggling to come to terms with it. Whereas most giants in their books were large, in the sense that they were broad and resembled boulders rather than humans, this one was strikingly similar to a human with the clothes and that head, brushing against most of the tall trees. *Tall*. It—he—was so tall, it was a miracle they hadn't spotted the creature earlier—and it was headed toward a path that had her heart jumping. Her eyes met Rick's, his body bent in the same way on his branch as he, too, ogled the staggering sight.

“Follow,” she mouthed. Then, “Mountain.”

Understanding dawned on his features, then lit up in challenge. The reckless streak should have been expected, but her breath caught in her throat when it visibly fired him up, his energy returning in the blink of an eye and every muscle in his body revved up with it. Her mouth went dry when he leaped to her branch, swaying them. The same arm that had been relentlessly holding on to her earlier came back, as steady and hard as ever.

“Hold on to me,” he mouthed back, and she could swear she heard the lowness of his tone.

She nodded once, then bit back a sound when he jumped again before the branch could crack. Before she knew it, they were navigating from branch to branch, the air

whipping her hair in a frenzy, but his body blocked the majority of it. A particularly long jump almost had her slipping, but his hand reached out, connecting a line to a branch ahead and dragging her with him. The shield returned just as the giant passed that area, too, blissfully unaware of their presence.

They kept going. Emerald would have protested, except she knew how incompetent she was when it came to physical stuff like this and didn't have a chance to catch up to the creature on her feet. She didn't trust letting her energy out either, in case the giant could feel it. So, she gritted her teeth and didn't say a word as Rick took charge and her body knocked, brushed, and pressed against his at every turn.

Just as the friction became unbearable, the forest stopped and they were back in the open field. Before he could make a run for it, she clasped his wrist and dragged him back, then waited for the giant to progress ahead before she finally whispered.

"I can't camouflage us with magic. I felt his energy and he might get wind of mine."

Magenta eyes widened, even while he kept his focus on the creature.

"Where's Yu?" she asked.

He shook his head, expression morose. "I don't know." When she looked around and attempted to return to the forest, it was his turn to take her wrist. "You can't go back. We need that mountain portal."

"We're not even sure if there is a mountain portal," she shot back. But he was right. They couldn't waste time.

"Yu lives here," he reminded. "He probably went to hide, knowing better than to follow a giant and get himself squashed."

Which was what they were doing and what they couldn't stop doing. Her resolve solidifying, she nodded resolutely.



“We wait until he’s out of the field. Then we follow,” she said.

There was no protest as Rick agreed wholeheartedly, but he didn’t hesitate to voice it out after a few seconds.

“That’s more like it.”

The fields were easy to navigate, and the trembling ground became their marker when they couldn’t spot the giant as he waded in and out of the forests. They got to the edge of the mountains somewhere in the afternoon...then, to their surprise, kept going without needing to scale the mountain as the giant entered a cave behind some thick, unkempt bushes. They looked at each other, a wordless communication with Rick’s decision loud and clear. But he waited for her.

“Yes,” she mouthed.

That was all he needed to push on and race inside. She raced after him, then stopped when darkness wrapped around her, unable to see anything beyond the cave entrance. She was startled when hands were on her before she recognized them. At Rick’s urging, she resumed walking.

They stumbled along some paths, indicating that while the Fae had sharper senses than her, the lack of sight was also a detriment for him. Trepidation slithered in when the trembling inside the cave quieted and they no longer had a marker. They stood still, unsure, before she drew a deep breath and took the first risk.

Energy crawled out, responding to her call as she willed them into her eyes without compromising them with any visible light. Relief coursed the moment she could see that the cave was empty, but with doorways where the upper part had been scratched a few times—the giants’ heads probably bumping against them by accident. Excitement leaped as she grabbed Rick’s hand, squeezing it once and trying to ignore the warmth that action brought. She led him to a doorway, then another doorway until it became a blur of doorways, pathways, and mazes with footprints and more scratches.

When they spotted a light up ahead, the roles switched and it was the Fae taking her hand and racing for it. They exited the cave and crouched under the nearest boulder as the last rays of sunlight shone on them. She glanced back at the cave, waiting for a giant to jump on them—

“Holy shit.”

She whirled to face Rick, magic readied to go on offense. But he was gaping ahead. She followed that gaze and her hand dropped away as she took in the sight.

“Holy shit,” she echoed, no longer bothering to ask him where he got the phrase from.

What should have been more forests became rolling hills and mountains surrounding them, the top ends within their line of sight...their spot so close to the clouds that she was half-sure she only needed a few minutes to climb up and touch them. Cliffs edged their flat area from all corners while a castle stood ahead, the rock and stone structure carved into smoothness, and larger than anything she had seen in her life.

“How did we get on top of the mountain when we didn’t even climb?” she asked in a daze.

“We’re in the Otherworld,” was his equally dazed response as he openly admired the view. “Sometimes it’s best not to analyze these things.”

It had to be the cave, a magical transport leading upward. She glanced back at it once more, nerves lurking. If the cave was magical, could it have detected hers? Would it alarm the giant—or giants—of their presence? Could they be walking into a trap?

“Em?”

She broke out of her reverie and shook her head. “I don’t like this.”

“Bad feeling?”

“You could say that.”

He sidled closer. Her nerves didn’t quiet down completely, but that steady presence eased them a little. “Then

let's do it fast. We're already on top of a mountain, so we don't even have to go inside the castle."

"We don't?"

Magenta eyes twinkled. "How do you feel about scaling the exterior of that majestic castle until we reach its top tower?"

*Bad idea*, her mind told her, especially since she was probably worse at hiking and scaling stuff...heights.

"Scaling how?" she asked cautiously.

"Magic." He held out a hand, where his fingers shimmered slightly. "Or you can let me hold you and I can scale it for both of us. Let's just say protective shields aren't my only specialty."

It was crazy how that look of mischief made her already want to nod her head, knowing he wouldn't lie to her about skills and had already proven that with his repeated protection. Emerald hesitated for a few seconds. Then she clasped his offered hand.

"I'm...not a very good climber. Not without magic. Most of my skills are dependent on magic."

The confession had him perusing her, but there was no judgment. He smiled. "Then you should hold on to me. Tightly, if you want. I don't mind."

Were they still talking about the climb? She wasn't sure. Was he flirting with her? She was half sure of it, especially when his expression challenged her to flirt back. The heady feeling told her she wasn't irritated by it anymore, which bewildered her and made her want to just...respond. Instead, Emerald bit her tongue and maintained her cool tone.

"I'm sure there's no need for all that caution. I won't slip."

Unfazed, he nodded and let go of her hand first, taking the electric charge with him. She watched his back as he made progress across the field, then stood up to follow him—

The ground shook again and the boulder in front of her crumbled. Then realization slammed that it was moving, not crumbling, before a rocky hand snatched her and encumbered her in darkness.

She braced for the pain and for death to take her swiftly. Then she made a sound when the hand just tightened into a fist, trapping her as the rest of the boulder—giant—started its walk toward the castle.

Emerald tried to push with all her might. She thrashed next, a futile attempt as there was no space to even navigate around inside the fist. When all physical exertion failed, she finally resorted to her magic, thinking up how to use it before she just tried to blast it off her hands. Shock petered inside her when the first shot didn't budge the giant. The next few attempts confirmed a suspicion that had never been in the books, leaving her numb as she stopped blasting.

“Rick?” she tried, then called out louder, trying to see through the gaps of the fingers first. But there was none. “Rick!”

The lack of response had her wondering if he had been taken, too, but there was no way to confirm. Instead, it was minutes of being locked in that fist and swung around repeatedly until her head was spinning, forcing her to stop shouting and focus on herself.

She tried magic once more, then a second series of pushing. When the dizziness heightened to an unbearable degree, she stopped altogether and tried to be as still as possible, sick to her stomach and fighting the urge to throw up. It felt like the trek was endless. And then it wasn't, as a door was slammed open and more doors creaked before she was released from the grasp and shaken to the ground.

Emerald fell on her butt, biting back a groan when it smarted. She scrambled to her feet, ready to run until she noted the iron bars surrounding her. A peek down confirmed that she wasn't on steady ground either, the floor seemingly so

far below and adding confusion to her already spinning mind. She willed herself to calm down, then took stock of her surroundings when the need to vomit abated.

She was in a cage, one resembling a birdcage, and connected to the ceiling via chains. More cages littered that ceiling, empty except for bones in some. The lack of a stench told her those bones weren't fresh, but...

"Holy shit," she whispered, then was reminded of Rick. Where was he?

Fear froze her at the thought of him dead before shuffling footsteps caught her attention. She peeked down once more, her mouth dropping open when she zoned in on the giant entering the room. This one was female and still partially rocky, but already shedding off most of it to reveal skin and a figure like the first one. The female giant hauled a cauldron inside the room, already filled with water. Neither made a sound as if the castle absorbed all the lumbering weight. The giant took a basket out and tossed mounds of regular-sized spices in it before lighting a fire below it.

*Holy shit*, her mind repeated as the water steamed and the giant stirred the spices. The giant hummed in contentment. Panic bloomed and had Emerald gripping the iron bars.

"I'm not delicious," she called out. "I'm not meaty and juicy either, so I don't think cooking me in that cauldron is a good idea."

She thought she saw the stirring slow down, but it resumed its pace before she could confirm. The giant didn't respond.

"Hello?" she tried again. Then she straightened her shoulders and cleared her throat. "Okay, let's try this again. You don't seem to understand, so I would like to make it clearer. I'm not like them."

Silence.

"These...bones in these cages, who were alive like me once, were probably trying to take advantage of you. Maybe they were stealing your treasure or invading your home, but

that's the last thing I want to do. I'm just passing by and have no intentions whatsoever for you and your kind. Harming you or trespassing is *not* what I'm here for."

Silence.

"I can be an ally if that's what you want. We can come to an agreement wherein I can be of service to you for a limited time in exchange for my release. I have a knack for that. Cooking me and eating me just seems...futile for the likes of me."

Silence.

"Let's talk about it. Aren't you even going to ask what I am?"

The stirring went on and the giant ignored her. Frustration rose, but she shut her mouth when she comprehended that she wasn't getting anywhere with her peace talks. Emerald narrowed her eyes.

"Are you sure you don't want to talk about it?"

At the continued silence, she let the magic out and slammed her palms on the bar. Then she bit back her alarm when nothing happened. The dread returned when more slams got her nowhere, switching her back to desperate as she knelt.

"I taste bitter. Toxic. The energy inside me is guaranteed to poison you at your first bite. It's just not worth it."

Was it her imagination or was that a smile on the giant's rocky lips? She glowered.

"Ma'am, it's very rude of you to ignore me like this when I'm sure you can understand what I'm saying."

She wasn't sure, not really, but the smile made her wonder. Tension coiled her muscles when the giant stopped stirring and approached her, reaching out. But the hand bypassed her cage, reaching for one with bones and shaking them loose toward the other large, open palm. Returning to the cauldron, the bones were tossed in and the humming sound

restarted. She gulped when the giant took a sip from the spoon and made a delighted sound.

“Hmm.”

The giant wandered back and forth around the room, pausing repeatedly enough below her cage that she couldn't help tensing each time. Frazzled beyond belief and biting back another bout of panic, Emerald stopped talking, watching instead as the giant took multiple sips and added spices here and there. Then the giant ambled out of the room, leaving her staring at the large, rough pieces of furniture before she eyed the cauldron.

“For someone who's supposedly anchored on logic and common sense, you sure know how to make the most outrageous offers to mystical creatures.”

Rick's voice was an outright jolt to the senses before his head peeked out from the cage's edge. His body followed, climbing until he could secure his feet on the cage's interior floor.

“You were here this whole time and you didn't bother to free me?”

“I'm a skilled climber, not a skilled giant whisperer,” he protested. “Besides, it's not a good idea to announce my presence to that large thing.”

“Living creature,” she corrected, even though he was right about the rest. She glanced at the door apprehensively, then held up a hand. “Don't use magic.”

“I don't have magic.” He tilted his head curiously. “But why not?”

“It's a waste of your energy and we need your shield. And they have magic.”

“What's their magic?”

“Their magic is that they're resistant to my magic. Probably yours too.”

“Except my shield,” he finished brightly, then sobered. Magenta eyes searched hers. “I should have stayed with you.”

The hushed, sincere regret squeezed her chest, but she shook it off. “I’m not that incompetent. And neither of us expected the books to be real.”

“Books?”

“Giants resembling rocks and boulders.”

“Oh.” He paused. “To be fair, the first giant we followed didn’t look like a boulder. Stand back, Em.”

“What?”

“The lock’s off, but the door won’t budge. Let me kick it off...oh, and I need your outer clothes.”

She stood back, puzzlement turning to amazement when she spotted the hinges in his hands and realized he hadn’t just been talking to her. She scrambled out of her clothes and tossed them at him, then watched as he tied a rope at the top. Just as he swung, the giant marched back in, sniffing the air.

“Who comes into my abode without permission?”

The roar was rough and aggressive. Large black eyes locked in on them just as Rick crashed the cage door open and snatched Emerald out. They swung some more, crashing on the large table where his shield gleamed around them. He wrapped her in his arms and puffed out his chest.

“Me. But that’s only because you took what was mine —”

“I’m not yours—”

“My friend,” Rick amended, glaring at her. “I’ve come to free her and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.”

Confidence rang in his tone and spread over his features, his smirk ever-present. The giant frowned, her face clearer now and the rocky parts gone. Then the giant walked over to them and Rick’s smirk dropped when the large hand scooped them up, bypassing the shield altogether.

“Damn it—”



They were crushed in darkness and each other then slammed into another empty cage hanging from the ceiling. She groaned when the iron bars hit her back. Before the cage could be slammed shut, Rick slipped out and landed more smoothly on the table. He held up his hands when the giant tried to scoop him up again, pissed off.

“Wait!”

“You—”

“I’m a mystical Fae prince and I can entertain you.”

Emerald threw him an incredulous look, hissing. “You will get yourself killed, you idiot. Run.”

“See now, she was my companion when we first landed here, so our connection’s short and she doesn’t know about all this. But now she does and so do you.”

The giant growled. Emerald opened her mouth to shout at him to run again, but the giant beat her to it.

“How will you entertain me?”

What?

“With my tricks, none of which involve me leaving this place,” Rick replied promptly, assurance in his tone. “That is, unless I get a smile out of you.”

The giant didn’t smile. The silence ticked on, leaving Emerald rattled with nerves and ready to kick the cage to get the female’s attention. But then the giant was backing away a step, grabbing a chair, and sitting down, arms folded.

“Entertain me,” she demanded.

There it was again, that smirk, oozing with so much confidence that Emerald was torn between bopping the damned man on the head and calling him all kinds of names. Instead, she kept quiet as she watched him relax, rolling his shoulders and stretching his arms as if he had all the time in the world.

A second later, she blinked as Rick started dancing. It looked like a random dance...but it wasn’t a random dance

because he was moving with a fluidity that almost belied bones. Not only that, but Rick was also moving as if following an invisible rhythm, one that made her imagine she could hear the thrum of the music and every single beat. She shook it off, worry overpowering amazement as she glanced at the giant.

A sound choked her throat when the giant stayed sitting on the chair, gaze pinned on Rick and just a bit glazed. The crazy sight had her gaping before the Fae's voice filled the quiet room.

"I don't know if you have heard of acrobatics, but it's another specialty of mine. It's good for entertaining but useless for other things." He beamed. "Which doesn't matter, because I am entertaining today."

He flipped on his feet, then flipped multiple times around the room until he was a blur. He climbed the table next and jumped toward an empty cage, swinging it around until he could flip mid-air, too, and swing to another cage. Dizziness seized her at the sight of him going at it, his stunt entering a frenzied state that had even the giant's eyes widening. When he reached for the cage in front of her, he swung toward her.

Face close to hers and separated only by the iron bars, Rick winked once, magenta eyes perusing her for wounds and relieved that she was okay. Then he broke into a grin.

"You're crazy," she mouthed.

He winked again. A bubble of laughter threatened to expose just how amused she was, and she held it down as it tickled her throat. He was crazy. Reckless. Silly. All those things rolled into one...yet he still looked wickedly handsome when he grinned like that without a care in the world, or how silly he looked.

A few more air flips and swings later, he jumped back to the table, where he rolled and did some fancy acrobatics before finishing it off with a grandiose pose. He held both his hands in the air, showing they were empty.

"No magic," he announced proudly. "Just me."

Oddly, the sight of him breathing hard and so infused with joy cut off her amusement as a different feeling entered her. She flattened her palm on her belly, willing it not to flutter...willing her body not to throb this hard for something this ridiculous.

“That was...good,” the giant offered.

“It was more than good,” she blurted out. Two heads whipped in her direction, one assessing. She swallowed her nerves and the other more insistent feeling. “It was fantastic. A top-tier performance, and not useless at all.”

Magenta eyes watched her closely, astonished. The giant examined her further, so she focused on the larger creature and held her head high.

“And I don’t care if you don’t talk to me or acknowledge me because that’s your choice. But at least give him the praise he deserves for risking his dignity.”

“Em, my dignity is intact—”

“It was fantastic,” the giant said, stunning them both—even more so that those eyes were on Emerald. “And my name’s Lily.”

“Emerald,” she replied in a daze.

“Rick,” Rick called out enthusiastically. “You have a lovely name, Lily. It’s as beautiful as you are.”

Emerald rolled her eyes and then stopped, but Lily didn’t seem to mind as a small smile finally appeared on her crusty lips. A hand reached up and Emerald’s cage was unlocked. She hesitantly opened it and peered at the boiling cauldron, then just as hesitantly lowered herself to the table. Rick was ready, catching her waist and steadying her on her feet...not letting go, his hand a hot brand on her skin.

“It’s not for you to swim in,” Lily assured. “Partly because Rick did make me smile, but mostly because I don’t eat meat anymore. I read that vegetables are healthier for the body.”

*Giants can read and speak fluently*, Emerald's mind jotted down, filing it for later dissection. It was distracting to think with Rick's fingers moving to soothe, so she gave up and let him do the talking.

"They are, but you do need meat from time to time. Not from captured sources like us, I hope. You are kinder and better than that."

There was a short laugh. "Kind isn't exactly a word used to describe us."

"Beautiful? Breathtaking?"

"Menacing. Deadly." Lily bared her teeth, chipped and sharp but ivory white. "We prefer it that way so others wouldn't bother us in our territory. Frankly, those who still come here while knowing we exist get what's coming to them."

The pointed look wasn't missed, but Rick waved it off. "And yet you choose not to do it. As I said, you are kind and there's a good soul inside you."

"Hmm."

"And we didn't come here to bother you. We are just passing by, and your tower just happens to be the best spot for us to get to where we need to be. After that, we will be out of your hair for good."

"Hmm." A pause. "Is there something wrong, Emerald?"

Emerald jerked her head, focus flying back to the giant guiltily. But there was only open curiosity in those eyes now. "You said you don't eat meat anymore."

"Yes."

"And those bones are..."

"Old," Lily confirmed. "Not mine. You're lucky I caught you. Because if my brother did..."

An ominous feeling came seconds before another figure entered the room. The quiet footsteps became loud as

the larger, taller figure stomped once, let out a growl, and zoned in on them. Rick sucked in a breath and pulled her backward—a mistake as the figure anticipated the move and blocked the exit window with a large hand. Before either of them could evade, two hands wrapped around their bodies while a giant, grotesquely broken nose bent to sniff them.

“You finally became useful and caught something.” Another sniff and a tongue licked her hair, coating her with stickiness and an unbearable stench.

“Wilson! They’re not for eating!”

“Not for you—stay back! Finders keepers,” the giant named Wilson snapped, voice rougher than Lily’s. “I’m hungry.”

“Wilson—”

There was a sickening crunch as Lily’s body was slammed back toward the nearest wall before the unconscious female giant slumped to the ground. Rick called out Lily’s name, but the sound faded. Emerald watched in horror as Rick slumped, too, leaving her the only one still conscious but starting to lose air with how tightly the giant held her.

Her brain worked overtime, panic thumping hard before common sense kicked in and willed her to calm down. She fought the panic back as she stayed perfectly still, not daring to move a muscle and prompt Wilson to crush her. Just as she was assessing where to bite, the hand loosened. She dove—and was slapped toward a cage, where she landed on her butt once more and caught a blur headed toward her.

“Be good and cook well for me,” Wilson sang, “I’ll be back when you’re deliciously infused in the soup my sister made.”

Emerald caught the weight that would have hit the iron bars, grunting at Rick’s heaviness. When he remained unconscious, she patted his cheeks and squeezed his neck until he joggled and shot up. She held him steady, watching confused features turn sharp.

“We’re trapped,” she said.

“No, we’re not,” he argued, already moving to kick the door. He stopped when he saw a chain outside connected to the wall, then another chain on the opposite end connected to another wall. Wilson worked fast.

“It prevents us from moving the cage around.” She watched awareness sink into his face as he peered down at the boiling water near the cage’s floor. Already, she could feel the heat of it on her feet and had to tiptoe. “Or kicking it open.”

For the first time, Rick didn’t have a comeback to that. But he scrutinized the door and swung from the cage ceiling, kicking it a few times to no avail. When that didn’t work, he body slammed it until she glimpsed flickers of pain in his features.

“Stop,” she called out, then pulled his shoulder when he didn’t listen. “Stop.”

“I have to get us out.”

A hiss came from his lips, riddled with pain. This time, she inserted herself as a shield and caught the Fae as he abruptly stopped charging—another confirmation that he wouldn’t hurt her. But the momentum flattened them on the bars and he growled.

“I hurt you. Em, I’m hurting you.”

She shook her head. Quietly, she climbed up when her feet couldn’t take the heat from the floor and waited until he did the same. They hung with their hands, hers straining from the weight.

“Come here,” he said.

More smoothly than she had ever moved, he locked his legs on the iron bars and locked his body in place. Emerald prolonged her hanging until her arms couldn’t take it anymore and she was left with no choice but to carefully lower herself to where he was. Wordlessly, he urged her body to lower to his, her feet to rest on top of his locked feet, and one of her hands to wrap around his neck. The unwavering support staggered her.

“I got you,” he whispered, soothing.

“We’re still going to be slow roasted to death.”

“Me first.”

She gasped when he rolled them until his back was completely below and she was on top, effectively shielding her from most of the heat. She desperately clutched at her magic, but whatever prevented her from breaking the cage or attacking the giant earlier also prevented her from accessing it now.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, voice shaky. “You will kill yourself.”

“I will die for you.”

She glowered, then hissed. “Stop being chivalrous.”

“You’re smart. You might find a way out. I’m giving you that fighting chance.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“I do.” Magenta eyes swept over her, torn between sincerity and the first stirrings of discomfort as steam rose from the cage floor. “You like to close yourself off and build your walls, but I do know you. You cared for Yu. You even cared for Lily. You looked at me like I was someone worthwhile when I was performing those silly tricks.”

“Not silly. Not silly at all.” Her breath hitched. “You’re amazing.”

“So are you, Emerald, sweetheart.”

An emotion so sharp tightened her chest and squeezed her belly. The selfless action of a creature believed to be so selfish and manipulative shook her to the core, and Emerald made another sound before she hugged him tighter. Awareness glided on his face as he took in her expression, understanding what she wanted even when she couldn’t understand it herself.

Her lips parted, lowering to his...brushing against his once, twice, enough times to feel the softness that kickstarted a terrible craving. Not a kiss, because this was enough to have before death knocked on their door.

Then there was an actual knock on their door before the cage was ripped from its chains.



## Chapter 6

It took Rick a moment to comprehend that his mouth was no longer near hers and that his body was no longer pressed against hers—then, that his back was no longer simmering with a heat that made him want to scream and curse his fate. He blinked as the cage moved with a speed that turned his stomach, his hands reaching out until he felt the familiar body shaken around, too, and hugged her to him. Then the iron bars were ripped open and they were abruptly staring at the open window and the long drop below.

“Go,” Lily gritted out, rubbing her scarred cheek and spitting out blood. She had lost a few teeth, her gums exposed and still bleeding. “Hurry before he comes back. There are rough bricks for a climb to our Northern towers where no one goes. Stay in one. Leave in the morning when most of our kind are done hunting for the night.”

“Thank you,” Emerald said, extending a hand to gently tug Lily’s hair. The giant’s eyes softened, then flicked toward him.

“Go now.”

He nodded once, wordlessly conveying his gratitude. Then he shifted Emerald to ride his back and heaved them out of the cage, grabbing for the first stone brick he could reach and pulling them out of the window. They hung for a few seconds, watching Lily stagger back into the room. Then they were making their way up.

The climb was faster than he expected, the non-smooth finish giving him plenty of space to navigate around and find the best stepping stone. When they reached the Northern towers, Emerald pointed.

“Clouds.”

Excitement surged but didn’t last when lightning struck, nearly taking out her hand while she was reaching for the closest cloud formation. She yelped and clung when more

lightning streaks shot down before rain fell on them in giant drops. One hit them on the heads and made him lose his grip—which also made her lose her grip and fall.

He reached out to catch her, their fingers intertwining just as his other hand caught another protruding brick. He gritted his teeth at the strain on his muscles, then heaved harder than ever until she could slowly, carefully climb toward his back again. This time, Rick was careful to dodge the drops as he made his way to the towers once more, where he hurriedly threw their bodies inside one.

In the darkness, he made out the small, circular space, and deduced that only one giant could fit in. Not satisfied with that, he searched around until he found some roughly constructed beams on top with smaller dots of windows. Emerald spotted it, too, and was climbing there first, then removing strings here and there.

“Bird traps. The towers are to catch meals,” she concluded, brows furrowing as she looked around the space. “They haven’t caught any here.”

“It must not be a popular spot with birds,” he mused.

The space was cramped, just enough for the two of them to rest their asses on the beams and backs against the wall. When her legs swung unsteadily, he pulled them up and wrapped them around his waist. She protested and repositioned herself until she could sit sideways on the beam, her hip brushing his knee.

“Did you lock the door?” she asked.

“No. That will make it more suspicious. We will know when they come here. And we have our exit.”

“Lily said no one comes here.”

“Exactly. So, there’s no need to lock the door.”

That didn’t sit well with her, but she didn’t argue. Despite the tower shielding them from most of the rainstorm, thunder still cracked hard on their ears, and water sprayed inside the small windows. She shivered but didn’t come closer.

“We can’t sleep,” she said. “They will be looking for us, so we have to leave as soon as the rain stops.”

“Hmm. We can take turns.”

“Do you want to sleep?” she asked.

“Hell, no. Do you?”

