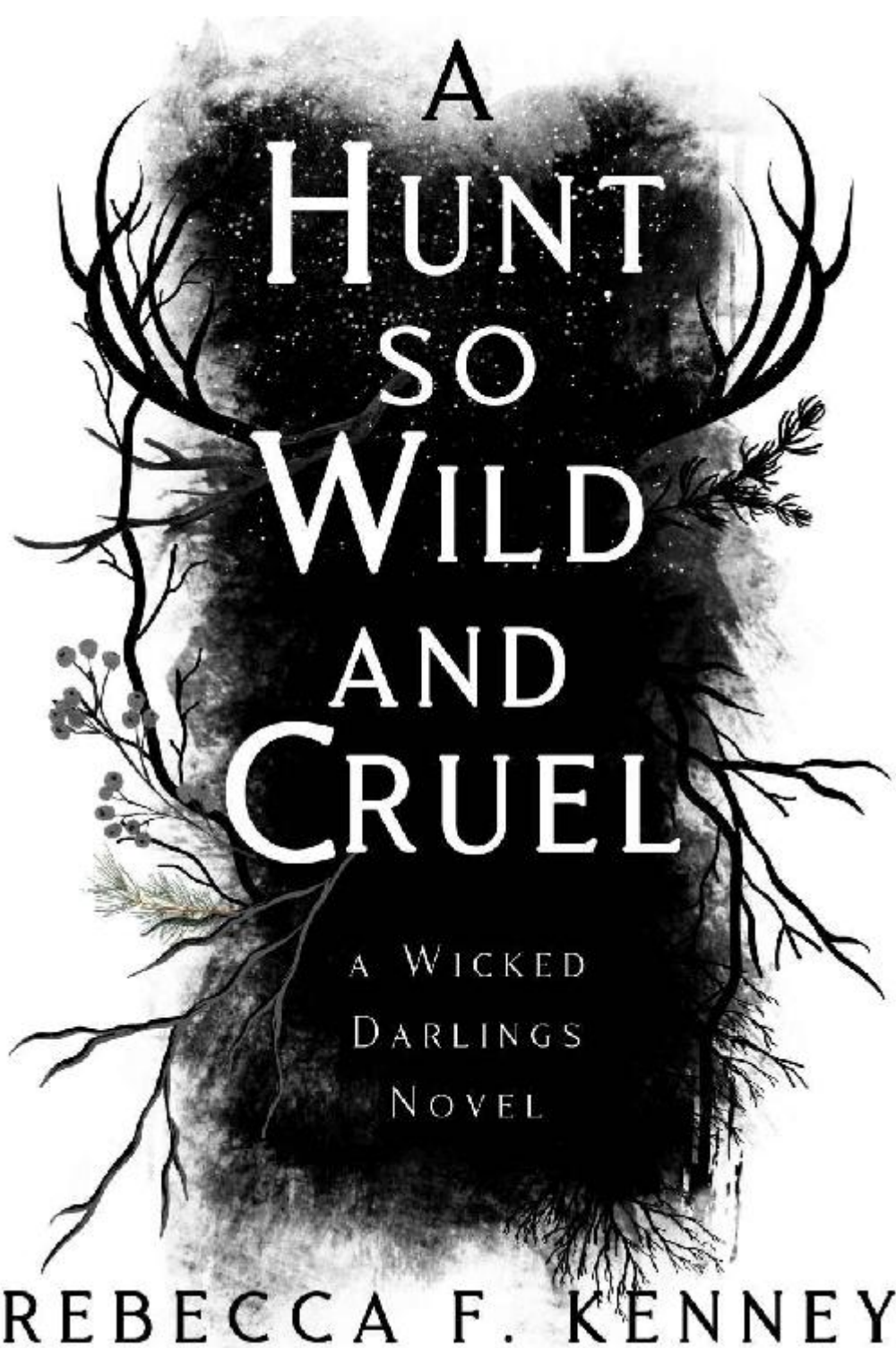


A
HUNT
SO WILD
AND
CRUEL

REBECCA F. KENNEY



A
HUNT
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A WICKED
DARLINGS
NOVEL

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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First Edition: November 2023

Kenney, Rebecca F.

A Hunt So Wild and Cruel / by Rebecca F. Kenney—First edition.

Cover art by Fay Lane



PLAYLIST

“Carol of the Bells” the bird and the bee

“We Are Gods” Audiomachine

“Anti-Hero” Taylor Swift

“Insomnia” 2WEI

“Claws” Kim Petras

“Don’t Make Me” MALINDA

“Pretty Devil” Alessandra

“Vicious” Bohnes

“I’m Gonna Show You Crazy” Bebe Rexha

“Paint It Black” Epic Trailer Version, Hidden Citizens, Ranya

“Casualty” MOTHICA

“Winter Trouble” Myuu

“Once Upon a December” Alala

“Gregorian Hymn” Nox Arcana

“Me and the Devil” Soap&Skin

“Cannibal” Tally Hall

“Eat Your Young” Arankai

“Running Up That Hill,” Corvyx, King Vagabond

“Ghost” Halsey

[*Spotify Playlist*](#)



TRIGGER WARNINGS

Brief instance of child abuse (hitting), child neglect,
murder, violence, racial bias in a fantasy setting,
explicit sex scenes between two or more partners,
mention of rape, brief orgy scene,
mention of suicide, on-page sexual threat and aggression,
disturbing sexual content and cannibalism witnessed by a
character when they were a child, a brief mention of genital
mutilation,
very brief scene of animal sacrifice,
sexy spanking, squirting.

