

SEASON FOUR



HOT
VAMPIRE
NEXT DOOR
NIKKI ST. CROWE

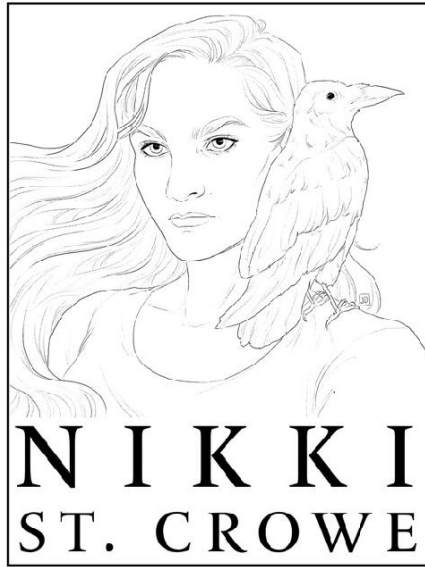
H O T
V A M P I R E
N E X T D O O R

S E A S O N F O U R

N I K K I S T . C R O W E



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BEFORE YOU READ

Hot Vampire Next Door: Season Four is a boxset of episodes 54-70 of the serial version of the story.

Hot Vampire Next Door is, first and foremost, a serial story published on Vella and is currently ongoing with no scheduled end.

Ebook boxsets will continue to be published for readers who wish to read only as an ebook.



Some of the content in this book may be triggering for some readers. If you'd like to learn more about CWs in my work, please visit my website:

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EPISODE 54

THAT MONSTER IS ME

YOUR ROYAL HIGHNESS.

I just gape at Stanley bent low on his knees on the wide front porch of Duval House and struggle with the urge not to laugh or cry or vomit.

Your Royal Highness?

What complete and utter bullshit.

It can't be true.

No fucking way.

Right?

Right?

“Get off your knees, old man,” Bran says and surges ahead, hooking his hand beneath Stanley’s arm. Stanley comes easily and follows Bran into the house. “You.” Bran points a finger at me. “Come.”

I scurry after him, ever the dutiful little mouse, as he leads Stanley through the foyer, then down the hall and into Damien’s office.

When we’re all inside, Bran shuts the door and goes to the wet bar. The cork top lets out a loud *fwop* as Bran pulls it out of the crystal decanter and fills a glass with liquor. He slings it back. All of it. All in one gulp.

He bows his head, sets the glass back down.

Stanley and I share a look. It's odd seeing him outside of the diner. Like a deer that has wandered into the milk aisle at the grocery store. Not that Stanley doesn't deserve to have a life outside of The Greasy Spoon. I've just literally never seen him beyond the four walls of the place.

He spins his hat in his hands, working at the brim with gnarled fingertips.

He seems nervous. I don't blame him. Bran is on edge and Stanley just dropped a bomb.

"This is a mistake," I say, trying to ease the tension from Bran's shoulders.

Stanley takes a deep breath, pushes it back out, and says, "I assure you, Your Royal—"

"Stop that." I shake my head. "You've been making me grilled cheeses for years. Now you're trying to tell me you're a brownie and I'm some...what, royal fae?"

He blinks. "Yes. That's precisely what I'm saying."

"But I'm not a *royal fae*."

"Jessie—"

"Stanley—"

"Enough!" Bran's voice cuts across the room even though his back is still to us.

Stanley clamps his mouth shut, curling the brim of his hat like an ocean wave.

Bran refills his glass and captures it in a white-knuckle grip before coming over to us. His energy is different than mine—less jittery, more raw chaos like a tornado about to touch ground.

He points a finger at Stanley. "You can't just barge into my house and start bowing in front of the whole fucking place!"

Stanley's bushy gray brow furrows over his brown eyes. "It's customary to bow before a—"

“I don’t fucking care what’s customary! You expose us all and risk far too much by getting on your fucking knees.” A vein pulses down Bran’s forehead. He turns away again, takes another sip of the alcohol, and paces the length of the room.

“Bran,” I try but he holds up his hand, cutting me off.

“I need to think, Mouse.”

I thought if we made it through my Pledge, Bran and I would be returning to the house and to our bed to celebrate. Instead, my sister and his brother are in some kind of magical coma and my favorite grilled cheese cook is a brownie who claims I’m royalty.

I’m starting to expect the unexpected, but even this is too much.

Plopping into one of the leather chairs, I prop my elbow on the arm and set my head in my hand. I’m exhausted. Mentally. Emotionally. Physically.

I’ve barely had time to think about what might be wrong with my sister let alone what any of the rest of this means.

I stopped an entire room with my voice. Dozens of extremely powerful vampires and shifters and witches.

Stopped them in their tracks with nothing more than four letters.

Everything is moving far too fast. I’m strapped to a speeding train and I can’t get off.

When Bran has had several minutes of silence, he drains the second glass of liquor and then sets it on Damien’s desk. The vein in his forehead has relaxed, but there’s still a pinch to his eyes, a hardness to his jaw.

As much as my world is spinning, Bran’s is too.

“What is she?” he asks.

Stanley licks his lips, nostrils flaring. “That’s a very complicated question and I—”

“Wait.” They both cut their gazes to me. “What if I don’t want to know?”

I can't get my mom's words out of my head.

The things you did, Jessie...

There is a monster lurking in the shadows and that monster is me.

Do I really want to put a name to it?

Maybe it's better if I don't know.

Bran scowls at me. "You went against me." He takes a step toward me and I sit up straighter in the chair. "You removed your necklace and refused to put it back on." I stand and lurch backward as Bran's eyes bleed to gold. "*You* made this decision. *You* made a show of force. This is not a genie that can be stuffed back into a bottle!"

I back into Damien's desk and a pencil holder rattles on top.

"Okay," I say, and hold up my hands. "Okay."

Bran heaves out a breath, fangs protruding from his mouth. I know he won't hurt me, but I'm worried he'll run away because he's *worried* he will.

I take his hand and bring it to my chest. "Make me a promise."

His face softens. "Now is not the time—"

"Make me a promise, Bran Duval."

He tilts his head and squeezes my hand in his. "Very well. What is it, little mouse?"

"Whatever I am, *whoever* I am, you'll stay by my side no matter what. Even if it terrifies you."

"I'm not afraid of you."

I know he's lying.

I know we're both terrified of the truth.

"Promise me."

"*Fine*. I promise."

There is nothing Bran values more than his word.

The relief that washes through me is nearly palpable.

I give him a nod. “All right then.” To Stanley I say, “Tell us. Tell us everything you know.”

Stanley sets his cap on the arm of the chair and folds his hands in his lap. He clears his throat, then swallows, the sharp line of his Adam’s apple sinking like a weight. “War has been brewing on the fae side for a very long time. The Autumn Court and the Winter Court are both of the Unseelie, but the Winter Court had always held more power and had always been a little crueller than the others. They lost that power in the Autumn Revolt many, many years ago. Long before you, vampire.” He eyes Bran with a wary look, the same kind of look a grandfather gives to the kids who think they know everything.

“The Autumn Court had the full support of the Summer and Spring Courts, and during the war, they were able to wipe out the entire royal line of the Winter Court.”

My heart hammers a little harder beneath my ribs.

“Or at least...that’s what we thought,” Stanley adds.

I suddenly can’t breathe.

“When I crossed paths with your mother in the park,” Stanley goes on, “I realized someone must have escaped.”

Cold dread spills down my spine.

“You smelled like the Winter Court, but more than that, you spoke like one.”

What you could do, Jessie...

“The royal line of the Winter Court had always had one very distinct power—the ability to control anyone—and I mean *anyone*— with nothing more than the sound of their voice.”

“Like a siren,” Bran says.

Stanley nods. “That’s a mortal term that’s been combined with mermaid, but yes, it is fitting. They could make men jump to their deaths. Women bow at their feet. Stop armies in their tracks. And worse, they were the only fae that could lie.”

Stanley sits forward in his chair. “And you, Jessie...you seem to be the only surviving member of the Royal Winter Court. The only living fae who can command others with nothing but the power of her voice. And now that you’ve used the power, the fae realm will be looking for a way to get to you.”

My chest rises and falls with several deep breaths. “Why, though? Why do they care now?”

“Because...the entire reason they were at war? It was because your family tried to overthrow all of the courts so they could rule the faerie realm under one banner. And they were using their voice to do it.”

He levels me with a heavy gaze. “As far as they’re concerned, you are the villain of their story.”

EPISODE 55

POWER CORRUPTS ABSOLUTELY

VILLAIN. NO BIG DEAL.

Do not puke.

You totally got this.

Everything is okay and everything will be okay and—

Shit.

I lurch across the room to a trash can, hit my knees and heave.

Oh god.

Oh god.

Bran is beside me in an instant, his cool hand at the nape of my neck. He says nothing. Just lets me retch and vomit in silence.

When my stomach stops revolting, I suck in several deep breaths.

“Jimmy,” Bran calls, but no one comes. Probably she’s still busy with Bianca and Damien and Kelly. “Stay here, Mouse,” he tells me and then is gone.

I push away from the wastebasket and fall back on the plush rug. Stanley blocks out the ceiling light when he comes to stand over me, several tissues in hand. I take them quickly and wipe at my mouth.

The old man kneels again. I groan but he offers me his hand and says, “Just to help you up.”

I suppose I can handle that.

When I'm back on my feet, I amble over to the chair and drop into it and let my head rest against the backside, eyes closed.

There is this overwhelming urge to just sob and sob and sob, but no tears come.

"Do you know why I love The Greasy Spoon so much, Stanley?" I ask.

He's quiet a moment and then says, "Why?"

"Because even when I was having a shitty day, I knew I could go to the diner and order a grilled cheese and as soon as it arrived at my table and I took the first bite, everything would feel all right again."

He chuckles to himself and the chair groans as he sits in it. "Diners and melted cheese are good for that."

I open my eyes. "I think I need that right now, more than anything. I need the comfort. I need something that's—" My voice catches. "I need something that's normal. I need to go somewhere where I'm not feared or loathed. Where I'm not a powerful tool or a villain."

"When Bran returns, we could ask—"

"No." I stand up. "I don't need his permission to go get a grilled cheese."

"With all due respect, Your Royal—"

"Please, for the love of god, stop saying that."

His chin wrinkles up, his mouth pressed firmly together as he considers his options. If he really does believe I'm some fabled royal fae, he'll listen to my commands.

"As you wish," he finally says, and I swear the ground trembles beneath me.

Everything is changing and I am freaking the fuck out.

I swallow several times, taking in a deep breath. "Did you drive here? Or ride in on some magical faerie steed?"

He laughs again. “I drove.”

“Then will you drive me to the diner and make me a grilled cheese and super salty french fries?”

He bows his head just slightly and I don’t miss the act of reverence. “Of course. I’ll call ahead and have Judy get the fryer going. But Bran—”

“Is my problem, Stanley. Don’t you worry.”

“Very well.” He returns his cap to his head and follows me out the door.

I’m not sure where Bran disappeared to, but we make it out of Duval House and into Stanley’s old sedan without anyone stopping us. I’m aware that I’m taking some risks here, but if Stanley wanted me dead, he could have killed me as an oblivious one-year-old instead of stuffing my face with grilled cheeses for twenty-one years.

And everyone and everything else that might pose a threat to me in Midnight Harbor will learn soon enough what I did at the Pledge Hall.

I won’t even have to open my mouth. They’ll scatter at the mere suggestion of it.

What’s the saying about power? Power corrupts absolutely.

My biological family tried to overthrow an entire kingdom.

What if I turn out just like them?

Don’t panic.

Breathe.

The lights are on inside The Greasy Spoon when Stanley parks out front, but the neon sign is dark. I can make out Judy behind the counter, her hair wound up in a claw clip.

“Is Judy fae too?” I ask as Stanley unlocks the front door with his key.

“She’s human.”

I’m not sure if I’m relieved by that or disappointed. I’m going to need all of the fae guidance I can get.

“Evening, sugar,” Judy says after the bell stops jingling overhead. “I take it the old man told you?”

“So you knew?”

She eyes Stanley over the glass donut case. “I did. Told him he should tell you. He said you weren’t ready.”

“She wasn’t,” Stanley says, his voice dry and grumbly. “She is now.”

“Well, have a seat, sugar. We’ll get you fixed up with some good old-fashioned comfort food if you’d like. Is that what you’d like?”

“It’s what I need. More than anything in the world.”

There’s that familiar burn in my eyes again, the unsettling in my bones, the world swaying on its axis. My mother is dead. My sister is in a coma. My boyfriend is afraid of me.

I feel utterly alone.

I want to run away. Even more than I did before I became entangled with Bran, back when I thought I was human and leaving would be easy.

If I ran now, there’s nowhere Bran couldn’t find me. I’m sure of that. Not that I want to leave him. I just...I want things to go back to normal, goddammit.

And I know they won’t.

How the hell do we move forward though?

I just want someone to tell me everything is going to be all right. But my support system is dwindling by the second.

Except for Sam.

“Can I use your phone?” I ask. I purposefully left my cell phone at Duval House.

“Of course.” Judy hands me an old cordless telephone and I’m extremely grateful I memorized Sam’s cell number in case

of emergencies just like this.

She answers on the first ring. “Sweet baby Jesus,” she says, her voice thin. “Where are you? What is happening? I just heard about your Pledge. The Guard is there now but we can’t get any more details on it.”

Elbow on the countertop, I scrub at my face and clutch at the phone with the other hand. “Where are you now?”

“I’m at the bookstore. I just finished closing up.”

“Come to The Greasy Spoon and I’ll tell you everything.”

I can hear keys jingling through the phone. “I’ll be there in less than ten.”

Judy keeps the front door locked to avoid walk-ins, so when Sam arrives, Judy turns the deadbolt with a loud thud and then suddenly Sam is rushing me, her arms wrapped around my neck. “I hate hugs but I know you need this,” she says.

I squeeze her back. “You have no idea.”

“Well, I’ll have an idea when you tell me.”

“Anything to drink or eat, sugar?” Judy asks, a pencil sticking out of her wound hair. Behind the counter, Stanley drops in a basket of fries and the oil snaps and crackles.

“Diet Coke,” Sam says as she slides onto a stool. “And a grilled cheese and fries.”

Judy fills a red plastic Coke cup with ice, then soda from the tap. The carbonation fizzes when Judy puts the cup in front of Sam. “Food will be up in a few minutes,” she says, then leaves us alone.

“All right.” Sam tears off the wrapper on her straw and jabs it through the ice. The chunks plink against the thick plastic. “Tell me what I’ve missed.”

A half hour later, after giving Sam the condensed version, she stares off into space, absently eating her fries one by one.

“Say something.” I nudge her with my foot.

She chomps on another fry. She hasn’t blinked in at least two whole minutes.

“Sam.”

Wiping the salt and the grease on a napkin, she turns the stool slowly toward me. “You remember when clogs got really popular in school and we were like, ‘Ummm, no.’”

“Yeah?”

“And then we bought a pair because fuck it, whatever, and we realized secretly we loved them? Hideous but easy to slip on and go, super comfortable.” She rolls her eyes. “Like so comfortable.”

“Yes. And?”

“And maybe this whole thing is like foam clogs.”

“You must be joking.”

“Maybe you’ll realize you like being the villain. Maybe you like being royalty. I mean, have you even asked if there’s a crown? A throne? Like what do you get out of this?”

“An entire fae race hunting her down,” Judy answers from behind the counter.

“War, surely,” Stanley calls.

Sam waves it away. “If you’re a siren, then use your voice.”

It’s an echo of what Bran keeps telling me. Something I’ve always been afraid to do. And now, looking back, I realize it was a learned behavior. My mother was always telling me to be careful what I said and how I said it. *Keep your voice down. Don’t be bossy.*

I just thought she was doing what mothers do and now I think she was trying to teach me not to use my powers, even though she'd already bound them.

My stomach clenches and a flare of anger sends warmth across my chest.

Mom robbed me of a lot, most of all choice.

And there's nothing I can do about it now. I can't scream at her. I can't give her the cold shoulder. I can't tell her all of the ways she hurt me.

Somehow that makes me even more mad.

Use my voice?

What's the first thing I do with it?

Where do I even begin?

I think the first thing I need to do is make sure my relationship with Bran is unshakeable. I know he's on unsteady ground. I know he's uncertain of how much to fear me. But I need to reassure him that I will never go against him. Well, my secret trip to The Greasy Spoon notwithstanding.

I'll ask for forgiveness. That's always better than permission, right?

"Thank you, Sam." I lean over and rest my head on her shoulder as she drags another fry through her pool of ketchup. "I'm so grateful for you."

"Same, Your Royal Highness."

I lurch upright. "Don't even start."

She laughs, salt glittering on the corner of her lip.

"Let's stop talking about me for a second," I say and my stomach fills with butterflies just thinking about my best friend being the Alpha's fated mate.

Is now the time to tell her? I don't know if there's a perfect time for that bomb to drop. But I like distracting from my own problems.

“Are you insisting we talk about me?” Sam asks. “You will be left wanting. The most exciting thing that happened to me in the last week is that I accidentally put on my little sister’s underwear when I was running late for work and then spent the rest of the night picking fabric out of my ass crack.”

I hang my head back and laugh and I swear some of the weight leaves my shoulders. Sam makes everything feel lighter.

Once I’ve sobered, I try again. “In all seriousness, there’s something I need to tell you—”

Sam leans in. “Okay.”

“And you’re not going to—”

Just then, the front door of The Greasy Spoon pulls open and the locked deadbolt tears through the door frame as one very strong arm rips it back.

And, as if summoned by mere thought, the Midnight Pack Alpha walks through the door of the diner, his eyes brilliant wolf gold, and says, “What the fuck do you two think you’re doing here alone?”

EPISODE 56

CONTROL ISSUES

BRAN

WHEN THE ALPHA'S NAME FLASHES ACROSS THE SCREEN OF my cell phone just five minutes after I've called him, I'm not sure if I should be annoyed or impressed.

I tap to answer. "Yeah?"

"Is that how you answer all of your phone calls?" he says.

"Did you find her or not?"

The Alpha laughs. It's a rumble through the phone, more animal than man. "Yeah, I found her."

"Where?"

I'm already moving toward the nearest exit in Duval House. Several lower ranking vampires duck out of my way as I stalk down the hall.

When I put eyes on her, she's going to regret running away.

Did I not tell her to stay put? Five minutes was all I needed to find her a wet cloth, something to clean the vomit from her mouth.