Her expression was answer enough. Silence washed over them as they mulled over their situation before he decided there was no use dwelling on it. He leaned back further on his side of the wall, crossing his arms and observing her through hooded eyes. Emerald was restless, wriggling about, obviously not contented to just stay put.

“They will hear you.”

She froze. “Do you hear them?”

“No. I just hear the rain. Let’s trust Lily.”

Her conflict remained, but not for long. Slowly, she relaxed too, a visible process that started from her wriggling toes to her rolling shoulders. When she finally leaned against the wall, her hip was still brushing his knee and her brows were still furrowed.

“Shut that brain off,” he suggested.

She gave him a grumpy look, then reluctantly heeded. Her forehead cleared, but she still didn’t achieve what he—and she—wanted.

“Tell me a secret.”

Emerald blinked. “Are you serious? While we’re hiding from flesh-eating giants?”

“You need a distraction. I’m willing to distract. No one can hear us and you still need to shut that brain of yours down.”

“It’s not that easy—”

“Tell me a secret and I will take it to my grave.”

“I made a magical pact with a dragon shifter to marry me,” she blurted out, stunning them both. They eyed each

other, she astonished and he slightly impressed.

“Really?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it. She abandoned some internal battle as she finally nodded. “Really. Not because I loved him but because I wanted to dangle him in my ex’s face. Not because I loved my ex, either, but because I wanted to prove to him that he didn’t break me like he thought he did. It was a silly motivation.”

“A good motivation,” he corrected. “I would have been way more petty.”

“You’re a Fae,” she pointed out. “You guys are petty.”

“Truer words have never been spoken. Did you regret the magical pact?”

“No.”

“That’s the spirit.” A dreadful feeling slithered in, wiping his smirk away. “Is the dragon your husband now?”

“No. My oldest sister was opposed to it and tried to stop it. She ended up marrying him to protect me and...” A small smile played on her lips. “They’re still together now. And thriving. It’s crazy how things work out.”

“It is,” he murmured, watching that smile. His fingers itched, so he crossed his arms tighter. “Tell me another secret.”

She raised a brow, and he knew she wanted to point out that the game didn’t work that way. Then she sighed.

“I hadn’t felt good about myself until I slept with the pirate. Or ex-pirate. He made me understand that sex can be casual, and that I don’t have to be engaged to someone to enjoy it...something that I always judged my sister about, but now I regret that.”

He didn’t say a word, understanding the mood had shifted and she was sharing something that came from the deepest part of her. A craving started in his stomach, clutching at the confession greedily and wanting more of it.

“I might not see her,” she continued. “I might not be able to tell her that she’s one of the bravest people I know for looking outside the box and defying convention.”

“I can’t wait to meet this sister of yours.”

“You would like her. You suit her personality.”

Her smile turned wistful. Instinctively, his hand reached out as he pushed off the wall and leaned toward her.

“You will see her,” he said firmly. “I’m getting us out of here if it’s the last thing I do. Do you trust me?”

“I...think I do.” Hope shone in her green eyes, one solely for him. There was another smile, more open than the last and making his pulse race. “We’re getting out of here.”

“Yes. The moment the rain stops.”

“Hmm. Rick?”

“What?”

“It’s your turn to tell me a secret.”

He scanned through his mind, aware that he had too many secrets in his hands and a too-messy life that shouldn’t be tainting hers. But it was only fair.

“All those things you heard about Fae are true. We are manipulative, greedy, and dangerous. We have the skills that most assassins could only dream of, including hired witches and warlocks. Even vampires, however much they hate us, know better than to cross us.”

“That’s not a secret,” she protested softly. “But you’re not that to me.”

Oh, this woman and her trust were going to kill him. He shook his head. “You don’t understand. Us and vampires, we used to have this age-old war that killed hundreds. Thousands.”

“And you weren’t in that war,” she argued, face rosy with triumph when he didn’t contradict her statement. “I’m not judging you on generalization but how you treated me here—and don’t you dare tell me I’m wrong.”

“I’m a failure in Fae standards, Em.”

“You’re not a failure to me. And I have very high standards.”

He closed his mouth. Something inside him shifted again, as the witch who didn’t know him too well threw her prejudice out the window and offered him words that soothed his soul.

“Okay,” he finally said.

“Tell me another secret. That one sucked.”

A chuckle slid out of him, even while he sifted for a new one.

“My court is shit. It’s beautiful but ugly and sometimes I’m sick and tired of living in it. But it’s home, and the other part of me thinks it’s still worth it and I can make it better. I want to make it better.”

“They tried to eliminate you,” she pointed out. “That means you were already doing it. Making it better.”

“Maybe.”

“It’s true.”

He smirked at her earnestness, unable to resist. “You sure know how to stroke an ego, Em.”

“And you surely tend to be idiotic sometimes, so it’s balanced.”

Laughter erupted from him while she slapped a hand over his mouth in a warning. He eyed her in mirth, then laughed some more when more water sprayed on them.

“Your hair’s a mess,” he said, playfully brushing large strands off her face. She swatted his hand and brushed the rest off herself.

“So is yours.”

“You strike me as someone who appreciates beauty.”

“Only when there’s a brain and a saneness attached to it.”

“Hmm. I have a feeling you will be in awe of my court, then. There are some brains and saneness there.”

“You just called your court ugly. And shitty.”

“It’s helpless because I’m not king. It will be wonderful when I am...you know, because I’m sane and I have a brain. Oh, and I’m devastatingly handsome.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Of all the arrogant, egotistical things to say—”

“Stop insulting me, Em.”

“Oh. I’m sorry—”

“I keep focusing on your mouth when you do and it’s distracting me. You have a pretty mouth ripe for kissing.”

Her smile faded. Awareness glided into her features, replacing the humor from their banter and leaving her looking like a drenched but still breathtaking being. There was a wariness there, too, her familiar walls creeping up. He knew what was next: Emerald glissading back into her cool state, shutting out that openness he wanted more of. He should back off. But try as he might, he couldn’t stop.

“Do you know what I want to do to it while you keep insulting me?”

On cue, her icy voice shut him out. “I don’t want to know.”

“You say that, but your eyes tell me differently. Your mouth, too, because it’s parted right now. It’s so distracting.”

Green eyes widened. “That’s not my problem.”

“I know. It’s mine. You’re so damn irresistible, Em.”

“And you are such a horny bastard, as you said.”

Those eyes still didn’t frost over, much to his fascination. “You called me amazing earlier.”

“I was under the influence,” she reasoned out, huffing—avoiding eye contact with him even while her cheeks turned a lovely pink.

“No, you weren’t.”

“It was a spur of the moment. We were dying and you were being a chivalrous idiot.”

“You loved it. You loved it so much that you were going to kiss me there.”

“You are such a bastard.”

She pushed him, but he was so sturdy in his spot that she ended up unbalancing herself. All amusement left him as he bent forward to catch her, the relief sharp when his grip didn’t slip. He swung her back up, then pulled her legs around him to lock her in place. This time, she didn’t pull them away.

“Stop falling for me,” he teased lightly, his hand coasting down her shivering back.

“Stop looking at me like that,” she shot back, voice frayed. Tense.

“I can’t help it.”

“Then help it.”

He breathed on her cheek, then over her lips. He wrenched her even closer and took what those parted lips offered, a temptation that could no longer be fought. A gasp got stuck somewhere in her throat where his thumb caressed and her mouth opened for him.

“Tell me a word,” he pleaded desperately, his free hand fisting on her clothes to avoid touching her skin. “Tell me no and I will keep my hands off you immediately.”

Her gasp turned into a sigh while his mouth kept moving over hers. When his tongue skimmed inside, she muttered something unintelligible.

“I need a word, Em. Not those delicious sounds you make.”

“Rick.”

The soft hitch made his cock harden so much. He groaned.



“Not my name. Not...”

But she was kissing him back, her mouth a ripe temptation that responded to his ministrations. She tasted as delicious as the last kiss, even more so now that he knew her better and was sure of how much he wanted this. When her tongue lightly tapped his, all blood drained downward.

“Fuck. Damn it.”

“Don’t curse.”

A broken laugh erupted from him. “I can’t help it.”

“Help it.”

But she didn’t ask him to stop kissing her. She didn’t pull away either, her head tilting in rhythm with his—and just like that, he knew he had lost the battle of not touching her as his hand stopped fisting and his palm opened over her thigh. It was cold, but it quivered at the contact. His fingers danced over her, unable to stop now that he could shift the wet clothes aside until he could touch more, more...

“You’re so reckless,” she said, even while her neck arched to receive his kisses there. “So...”

“I know.” When he parted her top, it was to the crazy realization that her last slip barely covered her tits and he could see their outline so clearly. Stiff nipples stubbornly clung to that wet slip. His thumb brushed one, then two until a moan keened out of her. With another curse, he kissed her again.

“Quiet. I don’t want anyone interrupting this. Can’t have that.” But he didn’t stop teasing her tits, didn’t stop fantasizing about having them in his mouth. “Or never mind being quiet. You can moan in my mouth. You can bite me if you want to scream.”

“What—oh. Rick.”

He expected another resistance and was stunned when her legs parted to accommodate his knuckles grazing her panties. When he nudged it aside, she quivered once more, stilling.

“Shh. I got you.” A finger skated in and he had to bite back a riper, louder swear word. “You’re wet.”

“It’s raining.”

And stubborn. “Is that so?”

He inserted another finger in and she gave up all pretense of it being just the rain. He teased at first, opening her up, then bit her lower lip when she squeezed his fingers. A roaring entered his system, shutting down all senses except what was attuned to hers, his cock raging to break out of his trousers and rub against the core that was so close. Instead, he removed his fingers and turned her around, ignoring her whimpered protest. When she was facing away from him while straddling the beam, he resumed playing with her, turning her head to the side so he could keep kissing her.

It was a good idea at first, eliminating the temptation of him fucking her in the most inappropriate place while still being able to please her. But then Emerald made it her business to press against him and start rocking, her ass aggressively rubbing against his erection until he was close to seeing stars. He protested, too, but the words were lost in the pleasure that rose and the way his action turned her wetter. When he started thrusting, she went slack.

“Em?”

“Faster.”

Oh, she was going to kill him. He thrust faster, timing the thrust of fingers and hips until he was essentially dry-humping her. When she arched against him, he had to break the kiss and lean back against his side of the wall.

“I want to taste you here. Lick you all up.”

He found her clit and tapped it, eliciting another quake from her. He rolled her nipples in his free hand, mind blank except for the crazed need to finish this for her. The sound of his thrusting fingers filled the space, competing with the sounds of their harsh breathing.

“But you might slip again if I turn you to face me. Are you coming?”

She didn't say yes out loud, but the soles of her feet bracing against the wooden beam gave him the answer. He flicked her clit, gentle at first, then hastened the rhythm until even he could feel the rapid vibrations. He turned her head again and swallowed her cry of release, her muscles clamping around him so hard that he could imagine it tightening just like that around his cock—and that was enough for now.

Rick rode her release like it was his, humping her shamelessly and sucking on her tongue while she pulsed over and over in his hand. When she slumped, he kept going, closing his eyes as he desperately sought his satisfaction and found it via a particularly hard thrust. He gathered her closer when he came in his pants, his vision a scorching white before he crashed down with a shudder. Then lips brushed his again, once, twice, anchoring him in a way that felt even better than his quick release.

He kissed her back, then let her rest against him as they basked in the aftermath. The contentment didn't last as his body restarted a craving, wanting more than a careless grinding into her. Then he set it aside when he sensed something again.

“Shut that mind down, Em.”

There was a stilling, then a resigned sigh.

“That was...”

“Loud?”

“Not really. But...” She stilled again. “It's not loud.”

“Yes. I know it wasn't loud. We managed to hide our voices perfectly well—”

“No, I mean it's not loud. The rain stopped.”

He looked up. For the first time, he heard the silence, too, and realized that she was right. Her excitement caught on as he watched her stand up and balanced on the beam before he did the same. Steadying each other, he urged her to climb to his shoulders, then pushed her toward the window so she could shimmy her way out.

“I see clouds,” she announced. “Clear clouds. No lightning.”

He heaved his body up, then got stuck halfway through the window. A door slammed below and Lily’s voice rang loud and clear.

“Wilson, stop it! They’re not—”

“There you are, you little—”

Magic surged, pulling him forward so hard that his teeth rattled. A big voice bellowed in rage below, the giant reaching up and breaking the beams they had just been sitting on. Then a hand was punching the windows and shaking the tower roof they were perched on. Emerald ignored it, already concentrating her energy on her chants. Then she paused.

“We can’t portal to my home. There are wards. Give me your coordinates.”

He whispered them in a rush, then grabbed her waist when a hand exploded from the now-broken tower. A head was next, squeezing itself out of the next hole as Wilson looked at them with so much contempt.

“You will die. I will crush you for daring to humiliate me like that.”

“We were trying not to get eaten, not humiliate you,” Rick corrected. “There’s no reason for something that small to humiliate you—”

Another hand rocketed out and nearly grabbed his leg. He danced back, slowly inching Emerald with him until they were teetering on the edge. A struggle happened below as Lily’s voice shouted again before something shimmering caught his eye—

“Yu!”

The pixie zipped through the commotion below, face lighting up at the sight of Rick. Yu heaved the bag in his hands higher, then paused to turn back to the wrestling giants below. When Wilson pushed his head out again, Yu pulled open the

bag—and out came a glittery explosion of powder that hit the giant right in the face.

“Rescue you,” Yu announced proudly just as Wilson toppled to the ground. Now it wasn’t just Lily’s shouts they heard but others as a stampede of stomping feet climbed the stairs.

“It’s open.”

The two men whipped their heads to gape at the portal shimmering before Emerald, essentially located over the long drop. The roof shook again, harder than ever as Lily was pushed aside and more giant hands came out to capture them.

“Jump,” Rick said.

“You first,” Emerald returned.

“Me first!” Yu exclaimed, already flying into the portal and winking out of sight.

Green eyes widened, noticing the pixie for the first time. She broke into a grin. He took her hand.

“Jump together?”

Emerald nodded once. Rick smirked.

They leaped together as the tower collapsed behind them.

## Chapter 7

The land was smoother than expected, like she was bouncing against a feather or a puffy cloud. Emerald didn't trust it immediately, standing up and surveying the area in case it was a trap. Yu did the same, hovering over her shoulder, bag in hand.

“What's in there?”

“Powder. Asked friends. Bored there.”

Her mouth dropped open, but she didn't relax yet. Rick got to his feet more slowly, a sense of satisfaction on his expression. Those magenta eyes, however, were sharper than they had ever been on the previous island, which made her nervous.

“Is this not your home?”

“It's my home,” he confirmed. “Not my territory, though, so we have to keep moving.”

She didn't argue with him, knowing better than to stir trouble in a place she knew nothing about. Her mind raced through the books she read again, but meeting Rick had rendered those inaccurate and she had no idea what to expect. Beside her, Yu trailed after the Fae, too, quiet as ever, and black eyes curiously flitting about. When the pixie spotted a bunch of glowing flowers, he flew toward it.

“No,” Rick called out, blocking Yu before the pixie could reach it. Rick wagged his finger but tried to smile. “Dangerous. Don't pick flowers or anything in the forest here, Yu. I'll give you flowers myself when we reach my home.”

He was nervous, too, she realized, his smile not as open as it had been before. It was strained, an extension to the rest of his body that seemed braced for an attack. Was he expecting the killer to pop up out of nowhere? Wordlessly, she tugged at the energy inside her, relieved when she could feel it still sliding and shifting. They kept going, their trek

uninterrupted until they got out of the forest and Rick stopped in his tracks.

“We’re here.”

Here was a winding path, with more glowing flowers scattered on both sides. Upon closer inspection, it dawned that the path was made of gemstones and something else, calling to her feet to keep moving. She still didn’t trust it, but she took a tentative step, then another. Rick’s hand wrapped around her wrist, halting her.

“Wait for it.”

She looked at where he was looking, the fog swirling on the horizon. The pink sky was gorgeous, taking her attention for a second. Then it was no longer pink, a translucent quality coating the whole sky...then, eliminating the fog inch by inch until she saw it.

Frost coated the grounds, turning it a blanket of white. The castle standing on it was not coated in that frost, mostly because it was already made of ice itself. She ogled the tall, glinting structure, imposingly thin and smoothly sculpted to perfection. Even from her spot, she knew it was impenetrable and riddled with magic.

The Winter Court. It had to be the Winter Court.

“Whatever happened to you belonging to a weaker court?” she asked, unable to keep the accusing tone from her voice.

Rick gave her a puzzled look. “I never said that. I said my court was ugly and shitty sometimes.”

He was right, of course, because other than that, all he said was that his court was helpless. It was she who had filled in the blanks in her mind, automatically assuming he wasn’t part of one of the major courts. He regarded her reaction.

“What did you hear about my court?”

“Dangerous, manipulative, and all that. The stuff made of nightmares and the worst of the four big ones.”

“That’s a lie if I ever heard one. We’re not the most dangerous court. The Summer Court is. All that sunshine and brightness hides their sinister hunger for destruction well.”

“Are there really just four major courts?”

“No. There’s the Underwater Court and the Sky Court, but they only visit the island for business. They also have their separate war against each other. The underwater court is probably crazier than the Summer Court.”

She peered at him. “You’re not icy. Or cold. You’re a ball of sunshine.”

“As I said, I’m a failure to my kind.” He shrugged, unfazed. “It will be fine. They can’t harm me.”

“They tried to harm you already,” she pointed out.

“Not this time. I have a plan. You and Yu just need to stay close to me. I will handle the introductions. It’s enough to get you immunity.”

How he spoke so confidently after getting tossed aside, she could not figure out. A part of her wanted to list the pros and cons of him going back there, but Rick was already moving. She eyed his back, then remembered his words about staying beside him. Reluctantly, she caught up to his pace while Yu hovered above their heads.

“Is your court immune to my magic?”

“No.” A pause. “But use it subtly. Any big flourishes and my court might take it as a threat. It will push back...oh, and we speak your language. We are a highly-developed court compared to the others.”

Great. She imagined ice slicing her from all directions as the flowers pointed toward them when they passed. When they finally stepped through the tall, wide doorway, her imagination paled at the sight of jagged ice shards hanging from the ceiling and dripping from some parts of the wall.

*Impalement. Ice shards plunging into my heart and other organs until they stop beating with life.*



Rick was nervous again. She reached for his hand—and was brushed aside when a figure came out of nowhere and hugged him. Then the figure—a female Fae with shimmering skin, a skintight dress, and perky tits—plastered herself over his side and rubbed those tits against his arm.

“Rickavior! Is it really you?”

Before he could reply, another figure came, ambling forward more slowly. The male Fae shot the female one a displeased look, but the nasty expression didn’t deter from the ethereal beauty.

“He’s not Rickavior to you. Stop calling him that or I will disown you.” There was a bow, then, “Your Majesty. We have a lot of questions, but it’s good to see you back.”

“It’s good to be back, Bronco. And Jyss.”

Emerald was still seething with jealousy over the woman’s overzealous display, it took her a while to hear the rest of the words. When they finally did register, she eyed the male Fae named Bronco.

“Majesty?”

Either the Fae didn’t hear her or chose to ignore her. Bronco stepped back, bowing again, then hollering at the top of his lungs. Energy hummed, amplifying the man’s voice and letting it echo throughout the castle without piercing her eardrums. But every word punched her hard, anyway.

“The prince is back! Our royal highness, Prince Rickavior, has returned, alive and well! Come gather in the front hall and see him for yourself!”

A chill went down her spine when Rick didn’t deny it, even while magenta eyes met hers with a quiet pleading. She took a step back. Yu nudged her forward.

“Stay beside him,” the pixie reminded in her ear.

A sound came from her throat, the memory of his introduction to the giant rushing back to her. *Prince*. He had called himself prince back then...had talked of not being king yet. Before either of them could speak, a physical chill spread

over the hall, signaling the arrival of more of his kind. Even Yu was intimidated as he scuttled behind her shoulder, stilling his wings.

“Prince Rickavior!”

“Your Majesty! Rick—Prince Rick! Where have you been?”

“You sweet, sassy man, we have been so worried about you!”

He was mobbed with graceful figures, thrumming with ice and excitedly trying to get nearer to where he was. Some reached out to touch him while others stood back, content to just watch him from afar. A group of women joined Jyss, swooning over him and listening intently as Jyss spoke in a rapid-fire whisper.

“The muscles are still there. He didn’t lose weight and he’s alert. I might have to test out that alertness later. He didn’t respond to me when I rubbed against him earlier. He didn’t even kiss me.”

“Maybe he needs two of us rubbing against him. And kissing him. He would like that kind of welcome, wouldn’t he?” the female beside Jyss suggested, tone vibrating with anticipation.

How many days had passed since they were gone? It had only felt like a few days on that strange island, but the way these people talked made it seem like more. And heavens, was being surrounded by women his desired life before?

*Prince.* He was a prince, not a commoner—the future ruler of the Winter Court.

It was suddenly too overwhelming, her brain unable to catch up and her body just wanting to get out of there. She shuddered at the energy and took a step back, then another until she thought she made progress and wouldn’t be paid attention to. A hand wrapped around her wrist.

“Em?”

A couple of heads turned in her direction, then more. The pressure of the energy increased and she gulped down her panic.

“I have to go.”

She didn't make a run for it, but her speed belied calmness. Wings fluttered out of the corner of her eye before a shadow blocked it and was in front of her. When his face was all she could see, she stopped. Then she felt a hum around her and realized he had put up a ball of shield, one that prevented other eyes from watching them and felt connected to the ground.

“Em—”

“You lied to me.” Hurt flourished over saying it out loud. “You betrayed me.”

Magenta eyes widened, his expression in denial. Then comprehension seemed to dawn and so did guilt.

“I didn't mean to...”

“Didn't mean to reveal that particular secret when we were sharing secrets?”

He gulped. Belatedly, she became aware of just how close he had stepped into her bubble of personal space, with his hand still wrapped around her wrist and his thumb running circles over her pulse line—an unconscious soothing. Despite her misgivings, the shivers came.

“Em,” he murmured, then gulped and whispered lower. More sincerely. “Emerald. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for leaving some things out or not making it clear. It wasn't my intention. I was just caught up in our time there. And then that last day, in that tower, when I...”

Touched her. Pleased her. Kissed her like he would die if he didn't. Her body burned scorching hot at the memory.

“You're the crown prince?” she blurted out.

“I was.”

“Was?”

Some of the softness and sincerity left his eyes as they closed in warning. Just like that, it didn't feel like an intimate conversation anymore.

“It's a long story. I'm sorry for getting you entangled in the adventure I was so determined to have.”

Except it wasn't an adventure he chose. The shield vibrated and in the blink of an eye, realization slammed that it wasn't his creation. She peered at the blur of figures, trying to locate its source until she felt Rick tense. When he let her hand go, it was she who reached out to clasp it back this time. She squeezed it.

The shield dropped and their fingers disentangled, though they didn't step back from each other. Instead, she looked around until she spotted the man from earlier—Bronco—wriggling his fingers to eliminate the last traces of the shield. Bronco nodded at Rick, who nodded back. Then an icy pathway swirled toward them.

“Brother! Where have you been?”

She felt the authority before she saw it, as well as the affection that rang crystal clear in the air. There was a warmth to the tone, too, subtle and inviting, that called to her. Emerald perused the woman approaching them and was knocked out by a beauty more ethereal than the rest, flowing in a long trail of black hair and pale, slightly glittering skin. The lavender dress she had on looked like a second skin, glittering every time she moved. Velvet lavender eyes welcomed Rick and open arms extended until he stepped forward and fell into the embrace.

If she had been missing from her sisters for a while, she would bet they wouldn't just settle for a hug. They would lather her with cheek kisses and a burst of queries until her cool persona fell away. Then they would drag her somewhere private to take care of her with their magic. The woman did none of that, stepping back after a few seconds of the embrace. Rick was unperturbed, an indolent grin slipping on his lips.

“I got bored and decided to have an adventure. Well, my body decided it for me. I got drunk, a feat never quite achieved around here, and the next thing I knew, I woke up on

a splendid island where I could lounge around and explore my options. But I got bored there, too, so here I am.”

More lies, Emerald deduced. To his sister? Was it for the ears surrounding them or for the woman’s benefit?

“Oh, and I brought some companions with me,” he added casually. “They were so blindly loyal that I couldn’t just abandon them.”

There was the Rick she knew, but also, the façade she was coming to terms with: his use of charm and ego to hide what he felt and what he thought. Belatedly, it sank in that everyone’s focus was on her once more, including his sister’s.

She could deny everything and plead to be taken out of here, using her brief connection to Rick to prevent forthcoming attacks. Maybe she could run back to that forest and choose a different coordinate for her and Yu, leaving Rick here in the sight and grasp of the killer. Or multiple killers. The cool smiles and murmurs felt like an icy brand that, instead of pushing her away, called to her protective instincts.

*Don’t leave Rick,* it said.

She bowed slightly.

“It’s an honor being in your court and his presence. I am in awe of everything.”

The lavender-eyed Fae zoned in on her, smile pasted on. But Emerald knew she was being assessed.

“Visitors, huh?” There was an amused pause. “I suppose they’re your gift to us.”

“To myself,” Rick said quickly. “Mine, Erinnala.”

There was a feral hint to the tone that rushed down her senses as she stared at him, dumbfounded. The woman, Erinnala, stared too, amusement still present.

“Jeez. Since when have I called you Rickavior? Just Erin. We don’t need any of that complication.” That humor-filled gaze flicked toward her. “That goes for his...gifts too.”

The crowd gasped dramatically, but Erin didn't seem to care. Rick raised a brow.

“The future ruler opting for casual names?”

The amusement faded as the woman shrugged. “I had no choice. You were missing for so long. We will discuss it later.”

With a swirl of skirts, the topic was dismissed and Erin walked—no, floated—away, her voice echoing sweetly in the hall.

“Your room's intact and I will take care of setting one up for your visitors. I will call off the search party too.”

“Thanks.”

“Do visit our parents when you can, Rick. And do attend the upcoming events we have in our court.”

“I will, sister.”

Half of the crowd dispersed, sensing that the major event was finished. Most trailed after Erin, calling her attention and singing her praises while she laughed and basked in them. Those who remained observed her, some in open dislike, others with mild curiosity. Rick steered Em and Yu away, nodding at Bronco once more until the male Fae got it and began to steer the rest of the Fae in the other direction.

“She's as...charming and arrogant as you.”

Her assessment had him smiling. “Not quite. My charm knows no bounds.”