The mention of myotonic muscular dystrophy stems from my
own experience.

The way Lauriel processes her trauma and mental health issues
is a sort of therapy, acceptable in a fantasy setting, but please
know that romantic partners, family, and friends can only help
to a certain extent, and professional counseling is always ideal if
you're struggling with mental and emotional health.



PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Lauriel: LOR-ee-el

Paemon: PAY-mun

Abraxas: Ah-BRAX-ahss

Helix: HEE-lix

Revallen: Rev-AH-len

Jaik Marleigh: Jake MAR-lee

Nocturis: Nok TOOR iss

Andregh: Ahn-DRAY





If you need the trigger warnings or pronunciation guide, flip backward a few pages to the front of the book. Please love yourself and read safely.

This book is for the antiheroes,
the “unlikable” characters,
the misunderstood,
the cruel and cold who hide their hurt,
the people who change,
and the ones who believe that a heart can soften.
And it is for those who love the “unlovable” ones, whether they
change or not.



My parents are dead, to begin with. Of that, I am absolutely certain. And the dead cannot return to demand submission, dole out punishment, or beg forgiveness. They can only lie sightless in moldering soil, while beetles creep between their lips and worms slither into their ears.

Sometimes it causes me pain to picture my mother and father this way. But not for the reasons most people would think.

My parents are dead, no doubt of it... and they left me with a broken kingdom and the rulership of a people I despise. It was their final, cruel trick—like the monstrous joke of bringing me into this fucking world.

At twenty-three, I am their sole heir, monarch of Revallen. Lucky me.

Another supplicant approaches down the long crimson carpet that leads to my throne. He pauses to give his name to my clerk, Kratchet, who's standing behind a tall desk, taking notes. Kratchet glances at me and blows on his fingertips to warm them before writing down the supplicant's name. I roll my eyes and look away. Kratchet is always hinting that I keep it too cold in here. But it's moronic to waste either coal or logs heating this enormous throne room. When I imagine the sheer cost of

keeping the drafty space even moderately warm, I want to vomit.

The supplicant advances, twisting his hands together. He's a scrawny man in a stocking cap, with a bristly chin. The coat he's wearing looks more like an old, threadbare robe.

Reaching over to the small table beside my throne, I pick up a segment of blood orange and insert both my sharp thumbnails into its center, prying it in half. I love the way the thin skin tears, the way the dark, pulpy cells split apart from each other. Blood oranges and pomegranates are among the few delicacies I allow myself to enjoy.

The peasant lurches to one bony knee and bends his head slightly by way of obeisance, until all I can see of his face is his long nose, pointed chin, and bristly gray eyebrows.

“Your Majesty, Almighty Qu—”

“Skip the honorifics. I've heard plenty of them today. What do you want?” I pop half a segment of blood orange into my mouth.

“I am Eben, mayor of the border village of Lirac, located near the mountain pass to Ithaya. I have traveled days to reach you, to tell you of our plight. The Ithayans continually harass us, taking food from our gardens, breaking our fences, stealing our sheep, and befouling our wells. We have a town watch, but it is not enough to deal with the sheer numbers of raiders coming over the border. Two weeks ago, our blacksmith's shop was raided and a cache of new weapons was stolen. Six men have been killed trying to stop these invaders. I beg you, my Queen, to send soldiers to intervene.”

“Are there no soldiers in the stockade that guards the pass?”

“Yes, but they will not help us. They say they must remain at their post.”

“As well they should, to forestall invaders.”

“Yes, Majesty, but meanwhile our enemies climb over the mountains by rocky paths or slip through secret tunnels.”

“Then go to the stockade and seek shelter there.”

“But our farms, Majesty, and our flocks—”

I lean forward and spit a blood-orange seed with such force it pings against the black marble floor right in front of him. The mayor startles back.

Slowly I rise, letting the rich dark silk of my skirts fall into place. I am shorter than most women, but my royal tailor Orseau has ways of making me appear taller, most of which involve gowns with high, cinched waists and shoes with very thick platform soles. My crown, a towering structure of twisted silver spires that’s much lighter than it looks. It adds to the illusion, and so does the height of the dais on which my throne sits.

“So you want me to give you soldiers,” I say coldly. “You want me to steal men and women from their families, move them from their usual posts, and send them to your tiny border village? Do you have any idea of the cost of such an operation? How much coin it would require?”