And she took those five minutes to run off like a naughty little mouse.

"She's at The Greasy Spoon with Sam," the Alpha says.

I turn the next corner and one of the newer vampires practically keels over at the sight of me.

"Sorry, sorry!" He dodges right, bumps into a marble pedestal and the priceless vase on top teeters. He spins, grabs it, holds it still. Looks like he's about to piss his pants.

The vase means nothing. Jessie means everything.

Is she indestructible? A villain with a voice that can command a room, but if a knife were to pierce her flesh...

I can't fucking think about it without losing my fucking mind.

"She safe?" I ask.

"Safe enough." The Alpha's voice levels out again. He's as annoyed as I am.

"What is it?"

I hit the night air. It smells like rain again and the wind is crisp.

"Sam must have heard by now that there was trouble at Jessie's Pledge," he says, "and yet she's here at the diner with a complete disregard for her safety."

"Why the fuck do you care about one of the witches' mortals?"

The Alpha is silent.

"Ahhh," I say and follow the stone path to the garage I share with my brother. "Sam's your fated mate." It's not much of a leap of logic.

The Alpha sighs. I hear the defeat and the frustration in the sound.

I can relate.

"Sam safe too?" I ask.

"Safe enough," he repeats.

"Try not to strangle her before I get there."

His grumble turns into a warning. "I don't need you to protect my woman."

"Does she know she's your woman?"

"Not yet."

I hit the remote on my key ring and the nearest bay door in the garage lurches upright. I duck beneath it before it's opened all the way. My Audi is backed inside. I reach for the door handle, but Jimmy is suddenly there, that look on her face. It's equal parts annoyed and worried.

I like annoying her. I hate when she worries.

She is much like my little sister in that regard. Too big of a heart, too intuitive for her own fucking good.

“Gotta go,” I tell the Alpha.

“I’ll be here until you arrive.”

I disconnect, sliding the phone into the pocket of my jacket. “What?” I say to Jimmy.

“Since when do you voluntarily involve the Alpha in our business?”

“His nose is better than mine. Might as well use it to our advantage.”

“Mhmm.” She folds her arms over her middle and leans a hip into the side of my car. “You’re starting to like him.”

“I like him the same way I like a can opener. He performs a function that I happen to need.”

“As if you’ve ever opened a can in your life.”

“That is entirely beside the point. Now move so I can leave.”

She doesn’t budge.

“Jimmy, I swear to fucking god—”

“She’s safe. Take a breath and give her a minute to catch hers.”

I scowl at her. “Absolutely not. Running off puts us all at risk and she needs to obey me if—”

“Obey you?” She laughs out loud and the hoop earrings hanging from her ears swing beneath her curls. “Are you that oblivious?”

I let my eyes close as I summon a deep, disgruntled breath. “I don’t have time for this, Jimmy.”

“You can take two seconds to talk to me and reorient yourself now that literally everything has changed. Because I know inside you’re losing your fucking mind and it terrifies you. I know that, because I know you better than anyone and I

would not be a very good friend if I didn't help you when you needed it the most.”

Before I can argue, she takes my hand. Hers is warm. She's always run a little hotter than I do, despite us all being undead vampires.

I've always taken that to mean her heart isn't as cold as mine.

Despite the undeniable tug to get to Jessie, I let Jimmy pull me away from the car and out into the night.

“Sit.”

I look between my best friend and the fallen log that rests on the shore of the large pond on the back of the Duval property. Even when Damien and I were living in 18th century France, I would never lower myself to sitting on logs.

Jimmy is the kind of girl who can find comfort and light in anything, even me.

I sit. She sits next to me and threads her arm through mine.

The pond ripples as the wind shifts direction. There is barely a sliver of moon left. Once it's gone, Rita will unbind Jessie and then there will be no turning back.

It's what I want for her. More than anything, I want her to be who she is and to hold the power that she was born with.

But I would be lying if I said it didn't change things.

Jimmy is right—everything is different and I don't like it.

“Let's talk about Anna,” Jimmy says and I immediately tense up beside her. “Do you remember when she asked for your and Damien's permission to marry the shipbuilder and you both denied her?”

A duck swims out of the cattails along the eastern shore of the pond. I watch it coast along the surface.

I do not love women often. All of the women I've ever loved are dead.

Except for Jimmy. I think the only reason I allowed her in is because she is a vampire.

Now I have to add Jessie to that list.

There is a thread of anxiety at seeing the list grow.

"Bran," she says.

I look away from the duck and to her. "I can't do this right now."

"You and Damien both held on to Anna with too firm of a grip and she ran away because of it. Don't make the same mistake with Jessie."

I hang my head and turn my ears to the lapping of the water against the shore, the sound of the wind in Jimmy's hair. If I focus on something else, maybe I can forget how hard it is to let go when all I want to do is hold on tightly.

I know I have control issues. For fuck's sake, I know I do and for good fucking reason.

I can still see the blood dried on Anna's neck. I can still see the stillness in her body and the dead stare in her eyes.

Rage is a close cousin of heartbreak. I have disowned heartbreak. I will only let the rage remain.

"Like it or not," Jimmy goes on, "Jessie is not so little anymore. And the more overbearing you are, the further away she'll pull. I know you admire a woman in power. You always have."

I snort and look over at her. She gives me one of her smug ass smiles.

"Shut up," I say.

She leans into me, rests her head on the rise of my shoulder. She still smells like lavender, like home.

I do not like to give away any part of myself. I am fortified, just as Damien is. We gave everything we had to our

sister and someday I think we both thought there was nothing left to give after her death.

I don't want to think about it.

I hate thinking about Anna.

And now Damien...

Fuck.

Fucking hell.

I can't think about Damien either. Not right now.

If I must relent to Jessie in order to keep her, then I will relent.

"Stand *beside* Jessie," Jimmy says. "Not in front. And you both will be unstoppable."

The duck quacks loudly.

"Do you know what I hate above all else?"

"Oh, I can only imagine," Jimmy says.

"When you bring up irrefutable truths."

She laughs out loud again, head hung back, and the duck flaps its wings and flies away.

"That's why you keep me around, I suspect. Because I am the only one who will tell you the truth."

"I keep you around because you're the only person I can stand for more than ten minutes." I get up from the log and start back toward the house.

"Be gentle with her."

"Fine. Yes. I will be gentle and kind. Not at all an asshole."

"Promise me." She jogs to catch up.

"Fine. I promise."

"Thank you." She gives my arm a squeeze. "Wanna race back?"

"As if you'll ever beat me."

We both take off at a run.

And I win.

EPISODE 57

I LOVE YOU AND YOU ARE A MENACE

MY FIRST THOUGHT, SEEING THE ALPHA OF THE MIDNIGHT Pack standing in the now torn doorway of The Greasy Spoon is:

Damn, the Alpha is hot when he's pissed.

My second thought is:

Oh shit, the Alpha is pissed.

Cal stalks into the diner and I think the narrow building shrinks in size because he looks like he takes up at least half the room.

His wolf eyes flash bright yellow with a pulsing ring of black around his irises.

“Heyyyyy, Cal,” I start, but Sam slips off the stool at the diner counter and squares her shoulders and says, “What we do is none of your business.”

Cal’s eyes widen with rage as his hands clench into fists. “You put yourself at risk by being out here and—”

“You don’t get to boss me around!” Sam jams her finger in his direction. “I’m not promised to you or the pack!”

All of the tendons and veins in Cal’s forearms bulge beneath his skin. “We’re at war and you could get hurt.”

“Like you care.”

“I fucking care more than I—”

I step between them and face my best friend. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

“No need,” Sam says as she narrows her eyes at him. “I already know he’s a gigantic egotistical asshole.”

“Okay, but listen. Sam. Look at me.”

She finally focuses her gaze on my face, a pinch of confusion between her blonde brows.

“It’s about you and Cal, and—”

“Maybe now isn’t the time, Jess,” Cal says behind me.

“Jess?” Sam’s frown sharpens to a scowl. “Jess?! She’s Your Royal Highness to you, jerk-face.”

“Sam!”

She snaps back to me.

“You’re Cal’s fated mate.”

I see the moment Sam’s brain stops working. There’s a dead look in her eyes. She’s staring right at me but I don’t think she’s seeing me.

Cal takes a step closer.

And then Sam hangs her head back and laughs out loud.

She laughs and laughs until tears stream down her face.

“Tell Jessie that’s bullshit,” she says through the unhinged tears.

Cal sighs.

“Tell her.”

I’m not sure where Stanley and Judy disappeared to, but they are noticeably absent, the fryer quiet, the grill cold.

“Sam,” Cal says.

“Tell her!”

“I can’t!” he shouts back. “I won’t.”

Sam clenches her teeth so hard I hear her molars grit together. She reaches across the counter and grabs a canister of

sugar and lobs it at Cal.

“Sam!” I yell, but the sugar never lands.

Instead, it’s caught mid-air by someone’s outstretched hand.

Bran.

My heart thuds against the back of my tongue.

The diner goes eerily silent.

It’s Bran that breaks it.

“Violence is a tool,” he says in that cool, calm, detached tone of voice. “It should never be a reaction. That’s a lesson the Alpha’s mate needs to learn sooner rather than later.”

“I’m not his mate,” Sam argues, but some of the heat has left her voice.

“I’m quite sure the word ‘fated’ is not one you can fight,” Bran points out.

Sam huffs and then crosses her arms over her chest.

“I’m sorry, Sam,” I say. “I just found out. I thought you should know.”

“It doesn’t matter.” She narrows her eyes at Cal again. “I’ll never agree to it.”

Cal growls. Literally *growls*.

Bran edges closer to Sam and me and faces the Alpha. “You need to get control of that.”

“I am!” Cal says as his teeth sharpen, not unlike Bran’s fangs.

“Why don’t you return to the Pack,” Bran says. “I’ll make sure Sam gets to where she’s going.”

Cal’s nostrils flare as he looks over top of us to Sam. Pain etches itself into the fine lines around his golden eyes. Not physical pain. This is an ache that does not bleed.

He doesn’t want to let Sam out of his sight.

“Let me take you home,” he says to her, now with more control. His gaze is locked on Sam and only Sam. “*Please.*”

I watch several emotions pass over my best friend’s face. Regret. Heartbreak. Worry. Fear. Hunger.

I think Sam has been keeping some things from me, namely how she *really* feels about the Alpha.

I mean, I totally believe she believes she hates him and maybe in some ways she does, but the hate is not complete. There are cracks in that hardened exterior and they are starting to show.

“Fine.” She makes her way for the door. “But don’t talk to me.”

“As if I have anything to say to you,” Cal says.

“Jerk,” Sam says.

“Brat,” Cal says and follows her through the wreckage of the front door.

“That’s either going to be a match made in Heaven or a train wreck,” I say as I watch them leave.

Bran sets the canister of sugar on the counter and comes over to me. “You—”

“Oh, don’t start with me too.”

“I owe you an apology,” he finishes.

That pulls me to a stop.

“Umm...really? You owe *me* an apology?”

“Don’t get cocky about it,” he says.

“Me? Cocky? Never.”

He takes my hand in his and brings my wrist to his nose. He inhales, his eyes slipping closed. “I’m sorry if I gave you the impression you should be worried about me or about us.” He opens his eyes again and there is the hint of sharp fangs in his mouth. “We have a lot to figure out and much to discuss, but I don’t want you worried about us.

“We stand side by side,” he adds. “Partners. We will not hide from one another. Promise me, Mouse.”

I lick my lips as his mouth drags closer to the thumping pulse point in my wrist. “Tell me the truth.”

“About what?”

“Are you afraid of me?”

Dropping my arm, he takes another step closer, closing the final gap between us. His thumb drags over my bottom lip. “I trust that this mouth will do only what it needs to do. No more and no less.”

My tongue darts out to meet him and his eyes flare to life.

“But I need you to trust me, Mouse.”

“I do.”

“No. I mean it. You may have more power than either of us expected, but I have centuries worth of experience.”

I roll my eyes at him. “That feels very close to mansplaining to me.”

His expression doesn’t change. If anything, he grows more serious. “I need you to trust me.”

I tip my head to look up at him, his eyes starting to bleed to that bright gold. “Okay. But I need you to let me make mistakes.”

I hear his teeth clench. *Loudly.*

“That’s the promise I need from you.”

“Mouse—”

“I can’t become who I’m supposed to become by being coddled.”

His eyes close again and the breath he takes is long and deep.

“Please, Bran.”

When he meets my gaze again, there’s defeat in his eyes. He knows I’m right.

I'm not sure where any of this is going to take us. I'm not even sure what comes after we walk out that door. But I do want us on the same side, on even ground. But I don't want to be afraid of acting and I sure as hell don't want to ask for permission.

Bran's grip on my wrist slides up my arm, and then he takes my hand in his again and brings my knuckles to his lips. He plants a soft kiss there. "You have my promise that I will try very hard to allow you to make stupid mistakes."

I laugh. "That's not a promise!"

"It's all you'll get from me."

"Fine. Then I promise to *mostly* trust you."

He yanks me into him and wraps his arms around my waist. "I love you, and you are a menace."

"I love you too, you asshole."

He brings his mouth down on mine and breathes out, almost a sigh.

Now when we kiss, it's an act that feels like home.

"Oh, little mouse," he says when he pulls away just enough to speak, "I think I need to take you home and to our bed."

I grind against him as his hands sink to my hips. "I agree."

Someone clears their throat behind us.

I jolt away from Bran, embarrassed. I totally forgot we were in the diner with Stanley and Judy.

"What is it, old man?" Bran asks, an edge of warning in his voice.

"We have a problem."

"For fuck's sake," Bran says. "When don't we have a problem?"

"What is it?" I ask quickly.

Stanley nods toward the front of the diner and the street beyond. I can just make out the shape of a crowd in the dark.

Maybe it's the Guard come to haul me away.

Or maybe the Lockes have reorganized and want their revenge...

But when Bran and I step out onto the sidewalk, we find almost every single fae that resides in Midnight Harbor.

And they're all on their knees.

EPISODE 58

SOME RANDOM FAE LORD

THE FAE ON THIS SIDE OF THE GATE HAVE ALWAYS KEPT TO themselves. Most of the time, I could go days without running into one of them. Now there's a crowd of fae in the streets of Midnight Harbor and worse...they're kneeling for me.

I immediately recognize a few of them. In the front holding a baby in her arms is the woman Sam and I ran into not that long ago on the river walk. The baby had been fussing in her stroller while the mom cleaned chocolate off the face of her toddler.

The baby had quieted as soon as I lifted her into my arms.

Fae babies have always taken to me.

I swallow hard, realizing there were clues dotted in my past about who I was and how I was different.

Fae babies are notoriously fussy now that they've been sealed off from the fae realm and all of its power and magic.

My mom complained more than once that I was just as bad.

"Get up," I say to them, but my voice is weak and too quiet.

I'm lacking conviction, overwrought with fear.

Why the hell are they kneeling? Didn't Stanley say I was the villain? Shouldn't these people be afraid of me or outright hate me?

Of course, Stanley did tell me that kneeling is customary, if not compulsory.

But I don't want this. I don't want any of it.

"Get up," I try again, this time louder.

The crowd stands to their feet just as Bran steps off the curb, putting himself between me and them. With the waning moon, it's hard to make out all of their faces, but the crowd is spread out all the way to the opposite side of the street. There must be close to fifty of them.

"Why are you here?" Bran asks them, keeping his voice level because Bran knows how to act when in the face of something unexpected.

I wish I had his spine of steel. I wish I had his confidence.

Someone in the center of the crowd starts forward and the others go quiet.

The hair lifts on my arms and along the back of my neck.

I can't be sure if it's the night or some baser instinct, if it's my fae side taking notice of this man as he steps forward into the pool of light cast from The Greasy Spoon's windows.

My first thought is: *I've never seen this man before.* I would remember him if I had. And my second thought is: *how odd that I've never seen this man before.*

His dark hair is shorn practically to the scalp on the sides, maybe to make it easier to see the intricately knotted tattoos on the side of his head. The top is left long, and several strands hang in his face.

His ears are pointed, meaning he's full blood fae.

I *should* have seen him before.

How have I never seen him?

And why aren't my ears pointed?

Instinctively, my hand trails up to the soft shell of my ear where it rounds like a mortal's should.

There are so many questions still, too many unearthed answers.

When the fae comes to a stop just a few feet from Bran, he clasps his hands behind his back and the metal rivets in his leather clothing glimmer like gold. More metallic threads shine in his highly decorated tunic.

Now that he's much closer and in the light I can tell his hair isn't black but midnight blue, like a pool of expensive ink spilled across a desk.

He looks like he stepped out of a child's fairytale book. Even in a place like Midnight Harbor, he looks like he doesn't quite belong.

"What's your purpose for being here?" Bran asks, bypassing any kind of introduction.

"My purpose," the man says, "is no concern of yours."

Bran's shoulders rise slowly with a deep breath. "Excuse me?"

"Bran—" I thread my hand with his and give him a squeeze. He shifts, tipping his chin so he can look at me over his shoulder. "Be nice."

"Be nice, Mouse? Be nice? This is a blatant display of *something* and until we know what it is, I will not *be* nice."

With a grumble, I turn back to the fae. "Can you help us out? He's a man that likes to know what he's dealing with."

The fae turns his bright blue eyes on Bran. "Not quite a man, is he?"

"Vampire. Close enough. Why are you kneeling outside of a diner?"

He cants his head and his tunic glimmers again with the movement. "It is our duty to show respect. But beyond that, you used your power, which means everything is about to change."

I said it, didn't I?

The fae looks back toward the diner where Stanley and Judy are now standing outside.

“You kept this from us, brownie.”

Stanley doesn't balk. “There was a reason she was hidden and bound, and it wasn't my place to decide to undo it. Nor was it yours.”

“Stanley, do you know this man?” I ask him.

“The name is Arion,” the fae answers. “And I am a Lord of the Summer Court.”

Though I'm trying my hardest not to appear overwhelmed, hearing his title makes my eyes pop open with awe.

“I didn't know any of the high born were on this side,” Bran says.

“You wouldn't.” Arion narrows his eyes when he looks over at Bran. “As I said, it's none of your concern.”

Oh, well, shit. This isn't going well.

Bran practically vibrates with rage.

I take a step, inserting myself between them before Bran has a fae heart dripping blood from his hand.

“It's really nice to meet you, Arion,” I say, trying for diplomacy and kindness. After all, if I'm regarded as the villain, I need to do everything in my power to prove to them that I'm not.