“Funny, I was thinking just that about your arrogance.” Her belly tightened at his surprised, pleased chuckle. “Is that all it takes for someone else to be the ruler? You missing for not even a year?”

His laugh lines faded. “We get attacks from so many hostile forces that it's a must to always have someone sworn in.”

“Permanently?”

“Only when the original party proves to be unfit.”

“Define unfit.”

“Lack of a sense of responsibility for their court and their people. Getting drunk and deciding to abandon their court just to have an adventure.”

Him—or how he was portrayed. The way it worked made sense, but it also meant that it was that easy to be replaced. A younger sibling could just find a way to get rid of an older one to get to the throne, and...was that what Erin did?

“Earlier, you called her the future ruler. And you are the crown prince. Where are your parents, the king and queen?”

“Gone,” he said flatly.

“Oh.” She stopped in her tracks, touching his arm. “Mine too. I’m sorry. It never hurts less.”

He nodded. “But they are still king and queen until we are of age, which we will be in a few years in Fae terms. Technically, we don’t need to step in yet because the court runs itself when it comes to daily activities. It’s during wars, breaches, and huge political decisions that we have to exercise our command.”

“So, there are trusted advisors?”

“Bronco runs the castle in general and his sister, Jyss, plans the events. There’s another Fae who runs interior domestic stuff and more who run individual things like the outside activities, the island security, the castle security, and trading—not that we do trading often. The Winter Court is known for being able to sustain itself.”

“And being formidable pricks,” she said lightly. “Your court is one that no one wants to get entangled with.”

He smirked. “Then we are doing a good job of maintaining our security. Anyway, any shift in the routine would need to be consulted with me and my sister until someone’s officially sworn in. In the meantime, we do run one thing ourselves: the court’s army, though we have a separate Fae training them.”

“That’s...”

“Complicated,” he confirmed. “It’s why Erin and I try to keep other things simple.”

“Right. We don’t have a monarchy in Broom’s Isle, but we have a council that makes the hardest decisions. Sometimes they make the wrong ones, but for the most part, they try their best.” Her brother came to mind again before she brushed it off. “I hope your group of heads isn’t making the wrong decisions.”

“Hmm. Em?”

“What?”

“Don’t get me wrong, I love your compassion and get so turned on by it...” The words were low, sending her body in a wake of vibrations. “But I need that cool mask now. It’s for your safety.”

The vibrations crashed. She regarded him and was unable to stop the lurking suspicion from being spoken out.

“Your sister. She’s in on it.”

Pain flashed in his eyes, confirming what she thought. But he shook his head.

“No. My sister’s mischievous and loves adventures, too, but she’s not in on this one. I decided to have the adventure myself.”

“What?”

“You have very unique ears, Em. And the prettiest eyes. I’m so glad I kept you.”

Translation: there were eyes and ears everywhere and he was still maintaining his excuse for being gone. The chill from earlier returned. Knowing when to back off, she shut her mouth and didn’t ask the hundreds of questions that swam in her mind. Yet.

“Your Majesty, may I have a word with you?”

It was Bronco, standing a respectable distance and waiting for Rick’s response. Rick nodded graciously, but



Bronco waited some more until Emerald understood and wandered off. She watched the Fae regard her in distrust, then looked away when the two men began to talk in low voices. Not understanding some of the questions she caught, she followed the flutter of wings as they flew away.

“Don’t stray too far,” she warned Yu.

“Rick safe. No one dare in public.”

The pixie was right, easing some of her worries. But she gave him a speculative look.

“How do you know about it, anyway?”

“Listen. All the time.”

Her mouth formed an O and her cheeks heated when she remembered how...expressive she and Rick had gotten in that tower. But Yu didn’t catch on to her mortification as he continued flying away, more interested in exploring the place. She followed him more willingly, taking note of the icy walls and careful to stand in spaces where there were no spiky formations.

“Fae there.”

That Yu was cautious again spoke a lot. She paused at a corner and took a peek. Sure enough, a couple of Fae folks were gathered in a smaller hall, their laughter tinkling now and then and filling her with a magical sensation. Something blurred in between them, passed around so quickly as they kicked and punched effortlessly.

“Ball?” Yu queried.

“Ball,” she confirmed, gaze shadowing the glittering object’s progress. They appeared younger than the ones who had welcomed Rick but were no less beautiful, not a single hair out of place or clothing wrinkled. The one with the bluish hair kicked and punched the hardest, his laughter trailing on braying territory when he hit a pink-haired Fae in the head.

“You need practice, Indy. You can’t defend and can’t even kick right. At this rate, we might as well disown you if this is how you act.”

The voice sounded familiar, but it wasn't until he spoke again that it all came rushing back to Emerald: that voice ordering the market seller to hand him the gemstone and escaping Centro before she could reach him. It was him—the Fae who had her gemstone.

“Come on, Tru. It's just a game. Give her a break,” another Fae piped in. The male wrapped a hand around Indy, who was still rubbing her head in pain. Tru didn't care, scoffing.

“We don't know when hostile forces will come. We don't want to follow in the footsteps of the prince and his friends. *You* have to be prepared for anything, not fumble around like a loser.”

More voices piped in, some joining in on Tru's insults and others changing the topic. In the end, they all stopped the game and left the hall while Yu turned, no longer interested. She slipped out of her corner and was already racing to follow, her heart pounding hard. But Emerald's anticipation turned to bewilderment when she couldn't find anyone in the next hallways and couldn't determine where the Fae folks had disappeared to so abruptly.

“Do you know where they went, Yu?”

“In the castle.”

She bit back a groan. “I meant can you sense them?”

“No. Why?”

“That Tru guy has something I need. A gemstone.”

“Gemstone?”

She began to describe it until his eyes lit up.

“A rock!” he exclaimed enthusiastically. “Rocks outside. I saw. Let's gather.”

“No, no, not an ordinary rock. A specific rock.”

The pixie looked at her in confusion, as if unable to comprehend why she wanted that specific rock. With a sigh,

she opened her mouth to tell him to return to Rick, but someone else spoke first.

“Is everything okay?”

As if on cue, Rick came into view with Bronco in tow. The latter still looked at her with distrust but kept it locked in when Rick approached her. How should she tell him that she had found what she lost, the sole purpose of her being out of Broom’s Isle in the first place? If she did, would he even let her take something from one of his folks? She glanced at Bronco once more.

*Not now. Tell him later.*

Heeding the warning, she nodded.

“Yes. Everything’s okay. I was just making sure that Yu didn’t wander off.”

“None of you should,” Bronco said matter-of-factly. “You might be His Majesty’s visitors, but we have Fae folks who do not take kindly to outsiders no matter their immunity.”

It was a warning if she ever heard one, but surprisingly, there wasn’t a hint of ugliness in his tone. She assessed him again, wondering if it was loyalty to Rick or just another façade.

“Noted on that,” she said lightly.

Rick took her hand again, seemingly not as guarded around this man as the others. “Come on. Let me show you your room and Yu’s.”

Amid the other man’s continuous quiet observation, Emerald kept her protest at bay and reluctantly let herself be pulled in the other direction.

## Chapter 8

“Yu, where were you and Em going?”

“Follow Tru. Em needs his gemstone.”

The conversation from days ago rang through Rick’s mind, never quite leaving him despite how other things preoccupied his hours. He waited for her to mention it to him, maybe even ask for his help to locate Tru, a young Fae who he never really interacted with. But Emerald never brought it up, and soon enough, other things persisted for his full attention—like Yu puttering around his head and the full-length mirrors surrounding them making it look like there were tens of Yu keeping him company.

“Yu, you seem excited.”

“Very excited. No parties at home.”

His brows rose. “Not even the giants?”

Yu wrinkled his nose. “Giants are enemies. No parties. Party poopers.”

He bit back a grin, understanding the size difference had a lot to do with the giant versus pixie discourse. But then again, their unique brand of aggressiveness might have something to do with that too.

“It’s not a party, per se. It’s more of a welcome banquet. So, more about food and mingling.”

“No dancing?” Yu asked, visibly disappointed.

“Maybe some dancing too.”

That was enough to kick up the pixie’s excitement again. After a few minutes of more puttering, it dawned on him that Yu was already practicing dance moves, awkwardly and wobbly to some but adorable to him. He tried not to react, leaving the small fellow to his devices and continuing to put on his clothes. Halfway through dressing up, a knock sounded on the dressing room’s door.

“Your Majesty, it’s Jyss. I came here to help you dress up.”

Jyss didn’t wait for his response, already sauntering in with a sway to her hips and wearing glittery scraps of clothing that barely covered her chest area. It was standard Jyss attire as far as he was concerned, something he didn’t pay attention to unless he was bored and she was eager to seduce him. None of that had happened in the past few months, mostly because he had been deliberately avoiding it.

“That shirt’s too plain,” she announced, hands already moving to unbutton it and pushing it off his shoulders. Fingers lingered, a brief touch here and there. “We need a flashier shirt for your welcome event.”

“It’s just a banquet,” he said, looking down when her hands trailed over his chest. “We have banquets all the time.”

“Not any to welcome a great prince like you. You look really good.”

“Weren’t you supposed to get me a flashier shirt?”

Her eyes glinted, amused at being caught. But she didn’t remove her hands, stepping closer instead and seemingly inhaling him. Her voice turned flirtatious as she rubbed her chest against him—an action that used to make him flirt back, but now he felt a stirring of discomfort.

His hand wrapped around her arm, debating between gently nudging her back or making a joke first to not hurt her feelings. The door opened again and in walked Emerald, impatiently tugging on her dress until her green eyes landed on the scenario. She froze. So did he.

“Oh. Am I interrupting something?”

It was fascinating how that impatience turned to frost in an instant, drawing him in unlike no other. Then his focus went to her dress, a light green ensemble that flowed around her knees. It didn’t shimmer or glitter like most dresses in the castle and was probably among the plainest except for its flowy, dreamy material, but something about the way she held

herself while wearing it had his muscles tensing and heat thickening his blood.

“On the contrary.” He cleared his throat, realizing he was on the verge of openly displaying his arousal. “You look amazing.”

Perhaps it was the huskiness in his tone that turned her cheeks pink, but he liked it. They eyed each other, surveying from head to foot, and he noted her lack of shoes to fit in with most of his folks’ lack of footwear. The sight of her bare toes had him biting back a sound.

“So do all of you,” she finally returned, oblivious to how he was feeling and begrudgingly acknowledging Jyss. Jyss still had her hands on him, just a tad bit possessive until he casually stepped away from the contact. If anything, that only had Jyss turning more indignant.

“His Majesty is getting dressed and I’m helping him. We need some privacy—”

Emerald gasped, a dramatic sound that had Jyss stopping.

“I didn’t realize that he couldn’t dress himself.”

“What?” Jyss asked, confused. “He knows how to.”

“Then why are you dressing him?”

It occurred to him that the witch was being dramatic on purpose, and it was working. Jyss lost her indignance and appeared bewildered before the Fae returned to her default state: trying to rub against him and smirking haughtily at Emerald. Emerald lost her dramatics, her expression turning unreadable.

“I’m an events planner, which means I should be paying attention to what His Majesty wears and how good he looks—”

“I don’t need to be dressed, which I should have told you before you came in here. I also don’t need assistance with stuff like this from here on...so, you don’t need to show up

here, Jyss. I would rather you focus your attention on the event, which I'm sure is going to be brilliant.”

Jyss looked like she had been slapped, her head rearing back as she looked at him oddly. Perhaps it was because he hadn't rejected her before, only resorting to avoiding without words when he hadn't been interested in whatever she had to offer.

“Are you sure?” Jyss tried again, struggling to catch up with the new dynamics. At Rick's firm nod, she gathered her shoulders, no longer posing to show off her chest, and walked away in a huff. The Fae bumped Emerald's shoulder, not acknowledging her.

Emerald kept her gaze on him. When she remained silent, he snatched the dress shirt back and began re-buttoning it.

“You don't know how to reject people,” she concluded after a while.

“I reject people all the time.”

“I meant advances from women.”

“I...” He trailed off, trying to recall all the times women approached him with something specific in mind. “I never had to.”

“Which was why I was a novelty. Someone who didn't easily fall for your charming act as most people did, including your folks.”

“I have female friends,” he said, a tad defensive. “It's not all about flirting with women for me.”

But a part of him acknowledged that, like Jyss, it had been his default in most situations he found himself in. Dealing with Lily the giant had been proof of that, and what would have been a normal interaction now bothered him.

“We were friends before that night in the tower,” he added. A memory of that moment flashed, squeezing him with a different kind of discomfort before he stomped it down. “I didn't flirt with that mermaid.”

“Hmm.”

“Speak your mind, Em,” he said when the silence became unbearable. “Don’t let my wonderful presence deter you.”

It was the right call as it snapped her out of what might have been pity. He loathed pity.

“Is that a common occurrence?” she asked. “Jyss coming into your dressing room and just putting her hands on you? Other females doing it?”

“It used to be,” he admitted.

“So, you just let her flirt with you all the time?”

“It used to be more than flirting. It wasn’t exclusive to her, but...yes. She was the most frequent one I took to bed. Or wherever it was convenient.”

“To sate a need.”

“Yes. To sate a need. To have fun. To avoid boredom.”

Shallow reasons, but that was him. That had been him, and he didn’t want to lie to her about it. Rick braced for the judgment now, the scathing words that put him in his place and told him she wouldn’t be like them. But she wasn’t like them, not in the least—not when touching her had felt like he was diving headfirst into the unknown and nothing about it felt perfunctory, hollow, or fun. Fun had been the last thing on his mind when she had driven him insane with the sounds she made and the way she came apart...

“Your shirt’s askew.”

“What?”

She pointed at his untucked shirt, not offering to fix it for him. Breaking out of his whirlwind of ruminations, he began to understand she was offering a truce, not judging. His shoulders eased.

“Tuck in,” Yu piped in, peeking from behind a mirror after hiding at Jyss’s entrance.

“Yes—”



“I can’t stay here for long.”

The announcement had the two men staring at Emerald, who was no longer paying attention to him.

“I know that,” he said. “But you need to stay here to gain at least a little bit of their trust, including my sister’s. Otherwise, they would think you were a spy and wouldn’t let you leave.”

She nodded, not fighting his reasoning but still restless over it. The idea of her leaving sent a pang to his chest, where he fought the itch to rub.

*How do you know Tru and why haven’t you told me about it?*

“Party. Late,” Yu announced again.

Setting aside the nagging curiosity, Rick sighed.

“A late appearance makes for a grand entrance, but not where my sister is concerned—and we don’t want you two in hot water. Come on. Let’s give you a good second impression.”

As far as banquets went, this one was grander than the one he was used to in his court, but far less intimate, as everyone was in attendance and the event spiraled from a warm welcome to just his folks hanging out in groups and eating their hearts out. He carefully selected plates of food for Emerald and Yu, warning them not to accept food offered vocally by others. Her eyes lit up.

“That’s in the books,” she said. “They say that once you eat a Fae’s offered feast, you are magically bound to him and his home and can never find your way out.”

“I’m sorry to burst your bubble, sweetheart, but we don’t need to offer you food for that. I’m just being cautious of poison and ingredients that might not sit well with your regular stomachs. I’m good at detecting those in food.”

“Except drinks.”

He choked on his drink, eyes widening at her little joke. She tossed a piece of the tart in her mouth and closed her eyes.

“Except drinks,” he agreed, unable to keep his gaze off the way she savored her food.

“Yup. Oh, heavens. Is this how most of your food tastes?”

“That’s the chef’s specialty.”

“Can I meet him? Ask him his secrets and to teach me his ways?”

A flare of jealousy punched him in the gut, aware that Tyrone could. But Tyrone was a bigger flirt than him, and the thought of the man putting his hands on her while he taught her to knead the dough properly made Rick want to do violent things. When she continued popping tarts in her mouth and looking like she was having an orgasm—at least, it looked like that in his mind—Rick couldn’t take it anymore and had to distract her from eating more and torturing him.

“Come dance with me.”

“What? But I’m not...” She trailed off, gaze landing on Yu, who was already doing the moves practiced in the dressing room. It thrilled her. “Sure. Dancing sounds fun.”

Dancing was also guaranteed to put the spotlight on them again, but at least she wouldn’t be eating. When they were on the dance floor, she awkwardly swayed, out of her element and regretting it immediately.

“I didn’t think this through. Perhaps we should go back and...”

“I got you.”

Lightly, he guided her hands around him and placed his on hers, pressing closer when other folks joined them on the dance floor. He realized his mistake when he felt her softness against him, a body so familiar yet still so strange.

“This is...nice,” she said.

It was more than nice, having her this close again when she had studiously avoided even brushing his hand since they arrived here. When another dancing couple sidled closer, he took advantage and drew her even closer, mouth quirking at the small gasp that petered out of her. But before she could say anything, a hand clasped his arm and squeezed intimately.

“Prince Rickavior. Would you care for a dance?”

The woman was vaguely familiar until he realized she always attended his private parties with his close circle of friends and always found a way to sit on his lap. She gleamed with intention now, her body already poised to take over and push Emerald away. But the thought of Emerald no longer close tensed him up and he was already shaking his head.

“No, but thank you for the invitation. I’m already dancing with someone and would like to keep dancing with her.”

He sensed the Fae’s shock and remembered how he never rejected her drunk, fun advances in the past. But the Fae didn’t argue, slinking away. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched a small group of women gathering before another approached him, wearing even less clothes than Jyss.

“I’m sorry about this,” he said to Emerald in advance, then braced himself for the invitation. Sure enough, this one asked him to accompany her outside to search for a lost sex toy while a third joined in and announced that it was in her bedroom. They eyed him in anticipation, waiting for him to join them.

“That’s lovely, but I don’t want to. Have fun.”

The lack of explanation stunned them more than the outright rejection. When another one slinked forward, Emerald growled.

“If this keeps up, then I don’t want to dance anymore.”

“If it’s any consolation, I haven’t slept with all of them. And those I did sleep with, I haven’t slept with in a long time.”

“That’s not the point.”

“No, I don’t want to dance and will not accept any more invitations for more,” he declared to the woman who stopped beside him before she could ask. A few more approaches and the women finally got the picture, returning to their small group and glaring at Emerald. “What’s the point?”

“It’s like they have no sense of respect.”

“I’m sorry that they disrespected you—”

“I meant you. They have no respect for you and it makes me angry.” He stopped swaying. So did she. He looked at her in what might have been stupefaction.

“I’m the prince. I’m public property as far as they’re concerned, and my past actions have never discouraged their attention.”

“You’re a *prince* of a prestigious, formidable court. Your sister currently first in line for the crown doesn’t change that and no should mean no, not a group of them plotting to see who could make you change your mind like some kind of sick game.”

“Are you...defending my honor?”

“What if I am?”

“I’m...” Touched. More than turned on. “Impressed.”

“Stop grinning at them like that.”

“Keep scowling at me like that,” he shot back, perusing that scowl...coming to another conclusion. “I’m starting to think it’s not just about the disrespect for me.”

“What?”

“You’re jealous.”

Her scowl deepened. “No, I’m not.”

“I know jealousy when I see it.” And it was right there, visible in the way she glared and tried not to direct it toward the women. She wouldn’t give them the satisfaction and that made him the receiving party. Weirdly, it melted the tension off his body and erased the others from his mind. The world

fell away, the dance floor morphing to just him and her and the way they held each other.

“I’m not jealous,” she clarified. “There’s nothing to be jealous about. We’re just acquaintances.”

“We’re more than that, Em. More than friends, sometimes.”

“No, we’re not.” But she didn’t sound convinced. “I’m just here until I can leave.”

His jaw clenched. A possessive streak surged and had him lowering his mouth to her ear, whispering a breath. The easiness of their dance morphed again until she was all he could scent.

“Do you let your acquaintances slide their fingers inside you? Do you let them play with your clit and bring you to climax?”

Her breath hitched and her hands curled on his shirt.

“Let me go.”

Casually, he removed his hands from hers and curled them on her dress, not her skin. It still burned.

“We’re just dancing. You can leave anytime, though that would make a bad impression when everyone’s eyes are on us.”

“Everyone?”

“Just those in the room. They’re still glaring at you and my sister’s amused. It doesn’t matter.” He kissed her earlobe, unable to help it. “It’s you I would like to be inside of.”

He knew there was a risk of Emerald freezing him out again—hell, maybe even slapping him. But her hands lowered from his chest area to his stomach, not quite touching as if unsure what to do with them.

“You already were,” she shot back, injecting some sharpness into her voice.

“I didn’t mean my fingers, Em.”

Oh, if only he could take a picture of the moment when those green eyes blazed with heat, darkening them with desire. It was gone in a second as she lifted her chin.

“We’re not fucking. I’m not going to be another notch in your bedpost.”

He knew, from the way her nipples tightened against him and the way her fingers drifted lower, that all it would take was a few choice words before he got her in his bed and she let him do things to her. But he didn’t want it easy, not when Emerald was worth fighting for and her full, uninhibited consent meant more than anything in the world could. That blew his mind even while he nodded...even while he fought damning it all to hell and just dragging her out of here so he could do everything he had been fantasizing about.

“All right,” he said, hard as a rock but voice steady. “I will respect that decision. I won’t fuck you unless you say yes.”

Her gaze narrowed, trying to catch any sign of mischief. “I’m glad we’re on the same page.”

“Is tasting you out of the question too? Or is it just my cock inside you? What about my tongue on the rest of your body?”

“Yes. I mean, no. I mean...yes, it’s out of the question.” Emerald growled once more, a sound that broke from her normally composed form. “You are so...”

“Sexy?”

“Crude,” she finished.

“I bet you’re wet from the crudeness.”

“Shut up.”

Her glower intensified, filling him with mirth and the need to tease her further...maybe get her hot and bothered as she had unconsciously done to him. The amusement died when he glanced up and found a male Fae dancing nearby with another female Fae, her gaze flying to him in interest from time to time. But she wasn’t his focus.

Tru was all dressed up in glittery clothes and not paying them any attention. The man was busy impressing his date with tales of his adventures, spoken in a low voice that only sensitive ears like Rick's could catch. He knew the conversation was a buildup to seduction, but he didn't care. All he cared about were Yu's words.

*Em needs his gemstone.*

"I think we should return to our seats," he found himself saying. When Emerald didn't protest, he tugged her away from the dance floor but didn't return to their seats. Instead, he took her to the side, out of Erin's sight and in Bronco's. Yu flew toward them, visibly tired but vibrating with excitement.

"Hungry," the pixie announced.

"Perfect."

He got a new selection of food on plates, waited for Emerald to get distracted with it, and excused himself to sit next to Bronco. The man graciously accepted the drink offer.

"Bronco, I need you to keep an eye on Yu."

"Yu? The pixie?"

"Yes, the pixie. He likes to wander around and I prefer to keep him unharmed. He's a great entertainer and I would be very annoyed if someone took advantage of him."

And wherever Yu went, Emerald went, which meant he was indirectly asking the man to keep an eye on her too. Bronco didn't suspect any of this, of course, and the man bowed slightly in an indication that he would do what he was asked to do. Satisfied, Rick lingered for a bit, making sure everyone was busy celebrating to pay any heed to their prince.

Then he was quickly, quietly slipping out.

## Chapter 9

Emerald didn't know how she got from following Tru out of the banquet room to listening to insults while hiding in a corner, but here she was. Their voices weren't familiar, and she was crouched in a small, shadowy corner, where she didn't dare take a peek and expose herself. But she was sure that Tru wasn't one of them and that she had lost him.

"It was spectacularly grand, and you could tell that Jyss and the princess put out all the stops. But it was so boring. I was waiting for him to do something and get the party *really* started, but nothing. All he did was dance with that ugly plaything of his."

"I don't think she's ugly. She was quite the sight, even in that hideous dress she had on. But you're right. He's no fun anymore. He used to be with us all the time, but suddenly, all he ever did was make excuses before he had his fun without us. Now that he's back, he's still ignoring us."

Someone scoffed. "Maybe it's best, then, that the princess is taking over the throne. That will teach him a lesson for looking down his nose at us. All the things we did to keep him entertained and for what?"

"Don't talk about him that way! He probably just needs time to readjust to the court."

"You're only saying that because you want to jump his dick—"

"Oh, please. Paola's already riding Bronco's dick and that boring prince is out of the picture—"

"Wait. Quiet. Someone's coming...hey, it's the prodigal prince!"

She was startled, not expecting Rick to walk in on a conversation that mostly didn't have good things to say about him. But he was unfazed when he greeted them, tone dancing with a heavily coated charm. Enthusiasm riddled the group, her body turning rigid at their abrupt switch-up that sang him



praises and extravagantly cheered him on. A female voice crooned.

“I have been waiting for you to spend some time with us. Now that you’re here, why don’t you tell us all about your latest adventure?”

“As you probably already heard, it was a happy accident, and I will be glad to talk about it...but not now. I bet you’re out here because the banquet they prepared is already making you want to sleep, right?”

“As a matter of fact—”

“I set up a room in the western hall. One of our usual spots. There will be more than dancing.”

There was a gasp, then a more sincere hum of excitement. The female voice crooned again.

“What about you? We miss you. I miss you. You should come with us. You can relax and I can ease your tension. Your muscles are really...hard.”

She closed her eyes against the urge to march out there, certain that wasn’t a good idea. She listened while the woman flirted some more and Rick politely interacted, promising them they would have such a good time. Then they were gone, footsteps receding and voices still talking about the now-generous prince. A quiet scoff glissaded off her lips—

“If they were headed here, you wouldn’t have stood a chance against getting caught.”

Emerald blinked, taken aback when she assumed he would go with them. But she recovered quickly.

“I have magic. I think I could manage.”

“They would detect it and you would still be found.”

“Yeah, well, they didn’t come here, so arguing about it is pointless.”

So was standing here in the corner, made tighter now that he squeezed himself in too. But Rick didn’t seem to mind,

taking up space with his wide shoulders and surveying her as if trying to figure her out.

“They will be distracted for a while, so you don’t need to worry about running into them.”

“I’m not worried.”

A ghost of a smile teased his mouth, drawing her attention there. “I figured. I suppose it’s them who should be worried about you.”

“Not quite either. Let’s just say we’re co-existing and don’t need to be worried about each other.”

It was a lie because nerves had riddled her earlier at the possibility of getting found and dragged somewhere without anyone’s knowledge. Perhaps he thought the same thing, too, as his smile faded and he eyed her some more.

“I asked Bronco to keep an eye on Yu, in turn keeping an eye on you.”

She raised a brow. “I don’t need anything keeping an eye on me. And Bronco didn’t disobey you. I bet he’s still in there keeping an eye on our friend. Do you trust him?”