The mayor’s long, knobby-knuckled fingers twist together, over and over. He has ragged, dirty nails. Who comes to see their ruler in such a state? It is a mark of disrespect.

I give him my best disdainful sneer. “If you don’t like where you live, perhaps you should move.”

The man looks up at me, disbelief and shock written across his haggard face. “But... Your Majesty...”

“You’d best hurry home.” I sink back onto my throne and wave my hand. Two guards move in on either side of the mayor, signaling in no uncertain terms that his audience with me is over.

“You’ve left me with no choice!” the mayor calls as he’s ushered out a side door. “You will regret this when they arrive to judge you!”

What nonsense is he speaking? It’s almost a threat. I could have him tossed in jail for daring to shout at his queen, but he’s almost out of sight, so I’ll let it slide. I’m used to desperate people shouting at me when I won’t give them what they want.

Another pair of supplicants begin the long walk toward my throne. They, too, are begging for money; they want to start

some factory powered by steam. What they describe sounds very suspicious to me—a little too much like magic, so I order them to be taken away for interrogation.

Next are neighboring lords whose blood feud has spilled into their servants' families, causing a series of beatings, mutilations, and general mayhem. They want money to build a great wall between their properties—as if that will end the trouble. I laugh them out of my throne room.

After them, a woman enters, carrying an infant. A second child clings to the woman's skirts, peeping around her at me.

“Kneel,” she hisses to the young boy. “Kneel before the Queen.”

The child only stares, sucking his thumb. The mother's face tightens and she glances at me with terrified apprehension.

But I don't punish children. Ignoring the boy, I speak to the mother. “Why have you come?”

“We live in a cottage on the edge of the Wickenwood,” she says. “My husband is there now, protecting our land. He would have come himself, but we have twice seen faeries in the woods, and he thought it best to send us here, to let Your Majesty know about it. We're staying in the city awhile, with my sister, just to be safe.”

“Faeries?” My heartbeat quickens, and an involuntary shiver passes over my skin. It's the same reaction my schoolmate Castalia has to spiders—a fear so deep it's beyond reason. Except I have plenty of reasons to hate the Fae. “Tell me what you've seen.”

The woman describes the sightings quickly, with enough detail for me to know that these are actual Fae, not the ravings of a sleep-deprived, wine-addled peasant. A vindictive glee rises in my soul as she speaks. I have found those despicable creatures again, in their new hiding place. This time I will eradicate every last one of them.

Before she finishes her tale, I'm already nodding to Kratchet. “Write a copy of this report for Commander Marleigh and deliver it to him at once. We will stir up the monsters' nest and destroy them.”

“Oh, thank you, Your Majesty!” the mother cries in relief.

“Be sure to tell everyone how gracious I can be,” I say dryly. “Go.”

As they leave, I glance at the great clock hanging at the back of the hall. Finally, this two-hour court session is up, and I can escape.

“Close the doors, Kratchet,” I order. “Let no one else in today.” I reach up to remove the pins holding my crown and hand it off to a servant, who hurries to lock it away. Lightweight as the diadem is, I don’t like wearing crowns except when I’m holding court or appearing in public.

Stiffly I rise from my throne and descend the steps at the back of the dais. My bodyguards rush to follow me into the narrow hallway that runs behind the throne room, but I warn them off with a sharp gesture and duck into the corridor alone.

I like this passage because of its blood-red carpet, patterned crimson wallpaper, and occasional black sconce fitted with a dripping candle. Its gloom suits me, embraces me, shuts out the rest of the damn world so I can *think*.

The shocked betrayal on the face of the village mayor lingers in my mind. But I don’t feel guilty for refusing him. He doesn’t understand what it would mean if I sent reinforcements to the Ithayan border. It would signal aggression to Ithaya’s volatile king, and he would respond in kind. He knows about the raiders and allows their violence to go unchecked on purpose, to taunt me. After all, I’m the young, inexperienced queen, the one whom every surrounding nation looks upon as easy prey.

I can’t afford to antagonize the worst neighbor of them all, the one who would likely declare war on us at the slightest provocation.

The crimson hallway empties into a long, gloomy chamber, decorated with my father’s hunting trophies. He never had the heads stuffed; instead he had them stripped down to the bone and mounted. In the light of the black candelabra branching from the walls, the shadows of the skulls dance menacingly. The servants hate cleaning this room, so cobwebs occasionally festoon the antlers or horns of the dead beasts.

“Still terrifying people from beyond the grave, eh, Father?” I mutter. I stalk through the room, remembering all the hunting trips the king took—some even to the northern reaches where my boarding school was located—and yet he never came to visit me. These beasts were more exciting than his daughter, their skulls a more worthwhile trophy than my affection.

If I’d had one of these horned heads, maybe I would have been able to get his attention.