“Can you at least tell us if you're friend or foe?”

Arion shrugs, but it's a calculated shrug with no ounce of casualness to it. “I think the answer to that question is entirely up to you.” He unclasps his hands from behind his back and offers up a thick card captured between his middle and pointer finger.

Before Bran can tell me otherwise, I snatch the card from the fae.

It's thick, the paper creamy, but textured like linen. The text on the front is an elegant, looping handwriting and the

note says: *Moonlit side of Bramwell Pond. Tomorrow night at midnight.*

I look up at Arion.

“Come if you wish. Or don’t. I don’t care.” He turns away and the fae crowd parts for him. He clearly rules what few fae remain on this side and my fear and anxiety turn into a knot.

I don’t like that I’ve literally never met this man, and I definitely don’t like that he immediately knew how and where to find me. It means he knows more about being fae than I do, which isn’t much at all.

He has the upper hand no matter how powerful I’m supposed to be.

I take a step to follow him when Bran hooks me by the elbow and whirls me around. “Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

I lean into him and lower my voice. “We need to find out what’s going on here.”

He takes the card from me and reads it over, then curses beneath his breath. “Waiting will be better, little mouse. Trust me.” He yanks me down the street away from the fae where they’re dispersing fast and following after Arion, the darkness of the night swallowing them up.

“Aren’t you curious about him? I hate waiting and I don’t want to run away,” I argue.

“There’s a difference between running away and knowing when you’re at a disadvantage, and following some random fae lord into his territory is an error in strategy and intelligence.”

“Are you calling me dumb?”

He makes a tsk sound. “No, Mouse. Inexperienced is the better word.”

I pull out of his grip and cross my arms over my chest. I hate that he’s right. And we did just establish some new rules within our relationship and here we’re already testing the limits.

I want to make perhaps unwise decisions and Bran wants to keep me from doing it.

We stand off against one another. His eyes glimmer with golden anger.

“No,” he says, reading my stubbornness.

“Yes.”

“Mouse, I will not hesitate to throw you over my shoulder and cart you back to the house and chain you to a fucking bed.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “You wouldn’t.”

He takes another step toward me, nostrils flaring. “Try me.”

Do I hate this idea? I feel like either way, I’m winning here. If he lets me chase after Arion and the other fae, I’m getting my way. If I disobey him, he’ll chain me to the bed and maybe do *other* things to me.

I take two steps backward. Bran’s jaw flexes.

“*Mouse.*”

I can’t help it—a tease of a smile spreads over my face. I need this. *We* need this.

I step off the sidewalk, but before my foot hits the street, Bran has me in his arms and thrown over his shoulder.

It happens so fast, the world spins.

“Hey! Come on!” I say, but my fight is full of laughter.

Bran pulls out his cell phone and makes a connection.

Someone answers on the other end. “Yes, Mr. Duval?”

“Get me a length of chain. Have it in my bedroom in ten minutes.”

“Yes, sir.”

Bran hangs up and then smacks my ass. A high-pitched yelp escapes me.

“Naughty little mouse,” he says and then carts me off into the night.

EPISODE 59

MAKE ME DO AS YOU PLEASE

IN NO TIME AT ALL, WE'RE BACK AT DUVAL HOUSE AND IN THE Anneliese with me chained to our bed.

The chain clanks against the frame when Bran clamps a metal cuff around my wrist. I don't even ask where he got a metal cuff with a perfect eye ring welded into the side on such short notice.

Once the cuff lets out a loud *ting* as the teeth lock into each other, Bran darts away.

"Where are you going?" I ask, not even bothering to hide the eagerness or flare of disappointment in my voice.

He drops into the wingback chair in the corner of the room and slouches into the curve of the wing, watching me with a cool, distant interest.

"Bran."

"Now what, little mouse?" he challenges.

"I thought..." I pull myself up into a sitting position and lean my back against the headboard.

"You thought what? That you'd disobey me and reap some kind of benefit from it?"

Oh, the devil is here, ladies and gentlemen, and he's taunting me. It causes a flare of joy to light in my chest. This is the Bran I know and love and it gives me hope that we'll be all right, no matter how much things are changing.

"It was certainly *implied*," I say.

His long legs are bent at the knee but splayed open, giving me a clear view of his crotch where a bulge is showing.

“Why torture us both?” I ask.

“You must know by now, little mouse, that I can be a very patient man.” His voice is husky, his eyes glinting with a hint of the vampire gold I’ve come to love.

But he’s right—I do know just how patient he can be.

“So you’re just going to sit there with a hard-on and watch me suffer?”

“Yes.”

I try to cross my arms over my chest in an act of annoyance, but the chain isn’t long enough and I’m too far to the center of the bed. The chain snaps and rattles. I scoot closer to the edge.

Bran props his elbow on the chair’s arm and brings his long, elegant fingers to the curve of his jaw.

It’s hard not to stare at him when he’s at rest, when I can appreciate every sharp edge, every masculine curve, every dark shadow that makes up the whole of Bran Duval.

My heart beats a little harder and I get a flash of when he had me on my knees in the bathroom, ordering me to stick my tongue out for him.

I feel new slickness between my legs and close my eyes, trying to draw the thoughts away and somehow overrule biology and instinct.

But it’s useless.

I can feel the weight of his gaze on me. His hunger. I can smell him everywhere in this room and everywhere on my skin.

I may be, apparently, an extremely powerful being, but I am powerless against Bran.

If I were a drug addict, my drug of choice would be the very hot-as-hell vampire sitting just out of my reach.

I want to fuck him.

I want to fuck him all of the time.

And he knows it.

I arch my back purposefully, letting my legs drop open so that the skirt of my dress slips up my thighs, revealing the now damp triangle of fabric at my center.

His gaze immediately sinks to my panties and his nostrils flare, taking in my scent. But his body is held impossibly still.

I grab the hem of my dress and pull it even higher until it's bunched around my hips.

Still, he hasn't moved, but the hard ridge of his cock is clearly straining against the front of his pants.

With a wiggle of my hips, I shimmy out of my panties, taking my time slipping them down the length of my calves, then over my feet. When they're off, I sink back against the pillows, ball the fabric in my free hand, and toss them.

Bran blurs out of the chair and catches them before they hit the floor.

His eyes are bright gold now, and when he brings the bunched fabric to his nose and inhales, his irises flare like flames.

I shiver beneath the heat of his stare.

"Naughty little mouse," he says, his voice scraping over a raw throat.

"Your turn," I suggest.

He takes another breath of my damp panties and then straightens his spine, looking down the sharp line of his nose at me. "Make me."

I frown. "What?"

"Use your talents, Mouse. Make me do as you please."

A lump immediately forms in my throat and I swallow it back. "You're serious?"

He says nothing as his eyes pulse with hunger.

“You made me promise not to use it.”

“This is under controlled circumstances, when I’ve given you permission.” He tosses the panties to the floor and comes closer to the end of the bed. The under-cabinet lighting in the bathroom sends a soft glow into the room and it skims the left side of his body in a hazy white light.

“Besides,” he adds, “you have to learn how to use it if we’re going to infiltrate the fae house. Best start now.”

“Infiltrate? This isn’t a covert mission.”

“Everything is a covert mission, Mouse.” He leans over and lets his fingertips trail up my bare leg. “The sooner you accept that, the better off you’ll be.”

I lick my lips, goosebumps lifting on my arms and legs. “Are there any rules to this exercise?”

His fingers come to the sensitive flesh of my inner thigh and I grow wetter.

“No.”

My eyes pop open. “None?”

“I’ve done a lot of dirty things in my lifetime.” He smirks. “There isn’t much that will turn me off.”

I narrow my eyes. “I don’t like thinking about you doing those dirty things with other women.”

“Then think about me doing them with you and make it so.”

His hand is now just a few inches from my pussy, and I spread my legs for him, thinking he’ll give me a tease at the very least.

But no.

He darts away, back to the chair.

“Bran!”

“I’m waiting,” he says and looks ridiculously smug and patient as he stretches out his legs.

I sit up again. The chain rattles. For some reason I feel like I need some leverage to get this right, so I curl my legs beneath me and sit on my knees.

The chain settles.

At my Pledge, there was no thinking about my power. I just used it. It was almost involuntary. And I still have yet to be unbound. Will I even have access to it now? Rita still has my necklace captured in her magical jar, so that's something at least.

Clearing my throat, splaying my hands on my thighs, I say, "Take off your clothes."

Bran doesn't move an inch and I grumble with frustration.

"Try again."

I shake out my hands like I'm getting ready to throw a pitch at a softball game. The chain complains more loudly.

Expanding my chest, filling up my lungs with oxygen, I say, "Bran, take off your clothes."

Still nothing.

"Goddammit." I fall back on my butt. "This isn't working."

"You're barely trying."

"I just want to fuck you," I say with a pout.

"Then try harder."

With a grumble, I close my eyes and try to put myself back at my Pledge. I was afraid then. Terrified of losing Bran and my sister. The fear made the blood pump fast through my veins.

I can't replicate that same feeling, but maybe if I latch onto that memory, if I let all of the muscles and tendons in my body tense up, maybe I can get close.

I imagine the smell of the Pledge Hall. The floor polish on the pine floors. The fresh water of the river nearby. The smell

of all those shifters and vampires and witches. A mix of spice and musk and sweetness.

In my mind, I see Kelly go down again and Bran under attack, and my heart skips.

I take in another long breath as heat races up my arms, then down my torso and into my core.

“*Bran,*” I say and open my eyes, “*take off your clothes.*”

I know I’ve found it by the uptick in his face, the fine lines around his eyes creasing with frustration as he loses control of his own body.

He stands up, kicks off his boots.

My heart races a little faster.

He never takes his eyes off of me as his belt comes out of the loops with a snap of leather. He tosses it next to my panties, and the metal clasp clanks loudly.

His pants are off in a second and then he yanks off his shirt, exposing all of those hard packed ab muscles.

The breath in my lungs rushes out in a moan of delight.

Just two seconds after that, his black boxer briefs are gone and his thick cock stands erect in the open air.

I lick my lips. I can’t help it.

This is too much power for one person to have, but goddamn, am I enjoying it.

“Now what, Mouse?” he says on a husky rasp.

“Stroke yourself.”

He tilts his head. “Try again.”

“Take yourself in your hand.”

“Again.”

A frustrated grumble rumbles in my chest. “Stroke your cock.”

He stands in the middle of the bedroom, his hands at his side.

“You’re killing me,” I say.

“You have until the count of five and then I’m putting my clothes back on.”

“Wait—”

“One.”

“That’s not fair!”

“Two.”

I crawl down the length of the bed, but the chain yanks me back. I forgot about it already.

“Three.”

The urgency takes root in my gut.

“Four.”

“*Get over here,*” I say.

He’s suddenly beside me on the bed.

“Better,” he says and wraps his hand in a length of my hair and gives it a sharp yank, forcing me to bend to his control. “Keep going.”

I reach between us for his cock, but he smacks my hand away.

I take another deep breath, focus on the beating of my heart, and then, “*Grab your cock.*”

With my hair still wound around his left hand, he uses his right to take control of his shaft. Excitement burns in my belly.

“*Stroke yourself from base to tip.*”

He does as I command and I can hear the soft rasp of his hand on his cock.

“*Faster,*” I say, and he picks up the pace.

Our eyes are locked on one another as he pumps himself harder, muscle and bone twining in his shoulder as he works himself. His irises burn brightly, and pleasure makes his lids heavy, his fangs sharp against his puffy lips.

“Don’t stop,” I say.

He keeps going, racing close to the finish line.

“Mouse,” he warns.

“Don’t stop until you come,” I say again.

He pushes me back against the bed and the chain clanks loudly on the headboard. He bats my knees open with his free hand, but keeps pumping himself with his other.

His breathing is ragged now, his teeth clenched tight.

He lines himself up at my center so that every stroke of his cock brings the backside of his knuckles against my clit.

The first graze of him makes me jolt, but he quickly wraps his free hand around my throat, driving me into place beneath him.

“You said faster, didn’t you, Mouse?” His assault on my clit is bringing me too close too quickly.

“Yes, but...*Bran*—”

He clamps his hand over my mouth.

“My turn, Mouse.”

The head of his shaft swells in the cup of his hand and rubs against my clit.

He keeps up the pace until he growls above me, body tensing, the tendons in his neck straining as he clenches his teeth.

“Come for me, Mouse,” he says as he pumps against me.

Oh fuck.

Fuck.

I wrap my hand around his wrist, his own hand still clamped on my mouth as I come hard and fast.

The pleasure is sharp, more a bolt of lightning than a growing crash of thunder, and heat races through my body.

I squeeze my eyes shut, my breath heaving out around Bran’s fingers.

And then he shoots his load all over my pussy, turning me into a slick mess as he growls above me and then slides his length up my wet slit. Another bolt of pleasure shoots through my core.

I clench up and moan into his hand.

“That’s my good girl,” he says at my ear and then kisses the sensitive flesh just beneath my lobe, his fangs grazing over my pulse point.

Oh god.

Oh fucking hell.

Eyes closed, I sink into the sated heaviness that makes me feel like I’m floating.

Bran curls up beside me and then rubs his wet, sticky fingers over my bottom lip. “You did well, Mouse. Taste it.”

I dart my tongue out to clean off his cum.

“You may have the power to command me,” he says, “but I will always control your pleasure.”

“Yes,” I say on a breath, still lost to the calmness that has washed over me.

He turns me, then wraps his arms around me, pulling me into him.

“Take off the chain,” I tell him.

“No,” he says. “Go to sleep.”

I want to argue, but I’m suddenly too tired. That took a lot out of me and I’m not entirely sure if it was using my power or coming.

I guess it doesn’t matter.

Both felt ridiculously good.

Maybe too good.

I might like using my voice more than I want to admit.

I drift off quickly, held safely in Bran’s arms. But it doesn’t feel like I’m asleep for long.

A pounding at the bedroom door forces me to lurch awake. Bran is out of bed before I can orient myself in the sleepy haze.

“This better be good,” he says when he whips the door open.

Jimmy is on the other side. “Get dressed,” she says. “And hurry.”

“Why?” he asks on a growl.

“Because Damien is awake. And something is wrong.”

EPISODE 60

YOU FLATTER ME, ALPHA

BRAN

IN 1737, A STRAIN OF FLU FOUND ITS WAY THROUGH Aquitaine, and Damien was the only one to fall ill to it in our household.

There is something unsettling about seeing your older brother slowly dying in his bed, a certain helplessness at not knowing how to fix it.

As much as Damien and I war against each other, we have always stood solidly at each other's backs when it mattered most.

He is my best friend, and he is the only true thing that remains of who I was when I was human.

Damien is awake and something is wrong.

I will burn the Renshaw House to the ground for what they've done, just as soon as I know what it is they did.

When I burst into Damien's bedroom, the door slams against the wall. Bianca is at his bedside, her hands hovering over his prone body. Jimmy is at the foot watching carefully, her arms crossed over her chest.

Sky is there too and I have to bury the urge to snap her neck and toss her out with the trash. I suspect Sky might be the new weak link in Duval House. How else did the Renshaw witches get through our defenses and take Kelly captive?

But I'll deal with her later.

"Get her out of here," I say to no one in particular.

"Me?" Sky says. "I'm Damien's assistant. Why wouldn't I be here?"

I snap my fingers at the two vampires who've been put on guard and the big guy takes Sky by the arm.

“Bran!” She tries to yank out of the big guy’s grip, but his fingers are like a vise and I can hear Sky’s bones crack. “What the fuck, Bran?”

I go to Bianca’s side. “I thought he was awake?”

“He was,” Jimmy says.

“So?” I’m impatient for answers.

I was the only one who visited Damien when he was sick all those years ago, the only one willing to risk their life to see him.

I remember the smell, the burn of the tallow candles and incense to drive away the scent of death.

But I remember the rattle of his chest the most.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he’d said to me when I brought him a fresh bottle of brandy.

“And you shouldn’t be in this fucking bed.”

He’d snorted, then dissolved into a coughing fit. I’d poured him some brandy and helped him drink.

“You need to keep yourself healthy,” he’d said. “Someone will need to care for mother and sister when I’m gone.”

“You will when you live.”

Damien hadn’t believed me then and if I’m honest, I hadn’t believed me either.

There’d been dark circles around his watery, bloodshot eyes. His lips had been cracked and bleeding. He’d looked so pale, so weak.

But somehow, he’d pulled through.

I was convinced then that my brother was invincible.

Except right now, I am reminded all over again of those long nights in our house in France. I am reminded of feeling helpless.

Bianca pulls her hands away. “He seems to be going from consciousness to unconsciousness, and when he’s awake he ___”

Suddenly Damien lurches upright, and Bianca yelps and steps back.

Now I see what they mean.

Something *is* wrong.

Damien's eyes are open but they're pure white.

"Brother?" I say.

He's sitting rigidly, hands limp at his sides. Though he has no pupils, it looks like he's gazing straight ahead.

I snap my fingers in front of his face. He fucking hates that.

"Damien."

Nothing.

"Has he responded to anything yet?" I ask.

"No," Jimmy says. "It's just this." She nods at him in bed. "He'll sit up. Do nothing. Saying nothing. Then he'll collapse again."

"What does this mean?"

Bianca rakes her teeth over her bottom lip. "I'll be honest, this is new to me. No witch I've worked with has ever mentioned anything like this."

Damien hasn't moved yet, nor has he blinked. I've seen a lot of fucked up weird shit in my day, but this has even my skin crawling. "Okay. So, how do we figure out what it means?"

"You should tell him what you felt," Jimmy says to Bianca. "He needs to know everything."

The scowl I turn on Bianca could singe hair. "Do not make me ask questions, witch. I need details. *Now.*"

"Sorry." She swallows audibly. "When I hold my hands out like this" —she repositions over Damien— "I feel something I've only felt once before, when I played with magic I wasn't supposed to play with."

There is a sinking weight in my gut. "Go on."

“Dark magic.”

This isn't unexpected. “Which means—”

“It means...” She gnaws at her lip again and then yanks her hands back as if something bit her. “We all know and can agree that the fae realm exists, right?”

“Yes,” I answer, growing more impatient by the second.

“Witches are always taught that magic—all magic, including witches and vampires and shifters—originated in the fae realm, that over the millennium, we've evolved to become what we are, which means...if this is magic not from this realm, it's...”

“From the fae realm,” I guess and she nods.