“He hasn’t shown any reason not to be trusted. And he’s not within my circle of friends, who could slip me anything in a drink and I wouldn’t question.” There was a long pause. “He’s a childhood friend. Close to me and my sister, but more to me. He never dropped the titles, though, because he’s just ornery that way.”

“Then Yu’s safe.” The conversation earlier flared again and she felt her shoulders tense. “Those Fae folks...”

“They’re my friends...or they were,” he mused. There was no bitterness, only his matter-of-fact tone. “I guess they’re not very pleased with me. The investigation kept me very busy and I practically shunned them. Then I left.”

“You didn’t leave,” she argued stubbornly. “At least, not voluntarily. And you have every reason to be cautious, even if it means avoiding them and being a prick in their eyes.”

*And if they were your friends, they wouldn't judge right away."*

She knew she had driven the point across when he didn't defend them. Instead, Rick sighed.

"I suppose I should tone the avoiding down and act normal around them...with lesser party attendances, of course."

Silence.

"Do you have a suspect among them? Someone in line with your sister?"

"No. And we haven't proven that it's my sister."

But his face said that it wasn't out of the question, not when his sister was the one who could benefit the most from his disappearance. Her chest ached. Her family had always been her most dependable anchor, the ones who would never betray her despite their differences. That he might not have that with his sister...

*Don't get emotional.*

"Where have you been, anyway?" she asked casually.

"I just had a little errand."

"Your sister was looking for you. I don't think she was pleased that you left before she could talk to you."

"Talking with my sister involves hours of her discussing ways to improve our court, complaining about our court, and nagging me about my...not-so-tame habits." Light danced in his magenta eyes, then sobered. "Why did you leave the festivities?"

"I wanted to explore."

"I see. Here."

She looked down at his extended hand, expecting him to either invite her back to the banquet or offer to accompany her in her exploration. The world stopped when her focus landed on what he held in his palm, small but sparkly...more valuable to her than anything she could imagine.

“What? How did...?”

Casually, he nudged her numb hand open and transferred the gemstone there, fisting her hand around it and wrapping his on top. The warmth of his touch contrasted the coldness of the stone, but she gripped it tighter as he spoke.

“Yu might have mentioned that you wanted a gemstone from Tru. So, I searched his room and this was the only gemstone I could find. Is it the one you were looking for?”

Still stunned, she nodded. “It is. This was my mission before I was thrown on that island with you. The council wanted this gemstone and I was supposed to deliver it to them. It doesn’t belong to Tru. He stole it.”

“Well, then, hide it until you can get it to them. It’s small enough to be undetectable, so that should be fairly easy.”

He didn’t contest, didn’t ask questions. Guilt seeped in and her mouth went dry, understanding that him getting found in Tru’s room and taking stuff would have gotten him in at least some form of trouble.

“Rick. I didn’t tell you because...”

“You don’t have to explain,” he cut in. “If Tru kept it that carelessly in his room, it must not have been as important to him as it was to you. Consider it a thank you for getting me off that island.”

“We got each other off that island.”

“Hmm.” He smirked. “I suppose my face and charming personality helped.”

She rolled her eyes. Laughter tickled her throat but was interrupted when voices drifted in the background. They weren’t the familiar voices of his friends earlier but two giggling women.

“He is so hot. He was dancing so intensely earlier and it was like seeing a whole new side of him. I didn’t know he could be that broody.”

“Right? Broody looks hot on him. I got so wet when the others talked about their experiences with him but imagine

if we got into bed with him while he was all moody, maybe even angry. Did you hear he fucked the court's last visitor in her bedroom, while her father was negotiating deals for an alliance with Princess Erin? I bet his current visitor's already enjoying herself."

There was a wistful sigh. "Lucky bitch. I wouldn't be surprised considering they were already eye-fucking each other on the dance floor."

The laughter stuck in her throat threatened to thunder out, incredulity and mortification battling each other. When they were gone, she gaped at him.

"What is it with you and these women? Do you have a magic cock or something?"

Rick had the gall to chortle, humor dancing in his features. He held up his hands. "Or something. I don't even know them, and the visitor thing was a rumor. Are you jealous again?"

"I never was. I almost feel guilty."

"For what?"

"For keeping you away from them."

He shook his head, catching on to her teasing. "Don't be. As I said..."

"You haven't touched them in a while, yeah." Curiosity slithered in. She stomped it back, but it refused to settle. "Where was the last time?"

"Months ago...oh. Where?" His eyes widened. "Are you that curious?"

She shrugged, already regretting it. But the curiosity was stronger. "Maybe."

The man's grin was positively brazen.

"Well, sweetheart, if you were expecting something wild, it wasn't. The last one was in bed. The woman's bed, because I was trying to carry her there to tend to her sprained ankle. We were sparring that day for practice."

Her mouth dropped open. “So, you seduced her with her sprained ankle?”

“No.” He smirked. “I fixed her ankle and she rode me. Fairly tame.”

A vision of his hands gripping a nameless woman’s hips while she rode him enthusiastically popped in. She gulped. “Right. Tame.”

“Would you like to know about the one before that?”

This was a bad idea. Inappropriate...a mistake. But it was like her brain was being taken over.

“I’m sure you’re about to tell me,” she challenged.

“At a party. One of the many court parties, which often become unruly. We were dancing, then grinding against each other. Let’s just say we took the grinding into a closet, found a table, and did our thing there. Not that wild, either, but the one before that is.”

Fire caressed her skin. “Oh?”

“She was human and a waitress in the Sky, the pirates’ abode. I was friends with a few of them and they took me to a bar. We flirted for a bit before she pulled me behind a wall—no doors, nothing to lock us away from the patrons. Anyone could search for us at the back and find us fucking each other’s brains out. I had her against the wall and we worked very hard to keep each other quiet.”

In her mind, she saw the scenes clearly, but they were no longer nameless women. The women became her, watching as his face scrunched in ecstasy and his groan emitted through the space—because it was just so good, he couldn’t take being quiet. Emerald’s breath hitched as her imagination got out of hand, but she still tried to keep her voice steady.

“That’s not...” Was it her or had it substantially become hotter in their little alcove? “That’s not too wild.”

Rick didn’t argue, his expression hooded. But she felt the tension whittle down his shoulders and glimpsed it in the rigid set of his jaw.

“What about you? Where did you sleep with that pirate of yours?”

“He wasn’t mine.”

“You know what I’m asking, Em,” he said softly, but it didn’t feel soft. It felt like a man who was invested in the answer, his hands moving to fist the wall on each side of her shoulder. She tilted her chin, looking him in the eye.

“In his quarters, while the others were asleep. In his smaller, private boat, where he didn’t have a crew. He had a nice, fluffy bed, one he stole from other pirates. We made it squeak a lot. Also, there was a thunderstorm once. We almost drowned but managed to survive. He fucked me on the deck and we didn’t have to be quiet about it.”

The fisted hands jerked down, fingers brushing the cloth on her hips.

“Jesus, Em. That’s hot.” His voice was rough, his breathing uneven. “I bet you screamed in pleasure. Do you do that? Scream in pleasure?”

“I haven’t yet. But I made him scream my name.”

“Hot damn. That’s even hotter.”

“It’s the pirates,” she blurted out, comprehension dawning. “Your coarse language and the odd words you throw out now and then. You hang out with pirates a lot.”

“There are nice ones. I bet you already know that.”

“I know. But your kind shuns everyone.”

The arousal in his features died a bit as he frowned, mulling over her words. Slowly, he shook his head.

“Discrimination is for the weak—those who can’t see past their heads stuck in their asses. I might tend to think that Fae folks are among the superior breed, but we’re not the only superior ones. It also doesn’t mean that other creatures don’t have unique qualities that are more than impressive.” He grimaced. “Now, I’m not a huge fan of vampires, but there’s no denying that they could rip my heart out and cut my head off the moment I lower my guard around them.”

“Vampires are crazy,” she agreed. “I wouldn’t want to mess with them.”

“Hmm.” His gaze flicked to her mouth. “You’re a witch. Your powers have people’s knees trembling, and I bet you could choke me with a snap of those fingers.”

“Maybe. With the right chant outside this castle.”

“It’s hot as hell,” he murmured, low voice washing over her senses. “What else can you do with that magic of yours, sweetheart?”

This was verging on burning-hot territory, her skin so tingly that all she needed was a touch to explode. But Rick didn’t touch her. Despite crowding her in, there was a certain control to the way he held himself, his fingers limited to tracing circles on her dress, not her actual hips. It didn’t stop her from feeling the whisper of his erection somewhere in her lower half, one she knew would grow harder if she just arched her body the right way. But that would mean direct contact with her throbbing core and the idea of all that rubbing and crazy friction...

A moan cruised from her throat, accidental and filled with longing. A sound came from him—and then he was pushing off the wall and taking all the heat with him until she felt the frost. Emerald shivered as she looked at him. He looked back, jaw more clenched than ever. He turned away from her, silent. When he turned back, he was composed and there was no bulge straining his trousers.

“Let’s get you to your room. I checked it already and it’s safe. I can go fetch Yu after. I’m sure he’s tired from all that dancing.”

Disappointment crashed hard, but she swallowed it and nodded.

“Right. He’s definitely tired.”

He stepped forward, as if to hold her and lead her, then changed his mind and put his hands in his pockets. Emerald thought she saw them fisting again inside, but her gaze flew straight ahead, refusing to dwell on it. Did he stop because he



didn't want her to think she was another notch in his bedpost? Did their teasing mean nothing but a way to pass up the time? Did he just get...bored?

It didn't matter. This was for the best.

“Follow me. I'll lead the way and show you some of our less-used paths.”

Later, as she tossed and turned in bed, it occurred to Emerald that there was one more reason for him to stop—perhaps the most important reason. She recalled his promise, declared in a solemn voice while they had danced the night away.

*I won't fuck you unless you say yes.*

Would they have already been doing it if she had just said the magic word earlier?

Her lack of control frustrated her, but so did the ache that just wouldn't go away. She cursed the complicated situation, cursed herself for being so weak against his seductive words. Then she continued cursing herself when her hand skimmed downward until she was rubbing her knuckles against her panties...then, coasting her fingers inside, where she was already wet and trembling.

Cursing turned into a moan, then a whimper. The minutes ticked by and the frustration returned when no matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't get to that orgasm her body needed—not like when his fingers were the ones inside her, driving her mad with lust and leaving her aching for more. For everything. Emerald climbed to the verge each time but never tipped, and in the end, she gave up and threw a pillow against a wall.

“Datted man. I could please myself just fine before he meddled.”

Now he had ruined it for her and she wanted to kill him for it. She climbed out of bed and stalked across the rug, the fluffy material becoming worn down when magic unconsciously skated down her feet. Voices of how bad of an

idea it was to entertain this attraction floated in her head, the cons heavier than the pros and willing her to return to her unperturbed, emotionless state. It took her a few more seconds to register that an added layer of voices could be heard outside her head...outside her room.

Emerald didn't let her magic disappear abruptly, understanding that would only catch more attention. Quietly, she ambled closer to the door until her ear was pressed there and she could redirect her energy to that ear. Once she did, the voices became crystal clear.

"Are you sure there's no way for us to sneak in there and check out her room?"

"There's no way. Bronco did a good job of securing it and I think Rick did something else to double that security."

"Prince Rick. Really?"

"Yes. I don't know what they placed, but I'm sure he would be alerted once there's a breach. The same goes for his room. It's as tight as the outside security and Bronco had a hand in it too."

"I'm not interested in his room. I can ambush him easily anywhere on the grounds. We're due for that confrontation, anyway. But her...what a pity. It would have been nice to catch her off guard and see if she would squeal like a pig."

"She's not ordinary. I feel it, but I can't quite place what she is. If she is a witch, then we might be in trouble."

"Don't worry about it. Leave her to me. I'll get my answers somehow, witch or not. And if she's a witch, then it will be fun. I haven't played with one in a while."

The voices drifted off. A chill raced down her spine, not because they were talking about possibly hurting her that casually.

No, it was because Emerald was pretty sure that one of the voices belonged to Erin.

## Chapter 10

Bronco looked at Rick as if wondering whether he was mental or a different person altogether. Frankly, Rick wasn't sure either.

“You didn't get any sleep? Even when you retired early from your welcome banquet and didn't join your friends' party?”

Rick winced. He didn't promise to join, not specifically, but he was sure that wouldn't sit well with them—and he needed them soft and their guards down for him to get to the truth. He peered at the Fae who was fast becoming his right-hand man.

“I take it my absence in both has been circulating already?”

“Yes. The princess retired early too. Word has it that she wasn't pleased with how callously you dismissed her and my sister's efforts.”

He raised a brow. “Not surprising for Erin. She likes her banquets respected. And what do you think?”

Bronco shifted on his feet, unsure. Then the man straightened his shoulders and cleared his throat.

“I think my sister's annoying for throwing herself at you when she has plenty of suitors and could settle down respectably anytime. Of course, none of her relationships with men... or women...are my business. I think the crown princess has a right to be displeased, though you also have every right to not attend what you don't want to attend... which, I will reiterate, is none of my business.”

“Hmm. And what do you think of my visitors?”

At this, Bronco's spine stiffened and he was silent for a long time. When Rick kept staring at him, the man finally relented.

“The pixie’s fine. A little silly, but he matches the energy of a lot of our undignified peers.” He sighed as if the reality of their undignified peers exasperated him. “That woman...”

“Yes?”

Bronco glanced at him, then looked straight ahead. “She’s not silly. She’s serious and intense. Respectful enough, but I don’t trust the way she eyes everything when she thinks no one’s looking.”

Pride lit up inside him, along with something else. While Emerald’s independent, capable streak was impressive, the sexiness of it called to him more.

“Maybe she’s just observant and making sure she’s safe here. She might be loyal to me, but that doesn’t mean she should trust everyone in the Winter Court blindly.”

“Maybe. But I have secured her room to alert you if she ever stole something from us or if something new enters her room. Just in case. You’re the only one who would know and I’m sure you would deal with it accordingly.”

Amusement spread through him, even while he kept quiet that he already knew. The alert had been ringing in a magical device in his bedroom when he had entered it last night.

“Clever, Bronco. I suppose this means you trust Yu and don’t trust her?”

Bronco shrugged. “I don’t trust outsiders in general. But it doesn’t matter.”

“Why not?”

“They don’t run the household, I do. They don’t have any effect on how things work here, including those outside my grasp because the other Fae assigned to protect our court are very capable. Also, in case she breaks her loyalty, I’m sure you will do the right thing.”

The turn of conversation had Rick’s smile drifting off as he deduced that Bronco wasn’t even trying to impress him.

Curiosity blazed and he tilted his head.

“Do you think I will make a good king someday, Bronco?”

“Only if you clean up your act, Your Majesty.”

“And my sister?”

There was a hesitant pause, then, “She will rule well. But her short temper might get us in trouble while your patience is in line with your father’s.”

It wasn’t a full-on support, but it was enough. For now.

“Thank you for your honesty.”

“You’re welcome. What were you doing when you weren’t sleeping?”

Watching over the halls and the rooms. Making sure Yu didn’t leave. Longing for a witch, who had probably slept so well and didn’t spare a thought in his direction. It was laughable how he only thought of her, and even the idea of stroking himself to images of their interaction in that alcove felt hollow compared to what could have been. Jealousy had been a nasty bastard keeping him aching as he remembered—and envisioned—over and over again how she looked on that ship deck while her pirate fucked her thoroughly. The ache had become unbearable when he recalled his trysts, too, and all he could see was her, with her head thrown back and her voice calling his name.

*You promised her. Keep your promise.*

“Just reexploring the court. It doesn’t matter. There’s no event today and I can catch up on my sleep.” But the way Bronco reacted had him frowning. “Unless there’s an event today that I forgot about.”

“Her Majesty, the crown princess, wants to talk to you.”

“I’m sure she does. Please tell her I’m asleep.”

“She made a royal decree for it, demanding you to meet with her as soon as you can. You can’t refuse and I will

be punished if you do.”

“Oh, for the love of—” Rick hissed, then inhaled deeply. The wheels in his mind turned. “Bronco?”

“Yes?”

“The decree said as soon as I can, right?”

“Right?”

Rick beamed. “Okay. Then please make yourself scarce today. Very scarce.”

The man looked at him again as if he was mental, but understood, too, that Erin couldn’t punish immediately with such an open-ended decree. With a sigh, Bronco agreed.

“I will. But you will have to meet up with her soon, I’m afraid.”

“And I will,” Rick promised. “As soon as I can. For now, I can’t yet.”

Bronco shook his head but didn’t argue, already leaving. When the man was gone, Rick’s good nature dropped as he scrambled out of the hall, aware that most of his peers were asleep and wishing he could sleep too. But things needed to be pushed to action because his sister was already starting the wheel—and he couldn’t very well let her navigate things by herself.

It was his fault for worrying over his visitors when they were perfectly capable of handling themselves. It was his fault for getting distracted, particularly over the larger, prettier visitor, who looked so vulnerable and turned on last night that if he was his old self, he would have had his way with her right then and there. But she hadn’t said yes. He would cut off his hand first before touching her without her consent, even if it killed him...and yes, it was killing him.

The bad mood followed Rick as he snuck out of the castle, marching to the back where the snow was mostly untouched. He jumped above a mound and used the other nearby mounds to further the distance between him and his home, then trudged on frosted flakes and covered his tracks

along the way. Halfway through his trek, he sensed the buzzing and paused.

“Yu?”

There was silence. A grin spread at the sight of the small creature that hovered in between trees and slowly approached him.

“I knew that was you. I’m starting to get the hang of your presence whenever you’re flying nearby and...”

The words halted when the scent of blood filled his nostrils before he spotted the red dripping from Yu’s shoulder. Alarm kicked in and the tables turned as he hovered over the pixie now.

“What the hell happened?”

“Play,” Yu announced, his voice weak. Tinier than ever. “All morning, we play.”

“Who?”

It came off as a growl. The pixie startled, then stood on the palm he held open.

“Friends. Party. Your special friends.”

His blood throbbed, a raging fire that threatened to explode. It turned his vision red, his body already prepped to head back to that castle and let them see just how much of a not-fun guy he was. But the whimper from Yu told him that he would be abandoning the pixie, and, well...Yu needed him now.

It was another battle of willpower, one that made him think of Emerald. Thinking of her soothed his soul, but also allowed him to grasp at his composure the way he knew she would. When he was relatively calmer, he looked at Yu.

“Do you want to go back to the castle?”

The pixie’s wings lurched, wracked with an involuntary shudder that only pained those shoulders more. Yu shook his head.

“Later. Recuperate. Somewhere private.” A pause, then, “Em okay. With Jyss.”

Rick stilled, then decided that Jyss wouldn't hurt her even if the Fae didn't like his current relationship with Emerald. Besides, Emerald was way stronger than Jyss and wouldn't let herself be ambushed. With a nod, Rick turned and continued his offbeat path away from the castle.

Minutes later, he arrived in a forest lushier than the rest, the snow melting away to give way to blue flowers and silver-white grass. Two rocks stood on a clearing, smoothed over the years and covering the ground with a steady thrum of peaceful energy. While others did their best to respect the area and keep away, this was a deeper part of home to him and one of his favorite spots. But it was also the one he dreaded going to lately.

“Hello, Mom and Dad...your Highnesses. I'm sorry for not visiting sooner and for not being here for a while. It didn't feel that long where I was, but I heard it's been months and only my sister has been your frequent visitor.”

There was no response, but he was just getting started. He sat down in front of the rocks, then gently placed Yu on the ground. Yu looked up quizzically.

“Talking who?”

Rick smiled. “My parents.”

“Alive?”

“Dead, but...it's not that simple.” He looked to the rocks again. “I brought a friend with me. You might be able to tell that he's new and foreign, different from me and my sister. His name's Yu and he needs some help. Can you help him?”

The silence went on. Yu's lashes fluttered, drowsiness and perhaps the wound already tiring him, but the pixie started when a light circled his tiny feet. Rick held up a hand before the creature could fly away, meeting his gaze and shaking his head.

*Trust me, he tried to communicate without words. I won't hurt you.*



The pixie's wings stopped moving, his body tentatively returning to the ground. The circling light continued, then grew brighter, before spiraling up and coating the pixie's bottom half. Yu whimpered at whatever sensation was coating him, which Rick supposed felt like being wrapped up in a warm, tight hug.

"Just stay still," he suggested. "If you can."

The light danced upward, reaching the pixie's chest and finally, his shoulders. Yu's whimper grew louder, then died down, and Rick watched as the pixie's agonized expression morphed into a relief so stark and raw. It felt like Rick's tension was being healed, too, leaving his body until the two men basked in their relaxed state and the light died away. Rick observed Yu's shoulder, pleased when even the traces of blood were gone.

"Thank you, Your Highnesses. Did it feel good to bestow kindness on a stranger?"

The light flared, then retreated. The lack of brightness told him that there were opposing answers and his mouth quirked.

"Come on, Dad. I'm sure it felt good, even just a little bit. No one will know that you didn't look down your nose at a non-Fae."

The light didn't come back, as if not deeming his words important enough to answer. Rick let it be, not needing it. But he did need one for a question that had been plaguing him since his return—hell, since he had been thrown out of here by a force that their security should have been able to detect but didn't.

"Good," Yu muttered, then lay down more freely on the ground. "No more pain."

"That's good."

"Thanks."

"He's grateful," Rick said to the rocks. Then, "Is my sister thirsty enough for the crown to betray me?"

There was silence again. He waited for the light to come back and coat him this time, for the answers to be as clear as day. But there was no light and there were no answers. Frustrated, Rick moved to stand up—and was hauled down so smoothly and so effortlessly.

*Erinnala is special. So are you, Rickavior.*

*When we are gone, it will just be you and her. Please rely on each other as your father and I did. We have bigger enemies outside to indulge in these petty fights you two always have.*

*Your games and your irresponsible ways are going to be the death of us! Maybe we should have just broken our centuries-old rule and given the throne to your sister!*

The words were familiar, taking him back to the years in his life when they said them to him in reality. It felt like another brand of comfort, but his heart twinged remembering how the king had seen his son, especially during their later years. The queen, in the meantime, favored Rick more than anyone else, to the point that Erin was either neglected or scolded for always trying to outshine him.

*Rickavior, your heart is light and that's what our kingdom needs. People will take advantage, but those who know you well wish they had that lightness within them too.*

The words faded, but they were locked in his heart. None of them answered his question directly, and even if there was a hidden message there, he couldn't for the life of him figure out what it was. Rick sighed.

“You guys have always been cryptic. I guess that doesn't change even when you're dead and truly cold.”

The next bout of silence was the strongest, the energy retreating and no longer interacting with either of them. Yu continued lounging in his spot.

“What about you, Yu? What do you think of my sister?”

“Pretty. More than you.”

Rick scoffed but couldn't fault the honesty. When the pixie dozed off into slumber, Rick knelt very low until his mouth was whispering on the ground.

"Please keep my friend safe here. Please let him sleep in peace and without disturbance."

His father might choose to ignore the request, but he was confident that his mother's energy would respond to it. Yu continued sleeping as Rick trudged away, his doubts already tucked in. He scanned his mind, then asked a kitchen staff to pass on a message.

"My room feels outdated and boring. I need new furniture and I need the best. Tell whoever's assigned to redecorating it that if he doesn't come within an hour, I'm going to destroy every single piece and wreak havoc in every other room I come in contact with today."

Not long after that, Bronco was hurrying to Rick's room, gaze landing on the lush couch in line with the doorway. It was intact, with Rick lounged comfortably in the center.

"Your room is fine. The furniture is new and the best. I'm not assigned to it, but I worked directly with the designer to make sure of it..." Bronco trailed off, the puzzlement disappearing. "Which means that message was a direct call for me."

"You catch on fairly quickly, Bronco," Rick praised.

"I...yes, Your Majesty."

"Bronco, I know I said to make yourself scarce, but I have a favor to ask."

"What is it?"

"Please round up Nikolai and Merrell. Take them to our third entertainment room and tell them we're holding a party...actually, no. Take all my friends to our entertainment room, not just the two of them. But before you send them over, send Jyss first...oh, and keep an eye on Emerald, please."

Bronco was back to being bewildered, but the man held himself with grace and was off to do his bidding. When

he reached the entertainment room, Jyss was already there, visibly excited and already posing to seduce. Rick cleared his throat before the woman could rip her clothes off.

“I need you to set up the interrogation equipment in here. As fast and as discreetly as you can, Jyss. You have half an hour to do it.”

Like Bronco, Jyss was confused but realized that Rick had no intention of playing. She moved into action as efficiently as her brother, and soon all Rick had to do was wait it out. So, he sat on the plushiest chair in the room, one that was facing the closed door.

And he waited.

His friends came in trickles, only one of them prompt and the rest late and looking tired. They lit up at the sight of him all dressed up...then, morphed into confusion when they finally noticed the interrogation equipment. Rick didn't give them time to panic, his hand already on the on button and pressing it.

Magic filled the room and coated everyone hard, his parents' brand still very much alive in it. His friends flew and were pinned against the wall, which they tried to pull away from but couldn't. The women peppered out some pleas while the men growled.

“What is the meaning of this, Prince Rick?” Nikolai asked, green hair stiff with tension and glaring at him. “You didn't show up last night and you call us for such nonsense this morning?”

“When we were told there would be another party, we thought it would be the fun kind,” Merrell intoned, calmer than the others. The man smirked. “Maybe this *is* a party, then. Some kind of weird, twisted—”

Rick flicked a button, sending Merrell flying in his direction. The smug smirk was wiped off when Rick grabbed the man's shirt and hauled him toward a chair.

“Rick, this isn’t funny anymore—”

“That’s Prince Rick to you. Your Majesty or Your Highness will do too,” Rick chirped back. “I won’t even oppose Your Royal Handsomeness if you’re down for that. But let’s discuss that later.”

He locked the man’s limbs in place, pressing more buttons that released more energy into the air. The pleas and protests from the wall prisoners died down while Merrell let out a strangled breath.

“Rick—Your Majesty—”

“Keep talking. Now, tell me about your time this morning with our pixie guest, Yu.”

He watched the way the Fae paled, seconds before a wall was put up and Merrell was shaking his head.

“I didn’t do anything—”

“Wrong answer. There should be confusion first, not an instant denial. Now, let’s try again. Nikolai, come join us. And feel free to tell us the names of the others involved.”

The denial came in spades, then spiraled into howls when the interrogation equipment glowed and did its thing. He knew Bronco hovered somewhere outside, but the door remained closed and no sounds filtered outside the room. Within minutes, he had a blabbering Nikolai in his hands and Merrell snarled at the man to shut up.