Impulsively I reach up to one of the lower trophies, a deer skull, and I wrench it from its mount. I’m strong for my size, thanks to hours spent in the training hall at school when my schoolmates were playing games or gossiping while pretending to study.

Hefting the deer skull, I lift it to eye level and turn toward the window. Night comes early this time of year, transforming the thick glass into a mirror. I pose with the deer skull in front of my face and my hips tilted in saucy defiance. I look like a mad dancer with a head of bone and antlers.

“What now, Father?” I hiss under my breath. “Am I worth your time *now*?”

But he’s rotting in the earth and cannot hear me. Been dead for nearly two months.

I tilt my head and the deer-skull simultaneously, enjoying the menace of my reflection. How unnatural it is, almost—

Almost Fae.

Shit.

With a shudder and an angry cry, I throw the antlered skull—too violently. One antler smashes through a windowpane, leaving jagged shards clinging to the frame. Icy wind rushes into the room, catching my gauzy black sleeves and turning them into fluttering shadows, lifting my ebony hair and testing the pins that hold half of it up.

“My Queen?” Two guards burst into the room from the farthest pair of doors. They knew where I would emerge and must have circled around to wait for me.

When I turn from the broken window, eyes stricken, fists clenched, my skirts and hair wild from the wind, both of them recoil. I see it on their faces—the fear of me, the dislike.

No one likes me here. Why should they? They don't know me at all. I'm the distant princess, the half-mad one who was never home. A stranger.

I lift my chin, my posture stiffening. "The window broke," I say caustically. "Have someone fix it."

"Yes, my Queen."

I stalk from the room, intent on heading to my chambers, but the city planner, the Master of Festivals, and the High Priest of Andregh's Temple are coming toward me, trailed by one of my palace stewards.

The Master of Festivals is a round, rosy fellow in a furred cloak, while the city planner is gaunt and anxious, with a perpetually wrinkled brow and a habit of tugging at his cuffs.

The High Priest is much taller, with umber skin and a wiry gray beard that brushes the breast of his clerical robes. His belt bears the symbols of the deity we worship in Revallen—tiny scales of justice, male figures balanced on one leg with their arms in various angular positions. That's how Andregh, god of balance, is always depicted—poised on one foot.

I remember the faces and roles of the men approaching me, but not their names. It's been less than two months—I haven't had time to learn everyone's names yet. Not that I've really tried.

"If you're seeking an audience, you missed your chance," I tell them.

"Your Majesty," ventures the steward. "The city officials do not need to wait with the other supplicants. They can request Your Majesty's attention at other times. I was about to take them to the reception parlor to await your pleasure."

"My pleasure?" My lip curls. "And which of them, pray tell, is going to do the pleasuring?"

Back at school, a quip like that, directed toward any of the randy boys who craved my attention, would have had my other

classmates giggling uncontrollably. But here, the city officials only stutter and cough awkwardly, and the High Priest looks grievously offended.

“Never mind.” I wave off their discomfort. “What is so important?”

The High Priest says, “Wouldn’t this be more comfortably discussed in the reception parlor?”

“Not at all. You three could do with more time on your feet,” I reply. “What do you want?”

The three men exchange glances, and the Master of Festivals clears his throat. “Well... you see, at this time of the year it is customary to be well under way with preparations for Midwinter Glee.”

“Midwinter Glee?” I fix him with an icy stare. “With my parents not two months dead? You think it an appropriate time for feasting and revelry, for plays and songs, for jesting and nonsense?”

“Begging Your Majesty’s pardon, Midwinter Glee is more than revelry and nonsense,” says the High Priest. “For some of our poorer citizens, it is a time to receive monetary gifts from the Crown, which enable them to survive the coming year. Many of our kingdom’s charitable institutions rely on royal donations as well. Your mother always gave—”

“I’m not my mother,” I cut in. “Hosting a festival here in the capital, at such a time of grief and upheaval, seems utterly inappropriate. And emptying the royal coffers to coddle the peasantry, when threats loom on every border, would be idiotic. What kind of queen would I be if I brushed off my parents’ death so easily and encouraged the citizens to make merry, when they would do better to keep their heads down and work hard through these dark months of the year?”

“But without the joy and relief that a holiday brings, many of them will not make it through the year,” the High Priest says. His high cheekbones are flushed through his brown skin, and his mouth sets in a grim line. It’s clear that he disapproves of me entirely.

“Holiday,” I muse, tapping my lips with my forefinger. “I’m not very familiar with the term, seeing as I never returned to the palace for such frolics.”

“All the more reason to make this year’s Midwinter Glee a festival to remember?” The city planner’s voice rises nervously, and his attempt to look hopeful only makes him appear more anxious than ever.

“I don’t think so,” I say coolly. “I don’t care to celebrate, and why should I drain palace resources so others can celebrate? No, I say it now, unequivocally—Midwinter Glee is canceled. I shall have Kratchet write up an edict to that effect.” I swerve my gaze to the steward. “Send Kratchet to my sitting room so he can take down the decree. If he’s on his way home, call him back.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” quavers the steward.