I turn away and scrub at my face as my heart races in my ears. I need a drink.

No, I need my fucking brother.

Damien was always the one who solved problems. I was just along for the joy ride.

With my back to them, I ask, “How would the Renshaw witches tap into fae magic if the gate is closed?”

“The gate may be closed,” Bianca says, “but there are currents to tap. It's not an impossibility.”

“And how would a person undo that magic?”

There is silence and it hangs heavy.

I turn to them just as my brother drops to the bed and a puff of air escapes his pillow as the feathers resetttle beneath his head. Damien refuses to use anything other than feathered pillows. It reminds him of home. I know it does even though he won't admit it.

Bianca licks her lips and takes a deep breath. “The Renshaw witches could undo it, but if they won't or are unwilling...you'd...I mean...the *origin*...”

“Spit it out, witch.”

“You’d have to open the gate and get Damien to the fae realm.”

The Alpha answers on the second ring. “I’m busy,” he says.

“And yet you answered.”

He growls through the phone. “What do you want now, Duval? I’m not your personal errand boy.”

“No, but everything we do from here on out affects us both.”

I’m moving through the house, the phone clutched to my ear. I can hear Jimmy not far off, telling Mouse the abbreviated version of what’s transpired and the news that I’m leaving. The sun will be up within the hour.

“What did the Guard do with those who were trapped inside the Pledge Hall?” I ask.

The Alpha is silent for a beat. I can hear the sound of clothing rasping against skin on the other end, then a door creaking open. “Why do you think I know anything about it?”

“Stop fucking around. Everyone in Midnight knows you control the Guard.”

He grumbles again. “It’s in moments like these that I hope my psychic misread her prediction.”

I rush down the front steps of Duval House and down the driveway. “Hurry, shifter.”

“The spell broke eventually. Whatever Jessie did, the effects faded. The Renshaws were already gone by the time the Guard got there. The humans took longer to come out of it. They were the only ones left by then and all of their memories were wiped.”

“Thanks.” I pull the phone away to disconnect, but the Alpha stops me.

“Wait. What stupid shit are you planning now? You going to murder the entire Renshaw House?”

“Don’t be silly. Torture first. Answers second. Then murder.”

“By yourself?”

“Careful, Alpha,” I say as I near the end of the driveway. “Keep talking like that and someone will think you care what happens to a leader of a rival house.”

“Put eight on the perimeter,” he says to someone beyond the phone. “Two on each entrance.”

“Where are you going?” Fox asks.

“Trying to prevent a massacre,” the Alpha says as I hear the shift of the wind in the phone.

“I don’t need your help,” I tell him.

“What do you think your brother will say when he wakes up and realizes you’re dead because of some stupid revenge mission?”

Beyond the pines, the sky is starting to brighten. Really, it’s the perfect time to infiltrate a witch house. They’ll never expect a vampire to be out this late.

“I’m meeting you there,” the Alpha says.

“To stop me or to help me?”

“Aren’t those the same thing?”

“Don’t make me fight you too.”

“Fine. To help you, you fucking idiot.”

“You flatter me, Alpha.”

He laughs.

“How long will it take you?” I ask him.

“Less than ten.”

“Make it five.”

“I can’t run that fa—” I hang up, slide the phone into my pocket, and start running.

EPISODE 61

DEAD MEN HOLD NO VALUE

BRAN

DAMIEN HAS NO LOVE FOR THE ALPHA, AND YET I SUSPECT HE would agree with the wolf—I'm perhaps being a bit reckless going to the Renshaw witch house with an imperfect plan and an overwhelming desire for revenge.

I want to fucking kill something.

Something being witches.

But I need answers first in order to save my brother.

And I suppose, in a way, Kelly too.

We are all connected now. The MacMahon sisters. The Duval brothers.

When I reach the Renshaw property, the vibration in the air tells me there is a border spell. Not surprising, not insurmountable, but fucking annoying.

I pace away from the property and tap at a name on my cell phone. Bianca answers on the first ring. I'm glad she already knows not to keep me waiting.

She begins with a greeting, but I cut her off before she can get the words out.

“How do I get past a barrier spell?”

I'm in the thickness of the woods where the night is still clinging to the shadows. The boughs of the hardwoods creak above me as the wind shifts. We're not far off from autumn now and the air already smells crisper as the leaves start their change and the ground grows colder night by night.

And thinking of autumn has me thinking of the Autumn Court.

My little mouse will be hunted by them before too long, if they get their way.

I am reminded of Damian's warning on that desolate country road just a few days ago.

If the gate were to be opened again... Here, we're kings. But standing against one of the princes from the Unseelie Court? We would not measure up.

I wanted to help Mouse identify her origins. There is no way to embrace your power when you don't even know who you are.

But this...this was never on the list of possibilities. How the fuck am I to protect Mouse from the entire Unseelie Court?

Before the fear takes over, I push it away. Another problem for another time.

"Renshaw border spell?" Bianca guesses, pulling me from my reverie.

I pace in a circle beneath the canopy of an oak tree. "Yes."

"They'll have perimeter markers holding the spell in place. Trees or rocks. Look for carvings or paintings of symbols. Renshaws tend to grip the darker side of magic so you'll likely see primitive runes."

I dart back to the property line where the air shifts again, sensing an intrusion, and I start a path along the perimeter. When I find a carving in an old maple, I relay the rune to Bianca—intertwined V's with a circle in the center.

"Okay..."

I hear her hesitation. "What is it?"

"Well...that's an easy one to undo, is all. How old is the cut?"

I can smell the tang of fresh wood on the air. "Hours maybe."

"Hmmm."

"Spit it out, witch."

"This might be a trap."

"And?"

“And I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t warn you of it.”

“Just tell me how to undo it.”

“You’ll need to break it. Anything will do, but you’ll not want to touch it.”

I scan the forest floor and find a stone about the size of a grapefruit. Picking it up, I pace back several yards and set the phone on a fallen log.

“You’ll want to be sure the entire symbol is destroyed,” Bianca goes on.

I toss the rock up and catch it again, testing its weight.

“I wouldn’t try a knife,” Bianca says, “because you’ll still be connected to it through metal—”

I cock my arm back and throw the rock like a baseball.

It’s flying so fast, the air whistles and when it hits the mark, a loud crack echoes through the forest as the tree trunk explodes.

The canopy shudders overhead and the tree wavers, no longer able to support its weight with half the trunk missing.

Thick roots lift from the dirt and the tree sways again.

“There you are,” the Alpha says as he comes up beside me a little breathless, sweat coating his forehead. “Where should we—”

The tree cracks several yards away as the last of its trunk gives. And when it hits the ground, the reverberation sings across the earth.

Bright violet light flashes through the forest as the air takes on the scent of burnt wood and magic.

“What the fuck are you doing?” the Alpha asks. “Everyone in a five-mile radius probably heard that. Is that...fucking hell. *Witch magic.*” He says the latter like it tastes bitter, and then he wrinkles his nose and waves his hand through the air as if that will help drive the scent away.

I only smell what reminds me of anise and maybe a thread of sulphur. Nothing to gripe about. But wolves hate magic.

“Is that Callum?” Bianca asks.

The Alpha notices the phone.

“Thanks, Bianca,” I say, ending the call.

“I see your witch is already coming in handy,” the wolf says. “Might have been a good idea after all, bringing in someone not of your ilk.”

I smile at him. “I only have good ideas, wolf.”

He snorts and crosses his arms over his chest. “So full of hot air. I’m shocked you don’t float away.”

Now he’s the one smiling.

“You can come or you can go,” I tell him and head off in the direction of the Renshaw house. “No one forced you to join this adventure.”

He decides to come.

Even someone like the Alpha can’t say no to putting a rogue witch house in their place.

The Renshaw house really fits the brand of the witch.

It’s a hulking Victorian with black siding and black-framed windows with trim work that looks like spiderwebs.

When we reach the wraparound porch and start up the front steps, we find no resistance from magic.

The Alpha and I walk right in through the front door.

Of course, that’s just one more sign that we’ve walked into a trap, but I’m going to pretend it’s just the hubris of a witch.

Voices filter out through closed pocket doors to our left.

The conversation is about the Pledging and the Guard.

I count four heartbeats in the room.

The Alpha and I share a look. There are no overhead lights on in the house, only lamps, and the low lighting casts thick shadows. He doesn't look worried, only eager, and I'm glad of it.

The Alpha nods at the pocket doors and I nod in agreement.

He puts his fingers into the recessed handles on the doors and gives them an outward push. The pocket doors slide open and bang against the stoppers embedded in the tracks.

The room turns to us.

There's Tabitha, the matriarch of the Renshaw House, and three other Renshaw witches. Two men, one woman. I recognize the woman as being Tabitha's Irish cousin. She moved to Midnight several years ago and is now second-in-command of the Renshaw House.

The men are lower in the hierarchy, and I don't recall their names. None of them are suffering any visible wounds despite the fighting at the Pledge Hall. Witches are good at healing themselves, but not as good as vampires and wolves.

"Bran," Tabitha says in a tone of voice that is not surprised and, dare I say, expecting? "It's nice to see you out so close to dawn. It changes your sunny disposition." She smiles with closed lips.

The Alpha and I break away from one another and circle the room, boxing the witches in. It's a dangerous move, but one of strategy if we play our cards right.

Tabitha clasps her hands in front of her. She's wearing all black to match the mood of her House. All black save for a bright yellow garnet that hangs from a silver chain around her neck.

"Won't you have a seat?" Tabitha gestures at the sitting area around a cold fireplace.

"Were you expecting us?" I ask.

I don't like beating around bushes. Or threats.

"Of course."

I catch the Alpha scenting the air, looking for traps. He gives me a quick shake of his head.

Nothing.

“We prefer to stand,” I tell her.

“Very well.”

“You know why I’ve come,” I say.

Tabitha takes a breath, lifting her chin just slightly so she can regard me from the broad slant of her nose. “Julian Locke was blinded by greed and desperation. Our goals were a bit loftier, but there was some overlap.”

This isn’t going the way I thought it would and I’m not sure if I like it.

“And you decided to use my brother as a pawn?”

“Wouldn’t you do the same if you saw the opportunity?”

“Would I use Damian as a pawn? Only a fool would.”

“Fair enough. But the ship has already left the harbor and now we need to find a solution if you want to get it back.”

“Is my brother the ship in this analogy?”

Tabitha smirks. “I suppose he is.”

“He’d hate that.”

“I know.”

“Go on.”

“When Julian came to me, all he wanted was Jessie. He didn’t think beyond that. He knew that Jessie equaled power, and power was what he wanted. He thought that was what I wanted too. He never bothered to ask though.”

I come around a wingback chair, keeping my eyes on the other witches flanking Tabitha like guards. All of them have their hands clasped in front of them—a clear sign of respect for those in the room who are not witches.

What an odd morning this is turning out to be.

“I knew that when Julian decided to use Kelly in his revenge plot, that Damien would do everything in his power to protect her. And I knew you would do everything in your power to protect him.”

She’s right, of course. But I’m not going to admit to my weaknesses, even if everyone knows of them.

“So it stood to reason that I could use both Kelly and Damien as leverage,” Tabitha goes on. “It’s no mistake that they are alive but unconscious. Dead men hold no value.”

The anger that ignites in my chest has my heart thumping hard against my ears.

She’ll pay for that. One day.

“What was the end goal, witch?” I ask.

She takes a deep breath. “I want the fae gate opened. You need it open to save your brother. And I can help you do it.”

I meet her eyes, looking for the catch, the lie, or the misdirection. Tabitha has always been a straightforward person. When she wants to speak.

“Why would you want the fae gate opened?” I ask.

“I had a brother too,” she answers, and the waver in her voice does not go unnoticed. “Until one of the fae took him from me.”

EPISODE 62

DIG UP DIRT ON A FAE LORD

IT'S JIMMY WHO UNDOES THE CHAIN FROM AROUND MY WRIST. I want to be annoyed that Bran just left me here, fucked and wet and sticky, but I guess I can't blame him when it comes to his brother.

"Thank you, Jimmy," I tell her and rub my sore wrist, trying not to blush. "We were...I was..."

"No need to explain. We all have our kinks." She winks at me and then turns to leave.

"Is Damien better? Is Kelly—"

"Not yet." She pauses at the door, her hand curled around the wood. "We're still trying to figure it out. Bran is going to the Renshaw witches to get answers."

"He what?" I bolt upright, forget that I'm still half naked and a mess and then grab the bedsheet to wrap around myself. "I should go with him and use my power and—"

"He's taking the Alpha," Jimmy says. "And I would highly suggest you don't go chasing after him. He'll never let you or me forget it."

With a grumble, I take a fold of the sheet in hand and cross the room. "I'm tired of just sitting on the sidelines. I was the one who saved us all at my Pledge."

"Do you want my advice? Or do you just need to vent?"

"Umm...well...no one has ever asked me that." I think for a second. "Your advice."

“Okay.” She straightens and her hoop earrings swing with the movement. “Almost no one is an expert at something when they first begin, and power is always easier to access without training when under duress. But reaching for it might not always be that simple. You need to figure out more about your abilities before you can rely on them.”

She takes a step into the room. “Bran has been in hundreds of dangerous scenarios. He’s an expert at navigating them. And even better, he’s not so easily killed.” She tilts her head and a rogue curl of hair slides over her forehead. “You may be fae and immortal, but fae can die a lot easier than vampires.”

A shiver makes my skin crawl across my bare shoulders. She’s right, of course. And I can’t help my sister if I’m dead.

“Okay, fine.” I exhale loudly. “I won’t go running after Bran.”

She nods. “I need to get to bed before I shrivel into dust. If you need anything, there are always several of our bound mortals on duty during the day. You’ll find them in the main house.”

“Thanks.”

She gives me a quick wave of her fingers and then she’s gone.

I take a shower and dress in jeans and a tee. The house is still quiet as I leave the bedroom while running a brush through my wet hair. Beyond the Anneliese, the sky is already showing daybreak.

Where the hell is Bran—

“Mouse.”

I yelp and jolt back.

Bran is standing behind me in the hallway.

“Goddammit! Don’t do that.”

He laughs even though he looks like he's about to pass out on his feet. There are dark circles beneath his eyes, and bags are starting to form in the shadows. His lips are dry, the whites of his eyes bloodshot.

"Are you okay?" I ask. "Did the Renshaw witches hurt you?" I search him for injuries and find none.

"It's past my bedtime." He laughs again and then rests his shoulder against the corner where the hallway spills into the living room. He's slouched, as if being upright is starting to wear on him.

"Did you get your answers? You just *left* me."

His head lolls against the wall. "Would you forgive me if I apologized?"

"No."

"Then I won't."

"Such an asshole." I roll my eyes and set the brush aside. When I reach him at the hallway, I slide my hands over his stomach, feeling the tautness of his abs beneath the thin material of his shirt. "You left me chained to the bed."

"That's my favorite way to leave you."

I gaze up at him and find his eyelids heavy. It's hard to say if it's exhaustion or lust. Maybe a little of both.

"Don't ever do that again," I warn him halfheartedly.

"I absolutely will." In a flash, he grabs me, presses me against the wall, and wraps his hand around my throat. A little breath escapes me as he tilts my chin up, his lips hovering just an inch above mine.

"You did good, using your voice on me," he says, "but I still prefer you at my mercy."

Our breath mingles. My heart races faster, thudding against my ribs.

I may have told him never to do it again, but he and I both know I also prefer being at his mercy.

Bran picks up on it and says, “My naughty little mouse.”

Then he kisses me. It’s a slow meeting of lips first, then his tongue invades my mouth as his hips press into mine, driving me into the wall. I moan into him and he grinds his cock against me and then—

He’s gone.

I stumble away from the wall, a little drunk with need. “You’re teasing me.”

“That’s all you get for now, little mouse.” He walks backward, disappearing into the shadows. “Come to bed with me.”

I follow the sound of his voice down the hallway, skin erupting in goosebumps as my base instinct senses the predator watching me from the darkness.

I know Bran and I have new ground to cover and our relationship has to transform as we uncover more and more about who I am and what I’m capable of, but we operate at our best when Bran has the upper hand and I submit to him.

He likes it and I like it.

We just have to figure out how to exist on equal ground outside of our relationship.

Maybe that’s the key.

Submit in the bedroom.

Assume my power outside of it and give Bran the grace he needs to find his place in that new balance.

His hand grabs mine in the dark and his touch is gentle as he guides me into the bedroom, then over to the bed. I slip off the jeans but leave the tee on. I’m not entirely sure I’m going to sleep yet.

A second later, the bed shifts beneath Bran’s weight and he slides over the thick, plush mattress to curl into me.

I notice he hasn’t said a word about the Renshaw witches or what answers he may have gotten, and I can’t help but worry it has something to do with me.

“Good night, little mouse,” he says.

“Good night.”

I wait until he’s fast asleep.

It’s hard to wake a vampire, especially in the first few hours so I don’t worry about slipping out from his embrace.

At the door, I pull it open, careful with the slant of light, and then slip out and close it softly behind me.

I’m not tired.

I don’t think I’ve ever been this keyed up, so ready to *do* something.

We’re supposed to meet Arion, Lord of the Summer Court, tonight. I’m excited and a little terrified. What can he possibly have to say about me? Stanley warned about the fae courts coming for me, but I don’t know how they’ll get through if the gate is still closed.

Before I leave the Anneliese, I check Kelly’s room only to find it empty. I’m not surprised, but the small flame of hope I was nurturing quickly extinguishes.

I make my way across the courtyard and into the main house. The place is much quieter in the daylight. While quieter means safer, because all of the vampires are in bed, I don’t think I like the emptiness or the silence. Duval House is supposed to be full of noise. Hearing the absence of it feels wrong.

I head to the library where a few of the pledged humans are dotted around the room, their attention on their phones or tablets or books. Soft jazz music plays through the sound system.

I go to the café counter where a guy is washing dishes in the sink.

“Excuse me,” I call.

He turns to me, then drops the dish in his hand when he realizes who I am. The dish hits the water with force, splashing it across his black apron.

“Oh shit,” he says and steps away from the sink, assessing the damage. “Sorry. Hi.”

“Hi.” I fold my arms over the counter. “Need help?”

“No. Absolutely not. Bran would kill me.”

I frown at him.

The guy ducks down and tosses a dirty towel over the mess on the floor.

“Why would he kill you?”

“You’re Jessie MacMahon,” he says. “Practically Duval House royalty now.” He straightens and slides the towel around on the floor with the toe of his black Converse sneakers. “And royalty does not do menial chores.”