“We were just having fun and didn’t mean any harm at first. He was very playful and tiny, but he bit Merrell when Merrell tried to rip out his wings. Merrell asked me to hold him down and hit him hard. I joined in...but I swear I stopped after one hit! He was too frail and didn’t look like he could take more. We were just joking around.”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up, you—”

“Who else is involved in hurting Yu, Merrell?” Rick asked, redirecting the attention.

Merrell gritted his teeth and struggled against his bonds, but the glow curled around him until his eyes glazed.

His answer felt distant when he finally spat it out.

“Me. Nikolai, too, but mostly me. The others watched. Only Paola asked us to stop, but she’s always been a weakling for you.”

Rick glanced at Paola, whose head was slightly turned away as if she didn’t want to see what was happening.

“Paola, come here.”

He released her with a flick and waited until she willingly stepped forward, albeit quivering along the way. Unlike his deadpan, abrupt interaction with the two men, he was gentle when he sat her down, redirected the glow on her, and whispered in her ear.

“Did you spike my drink at least once in your life?”

The shaking of her head was prompt, along with the one-word response as soon as her eyes glazed.

“No.”

“Are you aware of an attempt on my life recently?”

Another shake of the head, another no. Satisfied, he let her leave the room, confident that Bronco would take care of the rest. Then he called the others on the wall and waited patiently until they approached him, not needing to be dragged. When their answers satisfied him, too, he waved them off until only the two original parties remained.

“Why are you whispering to them?” Nikolai asked nervously. “They had nothing to do with Yu. Are we being cut off from the circle? Is this our punishment for what we did to him?”

Casually, Rick leaned in to whisper the questions to the Fae, too, and felt an odd sense of relief when the man’s answers were similar to his other friends. But he still didn’t let the man off easy.

“You can go, but you may not leave the court until I call on you again. Consider this a test of our friendship if you still want to be on good terms with me.”

Nikolai looked scared of the trap somewhere in that statement, but he nodded and hurriedly left. Rick finally turned his full attention to the last Fae strapped in.

“We’re not your enemies and not prisoners of the court,” Merrell declared indignantly. “You can’t just interrogate us like this. It’s against—”

“Did you spike my drink?”

There was a short, visible battle of wills, then, “Yes.”

His heart ached, but Rick pushed on. “Did you know about the attempt on my life?”

Another yes, another crash and burn of hope—especially because a part of him had still wondered if it had just been a prank gone wrong. Rick struggled with the truth laid out to him. But like an avalanche, he couldn’t stop.

“Were you in on the attempt to my life, hence the drink spiking?”

“Yes.”

“How many others are involved?”

“Me, a magic user, and your enemy.”

“Who is the magic user and who is my enemy?”

The answer didn’t come as Merrell’s lips closed down and his eyes teared up. Rick tried again until it dawned that he could sense a different kind of energy in the room, restricted and subtle. Merrell couldn’t mention names, even when the interrogation glow was pressuring him.

“Are the magic user and my enemy the same people?”  
Rick tried again.

There was no response. Merrell’s expression crumbled in pain and Rick felt his chest tighten.

“Are the magic user and my enemy involved in the other deaths in our court?”

“Yes.”

“Were they murdered?”

“Yes.”

“Are you involved in those deaths?”

“No.”

Merrell’s agony was so raw that Rick couldn’t take it anymore. Reluctantly, he turned off the device but didn’t remove the binds. Merrell’s entire body slumped, exhausted, and sweating profusely.

“Admitting knowledge to the murder of our Fae folks is a crime, especially because you didn’t tell anyone. Being an accomplice to a royal member’s murder is also a crime, and you admitted enough to be imprisoned,” Rick intoned. “I hope it was worth it, whatever it was that motivated you to do this against me and our people. Even if you didn’t like me, even if you loathed me, it would have been easier to just avoid me instead of resorting to this.”

“You were supposed to be the fun one, not the one nosing your business where it didn’t belong.”

“Talkative now, aren’t we? Tell me more.”

There was hatred in Merrell’s expression, one that had never been there whenever they partied together—an emotion hidden so well all these years. The man quaked with it.

“You had everything, the life of a powerful man with no consequences for anything you did. Even when you were missing, there were more worried questions than accusations about how irresponsible you were. Those deaths were warranted and if only you stuck to your lane—”

A door slammed open, interrupting the conversation. Or confession. Familiar energy trailed in Erin’s wake as she marched forward, eyes searing Rick with a heated look.

“What’s going on? Why am I hearing the news that you took our prison equipment up here? You know that’s illegal and...” Erin trailed off, attention finally landing on Merrell. Her voice grew sharp while her lavender eyes turned uncertain. “Rick, what’s going on?”



Rick stood up, facing her. Studying her. There was no hint of panic, not even an obvious attempt to hide her confusion. When she kept scanning Merrell's bound form, Rick cleared his throat.

"Nikolai and Merrell have just confessed to hurting my friend, Yu," he declared. "While Nikolai is only guilty of that, Merrell has also admitted to spiking my drink, working with a magic user to get me out of La Fleur, and throwing me in an island filled with enough magical creatures to keep me trapped—or kill me. I should know, considering I was almost killed by a pixie, a siren, and a giant while I was clawing my way out of there to come back here."

As he talked, he watched Erin's confusion morph into disbelief, then a stillness. He could sense her cognitive wheels working before she sucked in a breath.

"You didn't leave." Her voice was still infused with disbelief, even while that stillness had turned to restlessness. "You...didn't leave for an adventure?"

"You tell me, sister."

"How would I know when you don't even talk to me and wouldn't meet up with me?"

"And why would I want to talk to you when you threaten to punish others if I don't? Why do they have to be involved?" he returned. "Unless getting others involved is what you thrive in."

Lavender eyes widened, then grew blank. Her restlessness transformed into a visible realization and her whisper was stunned.

"You think I'm involved in whatever madness this is. It's why you wouldn't talk to me...why you continuously avoid me."

"Again, you tell me," he said evenly, refusing to fall for it. Out of the corner of his eye, Merrell was silent, watching them with a fascination that felt morbid.

He braced himself for the man to pipe in and defend her, denying her involvement. He waited for her to deny it,

too, and to do something spectacular: throw a tantrum and redirect the accusation, maim him on the spot and twist the truth, or plead with him that she wasn't involved and get on his good side...manipulate the situation, which a lot of Fae folks were fantastic at. But she did neither, walking forward with determination instead. Her shoulders were rigid and her jaw was clenched, but her voice was firm.

“I would be more than happy to tell you. Strap me up, brother.”

“What?”

Rick stared. Erin stared back.

“Interrogate me. While we're at it, perhaps your witch can help secure the process with a magical spell or a truth potion too.”

## Chapter 11

“You are requested in one of the court’s entertainment rooms, Miss Emerald.”

Emerald wasn’t used to the formality, especially when Jyss either acknowledged her rudely or didn’t acknowledge her at all. She glanced up. Sure enough, Jyss’s face looked like she would rather be anywhere else.

“If it’s to attend another banquet, I’ll wait for Rick—erm, the court prince. If it’s for a private party, I’ll pass.”

She expected that to be the end of the conversation and was caught off guard when a hand wrapped around her elbow and yanked her up. Thunderstruck, it took her a few seconds to wrench her arm off before she got dragged away. She gritted her teeth.

“I get that someone’s trying to force you to spend time with me to get rid of whatever prejudice you have grown up with—”

“Shut up. Not everything’s about you or me. And while I don’t get what they need from you, I will get you there despite your protests and hurt you if it comes down to it.”

Rigidity vibrated throughout Emerald’s core, taking it as a threat. Her energy awakened, even while instinct told her that it would be a very bad idea to let it out. Then she caught a glimpse of the emotion that Jyss was trying to fight, something she didn’t anticipate seeing in the woman: panic. Agitation. Just a slight touch of fear.

“What’s going on, Jyss?”

Jyss opened her mouth, looking ready to spew insults. Then the woman changed her mind and took a deep, calming breath.

“You are needed in the entertainment room.”

Someone who held a grudge like that wouldn’t just swallow it if it wasn’t important. Before she could analyze it,

Emerald found herself already following the hastening woman as she was led to uncrowded paths and deeper into castle territory. Doubt set in when it got colder, the walls so thick with ice and glinting with life. They could snap around her any second now and swallow her into the wall, where she would be hidden and never seen again...

“What took you so long?” Bronco growled, glare directed at Jyss as soon as they spotted him. Jyss shot her a look but didn’t say a word. “They need help. I need to go. Jyss...”

“I’m here. I’m not leaving.”

It all sounded so foreboding. Again, before she could ask questions, she was ushered inside the door they seemed to be guarding. Emerald had a moment of anxiety that she was going to be locked up before her eyes adjusted to the room’s interior...and her mind was blown away.

Bronco slipped in, too, quick and efficient as he removed a slumped male Fae from a handful of complicated straps. He hefted the Fae over his shoulder and was gone from the room, leaving her with the only strapped person left: Erin, who was looking straight at Rick, who also kept his eyes on his sister while he peppered her with questions.

“Did you spike my drink at any point in your life?”

“Yes. When we were fifteen. You were being a jerk and it was infuriating. Your stomach hurt the whole day and you couldn’t join the trip that Father arranged. He was very mad at you.”

“Just one time?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever made an attempt on my life?”

“No. That’s preposterous.”

“Were you aware of anyone making an attempt on my life?”

“No. That’s murder and a crime, even in our court.”

“What did you think when I left La Fleur?”

“I couldn’t believe it. I knew you loved your fun but I didn’t think you would just go off somewhere without telling anyone and ruin our parents’ legacy.” A pause, then, “I didn’t think you would abandon me.”

Awareness sank into Emerald’s bones as she took in Erin’s fervent voice and the dazed look in her features, a contrast that shouldn’t have made sense. Then there was the glow of a crystal device, dancing around Erin and illuminating the siblings until they were so achingly breathtaking. Because Emerald had magic and could recognize powerful energy when she felt it, she knew the intimate conversation wasn’t just a conversation—and just like that, she understood why she had been called.

On cue, magenta eyes flicked toward her, unreadable. Perhaps there was some sort of relief there, but it was gone in an instant.

“You requested my presence?” she asked.

Lavender eyes flew toward her too. “That was me. My brother thinks I tried to kill him. I figured a torture machine shouldn’t be the only thing questioning me.”

Uncertainty simmered within her and Rick’s silence was dreadful. But the small, subtle nod from him had her feet moving closer toward them until she was standing beside Erin.

“I will ask her the same questions. Over and over,” he said. “Do what you must.”

There were no further instructions, and instinct rioted at releasing her magic when the court hadn’t been the most welcoming of it. But she nodded, too, and knelt, easing energy into her fingers. They glowed, dimmer than the device’s glow. She bit her tongue when the larger energy in the room sensed hers and crowded around her, a crawling sensation that pushed her back.

Emerald directed more into her feet until she could lock herself in place and inactively fight the opposing force. Her stomach clenched from the hostility, but she ignored it and

placed her hands on Erin's as soon as Rick repeated the first question.

There was a rumble and a roaring when Erin resisted, then a gushing clarity when the woman answered. It washed over Emerald like a balm, the sweet, melodious voice ringing like a prayer. Another bout of resistance came at every question thrown, followed by the same gushing clarity. It wreaked havoc on Emerald's body, but she knew what she felt wasn't even a quarter of what Erin felt.

On the third round of repeated questions, the resistance snapped and Erin answered more freely, her words close to tripping over each other. Muscles trembled, then went lax, the emotions from the woman flowing jaggedly toward Emerald. When the first hint of pain came, Emerald's hands jolted.

"More. I can take more," Erin gasped, immediately aware of the broken connection.

"Stop," Emerald called at the same time, the woman's agony hidden so deep and fought so intensely. It made her quiver. "She can't take more."

Erin hissed. "I said I can take—"

"That's enough. You've answered enough." Rick's voice boomed, the steel in it cutting off the start of an argument. Emerald stepped back, needing to be away from such a palpable force as she fought to separate her magic from the two's emotions and the heavy one around them.

Erin hissed again, sheer frustration coating her expression. Then her mind caught up to her emotions and Emerald watched as the woman closed her eyes and stilled for a long time. When those lavender orbs opened, it was like a switch was flicked. Erin remained still as Rick carefully removed her binds. Erin stood up, head held high and meeting Rick's gaze.

"Am I clear of the charges, brother?" she asked coolly.

Silence.

"Yes."

There was a short nod, then Erin walked away as if she was just leaving a formal social event. The woman didn't even spare Emerald a glance upon brushing past, but Emerald felt it, anyway: the gaping hurt that loomed within the woman's being, one that was already weaving its way inside to be locked up tight. When the door closed and Emerald looked back, she found Rick slumped on a chair, his hands on his forehead and his eyes closed. It hadn't occurred to her until that moment that the dazzle of energies and his sister's responses would have affected him too.

"She's telling the truth," she said. "I don't have a potion and making one takes a while, but I know when someone's surrendered her truth. The device was enough. It's a powerful one and you didn't need me."

More silence.

"It was my parents.' They used it on enemies and we were forbidden to use it on our court folks. We weren't even allowed to take it out of the prison area."

Which meant he had broken the rules for this setup and for that interrogation. She tilted her head.

"Okay. How about you tell me what started all that elaborate display?"

"It started with Yu's bleeding shoulder and spiraled from there."

Whatever she was expecting, it wasn't that. A rush of anger entered her and had her headed for the door, but Rick was faster, recovering from his weak moment and blocking her path before she could open it.

"Who hurt Yu?" she demanded. "Where is he?"

"A couple of my friends who are no longer my friends," he said firmly. "He's fine now. Healed and all. And Bronco went to get him and will keep him safe."

Relief washed over her at his honest assurance but so did surprise that she didn't mind Bronco taking care of the pixie. She took a closer look at Rick.

“You’re not fine.”

He didn’t deny it. “It’s been a long day.”

“Define long.”

“Merrell spiked my drink and conspired against my life.”

“Merrell?” The Fae from earlier floated in mind and her body went cold. “Oh. One of your friends.”

“Hmm. Erin walked in on us and let’s just say it escalated from there.”

Erin’s hurt floated in, too, a rawer feeling that tightened her chest. It didn’t take a genius to understand that despite proving Erin’s innocence, the damage was done and it would take a while to repair the fracture in the siblings’ trust with each other.

“I see,” she mumbled, mostly because she didn’t know what to say.

“The device proved his guilt. But there’s something inside him that’s preventing him from confessing the rest.”

Magic.

“Take me to him,” she found herself saying.

“Em—”

“Either that or I will search for him. Alone.”

He frowned. His hair was askew and his clothes were so wrinkled, but even then, she thought he was the most spectacular creature to look at. A small sigh escaped his lips.

“Why do I get the feeling that’s not a bluff?”

“Clock’s ticking. Take me to him.”

There was a muttered curse before she was led out of the room. Rick paused to give instructions to Jyss, and Emerald felt Jyss’s eyes on their backs as they marched away. The minutes ticked by as she was led even deeper and had to use a bit of magic to lend her some heat. The walls whispered to her, not liking that, but she didn’t complain, understanding



it was part of their security at work. When she was ushered inside an ice block, instinct screamed at her to run and she knew this was prison territory.

“Make it quick, whatever you’re doing,” Rick said as he stood in the doorway.

Inside the ice block, there was a hollow space where Merrell lay. The ice walls surrounded him tightly, following every curve as if they melted against him. She knelt before him, directing her energy like she had with Erin, and touched him.

Touching Erin had been a clear, albeit vulnerable experience, sprinkled with moments of agony here and there. Touching Merrell felt like she was touching a block of ice before a bit of that melted off...and her magic came into contact with a darker, more powerful one lurking inside him. It didn’t feel alive. When she tried to poke further, the slumbering form didn’t awaken, but sickening anxiety gripped her stomach and it felt like she was choking.

Stubborn to the core, she tried again. And again. Each time, she didn’t get further than that initial melting, but layer after layer of trepidation was stacked at her until there was a violent storm inside her. It consumed her, not necessarily making her violent, too, but distracting her thoroughly. Belatedly, she felt herself floating and registered that arms were carrying her out of the ice block.

“It’s strong,” she admitted reluctantly. “I can’t break it. I’m sorry.”

“I figured. But thank you for trying.”

Rick led her away, faster than when he led her in as if he didn’t want her spending another second here.

“What’s going to happen to him?”

“I don’t know. But we will try to find a way to break through whatever spell is inside him.”

“It didn’t feel like a spell.”

“What did it feel like?”

“Magic, for sure. A wall I can’t penetrate. It was...I don’t know what it was.” She sighed. “But it’s solid. That ice block...”

“It’s ancient and can keep even the strongest warlock or Fae from breaking free. It will keep him there until we let him go.”

There was some consolation to that as she didn’t think the dark magic should ever be released. The rest of their walk was peaceful, and before she knew it, they were back outside their respective rooms. Rick leaned against the wall.

“You said Yu’s fine.”

“He is.”

“You don’t look fine,” she repeated.

He said nothing.

“You haven’t slept...was that you? I felt someone pattering about outside at dawn.” She didn’t mention that she had heard Erin outside, too, just hours before that, not wanting to add salt to the wound. “You haven’t slept at all. You were busy guarding me and Yu.”

“Maybe I was just waiting for you to invite me in.”

The words had heat simmering in her belly, a gentle nudge that threatened to flourish. She noted the teasing in his tone, one that didn’t align with what had transpired earlier.

“You always joke around when you feel vulnerable. But you can’t fool me, Rick.”

The teasing faded and he frowned down at her. A hand went up, fingering her hair and parting it so he could see her face more clearly.

“Can you read me now, Em? Do you know what I’m thinking about?”

Her cheeks flushed. Like a switch flicked again, the heat spread until she was throbbing from it, intensified when he leaned in to sniff her hair. When he backed away, their faces were still inches from each other.

“It’s not going to happen,” she whispered, sounding adamant. Not feeling adamant. “You still can’t fool me. You need rest. Lots of rest. You took a man down and proved your sister’s innocence. You didn’t sleep. Even a Fae needs a break from all of that.”

While his face didn’t pull away, his forehead creased. A troubled expression took over.

“I still have a long way to go. I need to find a magic user. And an enemy. I need to figure out if they’re the same person and if they’re after my sister too. I need to know why the murders are happening. I need...”

*You*, was what his eyes said, but he didn’t say it.

“Food too,” she said.

There was a small smile, and her thumb itched to trace it. “Maybe.”

“Food is sustenance. Even a Fae needs sustenance.”

“Hmm.” A pause. “You said you heard pattering outside. That means you didn’t sleep much either. What were you doing?”

*Aching. Remembering. Wanting.*

But she left them unsaid, too, and watched as Rick’s eyes traced the lines of her cheeks, then her mouth.

“I don’t remember,” she lied.

“I see. Em?”

“What?” He didn’t respond, but his eyes flared. Belatedly, she saw her fingers brushing against his chin, temptingly close to his mouth. When his jaw clenched, she snatched her hand back as if burned. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

“I didn’t change my mind,” she blurted out. “And you promised.”

They backed away at the same time, breaking whatever spell there was. Rick nodded once, the smile returning.

“I know. It will be kept.” Then, “I’ll get Yu.”

He left it at that, not waiting for her response when he excused himself and sauntered away.

The next few days were spent with Bronco and Jyss taking turns to shadow her and Yu no matter where they went, and Emerald would have been offended if she wasn’t aware of the tension working its way into the inner court. So, she let them shadow her and made a point of not hiding in her room but kept her mingling at a minimum so the Fae folks wouldn’t think she was overstepping. It felt like it worked as those who held her with contempt couldn’t criticize her to her face while those who were curious about her found the courage to approach her and ask questions. Jyss rolled her eyes when a teenage Fae asked Emerald what it was like to be exclusively named as the prince’s special guest.

“I’m not the only special guest. Yu is too,” Emerald corrected, smiling into wide, soft blue eyes. “And it feels honorable, especially if it means interacting with folks like you. What’s your name?”

“Belmi.”

“Lovely name. And you’re very pretty.”

The girl lit up at the praise, and Emerald’s friendliness prompted more questions until it felt like an interrogation session. Relief spread over her when Belmi finally finished, skipping off with a wave.

“She can compel others, you know,” Jyss mused. “Not the Winter Court, but those not belonging in it. One time, she compelled a kid who stumbled on our island by accident to reveal his deepest, darkest secrets. He bled and screamed for hours before our court found out and put a stop to it.”

The hair at the back of Emerald’s neck prickled, but she kept her composure. “What happened to the boy?”

Jyss shrugged. “How should I know?”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“It was funny to see your face pale like that.”

Emerald scowled, tempted to throw insults at the difficult woman. But she held her temper in check and lifted her chin.

“Or maybe you were trying to warn me about who to trust. You don’t want me to get hurt because you’re assigned to me, and me being hurt means you failed in your task. It will disappoint Rick—and you don’t want him disappointed.”

“Why, you—it’s Prince Rick, you stupid—”

“Fine. Prince Rick. And I dare you to call me stupid again when I never called you a single name other than Jyss \_\_\_”

“That’s enough.”

Bronco stepped into view. So did Yu. The pixie watched with wide eyes while Bronco’s disapproving frown seared them both. Jyss glowered, but Bronco cut her off before she could speak.

“There’s an upcoming event. Her Majesty needs you to organize it as soon as possible.”

“But—”

“Now, Jyss. She’s not in a good mood.”

Jyss kept making faces but had no choice but to stomp away and follow the order. Emerald spun to face Bronco, her feet braced.

“Your sister started it.”

To her astonishment, Bronco didn’t argue.

“I know. She always starts things. But she means no harm.”

“How do you—”

“She’s like the prince that way. Harmless fun, soft heart. They need to work on that.”

“What happened to the kid that Belmi tortured?”

He looked dumbfounded at the change of topic but answered eventually. “Her Majesty wanted the kid to stay, but His Majesty fought for the kid’s compelling before he escorted the kid to Centro.”

*No, he doesn’t need to change his soft heart.* That she liked it the way it was had her mouth going dry, and she took special care to hide her reaction and not blurt out the words. Bronco waited for more questions from her, but she just nodded.

“I see. That’s interesting.”

If only she had a penny for the number of times Bronco looked at her like she was the strangest thing, she would be rich by now. She held in her laughter, then tapped Yu so they could walk away together. Bronco followed from a distance until it became routine, and even Jyss didn’t bother her that much anymore. The only times the two didn’t shadow them was when Rick was around—a rare event as he either studiously avoided her and Yu or was just too busy dealing with other stuff.

“Are you sure I have to wear this for the party?”

The question had the Fae assigned to dressing her up, Elina, smiling. In a court sprinkled with hostility and cool dismissal, the silver-haired woman was a breath of fresh air, older than the old people in Broom’s Isle but looking so fresh-faced and lovely. Elina adjusted the dress that Emerald had on, fingers swatting Emerald’s hands away.

“Lavender and magenta are the court’s official colors, other than the icy blue we often show to the public,” the woman explained. “This is a shade in between and would show respect to our future ruler, whichever of the two takes the crown in the end.”

“It’s too short.”

A cool sensation touched her knees. Emerald watched as the hem lengthened, fluttering around her skin and draping to the ground.

“Too long,” Emerald said, biting back a grin at Elina’s eyeroll.

“You’re lucky I like you,” the woman declared before shortening the dress until it was just below her knees. Emerald twirled again, the layers of sheer material moving with her.

“Even if I’m not a Fae?”

“You know what to say and when to show your emotions. You know when to push your agenda and when to back off, and you can hold your own against our more malicious peers. You can be vicious, too, when it calls for it. You’re already acting like a Fae.”

“Oh,” she said, unsure how to react. It never sank into her mind that the qualities that had made her seem inaccessible to her peers would be the ones helping her survive here. “How do I look?”

“Like a goddamn dream.”

The way Elina quietly backed off told her it wasn’t an ordinary person who had walked in, but it was the familiar voice that gripped Emerald hard. She turned to look at Rick, his shoulder leaning on the doorway and his arms crossed. There was less tension on his face, signaling he had gotten some sleep in the past few days. Even his body was relaxed, though her gaze couldn’t help tracing his broad shoulders and the way his white silk shirt molded over his form.

“Hey. I haven’t seen you in a while,” she said.

“I have been busy. Good work, Elina. This is your nicest dress yet.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Rick nodded at the older woman, who announced that she would dress Yu up in the other room. Then it was just them, the door closing and him sauntering toward Emerald. She turned around and began to remove her dress, feeling exposed by it. Of course, what should have been an easy process became complicated as she didn’t account for the rows of strings and crystal buttons that refused to work with her.

“It’s a nice dress, but Elina likes her strings and buttons too much,” she complained.

“Hold still.”

There was no need for the words as she was already stilling at the first contact of his fingers on her back. The dress shifted while he gently pulled the strings at the back, and her hands gripped the front tight to keep it from slipping. She couldn’t see him, but she imagined his frown in place and his forehead creased in concentration.

“It’s a nice dress,” she said when the silence became too much. “It feels like silk, but lighter. Sometimes it feels like I’m not wearing anything.”

There was a harder tug, then the last string was undone. His fingers moved over her buttons next. Every time he unclasped one, his thumb brushed her skin and her hiss threatened to come out.

“We have excellent designers,” he mused, unaware of her struggle. “It’s why we always look good.”

How could he speak so normally when she was about to spontaneously combust?

“Untouchable.” She tried to match his casual tone. “You guys look untouchable.”

“You should see yourself when you’re in your element, your magic blooming with no holds barred. You beat us all with how untouchable you look.”

Heat curled, then locked tight. Desire buzzed with desperate hunger, even when his tone didn’t change at all. Gulping her unwarranted reaction down, Emerald forced herself to change the subject.

“Thanks. How’s the investigation going?”

“It’s going. No further leads.” The hands skimmed lower, unclasping the buttons on her butt. “Merrell still wouldn’t budge.”

She sucked in a breath when his thumb feathered over her ass, then retreated. “How are things with you and your



sister?”

He tensed, knuckles pressing against her hip when he did. She closed her eyes.

“It’s okay. Just okay.”

“I see.”

“We had our meeting. It was awkward but we managed to work up a strategy to find the culprit. She’s the one avoiding me now.”

The fingers continued moving almost absently, tracing the hem of her dress. Belatedly, it dawned that he had sunk to his knees.

“Give it time,” she whispered. “My sisters and I fight all the time. They can’t stand that I don’t share my secrets and am not as open to them as they are to me.”