“As for the rest of you—you should hurry home. It’s getting late, and the night is cold.”

With that, I glide between them and continue on my way. There’s an outbreak of indignant murmurs behind me, but they’re careful not to say anything loud enough for me to hear.

I glide onward through the halls, enjoying the way servants scatter or cringe at my approach. In the brief span of my rule, they have learned to be frightened of me. Fear is better than respect. Respect is easily lost—fear can be reinforced with timely demonstrations of power.

The great palace of Revallen, unlike most palaces in the neighboring kingdoms, is all on one level. It was built to suit the needs of my great-great-grandfather, who had a disease of wasting muscles and could not walk for most of his life. The halls, rooms, and doors are all extra-wide, to accommodate the wheeled chair he used. His son, my great-grandfather, had the same disease, only to a lesser degree, and my grandmother had a touch of it as well. The condition was not passed on beyond her, fortunately. Still, the fear that it will manifest haunts me, driving me to ever more strenuous workout sessions in the training rooms at school. I’ve kept up the regimen here, outfitting one of the rooms in my suite to serve the purpose.

When I arrive at my suite, I order my guards to stay outside. My two maids are waiting, hands tucked behind their backs, eyes wide and wary.

“Kratchet will be stopping by shortly to take down an announcement for me,” I tell them, beginning to tug the pins from my hair. “I’ll have my porridge and tea immediately afterward.”

They exchange glances, and the freckled one, Arin, says cautiously, “The palace chef was wondering if you might like to have your meal in the dining room this evening. He has prepared—”

“Why does that idiot continue preparing sumptuous meals when I have no interest in them? It’s enough to drive a woman mad. Tell him if he doesn’t stop, I’ll have his hands removed so he won’t be tempted to cook any more. He’s lucky I let him stay on at all. And warn him not to stray from the menu I’ve set for the servants and guards. We can’t afford the obscene luxuries my parents used to permit.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Kratchet stumbles in a few minutes later with a hasty bow. He’s clearly eager to get home for the night, but it’s not my business to coddle him when there’s work to be done. When I dictate the pronouncement for the cancellation of Midwinter Glee, his face falls, but he says nothing.

“On your way out of the palace, leave this with the copy-clerks,” I say. “Tell the Overseer of Communications that I want it posted all over the city tonight. Have him send his messenger birds throughout the kingdom right away, to carry the news.”

Kratchet looks utterly despondent.

“Something to say?” I ask crisply.

“No, Your Majesty. Rest well.” He bows and leaves the room, his shoulders more slumped than usual.

My maid Arin holds out the leggings and camisole I use for training. “Shall I braid your hair for you after you change, my lady?”

“Yes. Do it quickly.” I lift my arms, and the second maid, Krissa, hurries to unfasten the buttons of my gown and then my corset laces.

With the finery stripped off, my hair braided, and my training clothes on, I can breathe easier. I enjoy appearing in full royal dress because it provokes greater awe and respect in the people I rule; but I prefer the ease of just one or two lightweight garments. Divesting myself of the gown and trappings feels like peeling off my cocoon each night and emerging as the nocturnal moth I truly am.

I visit the privy, and by the time I return, my simple meal of porridge and tea is sitting on a tray beside my favorite armchair. After dismissing my maids for the night, I eat and drink while perusing a volume of Alcinore’s *Strategies for Masterful Rulership*. Alcinore was an emperor of the Lower Lands, considered ruthless by some, while others admired his ability to command armies and overtake whole countries simply by threat, with scarcely any bloodshed.

Time passes quickly, and when I finally look over at the tall clock in the corner, it’s almost midnight. Setting the book aside and swallowing the last of the cold tea, I rise from my armchair.

I should train for an hour before bed. If I don’t, I won’t be able to sleep. I’m plagued by wakefulness, and only the strictest of methodical habits can give me the best chance of a good night’s rest. I follow the same routine every night: porridge, tea, reading, and training, sometimes with a quick bath afterward.

A sudden outcry of raised voices outside my sitting room irritates me. I snatch a thin robe, wrap it around myself, and fling the door open. “What’s all this?”

The Captain of the Guard is there with a handful of soldiers. He’s a huge, square, bearded fellow with keen gray eyes. “Majesty, you must come quickly—as fast as you can. They’ve been spotted—that is to say—they are—you must see for yourself.”

His brow is filmed with sweat, and the hand gripping his sword-hilt is white-knuckled. This man is as solid and stoic as they come, yet he’s shaken. Terrified.

I knot the belt of my robe. “Lead on.”

We hasten down the hallway. The Captain has a massive stride, and I have to run to keep up with him. Normally I would complain, but he seems so panicked I don't protest.

We rush out the door at the end of the hall, onto a wide patio. The Captain points upward, to the heavy clouds blanketing most of the night sky.

The moon shines through a ragged gap in the clouds, silvering their edges—and through the aperture I see... by the gods... in the fucking sky... riders.