I scoff and come around the counter. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m extremely serious.”

I pick up a second towel.

“Ahh-ahh,” he says, like he’s a parent scolding a child. Except we’re practically the same age.

Slowly, deliberately, I reach around him and mop up the mess on the counter. He doesn’t try to stop me. I guess royalty can do as they please.

“See.” I toss the towel into a nearby bucket. “No murdering or maiming.”

The guy crosses his arms over his chest and his biceps swell against the sleeves of his gray t-shirt.

He’s thick and muscular, but just a few inches taller than I am with messy blond hair that hangs in his face. There’s a hoop earring in his left nostril and a full tattoo sleeve on his right arm. The tattoo is of a gorgeous shieldmaiden with a dark, stormy sky behind her and blackbirds in flight.

“You know my name,” I say to him, “but I don’t know yours.”

He smirks.

“What?”

“It’s King, actually.”

“Wait...seriously?”

Ducking his head, he tries to hide his embarrassment. “Kingston is my full name. Everyone calls me King.”

“I thought royalty didn’t do menial chores?”

He laughs to himself, a quick shot of air through his nose. “The name is ridiculous. I will give you that.”

“No, I like it.” I offer him my hand. “It’s nice to meet you, King.”

There is a second of hesitation, like he actually believes the lie he’s telling, that I’m somehow above him and shouldn’t be engaged with. But he finally shakes.

“Nice to meet you too, Jessie. *Formerly.*”

“Now that we got that out of the way...could I use your phone?”

I left my phone at Duval House when I went with Stanley to the diner, but I keep forgetting to charge it. At home, I had a routine—set my phone on the cordless charger on my desk right before I went to bed. Now my routine is all screwed up and my charger is still at the house.

It might be time I admit to myself that I’ve officially moved into Duval House, and if that’s the case, I need to move some of my things here too.

King pulls his cell from the back pocket of his jeans and unlocks the screen. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.”

He returns to the sink and picks up another dish to wash.

Because I was smart enough to memorize Sam’s number in case of emergency, I easily tap it out and connect. She answers

groggily on the fifth ring. “Who is this and what do you want?”

“It’s me. My phone is dead. I know it’s early—”

“How early?”

“Like nine?” I lie. It’s actually closer to eight, but I don’t want Sam to veto this idea before I get it out.

With a grumble, she readjusts the phone and says, “Speak.”

“Right after you left the diner last night, I was visited by a fae lord.”

There’s another rustle of fabric through the phone. “I’m sorry...did you say, ‘fae lord?’”

“My mom used to be in charge of the mortal census, do you remember?”

“Yeah,” Sam says.

“And do you remember what she used to complain about every year?”

“Trying to track down all of the fae and getting them to cooperate.”

“Right. Because it was decided that the mortal court system would take on the responsibility of managing the fae records.”

Sam sounds like she’s moving now. “So you want to go to the mortal court and see if you can find records on this fae lord?”

“You know me so well,” I answer.

Keys jingle in Sam’s hand. “Mom, I’m leaving!” she yells through her house. To me she says, “This is the only time I will ever get out of bed early.”

“What better reason than to go dig up dirt on a fae lord?”

“You have a good point.”

“I’ll meet you there in ten minutes?”

“Already walking out the door.”

We hang up and I hand the phone back to King. “Thanks. I’ll see you around?”

“Of course, Your Majesty.” He bows with a laugh.

Sam and I meet outside the mortal court. Her strawberry blonde hair is braided into two messy braids that hang over her shoulders. Several wispy strands flutter in the warm morning breeze.

There is an oversized vintage movie t-shirt tied into a loose knot at her hips so that the material hugs her waist. She’s wearing cut-off denim shorts, white tennis shoes, and sunglasses with a horn-rimmed flare to the frame.

Despite clearly throwing together this outfit as she stumbled from bed, she looks effortless. Neither of us has ever been particularly fashion focused, not like Kelly. But somehow Sam has always pulled off a look that feels intentional and rebellious at the same time.

“Good morning,” I tell her.

“You lied about the time.” She follows me up the cement steps.

“I rounded up.”

She scoffs and when we enter into the darker hallway of the courthouse, Sam slides the sunglasses atop her head. She may be tired, but I’d recognize that glint of excitement anywhere.

Sam’s big family may be chaotic, but they love their game nights, and Sam is always on the hunt for a win. This is just another game to play and she loves it, even if she’s complaining about getting out of bed.

In the clerk’s office, we find Alice behind the counter stapling packets of paper. When she spots me, her eyes get big. In the cubicle beside her, the dark-haired girl, who I recall was

here when Bran and I fucked in the waiting room, stops clicking on her keyboard.

Alice yanks nervously at the hem of her blouse. “Jessie! Hi! What can I do for you?”

I lean over, as if I’m sharing a secret. “I need help finding some information on one of the fae. Is it possible you could help with that?”

She runs her tongue over her lips. “Um...okay. What fae are you looking for?”

“Arion?” I wince just hearing his name out loud, knowing that I’m technically breaking the rules and getting a little bit too nosy for my own good. I’m sure Bran has a much subtler way of getting this info, but the curiosity is getting the best of me and I’m not entirely sure Bran wants to dig up this information.

The dark-haired girl pushes away from her desk and disappears through a side door. I spot her name plate on the corner of her desk. Hailey. I can’t seem to place her at a House. Is she vampire, shifter, witch pledged? She doesn’t strike me as someone who would choose to be a virgin her entire life.

But can she be trusted?

“If you want to have a seat in the waiting room, I’ll see what I can dig up,” Alice says.

“Perfect. Thank you.”

The waiting room smells like it looks—like it’s a time capsule from another era.

“If your mom was still working here, she’d just let us go digging into the archives,” Sam says and pops some change into a soda machine.

“Not if we wanted to know about the fae.” I sit in one of the chairs next to the window that overlooks the parking lot. “Looking back, I realize she tried to keep me from interacting with the fae. Even when I babysat for the Leaf family, she would try talking me out of it.”

Sam ducks down to grab her can of cola. “Knowing what you know now, clearly she was trying to keep you from finding answers.”

“Yep.” I slouch in the chair and fold my arms over my chest. I’m not tired, exactly. Just worn out and afraid.

I’m worried for my sister. I have yet to check in on her. I’m terrified of what I might find or how it’ll make me feel to see her helpless in bed yet again, all because of me.

If I push it down deep and focus on this instead—*go, go, go*—maybe the wait for answers about my sister won’t be so hard to endure.

Sam sits beside me and her can clangs open when she flicks the tab. She takes a long gulp and then hands it off to me. I could use the caffeine.

“So you want to tell me how last night went with the Alpha?” I ask.

Speaking of ways to distract myself from my own problems...

Sam takes the can back after I’ve had a long drink. “We barely spoke in his truck. There isn’t much to report.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing. I’m just going to ignore him until he goes away.”

I laugh. “I have a suspicion that someone like Cal does not just *go away*.”

Sam rolls her eyes.

“Maybe he—” My words are cut off by a shadow in the waiting room doorway. I look up to see Arion, Lord of the Summer Court, leaning casually against the door frame.

“Hello, faeling,” he says. “I hear you’re trying to unearth my secrets. Let me save you the trouble.” He moves with an ethereal quickness that catches me off guard. And suddenly he’s standing in front of me, hauling me to my feet.

EPISODE 63

A WARNING POKE

ARION, LORD OF THE SUMMER COURT, SPINS ME AROUND AND slams me against the nearest wall. He towers over me, his scent everywhere. Like thistle and honeysuckle and something richer, darker, like rainwater soaking stone.

“You don’t get to know my secrets,” he says. “You don’t get to ask questions. You don’t—” He cuts himself off with a hiss of air between his teeth.

The smell of iron and burning flesh drives away the heady scent of fae lord.

“Put her down,” Sam says.

Sam has a tool in her hand that looks like a Swiss Army Knife. But this one is built for supernatural weapons. The tool flipped open is a small iron knife and Sam has it pressed to Arion’s throat.

Arion turns to her slowly. The blade pierces flesh and blood beads from the cut. “Careful, mortal,” he says.

Sam narrows her eyes. “I said, ‘*Put her down.*’”

Arion’s fingers exert more pressure on my throat, breaking off my supply of air. My lungs burn. My ears are ringing. I may be fae, but I still have to breathe.

Sam turns the point of the blade against Arion’s jugular. “Try me.”

Smoke curls in the air between us before the fae lord finally relents and drops me. I sputter, sucking in air. He stands

back and folds his hands behind him like this was all a minor misunderstanding.

When I'm able to fill my lungs with a full breath, I straighten and smooth over my shirt. When Bran finds out about this, and there's no doubt he will, I will never hear the end of it.

But I'm determined to navigate this new terrain with some measure of autonomy. I love Bran and I know he'll do everything in his power to protect me. I just need to prove to myself that I don't always need him to save me.

"I am not your enemy," I say.

"Does that make you an ally, faeling?" Arion tilts his head in consideration. "Allies do not dig for secrets they have not earned."

Well, he has me there.

I rub at the sore spot of flesh beneath my jawline. "I needed to know what I was dealing with. You can't blame me for that."

He says nothing.

"So are you? An enemy or ally?" I ask.

"Once upon a time, you were an enemy," he answers. "Now, it's up for debate."

It doesn't escape me that he's chosen his words carefully. Unlike me, the fae lord can't lie.

"So tell me what you want."

"I want to go home," he admits, with little to no emotion on his face.

"And you think I can help you with that?"

"You were quite possibly the last fae to come through the gate before it was sealed. So yes, I do think you can."

"And if I say no?"

The first hint of emotion filters into his eyes, making them glint. But I can't tell what it means.

He takes a step closer and I take a step back, bumping into Sam. She still has her supernatural Swiss Army Knife open, the iron pointed at Arion. But he ignores it.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “Did I ask for permission?”

My stomach knots. “Are you insinuating you’d force me to help you?”

“I’m insinuating that I can take your blood with very little effort.”

Is that what will unlock the gate? Arion doesn’t seem like an idiot. If he thinks I’m the answer, he probably won’t give up so easily in testing out the theory.

“Have you forgotten I can literally use my voice to make you do whatever I want?” I counter.

His nostrils flare. His hands are still clasped behind his back, but his body has taken on a new level of alertness, as if he could snap my neck in the next second before I even notice he’s moved.

“Try it,” he challenges.

I snort and then open my mouth to say, “*Bark like a dog,*” except the second I take a breath to utter the words, a gale force wind shoots into the room. My eyes burn from the shift in pressure and several papers pull free of a bulletin board and fly around the room. I throw my arm up to shield my eyes.

Arion is standing in the center of the whirlwind, his hair lightly fluttering in the breeze. He’s watching me blankly, a little bored.

I try again to reach for my voice and give a command, but the wind kicks up, stealing all the oxygen from my lungs.

I turn around and Sam and I huddle together, shielding our eyes, trying to catch our breath.

When the wind dies down, paper flutters to the floor.

Arion hasn’t moved, but his point has been made.

My family might once have been considered an all-powerful enemy of the other fae courts, but I barely know

anything at all about being powerful. He's probably had several hundred years' jump on me.

"Cooperate or don't," he says. "I don't really care. If you accept our invitation for tonight, I'll assume you chose our side and in that case, we'll celebrate. If you don't show up..." He tilts his head again and a lock of his dark hair falls over his forehead as he narrows his eyes at me. "Well, I know where to find you, now don't I?"

And then he turns around and leaves.

I can't go back to Duval House. Not yet. Bran probably isn't up, but by the time he's had his first drop of coffee later today, he'll know what happened at the courthouse.

And because sometimes avoiding confrontation is better than, *well, confronting*, I decide to go back to my house.

Sam insists on coming with me.

"I'll be fine," I tell her as I pull open the driver's side door on the Bimmer.

She goes around to the passenger side and is in the seat before I'm behind the wheel. "I'm sure you will." She buckles her seat belt. "But on the off chance you're threatened again by a fae lord, it might behoove you to have me and my supernatural widget to save you."

I sigh and settle into the driver's seat. "Where did you get that thing, anyway?"

Sam props her elbow on the door rest and wrinkles her nose. "Cal."

"Well, props to the Alpha," I say and turn the engine over. "That little widget came in handy."

"No props to him," Sam practically snarls. "*Zero* props."

I let her have that one. She's going to get enough push back from practically everyone when they find out she's the

Alpha's fated mate.

When the news breaks, she'll practically be a Midnight Harbor celebrity and everyone will be watching what she does, what she says, how she dresses and where she eats. They'll be pressuring her to dish on the Alpha and hounding her to reveal her own private thoughts about him and their relationship.

As her best friend, I just need to let her hate him—for now.

We park in the driveway outside my house. I find the front door still locked, and when I turn the key in the deadbolt and the lock thunks open, I breathe out with a sigh.

It's familiar, even if it's silly, and it makes me suddenly miss everything that was before.

I kick off my shoes and trudge over to the couch and dramatically throw myself into the cushions. Sam sits at the other end, snagging the TV remote from the end table.

I yawn and let my eyes slip closed.

"Do you have to work today?" I ask sleepily.

"No." Sam clicks on the TV and the room brightens with the glow. She scrolls through apps, landing on a streaming service.

"Will you stay with me all day?" I ask, feeling the exhaustion catch up to me.

"As long as I can," she says.

I curl into my side and Sam grabs the throw blanket draped over the back of the sofa and tosses it over me.

"Bran will show up around dusk," I warn her.

"My widget has a stake too."

I laugh and try to find a comfy spot on one of Kelly's throw pillows.

"Don't kill him," I tell her.

"Just give him a warning poke, got it."

The sleep tugs me down instantly.

When I wake hours later, the sun has set and Sam is no longer sitting at the other end of the sofa.

Bran Duval is.

EPISODE 64

LET ME TELL YOU A SECRET, MOUSE

WE WATCH EACH OTHER IN THE HALF-DARKNESS FOR SEVERAL long beats. There is a stillness to Bran that is unsettling and hot as fuck. I may be able to control him with just the sound of my voice, but I think his vampire speed could beat the words on my lips.

And the thought of him clamping his hand over my mouth and having his way with me has my insides churning and my thighs aching to wrap around him.

His nostrils flare as he scents the air.

“Where’s Sam?” I ask.

The house is dark and silent.

“I sent her home.”

“Did she stake you?”

He ignores me and says, “You were a naughty mouse today.” His voice vibrates with annoyance.

“I want to say I’m surprised you found out so quickly, but I’m not.”

“There is nothing you can hide from me, Mouse.”

“I know. But don’t forget your promise.”

He narrows his eyes. “Which one?”

“The one where you said you’d let me make mistakes.”

There is a tsk of air between his teeth and he looks away. The light of one of the street posts outside spills into the room

and across his face and pools over the broad line of his shoulder. His smell is everywhere even though it's my house. Wherever Bran is, he overwhelms. In scent and presence and fucking power.

His chest rises with a deep breath and then he says, "Once upon a time, if someone were to disobey me, I would do very terrible things to them."

I don't dare move.

"The urge to bend you over this couch and smack your ass is hard to ignore."

Heat surges to my pussy.

Is he trying to get me riled? Because it's working.

He leans over and snatches me by the wrist and hauls me onto his lap. My thighs straddle him and his hands come to my waist, fingers just *this side* of bruising as he seats me on his groin. My hair spills forward as the air quickens in my throat.

I want to rock against him so fucking badly, but I'm not about to give in to him.

"Do you feel satisfied with yourself, little mouse?" His eyes glow amber in the shadow cast by my body, and it causes a shiver to race up my spine.

I wiggle a little and he increases the pressure on my hips, forcing me still.

"I wanted information," I say, my pussy suddenly buzzing. "And I got some."

"Did you?" His voice vibrates in his chest. He rocks his hips, pressing the bulge of his pants into the heat between my legs. "Tell me."

"Why, when you're clearly mad I went after it?"

He drives me down on him and pleasure builds in my clit.

I can't help but moan. I try to grind into him, but he lifts me again, creating an aching distance between us.

His irises glint like twin flames. “Tell me, little mouse, and tell me now.”

Fuck. I may have the power to command with my voice, but I lack the authority that Bran can tap into so damn easily. And if I’m honest, I don’t want to give this up, this dance of obedience and defiance between us. The give and take of power.

We will find our new ground, and if I give in to the journey instead of stressing about the destination, maybe I’ll even enjoy it.

I suck in a deep breath when he finally sits me back down on him, teasing me more. “Arion wants my blood,” I answer.

“Why?”

“He thinks I can help unseal the gate to the fae realm.”

Bran goes still.

I refocus my eyes on him and find his gaze suddenly distant and his brow furrowed.

“What is it?”

His frown deepens. “The witches want to unseal the gate too.”

“The Renshaw witches?” He nods. “Why?”

“Apparently they were using Julian as a means to an end. Tabitha lost a brother to the fae realm when it was sealed off.”

“So she wants us to open the gate to rescue her brother? Why would we care enough to do that? We already won against them.”

Bran looks up at me. His jaw flexes. Not with anger, but anguish. “She linked the spell she used on my brother to the fae side. It cannot be undone without opening the gate.”

Numbness runs through my limbs, and the flame at my core immediately extinguishes.

“So Kelly...”

“Same spell,” he confirms. “Same solution.”

I climb off of him and sit on the cushion beside him. A car drives past on the street outside the front windows. One of the neighbors calls for their dog.

I want to scream.

If I were playing a game of chess, I have already lost, backed into a corner with no escape in sight.

I feel so fucking stupid.

And helpless.

Bran threads his fingers through mine and gives me a squeeze.

“If I *can* open that gate,” I start, “and more fae come through and they realize I exist...”

“I know,” Bran says.

“What if they want me dead?” My voice pitches with panic.

“They’ll have all of Duval House and the Pack to get through.”

I snort. “You really think the Alpha would put his pack on the line for me? There’s no way—”

“Yes,” he interrupts. “I do think he would.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re his fated mate’s best friend. If Sam didn’t hate him enough already, she’d murder him if he let anything happen to you.”

Okay, he may have a point.

“Even if you’re right, will that be enough? What if the entire Autumn Court comes through the gate?”

His grip on me tightens, pulling my attention to him. “I am not afraid, Mouse.”

My chest heaves at the assurance in his words. He is so confident it almost takes the fear away.

Almost.

I run my teeth over my bottom lip and try to keep the anxiety at bay. “But I am, Bran.”