When he breathed against the back of her knee, she was dangerously close to arching her ass and begging him to do more than trace. The wantonness of it took her aback and propelled her next words out.

“When is it safe for me to leave the island?”

There was a moment of silence before his fingers were gone, even though they never really even touched her. Just like that, he was stepping away and clearing his throat.

“Soon. I promise I will let you know soon.” Then, “You can take it off now. I’ll wait for you outside.”

Regret blossomed, even while common sense told her this was good ground to walk on. She let out the breath she had been holding in when she was alone in the dressing room, then hastily changed back into her regular clothes. Outside, Bronco was nowhere to be found and Rick was the picture of patience.

“Have you had dinner?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“No more dress fitting?”

“No.”

“Good. Bedroom.”

“What? It’s early.”

“It’s getting late and some Fae folks fought earlier. I’m sure they’re not done and we have guards on standby in case they decide to continue it tonight. If they see you…”

They might take their anger out on her, she deduced. She was quiet when he led her back to their room area. So was he.

“Yu has his room now.”

“I’m aware. He’s excited.” She smiled softly, remembering the pixie’s chatter earlier. “He said he’s never had a room before and had to share everything with his fellow pixies.”

He smiled, too, and she glimpsed the brightness in his amusement. “I’ll give him a bigger one when all the trouble’s over.”

“Neat.”

“You can leave soon,” he said after a while. “I will find a way to quicken the process for you. Then we can be out of each other’s hair.”

“You already said that. Thanks.” She stopped in front of her door and turned, her eyes widening. “You’re leaving?”

“Yeah. Things to do.”

“Oh.”

Emerald waited for the teasing, flirting Rick to come out before he did leave, ready with her scathing remark or two. She waited for the bright grin to encompass his face again and put butterflies in her stomach—anything, whatever banter they used to have. Trepidation glissaded in when it didn’t come and he didn’t move closer.

“Goodnight,” he murmured, voice light but low. The hot brand of his lips on her cheek had her biting back a moan, but there was nothing to moan about as Rick kept it casual.

When she turned her head a fraction, he ended the kiss and straightened.

It was all her and her raging emotions, fighting with the logic that she should follow his lead and stop whatever tension they were tiptoeing over. He was doing it splendidly, wasn't he? It was what she wanted, wasn't it? But her stubbornness worked against her this time, nagging her conflicted mind but making one thing clear.

"You don't want to let me go. That's what's causing the mood swing."

Rick's brows furrowed. He shook his head.

"There's no mood swing and I didn't say anything about not letting you go. You deserve to go back home."

"I do," she agreed. "But you weren't acting like this until I mentioned going home."

"I was helping you out of your dress as a friend would. I was keeping a respectful distance as a friend would. I was keeping to my promise. Isn't that what you want?"

"I..." She hesitated. "Yes. Rick—"

"You don't belong here, Em. That's clear to both of us."

Hurt lashed at his hard, matter-of-fact delivery. The argument died a swift death inside her, leaving her numb.

"Yes," she found herself saying. "I don't belong here."

His mouth tightened and his shoulders tensed, but they were gone and he was giving her an apologetic look.

"I'm—"

"Don't apologize," she cut in. "I'm the one being a pain in the ass tonight."

"You're not a pain," was all he said. "Are we good?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Rick."

He was unaffected, perhaps even relieved that no arguing ensued and they could leave the topic alone. He sounded like her staying or leaving didn't matter to him at all, not in the least, and the hurt that bloomed in her chest had no right being there. She should be happy that she had her gemstone and could return to finish her mission soon. She should be ecstatic that she and Rick were on civil terms—friends, even, who had helped each other out when they needed it the most. Not lovers. Not two people longing for each other, because she didn't long for his touch, or his mouth, or his—

A sound strangled her throat and her body quaked with arousal. The resistance she had been hanging on to for so long crumbled into frustration. She missed the flirty, easygoing Rick. She missed the man who didn't care what people thought and acted with a driven focus, which made people think he was reckless when he wasn't. Heavens, she missed his crudeness and his blatant honesty, even if all it ever did was tempt her to do all the wrong things.

Emerald took a step toward the bed, then spun and yanked the door open instead. She had every intention of marching out and hunting him down, revved for a confrontation. Instead, she nearly slammed into him when she found him still where he was earlier.

“Rick.”

He didn't speak, didn't look at her. His hands were fisted, one lowering to his side until it dawned that he had been on the verge of knocking. When he finally looked up, she was unprepared for the searing longing and desire in his eyes to hit her in the gut.

“I wasn't busy,” he admitted, voice short but wracked with his inner battle. “I mean, yes, I was, but not too busy to not have time for you. It's just that...”

“You were avoiding me.”

“If I didn't, I might break promises. I don't want to break promises to you, Em.”

Fire licked her belly, then traveled in between her legs.

“Rick—”

“I respect you so much, Em, and I admire your decisive mind and independent streak. It’s hot as hell, but it’s also driving me insane. But I’m not going to do anything about it.”

This was Rick, her Rick—the Rick she cared for and lusted over with every part of her being. The man might be easygoing, but he would do everything in his power to cherish a friendship and keep a promise, even if it killed him. The knowledge that someone like him wanted her so much that it drove him insane was enough to fan the fire until she was burning inside out.

And yet, he would rather suffer than disrespect her.

“Rick—”

“I’m going to honor my promise if it’s the last thing I do,” he said fervently. “So, close the door—”

“Yes.”

“—and let’s not...” A stunning realization came over him, morphing his face as he stared at her. “What?”

“I’m saying yes,” she repeated, defiance ringing in her voice. There were nerves, too, as he was silent after, at a loss for words. Just looking at her. “I realize it makes me flaky for changing my mind. I’m a jerk and you deserve better.”

There was still no response and it was unbearable. She swallowed her dismay and tried to be understanding.

“You are free to change your mind—”

“Thank goodness,” he cut in, his voice close to a growl. “Thank the hell.”

And then he was swooping in and driving all her doubts away.

The door slammed shut and she was abruptly pressed against it, with no recollection of how she got there and how he had cornered her. All she knew was that his hands were on

her hips, clutching her dress and still not touching. His mouth was breathing harshly against her ear, but he was also inhaling her neck as if he could drown in her scent. Her nipples puckered at his visible arousal, one that he still fought so valiantly.

“I missed you.”

The confession snatched her breath. “I missed you too.” Then, “I want this, Rick.”

His fists gripped tighter.

“You have to be sure. Otherwise—”

“Sure. Very sure. Kiss me.”

He didn’t need to be told twice. The casual, unaffected Rick was gone as the one in front of her took her face in his hands and kissed her with the same driven focus that she had missed so much. His mouth moved over her in hunger, in desperate impatience. His body pressed against her, hard and unable to hide what he had hidden in the last few days.

“You’re hard,” she whimpered the moment his erection touched her belly, its heat seeping out of his clothes. “Even after I shut you out and acted difficult.”

“Em, you could throw a tantrum and I would still be hard for you. You don’t know how many nights I got hard just thinking of you. You don’t know how much jerking it took me to get out of that state, only to think of you again and get hard again.”

Crude, dirty Rick shouldn’t have turned her on so much, but here she was, quivering at every rough word.

“Just at night?” she shot back.

She felt the grin against their kiss, right before his tongue dove in and tapped hers. She lost herself in the kiss before his next words brought her back.

“Every fucking second, Em. Every time you so much as looked in my direction.”

If he kept this up, she was going to spontaneously combust again before they even got anywhere. But Rick had other ideas when he pulled her away from the wall and deposited her on the soft, fluffy bed where she also had hours of restless, lust-ridden nights. His mouth found hers again, slowing down the kiss to savor. Even his hands were slow when they parted her top and—

“Holy mother of...” He swallowed, lust smoldering and gulping hard. “No bra?”

“Some of your folks don’t wear one,” she returned.

“Hot. So hot.” His murmur breathed hot air against her neck, then one breast. “Pretty.”

His mouth closed in on a nipple, taking the ache away. But she whimpered when a new one formed, sharper and stronger than the first, a pulling, aching sensation every time his tongue brushed her tip. She hissed a breath when he suckled softly, then pulled at his hair when he sucked harder. A chuckle cruised from his throat as he took his time playing with her tits and essentially drove her higher and higher into arousal. The maddeningly slow pace had impatience blossoming until she couldn’t take it anymore and pushed him back.

“Tell me what you want,” he suggested. “Tell me—shit.”

“You have the oddest choice of words.” She smiled against his neck, then coveted another kiss as she rolled him to his back and straddled him. “I can find what I want.”

Their mouths battled between a contrast in speed while her hands trailed down, removing his shirt and exploring the hard packs of muscles underneath. His stomach shuddered when she raked a finger there, but it was her hand rubbing over his bulge that had him sucking ferociously on her tongue. Wanting more, she skidded a hand inside and wrapped it around his bare cock. The tip was already wet and she felt it harden further when she started stroking.

“Em,” he called out. “Wait a minute...Emerald.”

A harder stroke and there were no more words from him as his hips arched into her hand and his kisses turned bruising. Triumph blazed but became the last thing in her mind when she found that grinding herself against him made it feel like they were humping again, albeit with lesser clothes this time. The ridge of his cock found the slit under her panties, and their grinding shot to the next level. He sat up, grunting, kneading her breast, licking the tip. She thumbed the side of his cock and his teeth grazed the side of her neck.

“My mouth,” she said. “I want this in my mouth.”

There was a curse, explosive and resounding.

“No.”

“Rick—”

“Not now. I’m so close and your mouth is top-tier fantasy. I want you to come first.”

She blinked when she was flipped, then frowned when her legs were nudged apart. She opened her mouth to protest and melted into a puddle of blankness when a head moved in, then a tongue, licking her from end to end before diving in. Then there was more licking, lapping, and even a few fingers thrusting before he sucked. Her feet pressed against his back when he encouraged them to rest there, opening her further until he was feasting on her with his mouth, tongue, and fingers. She writhed from the pleasure, then stilled when his hand pressed against her stomach to lock her in place. His fingers curled and his lips latched on to her clit, sucking even harder—

The orgasm took her apart, rocking her world with stars and a spasm of pleasure after pleasure. When she came down from her high, their positions were different again and Rick was kissing her, smug and pleased with himself. But the tension hadn’t left his body and the crazed heat in his gaze had intensified.

“Unfair,” she said weakly. “You made me come again.”

“You liked it.”



Emerald couldn't stand that sexy smirk, so she kissed it away and rocked against him when he wouldn't let her up. Astonishment flourished when she felt the stirrings of arousal again, building and building until she was back on the verge. Their kisses turned hungrier, wilder. His body became so hard that she wanted to sink into it and never let go, but there was one thing she wanted more.

“Now, Rick. Please.”

“Em—”

“Now. Now. Now—”

He plunged, a steady push that buried him to the hilt before either of them could react. The hot, pulsing sensation of his shaft inside her made her feel electric before he was already moving his hips and fucking her hard. The no-holds-barred approach stupefied her until she realized that this was a culmination of the days of longing, of holding back, of him fighting his feelings and attraction for her. So, she wrapped her legs around his waist, opening herself up more to welcome him.

“Yes,” she repeated, a word that she knew would drive him further to the edge.

It worked, the growl releasing from his throat. Her victory morphed into an almost painful pleasure when he kissed her again, the demand taking over—as if he was claiming her, perhaps mating with her. When he lifted her and locked her fingers around the headboard railing, his hands locking with hers, she braced her body, prepared for an even more impactful climax.

Even then, Emerald wasn't prepared for his next thrust, his next grind. She wasn't prepared for the wild, desperate movement of his hips that told her Rick had lost it, the last shred of his self-control obliterated. The aftermath was her becoming the main target of working his frustration off, and the awareness of Rick using her body to get himself off was so hot that she was coming before she knew it. She cried out in pleasure, and Rick continued drilling with a singular focus as he grabbed her ass and lifted it to plunge himself deeper. His

head burrowed against her neck as his pounding turned sloppier, as he spiraled into a blind chase of what she had already gone through twice—no, thrice.

She clamped her muscles hard, tightening around his shaft. She smiled when he groaned, then moaned brokenly when his fingers found her clit again and flicked with the same singular focus. His lips clamped on her earlobe, then let out a harsh, trembling order.

“You can scream, you know. No one will hear you here. I want to hear your first scream—”

Emerald tossed her head back and screamed as the next pleasure hit her like a thunderstorm. Rick groaned again in satisfaction, thrust a few more times, and emptied himself inside her while he found her mouth for a last, sealing kiss.

The next few days, there was no more avoidance—and Rick was insatiable, finding her whenever he could and dragging her somewhere more private when no one was looking. Well-rested became well-fucked as her bedroom became their most frequented spot, and even Bronco knew to make himself scarce whenever Rick got that look in his eye. After a week, she needed newly-sewn clothes with higher necklines and longer sleeves.

“I have hickeys everywhere,” she complained, swatting his wandering hands away. They weren’t in the bedroom today but in an alcove, where he had taken her for a short break from his sparring. “I can’t have hickeys everywhere, Rick.”

While his hands behaved at her swatting, his mouth still moved to rain kisses down her neck. She sighed and arched it involuntarily, even while her hands half-heartedly tried to push him away. He chuckled.

“That’s Prince Rick to you.”

“I can’t have hickeys everywhere, my prince. I can’t—Rick!”

She tried to sound stern. But the way his kisses felt against her skin and the way his hands just seemed to know where to touch chipped away at her resolve until there was none left. Now she whimpered, even while her tongue tapped his.

“You taste so good,” he murmured.

“I can’t ask Elina to make me another dress—”

“She would love to make you another dress. But let’s not talk about her while I do this.”

The whimper morphed into a moan when his fingers glided under her dress, then turned into soundless cries when he did what he was very good at. Pleasure climbed higher and higher until it was too much, and her body quaked when the leap toward her climax came. She closed her eyes as it consumed her but had the presence of mind to grab his arm before he could step out of the alcove.

This was risky, especially in a world that wasn’t hers, but being around Rick made her feel safe. So, Emerald knelt before she could ponder over the cons, her hand already wrapped around his shaft. Magenta eyes widened, his hands tangling in her hair as if to tug her up.

“You don’t have to,” he said gruffly, thunderous darkness in his expression that spoke of his overwhelming desire.

“I know,” was all she replied before she licked the tip and felt his muscles vibrate. Another lick and his fingers were kneading her hair while disbelieving sounds came from his mouth. A groan spilled out when she licked from his tip to his balls, then another when she sucked on him. Then it became a series of incoherent words, pleas, and the sexiest voice in the world unabashedly commanding her to take him deeper while he threw his head back, lost in what had to be a wonderful sensation.

Rick erupted in her mouth while she swallowed every inch, but it didn’t end there as he tugged her up. There was no fighting his determination when he took her again, this time

against the wall with her legs wrapped around his waist and her cries buried in his neck. At the next climax, they came together, joined in their lust and incessant need. When it was over, he didn't let her go right away, his mouth resting on her hair while he embraced her tightly.

“I don't think I can spar after that,” he croaked out.

“Yes, you can. You're not human. You have lots of energy left.”

“I meant that I'll be reminiscing this moment all day and will be so distracted, it will just render me useless and an easy target.”

She mirrored the sentiment, but they reluctantly rearranged their clothes, left the alcove, and walked away from each other so he could spar and she could look for Elina. He was right about the distraction, as her mind was already wandering to how it felt to be so consumed by Rick—and that made her fail to notice that the air had turned colder and her body was close to freezing.

Emerald slowed down in her tracks when she finally did feel it, but it was too late as the frost circled her and grew smaller. A second later, a familiar figure floated into view, the white dress illuminating her beauty. Emerald couldn't stop staring. She also couldn't stop noticing the steel in those normally neutral lavender eyes.

“Princess Erin,” she greeted, aiming for a bow. Ice wrapped around her neck and her back flew against ice, too, as Erin sauntered toward her.

“You smell like my brother,” the female Fae commented casually, wrinkling her nose. But the steel didn't leave those eyes. “And you have overstayed your welcome.”

“I don't think that's for you to—” Emerald choked on her words when the ice tightened, cutting off her circulation. Erin only stopped walking when their faces were close.

“Who are you and why are you here with my brother?”

Was this a woman being overprotective of her kin or someone who still had secrets? Emerald couldn't tell, but

instinct leaned on one answer. So, she risked it and lifted her chin.

“I’m Emerald Sutton, Em for short. I’m a witch, as you probably already suspected when you plotted to have me tortured.”

Erin’s eyes widened a fraction, then narrowed. “You heard that.”

“Yes.”

“But you didn’t tell my brother.” It wasn’t a question.

“No.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I didn’t mention torture.”

“Yes. You mentioned play but playing could also mean torture in Fae terms,” Emerald pointed out. “And before you accuse me of being a spy, I’m not. This is the last place I want to be stuck in. The only reason I’m here is that whatever spell took your brother to that island of death also took me. I was with him when he tried to fight for his life there and I will stay with him here until his killer is found. I owe him that.”

A frown had been playing on Erin’s lips at the confession, but the steely look was slowly fading. Erin tilted her head.

“Sutton...that sounds familiar.” Emerald didn’t say a word, waiting. Erin made a sound. “Sutton. Silver Sutton.”

“You know him?”

“I know of him. We tightened our security when rumors circulated of him still alive and roaming nearby. I don’t know the full story, but...”

“It’s similar to yours. Wrongly accused, but he proved himself innocent in the end...just like you did.”

Silence.

“You’re related to him,” Erin deduced. Then, “Would you have been able to call for him anytime?”

“Your security’s insane, but yes. I would have found loopholes and could have called my brother. My other siblings too. But Rick doesn’t need that mess. He just needs me.”

In a way, that was her warning: that whatever Erin threw her way, Emerald was going to take it and live through it. The plan to leave quickly became unimportant as her mind and body were already invested in seeing this through...and her heart too. Erin’s expression continued easing down as she eyed Emerald, visibly still trying to figure her out. Then the ice around Emerald’s neck loosened and her breath returned. She fisted her hand to hold back the urge to rub her neck, then watched as Erin spun and left without another word.

Emerald had been through worse, but she did not doubt that things were about to get worse. She continued her path, anyway, meeting with Elina to discuss dress options and trying not to think about the crown princess. Elina asked questions about Emerald’s desired designs and listed them down.

“I don’t mind what material you use. You can use whatever’s in store and whatever’s cheapest.”

“I see. I don’t think the prince would like cheap.”

“It will help you save on cost since I’m not going to be here for long. How about your most common material?”

“I don’t think sheer and transparent clothing will hide those hickeys you have everywhere.”

Emerald gaped at Elina, who had said it so casually and was jotting studiously on a notebook.

“Er...how about non-common material?”

Her cheeks burned, but the older Fae was unperturbed.

“We have those too. Not as cheap, but then again, nothing’s cheap here. Us Winter Fae spare no expense. Now, stretch your arms. I don’t know their length yet.”

Elina took measurements, never mentioning the hickeys again. Just as the measurements were jotted down, a bell sounded from a distance and cracked the ice on the walls.

Emerald frowned, puzzled. Elina's hands went slack, dropping the notebook.

“Elina?” Alarm coursed through Emerald when the woman's face turned ashen. “What's—”

“There's another death in the court.”

Emerald did her best to sound neutral. “Death? Is it not common around here?”

Elina gave her a look as if she was asking the most senseless question.

“We are a strong court and death shouldn't be a frequent occurrence here, accidental or not. Natural or not.” But the woman didn't mention murder. “It means our system is failing and something must be done.”

“I'm sure the crown princess and the prince are on top of it.”

“Let's hope so.”

But Emerald couldn't just rely on the two royal figures, not when the death was fresh and best investigated now. When they were done discussing the dresses, Emerald went out into the halls, where the bell toll was fainter but the buzz in the gathered crowds grew louder. There was disbelief as they tried to identify the death, then some cries when a particular group discovered that it was one of their friend's fathers. A few authoritative Fae folks calmed down the crowd while guards raced in and out of the castle, preoccupied. The Fae training the court's army, Billicent, snapped out instructions while Bronco went to look for Erin and Rick.

She snuck out through the side, observing the direction the guards and army folks rushed toward, then deciding that she couldn't barge in while they were still trying to figure things out. She needed Rick around for that. Emerald kept walking away from the castle, anyway, until she reached the first forest. Here, she had better access to her magic, albeit still with some restrictions. She kept walking, her energy slithering out of her fingers. It wasn't long before she stumbled on

droplets of blood, one leading to where the guards and army had gone and the fainter one leading in the opposite direction.

“Tricky,” she mumbled. If they spotted her around this scene, too, Erin might just be petty enough to pin the death on her. Emerald lowered her energy until it was nothing but a faint hum inside her, then raced to shadow the fainter blood tracks until it led her to an icy pond. It was empty except for... “Yu?”

The pixie was hovering over a mound of snow, lips pursed. Yu looked up at the mention of his name but didn’t light up as he gestured at her to keep quiet. She stepped on rocks to reach the area he was in, careful not to leave behind footsteps. She peered at the faint line of blood just barely hidden by the snow.

“I follow,” he whispered. “It ends here.”

Unconvinced, she brushed away some of the snow with her energy but found the soil clean. The rest of the area was untouched, confounding Yu who flew around in search of more blood. She checked the icy pond for impurities but found the top spotless.

“We have to get out of here before the Fae folks arrive,” she said urgently, then frowned when the pixie flew further away. “Yu, if they find us here...”

A hum caressed her shoulders, whisper soft. It could have just been her energy or the Winter Court’s lingering in the air, something she randomly felt wherever she went. But her heart pounded hard and her body went colder than ever, two instinctive warnings that had her running toward Yu.

“Don’t leave tracks—”

The pixie’s voice cut into a squeal as Emerald leaped to cover the distance, taking him down with her. Something grabbed her hair tight and yanked her upward, forcing her to let go of Yu so he wouldn’t get yanked too. Pain shot into her scalp and ballooned everywhere.

“Run!” she shouted, a choked gasp as she reached up and could feel nothing but air. She tried again, this time letting



her energy out. It touched the energy she felt earlier, stronger than ever until she could smell it smothering her nose. But she kept the contact, pushing until she felt the grip on her hair loosen.

Emerald fell on the ground with a slam and glimpsed a figure approaching her, cloak in place and body underneath glowing. She scented him, too, the energy pulsing from his being and calling out to her with familiarity. But it was a sinister kind of familiarity, mocking her for being no match. She shot up and swayed on her feet, hands held out and frustration rising when the Winter Court's energy grew agitated and blocked out most of it.

*Keep him distracted. Get that confession.*

“You’re the magic user,” she announced. “You’re the one who murdered that Fae and the one who’s conspiring with Merrell.”

Silence.

“You left those tracks to play with them, but you didn’t expect me to be out here ruining your plans.” A pause, then, “You wanted to catch me before I caught you. But I already caught you.”

She flicked her fingers to wrap her glowing string around him, then squeezed him tight. The cloak billowed, then fell to reveal a face she didn’t recognize. It was a beautiful face but ordinary compared to the Fae folks, and that alone should have told her that he wasn’t a Fae. But she felt the warm hint underneath his skin, a deeper energy that no regular creature should possess. It didn’t correlate with the magic he used on her earlier and a sinking feeling slithered inside her.

“You don’t look like a Fae, but you are one. You have that crisp warmth inside of you. You’re also not full. You’re half. A half-warlock.”

This meant he could easily hide in that warlock identity, misdirecting the Winter Court—because only another witch or warlock could tell what he was.

The string tightened further...then, scrambled away as if scalded. Shock hit her when she felt the buildup of magic he was hiding before he was shooting it in her direction, gushes that were also restricted but still stronger than hers. Emerald ducked but couldn't avoid the hard punch on her shoulder from an invisible fist.

She smelled blood and knew it was her own. She felt slices on her ankles but didn't stop, desperation keeping her moving to survive—but also to continue leading him away. That meant she couldn't hide, couldn't recuperate. Emerald dealt with her pain by distracting herself.

“Your magic's weak,” she called out. “Is that all you've got? It's pathetic. You're pathetic for thinking you could fool this court and me.”

For every insult she threw out, the figure was unfazed, shooting energy repeatedly and hitting her skin half the time. Her energy blocked some, covered her wounds, or numbed them enough so she wouldn't feel them. She didn't know how long she was running, but she felt tendrils of his malicious energy brushing her neck before it circled her. Emerald spun and jumped him before he could yank again, avoiding the choke he was attempting. Then they were rolling on the ground, and she prayed fervently that they were rolling in the direction she wanted them to.

She punched a few times and heard him grunt. She bit back a cry when he went for more slices until it felt like she was burning from the pain. Her vision blurred and her mind grew dim. Her physical energy waned, unable to extract more from deep within as she felt she was fighting a losing battle.

*Rick. He will kill next.*

There was a last surge from her until she was empty. There was a plunge to her stomach that had her vomiting red, the invasive magic intent on getting inside. Just as she felt her life about to end, Emerald felt another thing: a snap in the air, the Winter Court's energy disappearing.

*Out of court. Out of perimeter.*

Magic gushed out of her, all restrictions crumbling. Then a scream erupted from Emerald's throat, matching a male's horrified, agonized scream.

## Chapter 12

Finding Erin amid the current death had been Rick's priority, but she interpreted it the wrong way.

"Are you trying to make sure my hands are clean, brother, and that I have no involvement in this?"

"No, I'm trying to get you to come with me so we can investigate it together. Are you coming with me or not?"

Erin had been astonished but had caught up to him fast, and the two showed a solid stand as they found the location of the death and listened to the guards' interpretation of it. Renly was supposed to come back from a business trip yesterday, but his daughter assumed his trip was delayed and there was nothing to worry about. Ironically, it was the daughter's fiancé who had stumbled upon the dead body today while he was sneaking away with a lover.

"His legs are gone and there are teeth marks all over him. There's blood everywhere, too, but we can't find the chunks of flesh missing from his body. We think he was mauled to death and we have men looking for either his remnants or the creature who did this."

"Too simple," Erin murmured. "Especially since..."

Rick gave her a warning look and she cleared her throat.

"Keep searching," she instructed. "Report to me or Rick when you find a lead. And Billicent?"

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Interrogate the daughter, her fiancé, and the mistress. Keep them somewhere so I can interrogate them later too."

They left the scene on the pretense of going back to the castle. When they were alone, she turned to him.

"Are you thinking this is connected to your...?"

“Maybe. Maybe not.” He paused. “We don’t have creatures that maul Fae in our territory, Erin—at least, not ones that our folks couldn’t take. There’s never been that kind of breach here.”

She snorted. “Yes, well, there’s never been an attempt to get rid of you either, until recently. Where’s your witch?”