They're indistinct—raised arms, a bristle of spears or swords—long hair flying, horns and antlers glittering. Their horses, too, have a hazy, ethereal look to them. They're all arched necks and tossing manes, flashes of long galloping legs swirled together with mist and moonlight. Tails of white smoke streak behind the steeds as they plunge through the cloud bank, leaping across the moon in a cascade of furious hooves, galloping silently onward through the next mountain of clouds and away. Their forms sift into the thick darkness of the night.

And they're gone.

If they were there at all.



“You saw them.” The Captain’s voice is hoarse. One of the soldiers is muttering a frantic prayer under his breath.

I inhale the frigid air slowly, through my nose, and it crinkles the inside of my nostrils. “Saw what?”

The Captain turns. I can feel him staring at me, but I keep looking up at the sky. The moon is shrouded once more, and snow is beginning to fall. A flake lands on my cheekbone, melting instantly.

The Captain leans toward me, the tang of alcohol on his breath making me wince. “Majesty, it was the Wild Hunt. We all saw—”

“I saw some oddly shaped clouds whipped up by the wind.” I try to believe the words as I say them, because anything else is impossible... unthinkable. Fae on the ground can be ensnared, imprisoned, executed, but riders in the sky—I can’t reach them. I can’t control them or stop them, and the thought sends my pulse skittering into a panic.

“Perhaps your ale was too strong tonight, Captain. Yes, I can smell it on your breath. Maybe you *all* partook?” I do a slow turn, leveling the guards with my stare. Every one of them steps

back. “You’re lucky I don’t have you all tossed in the dungeon for drinking on duty. And you would try to convince *me* to join in your drunken delusion?” I release a cold laugh, and the sound of it steels me, fuels my next words. “I know better than to trust my senses, when the slightest thing can affect them. I would rather trust logic and reason. Now off with you, to your posts, and tomorrow I will decide the penalty for your egregious failure.”

With a snap of my fingers at my two bodyguards, I march back inside, straight to my suite, and I slam the sitting-room door. I lock it, too, even though the Captain has asked me never to do that unless the palace is under attack. The guards need to be able to get into my room and assist me if I need them.

But tonight, I can’t bear that tiny vulnerability. I need locks between me and everyone else.

My hands are shaking.

For the Captain of the Guard to be drunk on duty—even slightly—it’s an unforgivable offense, one he would never have dared to commit under my parents’ rule.

What can I do about it? He and his soldiers are my enforcers. Without their loyalty, I would be far weaker, like a warrior without a sword. I dare not punish the Captain too harshly, not when I’m this new to the throne.

Fuck.

I begin to pace the length of the sitting room, back and forth.

I’m not sure what I saw.

Yes I am.

It’s nothing. A shared delusion. A waking dream that passed as quickly as it came.

It’s more than that.

Sucking in a quick breath, I return to my door, unlock it, and address one of the guards. “Where is Commander Marleigh?”

“I believe he left the capital city a few hours ago, Your Majesty. Some report of Fae in the Wickenwood. He took a contingent of soldiers with him.”

Of course he did, because of the report from that mother with the little children. So Marleigh wasn't here to witness—whatever just happened. Too bad. I would have liked to hear his explanation.

“Good.” I nod, as if Marleigh's absence is exactly what I expected. “As you were.”

I close the door and fasten both the upper and lower locks this time. Then I head for my exercise room.

My training space used to be a personal library, with a high ceiling, a row of tall windows, and a single door that opens onto the back garden. I've had all the books, paintings, and furniture moved, and in their place are sets of small weights, ropes for my climbing work, sawdust-stuffed dummies for punching, and mats where I can practice combat routines. It's not the same as the training grounds I enjoyed back at school, but it's part of my suite, and therefore satisfyingly private and accessible.

There's a low fire in the fireplace at one end of the room—just enough for light and a little warmth. My maids have finally learned my preferences after several weeks of annoying trial and error.

I spent most of my life at the Argemont Institute, where young nobility and other wealthy students are educated and trained from early childhood up to age twenty-five. At twenty-three, I was nearing the end of their academic opportunities, and I'd begun to wonder if my parents would let me come home once I aged out, or whether they'd find somewhere else to put me.

Their death put an end to my wondering. Everything familiar, everyone I knew, was abruptly gone, and I was rushed back to the capital to assume my royal duties in a palace I barely remembered and hadn't visited since I was a child.

Perhaps leaving the school so permanently and abruptly would have hurt more if I'd been particularly close to any of my friends, or if I'd had romantic relationships beyond the

occasional tryst. Even so, the enormity of the change hollowed my soul, until I was able to set my routines and rituals in the palace—until I managed to carve out spaces for myself, sanctuaries like this room.

After centering myself with a breathing exercise, I begin a series of stretches on the rug nearest the long row of windows.