He winds his arm around me and pulls me into him and I deflate, resting my head against his shoulder. We haven’t made it to the point of our relationship where we’re so familiar with one another that cuddling comes naturally. We were built on annoyance first. Annoyance and frustration that turned into blazing heat.

I need his assurance now, I realize. Because his confidence in making it through this might just be the only thing holding me together.

“Let me tell you a secret, Mouse.”

I hold my breath, wondering what other things he might be keeping from me.

But it’s something better than all of that. It’s a truth straight from his heart.

“When Damien and I were mortal, he nearly died from a strain of flu. He had always protected me, my wise older brother. It made me feel invincible and I was terrified of losing him.” His shoulders rise with a deep breath. “I know I can tell you all day long that I will protect you. That I will do everything in my power to shield you from pain, both physical and mental, but ultimately your own strength will protect you even better than I can. And I know that it’s difficult to believe in your power when it’s still so new, but someday you’ll realize that with or without me, you can do extraordinary things.”

Tears bite at my eyes as I tilt my chin to look up at him. A wave of emotion stings at my sinuses and clogs in my throat. I don’t feel strong, even though I know I hold a great deal of power. I still can’t seem to believe it. Or believe in myself.

“I have trouble seeing it,” I admit to him.

“I know.” He kisses my forehead gently. “And until then, I will see it for you.”

We sit in the silence for several long minutes as the darkness descends outside the front windows. Bran doesn’t

move. He keeps his arm firmly around me, what little body heat he radiates enveloping me.

I don't want to get up, but I know I have to. There's still so much to do.

"I had a thought earlier," I say.

"Tell me."

"I should probably officially move into Duval House."

"I agree."

There is a little bit of relief at hearing him say it. I mean, all of the evidence points to him wanting me near, but I'm still keyed up, looking for signs of his flight or dismay at being with a fae princess with the power to command with her voice who also happens to be a hot fucking mess.

"So I should pack my things and—"

He shifts beside me, untangling us. "Gather the necessities. I'll have someone pack the rest."

"But—"

"You and I have better things to do, Mouse. We pay people for this." He gets up and offers me his hand.

"Fine." I take it and he lifts me easily off the couch then steers me toward the staircase. "Just the necessities then. Give me—"

I falter on the first step, suddenly lightheaded, and the room sways.

"Mouse!"

Bran catches me as I tilt backward. He has me pressed against the nearest wall a second later, his hands firmly on my body to keep me upright. "What is it?" His eyes are dark, his brow furrowed as he examines me. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know...I'm kinda dizzy all of a sudden and—"

A cell phone pings.

Bran's teeth grind together as he pulls his phone from his pants pocket. But as soon as he reads the name on the screen,

his expression softens. “It’s Bianca.”

He opens the screen and reads the text, his scowl deepening. “Damien is muttering in his sleep.”

That must be a good sign, right?

“What did he say?”

Bran turns the phone around and shows me the screen and I scan the words quickly.

He’s coming, the text reads.

The fae prince is coming.

EPISODE 65

IMMUNE TO CHIVALRY

I'M PRESSED AGAINST THE BACK OF THE PASSENGER SEAT AS Bran shifts the Bimmer into third gear and propels us through the night.

He's silent, his attention on the road, but his body is tight, the tendons and muscles in his forearms flexing beneath his pale skin as he works the transmission and the speedy engine to his advantage.

The urgency is nearly palpable even if he won't speak of it.

Damien was talking in his sleep, and if he was talking in his sleep, does that mean he is closer to consciousness?

I tried talking Bran into running home, that it would be faster and I'd meet him there, but he wasn't having it.

"You've been out of my sight once today," he'd said. "And look at the trouble you got yourself into. Once is enough."

I would have rolled my eyes at him and stood my ground, damn the consequences, if not for the news about Damien.

It doesn't take Bran long to turn down the winding driveway of Duval House. The windows are lit up and all of the landscaping lights are on, washing the green manicured grounds in golden pools of light.

As Bran pulls the car beneath the *porte cochère*, I can't help but wonder if my sister might also be clawing her way back to consciousness. I don't want to hope, because I don't

want to be disappointed, but it's really fucking hard not to cling to any glimmer of possible good news.

Please come back to me, Kelly.

Bran slams the car to a stop and yanks up on the emergency brake. He's out of the car a second later and tossing my key ring into the air. He doesn't check to see if anyone is there to catch them, because of course there is.

The girl at the double doors fumbles the keys but catches them before they hit the ground. She quickly darts in behind the wheel. Bran is already through the wide double doors as I scurry around the car's front bumper. "Catch up, Mouse," he calls, already halfway to the main staircase.

I run after him.

Somehow his fast walk is twice as fast as my run, but I catch up, practically breathless, as he takes the stairs two at a time and then turns down a hallway, then another, until we come up to a closed door far into the depths of the second floor. I've never been to this side of Duval House so I can only guess this is Damien's bedroom. The door is large and ornate, clearly hand carved, with laurel leaves and baroque filigree.

It's regal but not garish, just like the Duvals.

Without knocking, Bran pushes through and steps into the dim. I slow my pace and edge in just behind him, unsure if I should be here.

There's only one lamp on in the large space and the light skims a huge, heavy wooden bed pushed against the far wall. There is a sweet but masculine smell hanging in the air, like musk and lavender.

"Damien," Bran says. But when he gets to the bed, he stops, his eyes going wide.

Something slams into me from behind and shoves me to the floor.

I let out a yelp as a knee is pressed into the center of my back, driving me into the rug. A cold hand grabs my chin while the other comes to the back of my head, bracing me.

“Damien!” Bran yells.

Damien is awake.

And he’s on my back, just one wrist-flick away from snapping my neck.

My heart thuds in my ears.

“If she dies, they have no reason to come,” Damien says, his voice wet and raspy.

The heady scent of lavender overwhelms me.

“If she dies, so will you,” Bran answers.

I huff out as the pressure increases between my shoulder blades, squeezing my lungs.

“You would kill your own brother over a girl?” Damien sniffs. “I thought we were immune to chivalry, brother.”

“Immune to chivalry, perhaps,” Bran answers, “but not MacMahon sisters. Remember? Remember the lengths you went to, to protect Kelly? Kelly is the reason you can’t think straight now. Because you wanted to protect her.”

Damien’s grip on me shifts.

Bran comes closer. “What do you think Kelly will say when she finds out you killed her little sister?”

Would I survive my neck being snapped? I race through all of the facts I know about the fae, their anatomy, and their immortality. They can live practically forever, heal easily, but survive a snapped neck? Probably not.

Can Bran reach Damien in time?

How far away is he?

“I can smell her fear,” Damien says.

“Do you blame her?”

“Please, Da—”

He shifts his grip, putting the palm of his hand over my mouth.

“How do you trust a girl who can command you with her voice?”

When Bran speaks, he’s just a few feet away from us now, getting closer by the second. “You always taught me that trust was fickle and fickle things hold no value. It was always loyalty we wanted.”

Some of the weight of Damien’s knee lifts. “You must think yourself clever, using my own lessons against me.”

“Let her go, Damien.”

“Where is Kelly?” he asks.

“In the room across the hall,” Bran answers. “I haven’t checked on her yet today, but we can go over there together if you’d like.”

“Very well. Perhaps you’ve won after—”

Damien gasps out, his chest rattling, and then he grunts and tilts to the side, slipping off of me.

Even though I’m lying on the floor, my head swims. I’m lightheaded, my vision tunneling.

Bran is suddenly between us.

“Something is wrong,” I say. Pins and needles run up my arms and legs. I try to sit up now that I’m free, but my vision sways.

“Do you feel it too?” Damien asks. He’s on all fours beside me, looking directly at me, his eyes burning bright blue in the murky light.

“Feel what?”

He takes in another deep breath. “They’re trying to get through. The fae. They’re trying to get through the gate.”

Bran gets Damien’s arm slung around his shoulders and then pulls him to his feet. “Can you stand, Mouse?” Bran asks.

I give him a nod, even though I'm still dizzy. His brother should take priority right now. I'm going to pretend I'm okay as long as I need to.

I slowly climb to my feet and take in a deep breath to steady myself.

Damien lists in Bran's grip.

"Hey," Bran says and slaps Damien on the face. "Look at me."

Damien's eyes refocus and he looks over at his brother. "We should kill her," he says again.

"Shut up," Bran says as he carts Damien back to the bed and helps him onto the thick mattress. "Jessie is off-limits, even to you. You touch her again, I stake you. First in the ass. Then in the heart. End of story."

Damien lays his head against the pile of pillows, his eyes heavy. "Do you remember the bread Ma used to make?"

Bran goes still, his brow sinking low over his hooded eyes. "Yes."

"Do you remember the smell of the yeast baking on a winter afternoon?" Damien's head lolls on the pillows, his eyes closed now. "Do you remember the way it would taste when she cut off a fresh slice for us?"

"Of course." Bran's voice is thick with the memory.

"Why did we outlive them? Do you ever wonder?"

Bran pulls the blanket up around Damien. "Because we are cursed."

Damien swallows loudly. "Perhaps dying wouldn't be so bad after all."

"Don't talk like that."

I slink back into the shadows, my heart squeezing, suddenly uncomfortable with witnessing the intimacy between the Duval brothers. I'm not sure if Bran wants me to see them at their most vulnerable, when they are more brothers than

immortal vampires. Brothers with mothers and sisters and memories of fresh baked bread on cold afternoons.

“I can’t help you fight them,” Damien says as he slumps into the bed. “Not like this.”

“I’ll fix you. I just need you to rest and not kill my little mouse.”

Damien’s mouth lifts in an attempted laugh. “That’s a horrible pet name for her.” He’s quiet for another beat, his chest rattling with his breaths. “The mouse has become the monster.”

A shiver races down my arms, lifting goosebumps.

Bran looks over at me and even though I’m shrouded in darkness, I know with his vampire eyes he can see me the same as if I were standing in the light.

His eyes burn bright gold.

“We’re all monsters,” Bran says, his gaze still on me.



Within seconds, Damien is unconscious again and Bran ushers me into the hallway. As soon as we’re alone, he puts his hands on either side of my face and examines me with a furrowed brow and bright golden eyes.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Did he hurt you?” He checks my skin for bruises.

“He was gentle like a cat.”

Bran scowls at me. “This is no time for jokes.”

The door across from Damien’s catches my eye. “Is she really in there?”

“Yes.” Bran pulls away, satisfied with the state of my face, neck, and body.

“Can I...” I huff out a breath, trying to keep the emotion at bay. I will be practical about this. Kelly is unconscious because of witch magic. This is fixable. We’ll find the solution and we’ll fix her.

“Go see her,” Bran says. “I’ll come with you.”

I give him a nod and reach out for the handle. The door clicks open and I peer inside.

There is a small figure in the giant bed across the room. There are more lights on in here—small lamps glowing on several end tables.

My steps are slow as I approach the bed.

I’m not sure what I expected to find—Kelly looking like a corpse? Like a sleeping Snow White?

Her eyes are shut and her breathing even. Her skin is pale, yes, but there’s still a healthy glow to her cheeks. When the witch spell hit Kelly and Damien at the Pledge Hall, blackness spread beneath their skin. But it’s gone now. Like it never was.

“What are we going to do?” I muse.

“Did you feel it?” he asks.

I cut my attention to him.

“Was Damien right? Were you both feeling the fae trying to get through?”

Pressure builds at the bridge of my nose. “I don’t know. I felt...something.”

Arion thinks my blood can open the gate. And the spell used against Damien and Kelly is linked to magic on the fae side. It would make sense that we would feel any attempt to break the seal on the gate.

Bran leans a shoulder against the thick wooden post at the bed’s footboard. “We need allies, Mouse. Fae ones.”

“Arion,” I say and he nods. “Does that worry you?”

“Nothing worries me. There is only strategy and outcome.”

“You’re lying.”

His mouth is pursed, the glow gone from his eyes, but I can tell he *is* worried. Maybe even a little afraid.

I turn back to my sister, the odd stillness to her body. I reach out for her hand and the second our skin touches, I’m crying.

Not giant heaving sobs. But slow, painful tears.

I can’t ignore the hope that I can save her.

I think it might be the only thing I have left.

I’m not afraid.

I’m hungry to prove myself.

“I’m going to Arion tonight,” I say and wipe the tears away with the pad of my thumb. “And you’re coming with me and we’re going to make a bold statement.”

The corner of Bran’s mouth lifts. “You’re sexy when you’re determined.”

“I’m serious, Bran.”

“So am I, Mouse.”

I check on Kelly one last time before surging to the door. “Who do I call to help make me a fae princess in just a few hours?”

“A princess will always be lacking. In her position, she is inherently vulnerable and weak.” Bran takes my hand in his and pulls me down the hall. “Fuck a fae princess. We’re making you a queen and I have just the thing for it.”

EPISODE 66

THE WINTER COURT DRESS

WHEN WE LEAVE THE WING OF THE HOUSE WHERE DAMIEN AND Kelly's rooms are, Bran doesn't take me downstairs. Instead we go to the opposite wing, and deep, deep into the recess, down several more hallways until I'm well and truly lost again.

I guess this is another reason why he put me in the Anneliese when I first came to Duval House. I don't think I would have lasted a day in the main house. I would be lost in some distant corner like a mouse in a maze.

I snort at my own joke and Bran casts a sidelong glance my way.

"Why are you laughing?"

I wipe the smile from my face. He's disgruntled, tense, and clearly on some mission he has yet to share with me.

I told him I wanted to make a bold statement tonight with Arion and the rest of the fae community in Midnight. Bran said he had just the thing for it, but he has yet to tell me what the *thing* is.

"I was just thinking about mice in mazes looking for cheese," I tell him.

He comes to a sudden stop and I have to backtrack several steps to meet up with him again. There is no hint of emotion on his face, but I can still read the rigidity of his body, catching the barest of annoyance in the fine lines around his eyes.

He's so fucking hot when he's annoyed. Sometimes I want to annoy him on purpose to watch him scowl and brood at me.

"What?" I ask.

"My brother nearly snapped your neck just now and you're making jokes about cheese?"

I shrug. "Damien isn't the first person to try to do me harm."

To be honest, I haven't quite processed how close I was to death just a few minutes ago. I mean, when you live around vampires and werewolves, you're always close to it. We may have created a treaty of peace between us all, but if the vampires and wolves wanted to take an innocent life, who is to stop them?

Maybe that's why death doesn't seem as frightening. Maybe we've all been desensitized to it living in Midnight.

"It was a funny joke," I tell Bran.

He grumbles. "Maybe a little funny."

"Hah! I knew it."

"Come on, little mouse. Let me lead you to the cheese." He beckons me deeper into the house.

I jog to catch up. "You still haven't told me where we're going."

He takes another corner and a long hallway opens up before us. At the end are two large doors, arched at the top, with giant curved handles. There is a golden plaque above the door that reads ARCHIVE.

"You're so fancy you have an archive." I gape at it, then look over at him. "The closest thing we had to an archive was stale corn chips in the couch cushions."

I smile innocently at him.

The next second he has his arm around my waist and yanks me into his side. I let out a gasp, my mouth dropping open.

His fingers apply the barest hint of pressure. “No more jokes, Mouse. And if you don’t stop gaping at everything, I’ll find something to put in that tight little mouth.”

The breath hitches out of me as my pussy buzzes with his meaning.

“You’re teasing me.” I reach between us and grope him. He groans.

“No, I’m telling you what your punishment will be if you don’t behave.”

I demur. “Or my reward.”

“Mouse.”

I apply more pressure to his cock. It doesn’t take him long to thicken beneath the attention of my hand. His eyes still on my mouth, he brings his thumb to my bottom lip and presses down, opening me wider for him.

I dart my tongue out to meet him and his fangs lengthen into two pointed tines.

“Maybe we could slip into a closet somewhere,” I suggest.

“Oh little Mouse, I would destroy that pussy and we’ve no time for rest.”

I squeeze him harder and he leans into me just as the latch on the Archive clanks open.

I lurch away from Bran.

The doors swing open to reveal a woman in a dress straight out of the twenties, with fringe and pearls and glinting sequins.

“I can hear you, you know!” she says. “This isn’t a whorehouse!”

“Ramona,” Bran says. “If you’re here, it’s automatically a whorehouse.”

She hangs her head back and laughs at the ceiling and the pearls hanging from her ears swing back and forth.

I have no idea what I’m supposed to think of this exchange.

“Ramona was a whore in the twenties,” Bran explains.

“I was a successful one too.” She winks at him. “That’s where I found this asshole.”

“I think you mean, *I found you.*”

Oh god. Did they...did he...

“No,” Bran answers before I can even get the thought out. “Ramona tried. She failed.”

She frowns at him. “Too good for whorehouses. He and his brother both. Not too good to pay me for my time though, were you?”

“I needed information. Whores always had good information back then.”

“That we did.” Ramona beams at him. In appearance, she doesn’t look much older than I am. Maybe late twenties. She must be a vampire. She’s shorter than I am, maybe five feet. Next to Bran she looks like a sprite.

Her dark, thick hair is pinned back in a chignon, not a lock out of place. Her makeup is flawless—black winged eyeliner, smoky shadow, and deep purple lipstick.

She is exactly the type of woman who should be in charge of a vampire archive. I bet she loves every single piece in here.

Speaking of which...

I try to peek around her—the doors are just barely cracked—but I can’t really spot a clue.

“Jessie!” Ramona pulls my attention away from the doors by taking my hand in her cold ones. “What a pleasure to finally meet you.”

It still catches me off guard when people of Duval House know me and I don’t know them.

Up until recently, I thought I was a nobody in Midnight. Or maybe I was and it was Bran who changed that and pulled me from obscurity.

Or maybe there were always whispers. Julian marked me as off limits. The vampires must have known there was something different about me for him to go to that much trouble.

“Pleasure to meet you too,” I tell Ramona. “I love your dress.”

She does a twirl and the fringe on the skirt twirls. “It belonged to Norma Shearer. She wore it to the premiere of *The Mummy* in 1932. As an aside, *The Mummy* was not a hit with the critics but was considered a modest box office success. I do believe we have a prop from the set around here somewhere. Oh, where did I—”

“Ramona,” Bran says. “We’re here for a dress. Not a movie prop.”

She pouts at him, but quickly recovers and twirls away. “Very well! What sort of dress?”

“One from the fae collection.”

She pauses at the Archive doors, hands on the curved handles. “It must be a special night?”