“Hush. She’s in the castle, lying low.”

“She needs to do her thing. The one she did with me and Merrell.”

“We can ask, not order. Later. I’m sure she’s with Yu now...”

He trailed off when he glimpsed a figure out of the corner of his eye, flying in a frenzy. The pixie would have slammed against his head if he hadn’t sidestepped. He reached out to pluck the guy’s wings when Yu was about to hit a tree, gently redirecting him.

“Yu, what are you doing here? What—”

“Em. Help.”

Fear coated Yu’s tone. It fed Rick’s enough that he didn’t bother to ask questions, already running until Yu was leading the way. Erin followed behind them, a frown marring her lips. She gasped when they reached a clearing, but he barely heard her as he took in the cracked icy pond and destroyed tree barks.

Traces of blood led out of the clearing, along with footprints. He quickened his pace, leaving the two behind and feeling sick to his stomach when the blood drops grew thicker and the tracks became sluggish. Then up ahead was the shoreline, which their court avoided as too many creatures liked to portal in and out of the ocean.

“Not our territory,” Erin warned. “Rick, it’s not safe—”

The scream cut her off. Then power surged, so insanely strong that it made him stumble. There was another scream, then more power until it felt like they were clashing. The sounds died as fast as they came, and Rick was greeted with

silence when he pushed out of their territory toward the sand. Blood gleamed on every inch he could glimpse and dark holes petered into the ocean. A figure emerged, dragging another. His heart stopped as recognition flared, and soon he was running again.

Blood coated Emerald's shoulders, her legs, and her arms. Her dress was torn in various places, the dark patches indicating they had been burned. She dropped the cloaked man in her arms, whose lips were gray but whose forehead was bleeding.

"I'm sorry. I tried to catch him, but he tried to kill me. I tried to keep my magic in check, but he kept attacking. He's half-Fae. Half-warlock. Not from this court." She trembled. "I burned his heart. I've never done it before. I didn't mean to..."

"Shut up," Rick growled, unable to stand hearing the guilt in her voice. "Don't say another word. Don't..."

She crumpled to her feet before he could catch her, but Yu caught her head before it could slam on the sand. Then he was taking over, hefting her in his arms and looking around wildly.

"Castle. Healers—"

Erin blocked his path. "Graveyard first."

Like a curtain parting in his muddled, terrified mind, he got what she was saying and nodded. Then he was sprinting as fast as he could, faster than he ever had in his life with Yu in tow. He reached the graveyard in no time, where he knelt with her. She was still breathing, but it was harsh and riddled with pain.

"Hello, Mom and Dad...Your Highnesses. I brought another outsider and she needs your help. Please. Please help her. She can't die. She needs the help now."

It took every ounce of his being to let Emerald go, especially when he wanted to keep holding her. He stepped back, body rigid with tension, and forcibly restrained himself from jumping forward at every whimper she made. There was no activity at first, the seconds ticking by with agony and his

mind going crazed with it. Then the ground whispered with energy, thin and taking its time, wisping around her, then retreating.

“Her magic’s good. She won’t hurt you,” he added when the graveyard’s energy grew cautious. “Please.”

Silence. Then the energy touched her, light at first before building up. When the glow appeared, Emerald was consumed by it, and the sight nearly blinded him. Yu turned away, but Rick kept his gaze steady, even when the glow blocked him from seeing what was happening. After a while, he sensed another presence and saw Erin kneeling beside him.

“Hello, Father. Mother.” She glanced at him. “Billicent and his men are on the scene. They will secure the man.”

Rick nodded, not interested at first until one question bugged his mind. “Dead?”

“Dead.”

“Good.”

She hesitated. “Not that good. We could have questioned him alive—”

“No, you wouldn’t. I would have killed him first.”

Erin shut her mouth, not bothering to argue as she shifted her focus to the glow. They watched in silence while the pixie grew restless.

“How long?” Yu asked.

“I don’t know,” Erin replied.

“Too long. Not working?”

“I don’t know.”

“Has to work. Need alive.”

Rick gritted his teeth, growing impatient too. Just as he was about to ask, the glow faded and Emerald was released. He quickly shifted her to a sitting position, waiting. Her breathing was no longer harsh and the larger cuts on her body

had reduced, but she was struggling to open her eyes. When they did, they lasered in on him.

“Tired,” was all she said before she closed her eyes again.

Erin reached over, pressing a hand over her wrist and chest. “She’s alive but she needs rest. And she needs our healers to continue working on her. Wait.”

Before he could carry her again, Erin was taking over. “Erin—”

“I will take her to the healers and I will make sure our folks see. I will watch over her and make sure everyone knows. Call it a warning to anyone who tries another attempt on her life.”

“Erin...”

“It’s the least I can do after she found the magic user for us. Besides, *you* need to deal with the guy. And Merrell. It’s what a crown prince would do.”

“Erin!”

“Deal with it fast, brother.”

Her voice held no room for argument, and she didn’t elaborate on her statement as she created an ice block to lay Emerald down on. She nudged the block out of the graveyard with Yu in tow, leaving him staring after her. But she was right. Emerald was alive and the healers would do their work.

And Rick needed to move quickly if he didn’t want this happening again.

The first time Rick hounded Emerald’s new room for her status, the healers refused to let him enter on the reasoning that he would disrupt their process. While he trusted them, he still wanted to see her with his own eyes and argued with them until Erin had to intervene.



“You can’t come in. You heard them. You will disrupt their process.”

“I just want a peek at her.”

Erin relented, letting him peek, but all he saw was an ice block with Emerald encased deep in the center. Before he could move closer, she was dragging him out.

“I know you,” she said. “I know you’re ready to set up camp here and watch her all night. But you can’t. You have to trust the healers. That means not insulting their rituals and keeping visitation to a minimum.”

He was stubborn about it, of course, but there was no budging Erin. When she was finally annoyed, she grew stern and kicked him out.

“I’m banning you from visiting this area.”

“What—”

“You have an investigation ongoing. You have eyes everywhere and people already suspecting what this woman truly means to you.”

“She means—”

“I know what she means to you. I don’t agree with it, but I despise murder and traitors more and am grateful for what she did. If you want the crown back, you need to behave under scrutiny.”

“Don’t you want the crown?”

“I do, and I think I would make an excellent ruler.” Her chin lifted. “But I don’t want it at the expense of you thinking the worst of me, so I don’t mind voluntarily giving it up.”

He didn’t think the worst of her, not anymore. But his apology was cut off when she held up a hand.

“Anyway, it’s not just my call. You need the approval of the others and until you are proven fit, it’s best to show them the image of fit.”

Fit, meaning responsible, on top of things...not involved with a non-Fae, especially a witch. Sex was fine and

excusable, but Erin was right. Their court would have a riot if they knew he had almost gone crazy at the sight of Emerald close to death.

“I’ll stay away,” he finally agreed, albeit reluctantly. “But I will need updates.”

Erin agreed readily. The surprise came when it was Yu who ended up providing updates, peppering him with Fae terms of Emerald’s progress and what was happening in the healing room. While it fed Rick’s relief it didn’t feel enough. But it would have to do.

He kept himself distracted, even when Emerald remained in his mind. Then the investigation took a turn when the magic user’s body disintegrated into ash and a chain reaction occurred. One week later, he finally had substantial news for Erin.

“The magic user’s body disintegration caused all of his remaining energy to disintegrate, too, including the spells he placed on others.”

“Merrell?” she guessed.

He nodded. “The energy wall inside him has been lifted. He confessed to more crimes and confirmed the magic user’s identity, as well as working with the man. After watching the magic user orchestrate two of the deaths, Merrell also gave an account of how the magic user would have made the other deaths seem like accidents or natural causes.”

“Teeth and being mauled to death, so we would blame other creatures,” she cited.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“He was offered a better position and more access to power.”

“Which court?”

“That’s the thing. He doesn’t know which court, only that it was a major court. The magic user wasn’t just an

assassin, he was also a medium for communication. He made the promises and the offers.”

“Stupid. That’s so idiotic.” She growled. “He had to have other reasons.”

“Jealousy. Resentment. Dissatisfaction with our court. I can’t pinpoint the exact reason. I just know he was never my friend, to begin with.” A pause. “The magic user is half-Fae, half-warlock. Em was right. We found the remnants of energy before the disintegration to be closer to a Summer Fae’s, quality-wise.”

“Of course, it’s those murderous bastards. And we can’t even prove it and confront them.”

“Maybe that’s what they want, so they would have an excuse to go to war with us. They’re dangerous, but they are no match against our army’s training and the fact that Winter Fae are essentially more coldblooded when we need to be—figuratively. Plus, we have more pockets of energy in our lands from our ancestors, preserved by ice.”

“They have the stupid sun. Greedy bastards. Are you sure we can’t go to war with them?”

“We can, but as I said, that’s what they want.” Rick shrugged. “I find it best not to give them what they want and just bury this whole thing. Imagine how pissed they would be if they find out that their little plan had no effect whatsoever in our court.”

Lavender eyes peered at him sharply. “Funny.”

“What?”

“That’s how Father would have done it too. He was a good ruler.”

“He was.” A lump formed in his throat when he realized that it was Erin’s way of complimenting him. “Anyway, if you need to verify all of this, you can check with Billicent and Bronco. They were with me throughout the whole investigation.”

She waved a hand. “There’s no need. I believe you. So, is it over?”

“I think so. How’s Em?”

It was a sneaky question, one he expected Erin to catch quickly and answer with more scolding. But her prompt, casual answer left him stupefied.

“Your witch’s body has improved thoroughly and the wounds are gone.”

He recalled the wounds, marring every inch of her smooth skin. Rage tried to spurt out, but he reined it in and took a deep breath.

“That’s good. Their healing process is doing wonders. All the sleep she’s getting in that block of ice is helping too.”

“She’s off the block of ice. She’s awake, too, and out of the room the last time I saw her. She said she needed the exercise—Rick!”

“Talk later,” he called out, ignoring her warning as his feet were already taking him away. “Take it easy, sister.”

Rick didn’t even know where to look for her, but that didn’t matter as he was determined to find her no matter how long it took. He expected to find her with Yu, but the pixie was enjoying some time with a couple of Fae folks who gushed over his cuteness, including Jyss. Emerald wasn’t in their original bedroom area, either, and he almost asked around until he spotted her, strolling a garden hall with Bronco.

Bronco met his gaze, then subtly stepped back and disappeared to give him the floor. He reminded himself to thank the man’s sense of awareness next time before she was taking his attention. Green eyes locked in on him upon his approach, and his eyes devoured her back. The lack of scars and the healthy glow on her skin brought so much relief, but the worry was still there.

“Hello,” she greeted softly, searching his face. “Are you okay?”

A chuckle glissaded out of him. He took her hand.

“Hello to you, too, gorgeous. I’m okay.” Rick tugged her to the side, where flowers bloomed thicker and essentially hid them from prying eyes. He skimmed his gaze over her form once more, needing to take her in multiple times.

“I’m okay. Not that you asked, but you look like you’re searching for wounds. I have none anymore.”

“You almost died.”

A shadow went over her features and he wished he hadn’t mentioned it. But she straightened her shoulders. “But I’m alive, thanks to you, Princess Erin, and your healers. They did a much better job than I would have.”

“You pulled through on your own. You held your own, too, and kickstarted us into finding our answers.”

“I heard.” She smiled. “I’m happy that your killer’s caught. Why are we here?”

His mouth brushed against hers. She was soft and delicious, albeit vulnerable, so he restrained himself from taking more and made do with that one kiss—just enough for him to feel just how alive she was. When she leaned in for more, he chuckled again and gently eased her back.

“Maybe I just wanted you for myself for a while,” he admitted, then sighed. “But that’s selfish of me, and I’m trying not to be selfish. Come on. Let’s get you back to the healing room.”

He tugged again. This time, there was resistance as she tugged back, then walked in the opposite direction.

“I wanted to keep walking and get some air. It’s cold air, but I think I’m starting to get used to it.”

“Em, you’re still not well. You just went through a traumatic experience and...”

But she waved him off, much like Erin did earlier.

“Nothing can be as traumatic as losing my brother and finding him again. Everything else is a piece of cake, including this. I’m fine,” she assured him. “I’m healthy and I

have your little voodoo to thank for it. It helped me breathe again.”

Rick frowned at the voodoo comment, then smiled when he finally understood. “My parents. Their energy’s everywhere, but it’s particularly strong in their graveyard. It’s where I took Yu to heal him before, too, and Erin thought it was the best place to take you too before we took you to our healers.”

Her eyes widened the more he explained it, delight and wonder seeping in. “Oh. Then I must visit that graveyard sometime.”

“Sure. Not now. Now you need...”

“Walking.” And she kept walking. “I think news spread that I helped uncover some murders in the court and people are either looking at me funny or assuming I’m some kind of hero. It means no one bothered me while I explored today, so I’m going to keep exploring.”

“Em...”

“Rick, it’s fine if you’re busy. Go do your tasks and let me take my cold air.”

And leave her alone? It was the last thing on his mind, especially now that she was awake. When it looked like she wouldn’t budge about her intended stroll, he reluctantly fell in step with her.

“Where are we headed, anyway?” she asked.

Rick looked at her in disbelief. “Were you just going to stroll around blindly?”

She shrugged. “Maybe. Would I have been ambushed?”

Not when his sister had been vocally advocating for Emerald lately. “Maybe not.”

“Then blindly strolling around sounds like fun. I used to plan everything and follow all the rules. But after getting lost at sea, on an island, and almost dying here, I find that it’s

nice to take a break from all of that and just be free. This feels freeing.”

There was no arguing with that, especially since she looked so at peace. Rick began to relax as he let her take the lead and named the areas she asked about, only taking over when they passed by a crowd or two and he didn't want them wearing her down with questions. A series of silky doors, different from the icy doors, drew her curiosity, and she opened one to take a peek.

“You have so many rooms. What's this place?”

He followed her inside, where there were stairs leading to a VIP room. Inside was plush furniture, a marble table, and a glass wall that often allowed their guests to just watch the parties if they didn't want to join in.

“This is our entertainment wing. This room is for special guests.”

“A whole entertainment wing?” Excitement flickered in her tone. “That sounds fun. The Winter Court is so strange. I expected formalities and prudishness, not parties and...”

Her voice trailed off, the excitement freezing as she stood near the glass wall. He sauntered over to look and froze. The glass wall separated them from another room below, one where writhing bodies were visible.

“Sexcapades. We have lots of rooms for those too.” And he had forgotten that those activities still happened, even in broad daylight. He cursed his carelessness, already fretting. He watched her swallow.

“Sex rooms,” she whispered.

There were men and women, all Fae, some he knew well. They were in various states of undress, as well as sexual positions that ranged from just starting to get into it, already reaching their climax, or slumped in a state of sexual fatigue. He followed where her eyes were glued and landed on a couple on the floor. The woman lay on top of the man and was enthusiastically sucking his cock, while the man spread her legs and ate her core up. Another woman joined them and

sucked on the first woman's nipples until her moans were vibrating around the cock, turning it harder.

"You don't have to stay," he said. "It's not for everyone."

Silence.

"Did you participate in any of these?"

He could lie but opted for the truth. "Once or twice. Long ago, when I was a randy young adult. It wasn't for me. My sister tolerates them but she doesn't participate, either, and we are strict about keeping these activities secret and away from the more conservative folks in the court."

"That's...fascinating."

"Not disturbing?"

Again, she didn't answer. Now she was looking at another couple...no, threesome, the woman on her hands and knees while a man railed her from behind. She was also sucking the cock of the man kneeling in front of her.

"Em," he tried again. "You don't have to stay. I'm sure this isn't your scene."

"Hmm."

"It's scandalous to a lot of people."

"Hmm."

"You need rest, not to watch something wild like this. You're..." He touched her arm and found it heated...trembling. His hand coasted downward, where he found her nipples tenting the front of her shirt. "You're turned on."

She startled, her cheeks flaming. "No, I'm not." But the denial was weak, and she arched into his thumbs when he brushed them against her nipples again. "Can they see us too?"

"No. It's one-way." He fisted his hands when her hands splayed against the wall and her butt pressed back against him. With a steady inhale, he tried not to respond. "I shouldn't, Em. You're still recovering."



“I’m fully recovered. I’m tired of sleeping. I’m... energized.”

As if to prove her point, she ground against him, wriggling that ass. His cock jumped and he ground back, even while he gritted his teeth and told himself the reasons why they shouldn’t be doing this. The further down his hands went, the more he found proof of her arousal, the most incriminating one being what he felt between her legs.

“Wet. You’re wet.”

There was a growl to his voice, a wild roughness that spoke of how much he was holding back and how deeply she was tempting him. He played with her tits, then her clit, while they rocked back and forth repeatedly in their quest to chase the pleasure. The intensity paused when a woman below screamed in pleasure while bouncing again and again on a man’s willing cock. She whimpered at the sound, her hands curling into fists against the glass.

“Do you want me to make you scream? Or do you want to do this quietly?”

He shouldn’t even offer, shouldn’t even consider it. But the need was stronger than his willpower, his hand already pushing his trousers down and her dress out of the way.

“Anything. I just want you inside me.”

He didn’t expect the clear plea and felt his insides shake as he buried his cock inside her. The feeling of her hot, velvety tightness had him squeezing a breast, then exhaling hard against the side of her neck. She wriggled her hips, giving him no room to breathe, and he banded an arm around her waist to keep her still. The tension coiled between them, a spring ready to strike.

“You have no idea how much I missed you,” he crooned, then thrust—slow, gentle, just to get reacquainted. “How much I want you. How much I love that you’re turned on by this. But only because you’re up here.”

The idea of her being down there and on the receiving end of any of those men blinded him with jealousy, and that

jealousy worked its way into his bones until he was pumping in and out with no rhyme or reason. When it became too much, he retreated from her core, tip rubbing against her entrance until she was restless. To placate her and ease himself, he played with her tits again, kneading and plucking, then pushing them until they pressed against the glass. He angled her ass to receive his shaft as he buried himself in once more, then pulled her away from the glass.

“You can watch us instead.”

At his suggestion, her gaze strayed to the glass, where they could glimpse a bit of their reflection. Her eyes widened when he rolled her nipples with his fingers, then when he padded a thumb down her core to rub her clit—all for her to watch. It took the intimacy to the next level, their attention no longer on the scenes below. When he turned her around, she complied willingly, opening herself up so he could slide in again.

“I’m not into sharing, Em,” he said. “And I need your eyes on me when you come.”

“I know. Me neither.”

It spiraled into a blind, blissful joining as she sighed against him and he worked hard to drive them to an even higher pleasure. It didn’t take long, either, as one more press on her clit had Emerald catapulting into her orgasm, her scream cut off with his kiss. He tried to hold on, wanting to give her a second one. But the days of her absence and the way she urged him on were too much, and all he could do was surrender.

He emptied himself inside her, then collapsed when his strength left him. Somehow, he managed not to crush her as he rolled them around, where she rested against his chest. The sounds from below dimmed, their breathing the only thing accompanying them.

“Are you okay?” he asked after a while.

“Yes.” A pause, then, “Spent energy now, but it was worth it.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You’re welcome too, Rick,” she teased.

It should have been more than enough, and in a way, it was. But the other part of him kept seeing her in her bloodied state and couldn’t erase the truth that he and his court’s troubles were the cause of it. His sister had told him to behave, to earn his people’s trust again—and when he gave in to this and Emerald, wouldn’t it mean breaking his people’s trust and essentially putting Emerald in danger all over again?

“It’s safe for you to leave now,” he found himself saying. “Unless you want to stay and hang out.”

Silence followed his words, but Emerald didn’t tense. The way she contemplated against him told him she was expecting it, perhaps even waiting for the right time to mention it again. Rick held his breath...then, let it go, and tried not to pay attention to his constricting heart at her answer.

“No, I have to leave. I was waiting to leave. I don’t have a purpose here anymore.”

If he let her go now, they could prevent deeper connections. They could hold back regrets and heartaches, two things that were fast becoming a reality and shouldn’t exist. They could move on and look back at this with a smile, knowing they used their time limit to the fullest before they proceeded with their separate lives.

“I’ll help you with everything. You’re welcome to come back anytime too...just in case you want to visit Yu and experience the cold air again.”

Laughter rang from her, sweet and free.

“That’s nice. But for now...”

He nodded against her head. “I have a court to rule and you have a mission to finish.”

“Yes.” She nodded back, then rested her head against his. “Thank you. This is for the best. And we will be fine.”

Rick remained silent, doing his best to convince himself that she was right.

## Chapter 13

Finding herself back on Broom's Isle felt strange to Emerald, especially since everything before that had been a blur and never really guaranteed she would even have a chance of returning. But perhaps the most ironic thing was finding a familiar figure on the deck waiting for her arrival—and that figure wasn't either of her sisters.

“Welcome back to the island,” Gunther Lyra intoned, voice a practiced perfection of politeness. The man was the epitome of perfection from the way he looked, dressed, and moved, which had been what attracted her to him in the first place. She had wanted that perfection to be an extension of herself. She looked at him, unsure what to say, especially when he studiously avoided direct eye contact.

“Thank you.”

Behind him stood Henry Lyra, who didn't have any problem with eye contact. Her secret ex-fiancé's older brother frowned at her in disapproval, not even hiding the fact that he didn't like her. She couldn't tell if it was because he knew of their betrothal or just didn't like her family in general, one of the many who probably believed her brother was the reincarnation of the demon king. It didn't matter because she had no problem looking him in the eye, either, and waiting for whatever judgmental comment was coming.

A third figure came barreling toward her, almost pushing the two out of the way. Joy lit her up when Emerald spotted well-defined curves and white-gray eyes zoning in on her before Pearl was engulfing her in a tight embrace.

“Em! I'm so sorry I'm late. And I don't care that you're not into hugs because I'm going to hug the hell out of you. You had me *so* worried. You had Ruby so worried, too, and even Silver and Sapphire were asking about you. Consider this a hug from all of us.”

Emerald bit her lip. Turning away a hug was the last thing she wanted to do, and she found herself melting into it.

Pearl felt real and warm, a boisterous figure that Emerald badly needed now. The witch's chatter filled the air, comforting her with its presence.

“Anyway, I was supposed to come here early and wait for you, but there was some trouble with potions at home—nothing that needs reporting or has us accused of sordid things, so you can take it easy, boys.”

There was an accusation there somewhere, though Pearl managed to make it sound like she was talking about something fun. Henry's frown redirected to Pearl, but the short woman didn't care. When Henry glowered, Pearl responded with the same scathing look.

“This is official business and you are—”

“Welcoming my sister, who was gone for a while and probably needs all the care and rest in the world—”

“I just need to meet up with the Council,” Emerald interjected, cutting off whatever argument she could sense was broiling. “Now, if it's possible.”

“We will escort you—” Henry started again.

“I will escort her. You can escort us if you're that suspicious.”

Again, Pearl managed to make it sound light, but Emerald could feel the tension in the woman's shoulders. So, she hooked her arm around Pearl's and led the way herself, leaving the two men no choice but to follow. Gunther soon led the way, quiet and formal, the distance he put between them allowing Pearl to ask her questions.

“Where have you been? Why didn't you contact any of us?”

“It's a long story. It's a crazy story.”

Pearl scoffed. “I live for crazy. Try me.”

Emerald leaned in, telling what she could. White-gray eyes grew bigger and bigger in disbelief until Pearl was staring at her as if she had grown three heads.

“You can’t be Emerald. You must have abducted my sister because the Emerald I know wouldn’t just run off with a Fae.”

“It was for the mission. And survival. And my safety. That’s all there is to it.”

“It’s still crazy. The Council will have a fit.”

“No, they won’t. Not when I got them what they wanted.”

Soon enough, she was standing in front of the Council members, with Gunther and Henry present, and the story repeated in the closed-door function hall. She began with an apology about the lent boat, then details about the uncharted island. Then it was time to talk about La Fleur, after which Gunther was no longer avoiding her gaze.

“And during the time you were in La Fleur, no one attempted to hurt you or manipulate you? You weren’t under an enchantment and you aren’t under one now?” one of the Council members, John Wheel, asked.

“No. I had an ally and the court I was in had pretty good security, including against me. They have their secrets as we do, and all I needed to do was behave until I had the opportunity to get the gemstone.”

“Are you sure there will be no retribution from them and we won’t have ships surrounding us soon?”

“They don’t do ships, they do portals. And no. You can use a spell on me to check the truth. I voluntarily submit to a proper interrogation, too, to ensure that we would have no trouble and doubts moving forward.”

They did the spell to verify her answers but didn’t proceed with the interrogation at a majority of the Council members’ approval. Just like that, the mission was officially done, faster than she would have anticipated and leaving her with no doubt that it was a raging success.

Unbidden, her gaze flicked to Gunther, who was now looking at her directly. She recalled how this had all started and what taking the mission had been about: pride and an

opportunity to prove the man she had once cared for wrong, a big slap in the Lyras' face, and another victory for the Suttons. But all she felt was blankness when she looked at him, the triumph and smugness eluding her. All she felt was the hollow pit in her stomach, her body and soul not as fulfilled as they should have been.

When she was dismissed, Emerald promptly marched out of the room, feeling like she couldn't breathe. Pearl was waiting outside while another familiar figure engulfed her in a second, equally warm hug. When Ruby Sutton stepped back, soft brown eyes regarded her with relief.

"You look different, Em."

She felt different. Emerald smiled. "It's the hair. I couldn't maintain its shine while I was away."

"And that smile," Pearl observed loudly. "And your eyes. And the fact that you didn't nag us about our responsibilities and the household—and whatever we did—in your absence."

She opened her mouth, then shut it when she realized that Pearl was right. After their two oldest siblings, Silver and Sapphire, had chosen to live off-island with their mates, Emerald had stepped in as the next head of the household and had taken her role seriously. It had been a complicated job to clean up the family name, but it had been nice. It had given her great joy to restore their glory and reputation, but the excitement hadn't kicked in yet.

Her two sisters took her aside further when the Lyras walked out of the room. She felt Gunther's gaze on her again but shocked herself when she couldn't even be bothered to look back with defiance—like he was truly dead in her mind and heart. Pearl looked, though, and scoffed.

"Assholes."

"Careful," Ruby warned in a low voice. "We're no longer outcasts, but they're still powerful."

"Don't hear you. Don't care. They can suck it in hell."



Henry heard and glared. Pearl offered him a sugary-sweet smile. When they were gone, Pearl and Ruby began to fill Emerald in about the things she had missed.