Moonlight is slipping through the clouds again, and someone has lit a few lamps in the garden—a ridiculous waste of resources. Since the light is so low in the training room, I can see outside.

Snow falls in thick, soft flakes, floating down to blanket the shrubs and paved pathways of the garden. The bushes stand like stout, headless men bundled up in dark cloaks. Trees stretch their bare, crooked fingers over shriveled flowerbeds crisp with frost.

I lift both arms over my head and lean to the right, feeling the stretch along my left side.

Behind me the fire flares with a snap and hiss that makes my heart jerk in my chest. I whirl around, but the flames crouch back down over the logs, as if they barely dare to raise their heads in my presence.

I bend over, my glossy black nails extended to reach my toes. Sometimes I wrap my ankles or wrists for training, but tonight I didn't feel like taking the time. My routine has been disrupted enough, and I need to immerse myself in familiar exercise. I need to forget the bristly chin and haunted eyes of the village mayor and the smoky shapes of riders in the sky.

A gust of icy air traces across my lower back, along the bare skin between my leggings and my camisole. I whip upright.

The door to the garden is ajar. Snowflakes dance through the crack, borne on the night breeze.

That's impossible. The door is always locked, secured with multiple bolts. Perhaps one of the guards on patrol outside opened it? But no... that's ridiculous. They don't have the keys, and some of the bolts can only be undone from the inside.

I shove the door closed and clamp the locks back into place, one by one, adding the chain and the bar as well. Heart racing, I press my palms to the thick wood of the door. The white paint along the frame has cracked in places, but it's only surface wear—the wood itself is solid.

Mentally I rehearse the palace's security measures—gate guards, more guards along the outer and inner walls, patrols in the garden and the hallways, and the Fae-detecting charms Commander Marleigh has placed throughout the palace grounds and along the perimeter of the capital city. He swears they will warn us if the Fae should attempt another attack like the one that took my parents' lives.

Marleigh's words echo in my mind: "If only your royal parents had trusted me to ensure their safety, they might still be alive."

I won't make the same mistake. I have a personal goal: to eradicate all the Fae and sorcerers within the borders of my kingdom by the half-year anniversary of my parents' death. Not for their sakes, but for mine.

Marleigh is the only magic user I allow to operate legally within Revallen. After all, it takes one rat to sniff out the others. He swears he despises his own power and will cease to use it once the Fae threat is eliminated from our lands. In exchange for that promise, I gave him the title of Commander and authorized him to use whatever means necessary to rid my kingdom of magic and Fae.

He knows what he's doing. The palace and the capital are safe because of him. I have nothing to fear. Especially not from shreds of cloud that only looked like horses for a moment.

I walk to the mat and begin moving through a series of methodical movements, slow at first, then increasing in speed as I yield to the familiar flow of the combat routine—spinning around, ducking, sweeping my leg to knock an imaginary foe off balance, striking, cartwheeling, delivering high-kick after right hook after throat jab. Small as I am, I'm lethal. At least, I think so. I've never been tested against a real enemy, and when I sparred at school, I could never be sure that any of my opponents fought me with their full strength. Letting the Crown

Princess win every match seemed to be the thing to do, and even though I screamed at my fellow students to show me no mercy, I don't know if any of them really brought their best to the mat.

Sometimes I long for a worthy foe—one who cares nothing for my title and will truly challenge me.

It's unlikely I'll ever find such a person.

As I complete another low spin and a roll, the flames in the fireplace suddenly streak higher, lashing out over the hearth like crimson tentacles—and then they go out.

Darkness engulfs the room.

I stay crouched, panting, one leg extended and one palm braced on the mat. My long braid is looped over my shoulder, still swinging from my quick movements.

Moonlight shimmers through the windows, forming silver rectangles on the floor, crisscrossed by bars of blue shadow. A thread of orange light shines through the crack of the door leading back to my sitting room.

The only sound is my rough breathing as I remain tense, waiting.

The hair at the back of my neck lifts and my skin prickles.

I am not alone in this room. I could swear it, though I can see no one else.

Slowly I draw myself upright, peering into the black corners.

There's a rack of weapons on the wall opposite the fireplace. It's some distance away, in the darkest part of the room. If I can reach it, I'll have something to defend myself.

I could call for my guards. But if there's no one here, they will think me foolish—and if there's one thing I hate more than the Fae, it's people thinking I'm a fool.

Even though I closed the garden door, the scent of snow lingers in the room, fresh and sharp. There's another scent, too—like the dark, thick coffee I drink in the morning, but it's tempered with the cloying fragrance of snowbloom and the heat

of cinnamon. And I could swear I smell apples, too—stewed apples, sugared and syrupy...

Frowning, I inch toward the wall with the weapons rack.

A hiss slithers out of the darkness.

It's only the dying breath of the logs on the fire.

A deeper black silhouette shifts in the corner.

It's only clouds passing over the moon, altering the light.

I tell myself those lies, over and over, as I ease back, step by step.