“Jessie needs to look like a fae queen.”

“Say no more.”

She gives the doors a wider push, revealing what’s inside.

When I step over the threshold and into the Archive, I look around and gasp.

I’m not sure what I expected. A department store dressing room? A closet crammed with old garments?

It’s none of that.

It's a fucking ballroom with glass-topped cabinets like in a museum, and racks of clothing, and printer's cabinets with thin drawers for documents.

More cabinets line the walls with drawers on the bottom and glass doors on the top, revealing a wide array of treasures beneath soft inset lighting. Feathered hats and giant jeweled necklaces and carved stone objects.

"Holy shit," I breathe out.

"Holy shit yes!" Ramona claps her hands again and her short legs cart her off down an aisle, and the archives quickly swallow her up. "This way!"

Bran gives me a nudge. I head in the direction Ramona disappeared, weaving through the clothing racks. There are sequined dresses and pantsuits and dresses with pearls sewn into the bodice.

Does Kelly know about this place? She would lose her mind.

We finally come up on another door in the recess of the archive. It's also arched like the main doors, but smaller in scale. A shaft of light pools at the threshold, warm and inviting.

I enter to find a room done in rich wood paneling. There are built-in cabinets and drawers in a circle around the space, with a sitting area directly to the right of the door.

In the center of the room are five dress forms displaying the most dazzling garments I've ever laid eyes on.

"It just keeps getting better," I say like a huge dork, even though I'm not the least bit enamored with fashion.

Bran sits on the velvet settee the color of dawn and props his elbow on the gilded gold arm, curling his hand around his face.

If we were anywhere else, in any other clothing store, he would look like a bored boyfriend waiting for his girlfriend to finish shopping. But even bored, I know he's watching, calculating, *waiting*.

Bran is always playing a game.

I can only imagine what card he has up his sleeve now.

Ramona goes to the third dress on the left and pulls delicately at the skirt. A rainbow of gemstones glimmer beneath the light. “This would fit her beautifully and—”

“No,” Bran says, cutting her off.

“No? Okay. We have this purple one with the emeralds in the—”

“No,” Bran says again.

Ramona clucks her tongue. “Then which one?”

“Get her the Winter Court dress.”

Ramona goes still.

“Now,” Bran orders.

“Absolutely not,” she says.

“Ramona.” His tone leaves no room for negotiation.

My insides spin and dammit, my pussy clenches when he uses that commanding voice.

I cannot fucking wait to have him alone.

Ramona levels her shoulders, bracing for an argument. “Forgive me, but...the Winter Court dress...the message it would send—”

“I know what fucking message I want to send, Ramona,” he says.

She licks her lips, diverts her eyes, and nods as she turns away. “Very well.”

What the hell is the Winter Court dress anyway?

And what message do we want to send?

Ramona opens a cabinet and soft light turns on, activated by the doors opening.

And nestled inside is a dress made of the finest white fabric with a high collar that curves away from the form’s

neck, making the collar look like the pointed curves of fairy wings. The skirt is scalloped around the hem, but long enough that it would trail behind me like a train. A heavy belt is secured around the waist, with more jewels and ribbons woven into it.

The dress is beautiful, but it's damaged. And more than that, it appears to be bloody.

There is a tear above the left breast. Dark red has stained the white fabric and the color spills down the front of the skirt where it pooled at the wearer's feet.

"She can't wear that dress," Ramona says.

"She can and she will."

I take a tentative step toward it, a cold sweat beading at my spine. "What happened to it? What's the story?"

"We don't know the story," Bran answers, suddenly behind me. "But I bet Arion will."

My stomach turns sour.

The cold sweat races over my shoulders.

Just because this dress belonged to someone from the Winter Court doesn't mean I was related to them. I do know that fae courts are just as diverse as the Houses of Midnight. There is some family, yes, but primarily the courts are made up of unrelated fae that came together because of magic, power, and similar beliefs.

But even knowing that, and even though my brain wants to say I am far removed from this macabre dress, something in my gut says otherwise.

Bran reaches around me and lifts a bloody length of fabric to his nose.

I swallow hard as a lump forms in my throat.

Without warning, Bran grabs my wrist and pierces my flesh with his fangs. "Hey!"

There's no pain though, just surprise as he takes a shallow pull of blood.

“This isn’t time for a snack,” I tell him beneath my breath.

His eyes are bright gold when he retreats.

His frown deepens.

“What is it?” I ask.

“This blood...” He nods at the dress. “Your blood...it smells the same.”

The cold sweat turns to a cold chill as it races over my shoulders.

“Like fae?”

He grits his teeth. “Like family.”

EPISODE 67

REJOICE OVER MY CORPSE

THERE IS ONLY THE LOUD THUMPING OF MY HEART IN MY EARS.

Family.

That's what Bran said.

The bloody Winter Court dress smells like *my* family.

Up until this point, having a fae family was just an idea, a story. Now it's real. And worse than that, it's carnage right before my eyes. Proof that the fae courts really will do whatever it takes to destroy my line.

Bran snaps his fingers at Ramona and she scurries out of the room, shutting the door behind her.

I'm breathing faster now, my vision blurring on the edges.

They're going to kill me.

And then they'll all rejoice over my corpse.

"Sit down, Mouse," Bran orders, his hand on my arm, guiding me away from the dress. The backs of my legs bump into the settee, and I drop hard to the cushions.

"Mouse," he says.

I blink over to him.

"Tell me what you're thinking."

I swallow, trying to fill my lungs with oxygen.

He crouches in front of me and takes my face in his hands. "You don't have to go. We don't have to go." There's concern

between his brows. A flicker of worry in his amber eyes.

“Arion already said...” I trail off and suck in another breath.

“He said what?”

If I tell Bran Arion’s exact words, he’ll lose his fucking mind.

I’m insinuating that I can take your blood with very little effort.

“We have to go,” I tell Bran. “We have no choice.”

“There’s always a choice.”

I look past him to the dress, to the dark crimson stain down the front, the tear of fabric at the chest.

Stabbed in the heart.

Someone who shared my blood.

“What would you do?” I ask him.

He rises so he can sit next to me on the cushion. He puts his elbows on his knees and folds his hands in front of him while he thinks. I give him all the time he needs because I want his honest answer, I want him to work his strategic magic.

“If it were me,” he says, and looks over at me, a lock of his dark hair falling over his forehead. “I would go and I would wear the dress.”

“Why?”

My heart rate slows and I can finally take a full breath.

“Arion wants to intimidate you,” Bran says. “The dress symbolizes the carnage that’s already been wrought. If you wear it, you tell him you are not afraid of more spilled blood. If he can’t intimidate you, he can’t control you.”

I link my arm through his and lean my head against his shoulder. His scent soothes me, that amber and musk. Even the coolness of his body helps ground me.

“And if Arion asks me to help him unseal the gate?”

Bran looks over at me. He takes my hand in his. “Better he ask than coerce.”

“True. But I’d rather not do it at all.”

He sighs and closes his eyes. “I wish that was our best option, but Damien...”

“I know.” I unlink our arms and cross the room to stand in front of the dress. It really is gorgeous. Like starlight trapped in a dress form. And in some macabre way, the blood adds to its beauty. Violence with beauty, trapped in time.

“I’ll wear it,” I say.

Bran is suddenly behind me. “If at any moment, you feel uncomfortable, we’ll take it off.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” I glance at him over my shoulder.

“I was being serious. But yes.” He smirks.

“Devil.”

His arms wind around my waist, and he pulls me into him. His nose nuzzles at the crook of my neck, drinking in my scent and the pulsing heat of my veins. “When this is all over, little mouse, I will take you to some faraway castle and chain you to my bed and delight in your body again and again. And I will show you just how devilish I can be.”

It takes Bran no time at all to assemble an entire team to get me and him ready. Ramona selects a fae-made suit jacket for him. It’s black, with silver embroidery along the collar and down the lapel, and buttons shaped like orbs that when they catch the light, they almost seem to churn like an ocean.

Once Ramona is finished with him, she returns to me with blue metallic thread and needle and sews delicate knot-work around the stab wound in the chest of my dress, closing up the tear.

Next, my hair is curled, braided, and then pinned into a crown. While my vampire hair stylist finishes up, a tall, lanky woman who introduces herself as Charlie swipes bright red lipstick on my lips, finishing off my makeup.

When Bran and I finally come back together in front of a gilded floor-to-ceiling mirror, we match so well, it's hard not to think it was planned weeks ago.

"You are gorgeous," he says with hungry eyes.

"And you are ridiculously handsome," I say back.

"How do you feel?"

I turn to my left, then my right, checking the dress on all its angles. If a person didn't know the story of the dress, it would almost look like a fairytale avant-garde dress with a giant paint splatter.

But no, just dripping with blood.

I finger the stain. The fabric is thicker there, still a little stiff with a life drained from flesh.

My stomach swims. I take a breath.

I will not be disgusted by this dress. I will wear it with honor.

I may know absolutely nothing about my family, but I won't believe I was born from something evil. My family must have had a story, a reason to do what they did, even if it wasn't the right one.

"I feel ready," I finally tell Bran.

His gaze meets my reflection in the mirror, and he gives me a nod. "Then let's not keep them waiting any longer."

As Bran and I make our way through Bramwell Park, my heart starts thumping against the back of my throat.

I don't want to be nervous.

“Can’t you compel the anxiety out of me?” I ask him, my arm tightly woven through the crook of his. He can see much better in the dark than I can. Even though Arion’s invitation said to meet him on the moonlit side of Bramwell Pond, there is barely a moon in sight.

Which means if I survive tonight, tomorrow Rita will finally undo my binding spell on the new moon.

Arion couldn’t have better timing.

“I’m not compelling you,” Bran answers.

“Why not?”

“Because you need every instinct you possess.”

I wrinkle my nose at him. “I could do without the anxiety.”

He pulls me down one of the paved bike paths that eventually hugs close to the shore of Bramwell Pond. I don’t know which side is the moonlit side, but Bran seems to have a destination in mind.

Crickets and frogs chirp and croak in the darkness. The air is warm, with a slight breeze that makes the dry leaves of the underbrush scrape and rattle.

Bran finally comes to a stop where the bike path curves back toward the opposite park entrance.

“Is this it?” I ask.

He looks around. “This is it.”

The night is still. There’s no one around.

“Is it a trap?” My stomach spins and I look down at my dress again, and at the long skirt pooled around my slippered feet. I couldn’t run in this thing if I tried.

Bran’s dark brow furrows, eyes narrowing.

“What?” I ask.

“The air is different. Do you feel it?”

“Different? How—”

I cut myself off when a faint break of light wavers off to my left. There are two birch trees with trunks that curve away from one another but canopies that curve back, forming what almost looks like a doorway.

I let go of Bran and take a step. He mirrors me, keeping less than a foot between us.

His nearness makes me bold and I reach out, waving my hand through the air.

And suddenly a doorway appears...

...and Arion, Lord of the Summer Court, steps through.

EPISODE 68

DECORATING PARTY

I STUMBLE BACK.

I knew the birch trees were hiding a magical fairy door, but I didn't expect the fae lord to be waiting for us.

Bran immediately steps in front of me.

"No need for caution," Arion says. "You were invited here, after all."

Some of the light pouring around Arion dissipates and I can finally take in the full sight of the doorway.

The birch trees are the frame, with several branches that bend and curve over one another, forming the archway. Star jasmine and honeysuckle grow around the branches, the white and red flowers seemingly glowing in the dark night.

It takes my breath away, how gorgeous it is. But it's more than that. It feels...familiar almost.

"A fairy grotto hidden right in the middle of Bramwell Park," Bran says. "Clever."

"*Necessary*," Arion corrects.

He glances over at me and then his gaze catches on my dress.

There is a moment where his eyes are wide, his mouth slightly agape, and I realize I've surprised him, and the realization fuels my confidence.

But then he catches himself and he quickly corrects, teeth gritted, jaw flexing. "What is this?" His voice rumbles and the

air, I swear to god, crackles around him, “Is this some kind of joke to you?”

“It’s an homage,” I answer, folding my hands in front of me, trying not to betray the fact that every move I make tonight, I’ve already doubted it twice over. Including wearing this dress.

“An homage?” He scowls at me. Just like Bran, he’s more beautiful when he broods. “An homage to death and betrayal?”

The way he speaks about it leads me to believe he does know the story behind it. He knows exactly what dress this is, and who wore it, and what happened to them.

“Perhaps if I knew the full story,” I say, “I would know the full score of wearing the dress.”

“If I didn’t know any better,” Arion lowers his voice as he steps toward me, still half blocked by Bran, “I truly would think you mortal. Only a mortal would make such a bold move without knowing the full breadth of the consequences.” He glances at Bran. “But you, vampire, I’d expect more restraint from you.”

Bran’s eyes flash gold, but he says nothing.

Did we make a mistake?

My stomach spins.

Arion turns away and steps into the doorway and says, “Come, faeling. The party is waiting and you’re clearly ready to make an entrance.” The way he says it is disparaging, not admiring.

I look over at Bran. His face is blank, his gaze unreadable.

He gives me a subtle shake of his head, so I take a deep breath and follow Arion through the doorway.

I’m immediately dazzled by light.

The hidden fairy grotto really is like a fairy tale. Not the Cinderella kind, with castles and mice and sewing birds. The kind you find in books written by Grimm brothers. A little dark, a little magical, a little wondrous, a little eerie.

We enter into an earthen hallway, the walls covered in blooming vines. And at the end of the hallway, a large arched doorway opens to a great hall.

The lyrical notes of a lute greet us as we enter the main room, followed by the high tinkling sound of a woman singing along. A violin jumps in next, filling the hall with music that raises the hair along my arms.

Dozens of fae are dancing in the center of the room, some linked arm and arm, others twirling in and around each other.

And there are so *many*. More than I ever knew resided in Midnight. Possibly more than were reported on their census.

There are fae with deer horns and fae with ram horns. Fae with red eyes and pink hair and pointed ears. Fae that look human save for a slight upturn of their nose or a dusting of bright blue freckles along their cheeks. Everyone here is an adult though, not a kid in sight. I don't see the Leaf family or the mother I helped on the riverside not that long ago, and I don't see Stanley either. It's unfortunate, because I really could have used a friendly, familiar face.

My slippered feet are just a soft whisper on the stone floor as I crane my neck, trying to take it all in. The sheer size of the great hall is astounding, like a football field, if a football field were enclosed by earth and tangled, blooming vines.

Hanging from the ceiling are pendants fashioned from thick vines with glowing orbs at the ends, the lights various shades of pink and gold.

Arion precedes us into the great room, his hands clasped behind his back.

I notice there are faded black tattoos along two of his fingers. Shapes and symbols I can't decipher.

He's wearing a dagger at his left hip, and if I didn't know any better, I'd say he's hiding another sheath beneath the

sleeve of his royal blue tunic. I can just make out the faint line of the leather through the material.

Attention starts to wander to us. First because of Arion and then because of me.

Their eyes lock on the dull red stain covering my dress from chest to toe.

I swallow, sweat breaking out along my hairline.

When we reach the center of the room, the music fades out. The shuffling of the assembled fae echoes around us until they all bend to their knees.

Are they bowing for me or for Arion?

I suppose it doesn't matter, because *he* isn't bowing.

Bran comes up beside me. His shoulders are loose, his hands hanging by his sides, but I can read the tension in his body. Bran only likes supplication when it's aimed at him. I don't think it's envy or jealousy. It's worry and fear. Power means a target and at any moment, any one of these people could turn on me to test that power.

"We welcome the princess to our great hall," Arion says, his voice booming across the domed space. He steps in front of me and walks the perimeter of the circle of bowed fae around us. "The princess has been apart from her people for too long and we are honored she would join us in our hollowed halls. Let us drink and rejoice tonight, the eve of the new moon."

He turns back to me, a knowing glint in his eyes. "Let us show the princess what it truly means to be fae."

A servant appears with a silver tray and three golden goblets set on top. Arion takes two and offers them to me and Bran. Bran takes the drink and sniffs it and I wait for his approval.

"We grew up with warnings not to drink or eat anything of the fae," I say.

Arion grabs the third goblet and the servant scurries off. "I assure you, princess, the wine is safe for both fae and

vampire.”

Bran eyes Arion over the rim of his goblet before taking a long gulp.

My heart thumps a little harder in my chest as I wait for any reaction. But Bran seems fine.

The assembled fae are still on their knees, but their heads are craned, watching, *waiting*.

I can't very well snub them and the offering of their fae lord.

I take a drink.

The moment the fairy wine hits my tongue, I know I've made my first mistake.

The taste is delectable. Like the plumpest, juiciest, ripest strawberry, mixed with spices, mixed with a sharp tang of something that should be citrusy but is far more complex.

The wine goes straight to my head and then floods my body with warmth and ease.

I'm no longer worried and the fear fades away like the silhouette of someone I should be following but can't.

Arion smiles at me.

In the far, dark, deep trenches of my mind, my conscious brain thinks, oh shit.

But my fairy-bombed brain thinks, yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

Arion gulps down his entire goblet then lifts the cup. “To the princess!”

The fae rise, and hoist up their own goblets if they have them and shout, “To the princess!”

“Now,” Arion says, “drink and be merry.”

The music picks up again, this time a punchier tune clearly meant for lively dance.

I take another drink of wine. Then another. And another.

Arion waggles his fingers at a passing servant with a glass decanter of the bright red drink and orders the man to refill our glasses.

This is bad, my conscious brain says.

This is good, my primal brain says.

Bran upends his second goblet.

“Another!” Arion shouts, gesturing to the servant. Bran’s glass is refilled again.

“You said this was safe,” Bran says, his mouth curved in a devilish smile, his eyes bleeding to that bright gold. “Why am I drunk? Are you trying to get me drunk?”

“It is safe,” Arion answers. “You are standing on two feet, are you not?”

“Fae tricks,” Bran says, but he’s laughing now and I’m laughing right next to him.

“Enjoy yourselves tonight.” Arion tips his drink at my dress. “It’s a nice touch.”

“Wait.” I grab him by the arm and pull him to a stop. He looks down where our bodies meet. “We should talk. Right? Isn’t that why you asked us here?”

Arion smiles at me. I’m taken aback by how dazzling he is when the lighting is better and there’s a little fizz and pop in my veins.

Are all the court fae this gorgeous? And how come I didn’t get this gene?

“Slow down, princess,” he says. “There will be plenty of time for talking. Enjoy the party for now. Get to know your people. We’ll meet up later.”