“You see, everything’s been taken care of and you had nothing to worry about, to begin with. So, please maintain this non-nagging, non-uptight state you’re in and if you need another vacation to keep you in this state, then we would be more than happy to take over the household for you.” Pearl winked, throaty voice brimming with humor. The short woman reached up and rested her arms on the two’s shoulders, drawing them together. “Now, it’s a lovely afternoon. How about you freshen up, Em, and we can head out for drinks later? My treat.”

“I’m in, as long as it’s not the last bar,” Ruby said. “You were flirting like crazy with Ken and Maddox said the poor man was starting to fall head over heels for you.”

“No, he wasn’t,” Pearl denied. “If he was, that’s not my problem. Besides, head over heels is what Maddox is for you. You guys just can’t keep your hands off each other. And don’t think I didn’t see you sneak to the back last time and come out all disheveled and smug. It’s disgusting.”

Ruby turned pink. “We were just admiring the moon and getting away from all the noise.”

“Sure. While he railed you well, I bet.”

“Pearl!”

The banter went on, and listening to it felt familiar and comforting. But something was missing, and it wasn’t until Pearl started teasing Ruby that Emerald realized what it was. There had been teasing like this, too, in the Winter Court, but with Rick in Pearl’s role and guffawing his ass off when he managed to get a rise out of the receiving party—and in most cases, that was either her, Yu, or Erin. Her body tightened, remembering his infectious grin and Yu’s unfailing brightness. She remembered her and Rick’s last moment together, filled with so much passion that she could do nothing but drown in it.

“Anyway,” Ruby continued. “Let’s have Em get some rest and see if she wants to join us later. She just got home.”

Home was Rick, not Broom’s Isle. She had nothing to prove here and nothing to stay for except her sisters, who were as fiercely independent as she was and would do just fine without her. She had nothing to prove to Rick, either, but being with him made her happier and more whole because...

*I love him.*

She was in love with him. She was so blindly, irrevocably in love with him that it was ridiculous. Crazy. Wonderful.

Oh, heavens, why did she agree when he told her she could leave? Why did she act cool and unaffected when she should have thrown a temper tantrum and fought for what she felt? Like a dam breaking, everything gushed out of her before the truth of her feelings blared loud and clear.

“I can’t breathe,” she blurted out, stopping the conversation immediately.

“What?” Ruby moved in and patted her here and there. Energy flowed as Emerald’s youngest sister checked her lungs with magic as if that was the problem. Emerald barked out a laugh while the two of them gaped at her. When she was calmer, she inhaled deeply.

“I have to go back,” Emerald clarified—not that it clarified as Pearl’s brows shot up.

“Back where?” Pearl made a sound. “Back *there*?”

“I was afraid.”

“You want to go back to a court you were afraid of?”

“Not the court. I could take that court and what they dealt me. I wasn’t afraid of the court.”

Pearl frowned. “I’m not sure I’m following.”

“Him.”

“Em, I swear if you keep talking in riddles and not speak plainly, we will be going at it in circles...”

Ruby had remained silent the whole time, brown eyes steadily gazing. When she finally spoke, her voice was still soft.

“You were afraid of what you felt for him.”

Pearl’s eyes nearly bugged out, volleying back and forth between them.

“You were always afraid of emotions, Em, but now you aren’t anymore,” Ruby continued. Emerald’s mouth went dry, her throat feeling funny. Her heart felt funny too.

“Not anymore?” Pearl squawked. “That’s crazy. Emerald wouldn’t just change for a guy and wouldn’t just change overnight when her head ruled her for years and...”

Silence.

“Holy shit. Holy freaking shit.” Pearl let out an expletive, then a whistle. Ruby shushed her, but a small smile formed on the younger woman’s lips.

“Holy shit indeed,” Ruby mused. “Who is he?”

“A wonderful man,” Emerald said honestly. “A Fae who defies what the books say about Fae folks and... everything.”

Panic blossomed. Giddiness rushed at its heels and she took their hands, unable to stop her affection from flowing—and heavens, it was all Rick’s fault and she loved him for it too.

“I have to go back,” she repeated, grinning when they did. “Oh, heavens. I made him believe I was fine leaving him when I wasn’t. I have a lot of explaining to do. What if they don’t accept me back? What if he’s moved on already? What if —”

Pearl squeezed her hand firmly.

“Em, calm down. Don’t panic. You got this. And if he’s moved on already, then he will find out what the Sutton siblings’ wrath is like.” But the smirk died from Pearl’s lips. “But let me tell you that going back to La Fleur is difficult.

Complicated. I don't even think the Council would let you. And—”

“Miss Sutton?”

Pearl clamped her mouth shut and the three turned to John, who approached them with purposeful strides. Emerald braced herself for the Council to call her back to the room, but all he did was hold out his hand. She blinked at it, then tentatively shook it.

“Mr. Wheeler?”

“Thank you for volunteering for the mission, Miss Sutton, and for retrieving the gemstone for us.”

John smiled. She smiled back and watched Pearl and Ruby move back a bit to give them some privacy.

“Of course. It's no problem, Mr. Wheeler.”

“Call me John. I came here to let you know that the Council is very satisfied with the work you have done for us, Miss Sutton, including this one. Don't think we haven't been keeping tabs on the missions you accepted and how you have completed each one with flying colors.”

“Oh.”

“We are very watchful of what the Sutton family has been doing to uphold the integrity of Broom's Isle and we would like to extend our appreciation.”

“I...thank you.”

The complete turn, especially when the Council hadn't been on their side years ago, felt like it should be another moment of victory. But all she could think about was how to insert the topic of La Fleur at some point. Out of the corner of her eye, she noted Pearl's impatience and realized her sisters were waiting for that point, too, and her heart swelled at the knowledge that her happiness meant more to them than anything else.

“To be honest, we have been looking for the gemstone for a while now but just didn't get a chance,” John said, unaware of her conflict. “You retrieving it from the Fae folks

is nothing short of a miracle and it's one we ought to celebrate. No one wants it getting into the wrong hands."

"Why?" she asked, distracted as she arranged her speech in her head. *John, I have a favor to ask. A request, actually. Something unusual, but I hope you and the Council can grant it as a show of your appreciation.* "Does it contain our spells or our secrets?"

"No, but it's a very ancient one that could break through any kind of magical defense and kill the person it's targeted toward. There were more of these gemstones in the past with different powers before we caught on that a crazy warlock made it and we tried to contain its spread. When we heard rumors about this particular one circulating, we knew we had to act. It's a good thing it's in our hands now, because imagine if someone used it to target a Council member."

John laughed.

And Emerald felt her world dimming as she thought of Tru and the only person in the Winter Court whom a killer would need the gemstone for.

## Chapter 14

“You look like you have just gone through the ends of the Earth and back again in only a day or two...actually, no. That’s not even accurate. It looks like you aged a few years in the last few days—and not in a good way.”

Rick stared at Erin blearily, but only because Erin had planted herself in front of him with her hands on her hips and her expression determined to keep the conversation going. Her body language told him she wasn’t leaving anytime soon either.

“That doesn’t even make sense, Erin.”

She scoffed. “Fine. Here’s a more accurate description: you look like you have been to Hellhole and back. You look *terrible*, brother.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“I don’t like it.”

The worry in her tone had him looking at her more closely. “Why? Because it makes me a bad ruler?”

She made another sound, this one leaning toward exasperation. But her headshake was firm. “No. You’re doing a splendid job of keeping our folks’ spirits up and staying on top of things, which makes it even better that I passed the crown back to you earlier. For the record, I always thought you would make a good ruler.”

Surprise filled him, not expecting the outright vocal support and how much he appreciated it. But it didn’t erase the misery he felt, kept at bay with the bottle he held in his hand. To be truthful, the bottle felt more like a display these days, because the alcohol wasn’t doing a very good job of getting him drunk enough to forget.

“Gee, thanks.”

“But this isn’t the Rick I know,” she continued, persistent. They were in his room, where she had barged in,

confident of their privacy as she started in on him. A part of him wondered if he should have just gone to another room and hid from everyone—but then again, Erin’s persistence knew no bounds and she would still find him. “This isn’t the Rick I’m used to.”

“I drank and partied and had fun. I was great and charming but an irresponsible ass. That’s the Rick you were used to and that’s the Rick that’s in front of you now.”

“No.” She folded her arms stubbornly. “You’re drinking now but I see no fun. You’re miserable, brother. And I know why.”

“It’s not up for discussion—”

“Em. Emerald. That witch has you wrapped around her finger.”

He glared at her. She glared back. He growled at her, but she ignored it and glared harder.

“Don’t you dare talk about her that way,” he warned.

Her glare disappeared and she smirked, all smug.

“And that just proved my point, brother. Also, for the record, I didn’t call her witch as an insult.” She shrugged. “I have been developing a healthy appreciation for the skills they bring to the table and how beneficial it would be to have one or two as an ally.”

“We don’t do allies.”

“Things can change and rules can bend, brother.”

He eyed her in disbelief. A part willed her to go away and leave him alone, but another was revving for the argument. Erin seemed ready for it, her hair vibrating in her stillness and her lavender eyes spitting energy. He almost felt sorry for the bastard who would have to deal with that fiery spirit in the future.

“Since when?”

“Since the Winter Court was infiltrated and we’re not as impenetrable as I thought. Emerald helped us. Em could

have been our ally.”

Her name shouldn't have brought on the image of beautiful green eyes, but it did. The more Erin said that name, the more memories resurfaced to plague him. One of their last moments together hit him with a rawness that made his body weak, but what followed crushed his heart until he could no longer take in air. Rick closed his eyes, dealing with that emotion—tucking it in where no one could reach it. When he opened his eyes, he felt dead inside.

“It doesn't matter. She didn't stay.”

Silence.

“Maybe because you didn't ask her to.”

His head snapped up and his gaze met hers. Anger boiled.

“What do you want me to do?” he demanded. “Keep her here and imprison her? Lock her up just because I felt something? That's not how it works. I would rather cut off my hand than hurt her like that.”

Erin opened her mouth, then closed it. When he tried to turn away, she knelt before him, willing him to keep eye contact.

“You could have asked. You could have told her how you felt regardless of what I and the others felt.” She hesitated, then, “When I voiced out my disapproval before, I didn't consider things from your perspective. I didn't realize it would hurt you this badly.”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought it was a fling, brother, like all your other flings, except elevated a bit because she was different from your usual type.”

“She wasn't a fling. She's not. She's...”

The woman he loved. The woman he let go because he didn't want to be selfish...but what if Erin was right and he should have tried to fight for Emerald and not let her go so easily? He looked at his sister again—really looked, reading



her face. The understanding so confidently displayed there stunned him.

“Erin.”

“Yes?”

“Is there any way—”

A booming sound cut off his words. A second later, the walls shook violently, and Rick sensed the incoming pressure before he heard the whistle. Then an explosion shook him to his core, even while he reached for Erin and hauled her toward him. More explosions came, each one louder than the last until he could see nothing but darkness as the ceiling and walls crumbled around him. But his shield was there to cocoon him and his sister, preventing them from getting crushed to death.

The last explosion was the loudest, buzzing in his ears. Silence followed, prominent and eerie. Erin coughed.

“Are you okay?”

“If okay means alive, then sure. You?”

“Same.” He scanned the darkness, trying to find cracks in the debris. “We need to get out of here.”

“Let me take care of that.”

Frost hit him in the back, then the soles of his feet. It coated his shield and formed a thick, solid block of ice, matching the shield’s shape so as not to disturb it. He felt Erin brace, her energy building and building.

When she released it, it felt like salvation and death rolled into one, merciless in its core. It slunk in his bones and had him gritting his teeth, but there was a sense of triumph as he watched the first traces of light through the cracks she made in the debris. Seconds later, the debris was flying away in a frenzy and they could breathe more easily. But it wasn’t over yet.

Smoke filled the destroyed room, and it wasn’t just coming from the room. Their gazes met before they moved in unison, sprinting outside as fast as they could. What they saw

had them stopping in their tracks as the room area opened to the bigger, wider hall.

“What?” she squawked.

There was chaos everywhere as the castle walls kept shaking and debris continued to fly around. He spotted Billicent shouting orders, then using an ice force to crush falling debris into smaller pieces. Jyss was leading Fae folks away while Yu went straight for Erin as soon as he glimpsed them. The pixie was talking in shambles.

“Attack. Billicent said no breach. All confused. Run.”

It had to be a breach, one so subtle that even their security couldn't detect it. The screams and pulses of terror around him hurt his heart, but Rick hardened himself and stomped every bit of panic away. Realizing what needed to be done, he spun to face Erin and took her arm before she could move.

“You need to go to the safe room.”

Lavender eyes flared.

“Over my dead—”

“I have a natural shield. You don't and I know you're not sticking with me. Things are falling and everyone's distracted. You're an easy target.”

“But—”

“You and me dying will crush our people. We both have to survive and I'm guaranteed to. You're not.”

“Rick—”

“I command you to go to the safe room.”

Magic bloomed, then glowed.

“Rick!”

“This is my first command as the crown prince, Erin, which I can enforce now that we're at war. Go to the safe room. I'll come back for you later.”

Oh, the fury in her expression was astronomical, but she was aware of the rules and what would happen if she disobeyed. When she still didn't budge, he was left with no choice but to drag her there himself, the magic following them and waiting for her to make a mistake.

"I'm sorry about this," he muttered.

"You're an asshole."

"I'll come back sooner than you know," he promised.

She hissed and growled. He thought of other commands he needed to enforce to ensure the others didn't trample each other in their haste to escape, then thought of how he was going to direct his army when the invasion came. His people first, he decided. Barrier next.

"Rick, I want the crown back."

"You gave it back already."

They reached the safe room, one of the few that hadn't cracked in the explosion with how sturdy and foolproof it was. He ushered her in, relieved that the whole thing had been uneventful.

"I'm sorry," he intoned.

"You're not forgiven—"

The door slammed shut with enough force to almost clip Yu's hovering wings.

"Finally. I knew this was your first destination."

Heat pulsed in the air, melting the ice from the walls. Erin jumped inside Rick's shield and clutched Yu, but that proved futile as the heat touched it too—and to his astonishment, his shield gave in and melted away soundlessly. In the ensuing confusion, the voice clicked and he spun to peer into a dark corner.

"Show yourself."

Bronco glided forward, robes grand and expression not sharing everyone else's bewilderment and panic from outside.

A cold sensation wracked Rick's belly even while the heat repeatedly melted away every shield he tried to put up.

"I should have just done this in the first place," Bronco mused, one hand fisted on something sparkly. He waved it around and melted away Erin's attempts to hit the man with her ice, then flicked it until she cried out in pain. "It's hot, princess. I suggest not making me use it any further."

Rick moved to shield her and became that heat's target until he was sweating profusely. Pain riddled his body when that heat skimmed inside, invisible tendrils that seemed to wrap around his nerves, bones, and organs. His nature tried to fight it, the icy energy within him rebelling with everything it had. But whatever power Bronco held was stronger and darker, rendering him immobile.

"Bronco, what the hell?"

Refusing to give in, Rick threw up another shield. Bronco laughed. The stoic man disappeared and in its place was one brimming with purpose and disdain.

"It's not going to hold," Bronco advised casually. "Your shield needs ice and this is too hot to maintain that. It's perfect, actually, and as I said, I should have done this sooner. You have no power over it and neither do the others. The weaker a Fae is, the more I can identify who needs to go."

It didn't make sense...and then it did, clicking into place and washing another wave of coldness within Rick. Disbelief and fear clashed while the pain chased them off to dominate him. He didn't make a sound, but Erin did, her gasp echoing in the room.

"You're the killer."

Killer. Murderer. The enemy that Rick didn't know he had. Erin's certainty shone through and pride glinted in Bronco's features. The plenty of times he had entrusted his loved ones—and his court—with Bronco felt like a sickening lie, even when everything made sense: Bronco being always around, the eyes and ears that hid behind his silence. Bronco having access to let a magic user in with no one the wiser.

Bronco earning Emerald's trust so she and Rick wouldn't suspect him. Bronco poisoning minds to slowly, subtly go against him, with no one thinking the worst of it because the man had always been a reliable, loyal member of the court. As if agreeing with the last part, the man puffed out his chest.

"I'm not a killer, Your Majesty," Bronco corrected, shaking his head at Erin. "I'm a savior."

Rick waited until Bronco turned his way...looked his way. When their gazes met, fury roared inside him, but he kept it locked in.

"Merrell didn't know, did he? There was no other court involved. It was all you."

Bronco didn't respond, but the triumphant look on his face was enough.

"Why?" Rick demanded. "Why would you do this? You had the position and the power here. You never expressed interest in the crown—"

"It's not about the crown, or who was sitting on the throne," Bronco interrupted, snapping it out. "Either of you would have been fine. It was the people and those of weak blood within us."

Erin jerked back. "What?"

"Winter Fae should be ruthless and cold," Bronco insisted. "They should have no weaknesses. It was my job to slowly eliminate those who showed soft hearts and weak minds to build a better kingdom. It was *my* way of helping you, Prince Rick, and Her Majesty, but you just had to investigate and ruin the flawless plan. In the end, I decided that you were weak, too, especially after you showered so much attention to that witch—"

Against the pain, Rick brutally forced himself forward, hands reaching out to strangle the man. The agony doubled and crumpled him to the ground while Erin's voice echoed more dimly in his senses. His vision dimmed, too, and a crushing force pressed against his lungs. But Bronco's words

rang loud and clear, ironically sweet and swimming with cheer.

“Now I know Her Majesty deserves the crown, not you, and I can finally make that happen thanks to this gemstone. All of you weaklings will be eliminated, and the only way to achieve utopia and the perfect Winter Court is—”

“By killing lunatics like you.”

A blast of energy wrenched his soul, then battered him inside out. Screams ensued. Belatedly, it dawned that the pain was dimming and his vision was returning. Then it registered that he knew that energy deep in his heart, and that was enough to kickstart his fighting spirit and rouse him back to awareness. There was so much brightness at first, making it hard to determine which way was up, but a hand clasped his and Erin drew closer.

“Heads up, Rickavior,” she ordered.

Bronco stumbled into view, face purple and eyes bulging red. Before the man could reach them, Erin lifted their joined hands—and instinct drove into Rick, prompting him to do the rest as he swung their hands forward. Their energy formed to ice, sharp and brilliant...slicing straight through Bronco’s neck until the man’s head detached from his body and rolled to the ground. The body followed, crumpling with a heavy thud, and a stone clattered beside the bleeding form.

Erin bent over to examine the body while Rick was already whirling, desperate to locate the source of the new energy. The smoke cleared and a woman with brown hair, white-gray eyes, and a voluptuous figure sashayed forward to snatch the stone from the floor.

“That gemstone’s ours, by the way,” the woman’s throaty voice crooned. “And you’re nothing but a thief, a liar, and a murderer—at least, that’s what I’m getting from my sister and that ridiculous speech.”

Sister. Sutton.

“I don’t think he can hear you, but go on,” Erin said.

“Oh, I’m done.” The woman cleared her throat. “Em?”

Like the smoke had any bearing in making this even more dramatic, it parted like a curtain, and Emerald padded through. Her blonde hair was in a tight braid and her body language told him she was still reining in her magic, but those green eyes were watchful.

The other woman was impatient and bold. Emerald was restrained and poised. He waited until her magic was tucked in, then stepped forward. So did she. Her lips parted uncertainly, and to his surprise, she developed a shy tint to her cheeks. There was silence, then...

“I completed my mission.”

That wasn't what he expected. He tilted his head. “That's good.”

“My island's Council was pleased.”

“That's good too.”

The short, voluptuous woman cleared her throat while Emerald threw her a warning look. Then Emerald's attention was on him again, her shoulders straightening.

“I convinced them that I needed to help your court with one more thing, and doing so would mean you can do us a favor back when we—when our folks—need it. It's not written in stone, of course, and you can reject the idea—”

“You have my word,” he said quickly. “Anything you want.”

“Oh.”

“She put two and two together, by the way,” the woman called out. “The gemstone from your guy named Tru was dangerous and meant to target you. It led us back here to hunt him down—and just in time, too, it seems, because we didn't even know this other gemstone existed.”

“Billicent has Tru. You can interrogate him later,” Emerald added. “My sister and I can help with that.”

“Hmm.” He stepped forward again, ignoring all of that. It was like he was currently wired for one thought only. “Em, what are you really here for?”

More silence.

“Sex,” the woman offered. Erin raised a brow while Emerald hissed, then took a deep breath.

“I have unfinished business,” she said.

“Oh.” Hope withered. “What—”

“You.”

He blinked.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You’re my unfinished business. I left thinking I was done with this, but I’m not.”

Hope ballooned, but it felt so fragile. Refusing to believe and be hurt again, he begged her with his gaze.

“Em, you have to explain more clearly than that—”

“It means she loves you and came back for you, you bozo,” Erin cut in, sighing loudly. This time, it was Rick who threw her a warning look, but she was unfazed. The other woman let out a delighted sound.

“I like her. Is she your sister?”

Erin nodded. “Princess Erinnala Aviel of the Winter Court. Erin for short. And yes, I’m the sister of this man who still can’t seem to comprehend that you guys are truly here.”

“To be fair, it all happened so fast and we didn’t even plan anything other than restraining that ridiculous man earlier. But we Suttons are used to pressure and acting on instinct.” The woman smirked. “I’m Pearl Sutton of Broom’s Isle, by the way. No court, but it’s Pearl for short. Bozo?”

Erin shrugged. “I learned that from him.”

“Ooh. Cool. I guess I like him now too.”

“Yu!” The pixie, who had been missing in the last few minutes, zipped in excitedly. “Me. Yu of pixie.”

Pearl grinned. “You’re cute. I like you too.”



There was a lot of banter and good humor in that interaction, but Rick couldn't take his eyes off Emerald. Perhaps he wasn't the only one as her green eyes took in every inch of him, too, scanning sharply at first before softening to just look. Like a magnet, they were drawn closer and closer until the other three, the melted room, and the dead Bronco faded into the background and his tunnel vision could only see her.

“Is this a short visit?” he asked, needing to be assured again.

“Only if you don't want me to stay.”

And just like that, all doubts melted off too. His chest rumbled.

“To hell with that. You're staying for as long as you want. Or need. Or as long as I can keep you.”

Humor danced in her gaze. She tilted her head, her fingers brushing his.

“What if I wanted you to keep me forever?” she challenged.

Jesus, he loved this woman so much.

“I don't know what books you've read, but we do have a timeline with our lives too. We are not immortal. But we can work on the keeping part.” A smile tore from his lips and wouldn't go away. It brushed against her cheek, her hair, her nose. “I love you, Em. You are so goddamn amazing.”

“So are you. And I love you too,” she said. “I love—”

He cut her off with a kiss, her protest dying a quick death over their joined lips. He basked in her sigh and surrender, then eager participation that took the kiss to another level. It swept them in a tidal wave of desire and bliss, but happiness took the top spot as it shone on them like the sun itself. Ravenous, he cupped her cheek and angled the kiss deeper, sweeping his tongue in her cavern and tasting every bit that he had missed.

She was so delicious and he was shaking with lust and love, unable to control himself and not wanting to. She was everything, and the knowledge that she was willingly his—and vice versa—raged a storm inside him until it felt like he was a man reborn. Perhaps he was. Her moan fluttered into his ragged breath and her body yielded with a force that rattled. He groaned, determined to take it all.

Two throats cleared, then repeated it louder to penetrate his muddled, need-driven senses. Energy followed to tap and Emerald gasped, giving her sister a sheepish look and reluctantly breaking from the kiss. Rick leaned down to capture her mouth again, but she pushed him back and made him whimper from the loss. There was some satisfaction, though, at finding her nipples hard under her clothes and feeling her body pulsing violently against his.

“What a feral animal,” Erin commented, unamused with the display.

“My other sister and her mate are like that too. It’s disgusting,” Pearl agreed. “The guy’s a half-vampire, so it’s weird how animalistic he is for my sister.”

“Fascinating.”

“No, disgusting. Unless, of course, you like it that way.”

Erin smirked. “I’m a Winter Fae through and through. I will always be in control while I turn the man that I’m with out of control with pleasure.”

“Funny, but it’s the same for me. No sappy stuff for me when I can just have sex and fun.”

“Exactly.”

“Oh, my, I think we could be best friends now.”

“Let’s not head in that direction too fast.” Erin hummed. “Though I’m beginning to see that witches aren’t so bad, after all.”

“Trust me. It’s just me. I’m marvelous.”

Emerald gazed at them in exasperation while Rick tried not to laugh amid his arousal. When he tugged her to him again, she tugged back. He sobered when he realized she was no longer teasing him, her expression solemn as she shook her head.

“What’s wrong, Em?”

“Nothing. But you have to stop kissing me in public.”

“I can’t help it. And that’s ridiculous.”

But Emerald shook her head again and became preoccupied, glancing around. Figures milled about outside the safe room, the voices calmer and no longer buzzing with chaos.

“Your folks,” she mumbled. “Your court. They will riot.”

And then it clicked: her worry, why she was avoiding another kiss, and what she was protecting him against. But Bronco’s actions and the way the rest came together made everything fall into place, and he understood that it wasn’t just he who had changed. This time, when he took her face in his hands, it wasn’t to kiss her but to meet her gaze.

“I think I might just have the solution to that,” he said. “Hold on.”

He released her, then forced himself to step back and keep going until Erin was in his line of sight. Before she could make more comments, he held out a hand.

“Rule with me.”

“What?”

“Be my co-ruler. We can take turns or just do it together.”

Pearl whistled. Erin grew dazed.

“I’m not sure I’m following,” she muttered.

“We can talk about whatever works best,” he assured her. “My point is, this kingdom would be so much better with two rulers, not one, especially if those two rulers teamed up

and did their best to provide the safest place for their people. Our people.”

“Rick...”

“Erinnala, I know in my heart that it’s possible and could be the greatest thing to happen in this court. So, all I’m asking for is either a yes or a no. What’s your answer?”

The silence consumed, then enveloped like a blanket. Erin held out her hand, too, and firmly clasped his.

“Yes. Sure. If we are breaking some age-old traditions, we might as well do it together.”

“Good. I love you, sister.” He kissed her cheek and left her stupefied again. He laughed at that, then let go of her hand. “Now, if you will excuse me.”

Green eyes glittered with pride and softness as he approached Emerald again, his true destination—or maybe the start of his journey.

“There might still be a riot, but people love my sister,” he reasoned. “I think, in the long run, everything will work out just fine.”

Emerald smiled. “They love you too.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Yes.” Then, “Hell, yes.”

Rick grinned. This time, he kissed her even harder, rejoicing in her presence, in her love, and in the glorious future that awaited them.

## **NEXT BOOK**