“Okay, but—” I say, but the crowd quickly swallows him up.

I turn back to Bran. He’s on his fourth (fifth?) glass of wine. His fangs are protruding from his mouth, which tells me he’s in a very, very good place.

The dancers twirl in and around us and the great hall glitters with light and merriment.

“Dance with me,” Bran says.

“What, now?”

He gives his glass to a servant scuttling past, then takes mine too.

“I don’t want to dance. This dress is too long.”

“I’ll catch you if you trip.” His pupils are blown wide, his smile wider. It’s hard to tell him no when he’s like this. Bran very rarely gives in to indulgence. Unless it’s my body.

I place my hand in his outstretched one and as soon as he has hold of me, we’re spinning through the crowd. It’s like I’m a child again on a carnival ride, the world blurring beyond my nose.

Bran wraps his arm around my waist, keeping me upright and close to his body as he guides us through the music and the crowd.

I can’t stop the laughter from spilling from my mouth and Bran’s eyes glow brighter as my pleasure grows.

“You’re really good at this!” I shout as we spin nearer the band.

“I’ve had hundreds of years of practice,” he answers and twirls us back to the center of the room.

Never once does my dress get tangled. I don’t know how Bran manages it.

And when the tune ends and the crowd stops to applaud, my head keeps spinning, that fizzy warmth spreading through my limbs, then up, up to my belly and chest.

Beside me, a short woman with pink hair lowers her voice to her friend and says, “I just heard the decorating party started.”

The friend, a woman with dark skin and emerald green hair, waggles her eyebrows. “Ohhh, let’s go watch.”

“What’s the decorating party?” I ask Bran. He snatches another glass from a passing tray and drinks half of it before handing it off to me.

“Sounds like an orgy,” he answers.

“What?!” I giggle around the goblet. Several beads of wine dribble down my mouth and Bran reaches over with his thumb, swiping them away before sucking them off.

I am bright with need for something...anything that feels pleasing. More wine. Food. Sex.

“It can’t be an orgy,” I say, hoping I’m wrong. What a way to begin this night.

I track the women as they navigate through the crowd and then down the next hallway.

Bran gets in close to me. “If ‘decorating party’ isn’t an orgy, I’ll eat my hand.”

“Okay. If the decorating thing is not an orgy, you’ll eat your hand.”

“Okay.” He smiles at me with a closed-mouth smile, all eyes and bravado. “And if it is an orgy, we fuck in it.”

I giggle and then clamp my hand over my mouth to stop the high-pitched glee from filling the air around us.

Bran has pushed me outside of my safe bubble, but to partake in a fae orgy? No way. But he seems so sure and quite honestly, I’m not.

I don’t know why a fae party would include decorating. That seems odd. But a fae orgy? Far more likely.

I grab Bran’s hand and pull him through the crowd in the direction the women disappeared.

The music fades and when we reach the hallway, different music fills the empty spaces. This is softer though, more sensual, more languid.

Oh shit.

There's a smaller arched door at the end of the hall. It's cracked just enough to see flickering blue and pink and golden light inside. I can smell the debauchery, even from a distance. Sweat and musk and the earthy scent of oil.

When we reach the door, I stop. This entire night is starting to feel like one giant carnival ride.

Bran puts his hand on the back of my neck and leans in, his mouth at my ear, his breath tickling down my exposed neck. "Go on, little mouse. What's inside?"

I can hear the moaning, the pumping, the reedy whines.

I give the door a push and reveal dozens of naked fae fucking and sucking and locked in ecstasy inside.

EPISODE 69

BLOOD AND WINE

I GET WHY IT'S CALLED A DECORATING PARTY NOW.

Half of the people in the room are covered in cum.

It drips down naked chests and glistens on swollen lips. It's on faces and running down bare thighs.

I shiver, despite the heat. I feel like I've stumbled into a naughty secret.

Bran winds his arm around my shoulders, pulling me in to him. He empties whatever glass he's on. His arm is heavy on me, as if he's having trouble keeping himself upright.

"This place is magnificent," he answers. "Also, I told you so."

"You're drunk," I say, swaying.

"So are you," he counters and laughs through his nose.

"I feel like I shouldn't be watching this, I can't seem to take my eyes off of it."

There's so much to see, so much movement, too many limbs, bare cocks and bouncing tits. It reminds me of a computer screensaver, all of those curves moving in and around each other.

"The whole point of an orgy is to watch, Mouse." Bran's arm comes around me, his hand wrapping around my throat, his fingers on my jaw guiding me to watch.

It's art come to life. Depraved, debauched art.

I'm enthralled by a couple closest to us. The man is sitting on a circular velvet couch. There's a woman straddling him, fucking him. His hands are on her ass, bouncing her on him. Swirls of metallic paint cover the woman's back while black ink covers the man's hands. Again with the symbols I can't decipher, though his are softer, rounder symbols than Arion's.

Speaking of the fae lord...

I scan the room, hoping not to spot him. For some reason, the energy I get off Arion is an energy that reminds me of the whole concept of elders. Like one misstep and they'll be giving you a disconcerting look.

I don't want him to know that I'm drunk and enjoying this orgy. I don't want him to think I'm a spicy little faeling. Even though I am, let's be honest.

Bran's hand sinks to my midsection. Butterflies fill my belly and then dip down between my legs as he presses me against his chest. I can feel him growing hard at my ass. And how could he not? We're watching live porn and we're drunk.

Another server appears at my side. "More wine for m'lady?"

Of course. Don't mind if I do.

I down the glass. Bran downs his.

We're staring at one another, laughter bubbling up our throats.

Everything beyond this room fades away. My heart warms beneath the wine as Bran's pupils blow out, a thin sliver of his irises glowing gold.

He takes my hand and yanks me to the back of the room where a half-moon couch is tucked beneath hanging lights and tangled vines. The air back here smells sweet of honeysuckle and my head goes swimmy with excitement.

Are we doing this?

Bran tears the dress from my body, leaving me in nothing but a black lace corset and matching panties. "The dress didn't make the impact we wanted anyway," he says, tossing the

scraps to the floor. He spins me around and sits me on his lap so I'm facing the room. A flush of heat rises to my cheeks as he hooks my legs over his knees and spreads me open.

Excitement spins in my belly and my clit pulses with anticipation.

His hands come to my thighs and trail up, and the air catches in my throat making me squeak. I'm kinda nervous, a little shaky.

In front of us, a woman sits on a plush settee with cushions that look as though they're stuffed with feathers. A man goes to his knees in front of her and she upends her glass of wine, giggling to herself. There are thick horns protruding from her bright red hair and sharp fangs that peek through her parted lips.

The man slips his hand inside her skirt and watching them burns a fire in my veins.

This must be part of the allure of an orgy—getting to watch someone else indulge in pleasure while you do too. It's a double dose of sensory fire.

I can't say I've ever watched porn and had sex at the same time, but I imagine even that pales in comparison to this.

As the man teases at the woman's pussy, Bran slips inside my panties and finds me already wet.

"You like watching others, little mouse," he says at my ear, his voice practically a purr.

"I guess I do."

Bran's touch is light at first, priming me, making me wiggle.

Across from us, the man leans forward and nips at the wet panties of the woman on the settee and her body jolts.

Bran sinks his middle finger inside of me and my hips shift, wanting more of him, to be filled up despite the whisper of doubt in the far trenches of my mind.

I'm drunk on fairy wine and swept up in a fairy orgy.

Surely there's something wrong with this scenario?

But I can't seem to care. I can't seem to tell Bran to stop.

The man on his knees hooks his fingers around the woman's panties and stretches them to the side, baring her. Then his mouth is on her, eating her out like she's a delicacy.

The woman hangs her head back, her mouth popped open in ecstasy.

An answering thrill pulses in my pussy and Bran presses his thumb against my clit.

"Oh fuck, yeah, yes," I tell him, but my words pull him to a stop. He slips out of me and flattens his hand against me, holding still.

"Bran," I whine and tremble in his grip. He's hard beneath me, digging into my back. How is he showing restraint when sex is everywhere and I'm ready and willing?

I grab his wrist, push his arm back, and spin around so I can straddle him face-to-face.

His eyes are hooded, irises glowing. "Naughty little mouse."

I kiss him. His tongue darts out to meet mine and the kiss deepens. His hands go to my ass, grabbing me possessively as our lips crash together.

I can't get enough of him. He's just as addictive as the fairy wine.

His cock presses against the dark material of his pants, so I reach between us, and fumble with the button before tearing it off and yanking the zipper down. He's in my hand in just a few seconds and his groan of pleasure fills my mouth.

"Fuck, Mouse," he says. "I need the heat of that pussy wrapped around my cock."

"Then hurry up," I tell him between kisses.

He tears off my panties, not bothering with the delicacies of the man behind us.

Bran lifts me up so he can get beneath me and then seats himself inside my pussy with a hot, wet rush.

I yelp in surprise. He lifts me again and slams me down on him.

The sound of our fucking joins the chorus of fucking in the room.

“Keep bouncing on my cock, Mouse.” I find my momentum and fuck him fast. “Just like that. Don’t stop.”

I find the right spot so that my clit rocks against him every time I go down. The tide wells up, higher and higher.

Bran’s fangs protrude from his swollen mouth and he bites me on the breast. I feel nothing but the heat of his mouth. He drags his tongue over the well of blood before covering the wound entirely, drinking me back.

“Oh fuck,” I say and keep the rhythm going, fast, fast, don’t stop.

Blood runs from his mouth, drips between us, down my pussy, making us wetter.

We’re a mess, but we don’t care.

There is only the carnal pleasure of sex and blood and the pressing energy of ecstasy behind us.

Bran growls, pulling in a long draw of crimson as he buries himself deeply. “I’m filling up that fucking pussy,” he tells me. “Come on my cock, Mouse.”

I close my eyes, feeling the thickness of his cock grow the closer he gets to coming.

His hands go to my hips, taking control of me with a hungry possessiveness that makes me fucking lose my mind.

The pressure explodes, burning through me, and Bran slams me down hard on him, filling me up.

I push all my weight forward, rocking my clit against him as the orgasm takes over my entire body, bones and all.

I'm shaking, trembling, breathless. Sweat beads at the back of my neck.

I ride the wave, Bran's grip on me tight and sure, his tongue lapping up the last of my blood.

Gravity pulls me down as the pleasure blinks through my nerves. Bran takes on my weight as I sink forward against him and my hair tangles around his face.

"That was fucking amazing," he says around heavy breathes. "You did good, Mouse." He chuckles to himself, his breath smelling of wine and blood.

With what little energy I have left, I slip off of him, sticky and sweaty, and collapse onto the couch on my back. He finds a blanket at the end of the couch, the yarn coarse like wool. He drapes it over me and then sinks to the couch behind me, pulling me into him.

"We should get up," I tell him, snuggling into the warm glow.

"Let us bask in this a moment longer."

My eyes sink closed.

Bran's breathing evens out beside me.

Everything is beautiful, especially this man and the way he makes me feel.

Before I know it, I'm out.

EPISODE 70

DOLLAR STORE FAE

I WAKE TO THE WARMTH OF SUNLIGHT ON MY SKIN AND THE prickle of dry grass beneath me.

It takes my brain several seconds to catch up and realize that this is wrong.

When did I fall asleep? And better yet, where?

Then I remember the fairy grotto, the sharp, bright taste of fairy wine, the orgy...

Bran.

I lurch upright, head foggy, my vision swimming.

Through squinted eyes, I make out a meadow in front of me and rolling hills that eventually meet a line of hardwood trees where a clear path disappears into the forest.

I've been here before, but only once.

Every human kid in Midnight Harbor grows up hearing the warnings about the fairy glen and the sealed gateway to the fae realm.

You never know when it may open again and the faeries will steal you away.

You get too close, the door may crack open and a monster may come through.

I came to the fairy glen with Sam when we were twelve years old. Like most kids, we were equal parts terrified and curious about it. There were no photographs of it, no paintings or sketches. It was as if Midnight Harbor wanted to forget it

existed, like a skeleton tucked behind shoe boxes in the far corner of a closet. The fae were stuck in Midnight Harbor as reluctant refugees, and there was nothing any of us could do about it, so there was no sense talking about it either.

When Sam and I snuck into the glen, it was late and the moon was new and it was so terrifying, we barely lasted a full minute before we ran back down the dirt path.

Still, I'd remember this glen. It's not just the circular meadow or the blooming flowers that somehow seem more vibrant than anywhere else. It's the energy too. Like the pulsing, electric feel of a storm just minutes before it lands.

It's an energy that whispers down your spine.

I feel that energy now.

I look over my shoulder at the gate and am not surprised to see Arion there, draped over a large boulder at the foot of the archway. His back is leaning against the gate's thick wall, one knee up. His eyes are closed, head lolled back, basking in the sunlight.

"Why are we here?" I ask him.

Is this a dream?

The light is hazy and golden enough to almost be fake. I fell asleep practically naked and now I'm wearing a thin, gauzy tunic with golden embroidery along the sleeves and hem.

It does not escape me that the color of the material is the same shade of thick ice in the middle of winter.

Without opening his eyes, Arion says, "It was a mistake, wearing that dress."

I climb to my feet. A singing robin flutters past and lands in a nearby tree.

The gate is a freestanding stone feature with an archway made of thin, rectangular stones, and the base of thick boulders. There's a door embedded in the archway, the rivets, straps, and handles made of bronze that's long since turned green from weather and age.

Moss and vines climb up the archway with bright yellow and pink flowers blooming between the crevices.

I lean against one of the boulders on the opposite side of the gate, facing Arion.

I'm not sure if I'm in danger yet, but there's now full sun in the sky, which means no vampire is going to swoop in and save me.

I have to solve this one on my own.

It's not time to panic *yet*.

"You know the story of the dress?" I ask, even though I think that's been made clear.

He opens one eye and glances over at me. "I was there when it happened."

"It" being the violent stabbing of my relative.

"Tell me."

"I was the one with the blade."

With both of his eyes open now, I'm rendered still by the intensity in his gaze.

Is this some kind of revenge? I threw his past in his face and now he's kidnapped me from a fairy orgy?

I guess it could be worse.

I adjust on the boulder, positioning myself better so that I can run if I need to. "Who wore the dress?"

He stands and goes to a thick raspberry bush growing just down the wall of the gate. He plucks a ripe berry from the stem and pops it in his mouth. "Your mother."

I take a deep breath.

Arion can't lie. He's not like me. And there's no way to misinterpret that. Two words that can only mean one thing.

"You killed my mother?"

He plucks several more berries and piles them up in the cup of his hand. He's changed clothing since last night and is

now wearing leather armor on his shoulders and across his chest. A sword at his hip. The outfit of a warrior.

There's a dull ache in my left arm that begins to throb, so I hold it against my torso.

"Why would you do that?" I ask him. "Because she was from the Winter Court?"

A berry disappears in his mouth, then another. He shakes his head. "She was Summer Court."

"What?" I slip off the boulder. "But...I'm from the Winter Court. That's what everyone said."

"Your father was from the Winter Court. Your mother betrayed her people and joined your father in the revolt."

I might still be hungover because it takes me several long seconds to digest his words and for them to make sense.

I'm not entirely Winter Court? I'm half Summer? I know any fae can leave their court of birth and join another, so there's no such thing as purity in most of their blood lines. Except, *usually*, in the royal lines. I always assumed both my mother and father were from the Winter Court.

I look at Arion with new understanding. "If my mother was from the Summer Court, you must have known her?"

He tosses a berry into the air and catches it in his mouth. His teeth are stained bright red and a shiver rolls over my shoulders.

"She was my mother as well."

The numbness that settles over me rolls in slowly, then all at once, until it seems like I've left my body entirely because I can't feel a thing.

She was his mother?

Which would mean...

"You're my family. You're my...brother?"

He nods.

Heat flames across my face when I realize... “Oh god,” I squeak out. “The orgy. I was...*you*...” I look down at the new clothing that someone must have put me in.

“Have some decency,” he scolds. “I had another fae fetch you.”

I collapse back against the gate wall. “Thank fucking god.”

He clucks his tongue. “You always speak with such foul syllables?”

“Yes, when my modesty is on the line!”

“Modesty.” He bites into another berry. “As if you know what that is.”

“Hey, listen here—”

“Shut up,” he says.

The shock of his words makes the argument dry up. I clamp my mouth closed.

It might be time to panic.

“I don’t want to be part of this fight,” I tell him.

“Then you shouldn’t have worn the dress. You made a move on the chessboard, and you didn’t even know the pieces.”

Goddammit, Bran.

I should have listened to my own gut. What was it trying to tell me? Not to ruffle feathers. I’m pretty sure that’s what it was saying, right? But I’m so damn obsessed with pleasing Bran that sometimes I don’t listen to my own instincts.

“A year ago, I had no idea I was even fae...” I tell Arion, trying to think on my feet. “I don’t want to make trouble. But I don’t want you all to think me weak either. I spent the first several decades of my life thinking I was mortal, destined to be a blood bag...”

He takes a step toward me.

A breeze shifts across the glen and some of his midnight black hair flutters across his face.

“Arion, please...I’m not my mother. *Our* mother. Or my father, for that matter. I’m not even very fae. I’m like dollar-store fae.” I laugh nervously at my own stupid joke. “Maybe if we talk about this, we can figure out how to open the gate for you so you can go home and—”

The ground rumbles and I spread out my arms instinctively to catch my balance.

A loud clank sounds behind the gate.

My ears start ringing.

Oh shit.

“What’s happening?” I ask.

Arion goes still, his eyes trained on me, but his face blank.

The ground shakes again and dirt rains down from the archway, taking pieces of vine and flower petals with it.

A flock of birds lift from the nearby oak tree and fly away squawking.

“Arion?”

I look down at my arm again, at the blooming bruise in the crook of my elbow. The perfect spot to draw blood.

“Oh gods,” I breathe out. “Tell me you didn’t.”

“I can’t,” he answers.

A loud boom thunders across the glen, raising the hair along the nape of my neck.

More dirt falls from the stones.

Arion and I both turn to look at the fae gate...

...Just as it cracks open.

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NIKKI ST. CROWE has been writing for as long as she can remember. Her first book, written in the 4th grade, was about a magical mansion full of treasure. While she still loves writing about magic, she's ditched the treasure for something better: villains, monsters, and anti-heroes, and the women who make them wild.

These days, when Nikki isn't writing or daydreaming about villains, she can either be found in the woods or at home with her husband and daughter.

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