With a loud *clang, clang*, the clock in the sitting room strikes midnight.

Nothing moves as it rings out all twelve strokes. I'm frozen—I barely breathe.

But as the last stroke dies, three towering shapes emerge from the blackness, as if the shadows are doorways for their passage.

It's too dark to see them clearly, but I can make out hulking shoulders and heads crowned with horns or antlers.

The air congeals in my lungs. Even if I wanted to scream for my guards, I couldn't.

“Lauriel Anderion.” A voice slithers through the darkness, unfurling like honeyed silk. “Queen of Revallen. We of the Wild Hunt have been summoned by the cry of a citizen to bring justice to this land.”

“And mercy,” adds a second voice—a voice so deep it's like the thunder of an avalanche, or the growl of a bear.

The silky voice sighs. “Justice *and* mercy. But mostly justice. For nine days we will endeavor to shape you into the ruler you should be—to correct cruelty, develop empathy, and strengthen your sense of responsibility to your people. If, at the end of that time, there is no true change in your heart, you will receive punishment for your atrocities.”

“‘Atrocities’ is a bit harsh,” grumbles the deep voice. “I mean, in this case—”

“Do *you* want to deliver the speech, Abraxas?” The silky voice sounds exasperated. “I thought we agreed that *I* should be the one to do it since *I* will be dealing with her first, but if you think you can do it better, then by all means—”

“Shut up, Brax,” seethes a third voice, and in its breathy sibilance I recognize the hiss I heard earlier. “Finish explaining it, Helix.”

The silky voice clears its throat lightly and continues. “As I said, we are three riders of the Wild Hunt—ghosts of Fae warriors, sent to you by the mercy of the god-stars, to grant you a chance for redemption. There are not usually so many of us sent to one person, but I’m told yours is a special case. For nine days and nights we shall be with you. During the day we will remain in spirit form, and you will be the only one able to see or hear us, unless we wish otherwise. From midnight to dawn we may take corporeal form, so that we can interact with you more closely as we guide you through the remaking of your heart and mind... lest you meet a bloody and untimely end.”

Again, the deep voice: “A bit harsh, don’t you think? And why in the god-stars’ names are we doing this in the dark?”

The honeyed voice changes, as if the words are squeezing out between gritted teeth. “Because it’s more impressive that way. Mortals don’t like the dark.”

“And we’re trying to scare her?” rumbles the low voice.

“Yes. Hence the open door, the thing with the fire—”

“Isn’t that counterproductive if we want her to trust us?”

“Fucking make a light, then,” says the honeyed voice, in tones of silken fury.

“Why don’t *you* make a light?” counters the deep one. “You have that staff of yours—”

The hissing voice mutters, “Working with you two is going to be a delight.”

Meanwhile, my thoughts are streaking in frenzied circles through my brain, assembling two possible realities—one in which I’ve been drugged or gone mad, and the other in which all of this is real, and actually *happening*.

The riders in the sky—the Wild Hunt—it’s too terrible not to be real. Just the sort of luck I usually have.

Despite my horror, I’ve been edging back toward the weapons rack during the speeches and the arguing. I’m almost there.

We are three riders of the Wild Hunt—ghosts of Fae warriors, sent to you by the mercy of the god-stars, to grant you a chance for redemption.

My fingertips brush against metal, then slide and curl around the haft of a small throwing ax.

Light flares as a dozen tiny balls of flame emerge from a broad palm, rising up to float just beneath the high ceiling.

And in that light I see them. Three gigantic Fae warriors.

The first warrior has orange eyes and a cascade of curly red hair down to his waist. Brown deer antlers branch from his head, and they, like his pointed ears, are decorated with gold rings. His bare, tanned chest is broad and bulky with muscle, and he’s so tall the top of my head would barely brush his collarbone. Gold ribbons wrap his biceps and wrists, and the ledges of his hips bear complex woven tattoos pointing downward, toward his deerskin trousers. In one hand he holds a tall, twisted staff, and as I watch, the tip ignites. But the flame is strange—there’s a shimmer to its dancing light. I can almost see tiny shapes moving through the fire.

I give the other two a cursory glance—one has deep brown skin, short white hair, and the red horns of an ox, while the third is the tallest, pale-skinned, with angled eyes, white rams’ horns, and dark purple hair flowing past his waist.

The ax in my hand flies with practiced surety, lodging firmly in the tanned chest of the Fae with the staff. I don’t pause to see his reaction. I whirl back to the weapons rack and seize two more throwing axes. Instantly I hurl them at the two remaining Fae.

The tallest one lifts his hand to fend off the first ax, and my heart nearly stops at the sight of his fingers—impossibly long and spidery, with claws long as my forearm. The ax bounces off the gold bracer on his wrist.

The red-horned Fae with the deep brown skin catches the ax I flung at him—plucks it out of the air neatly by the handle. There’s a sword at his belt—no sheath, just the naked blade itself.

“I told you, Helix,” he rumbles in his deep voice, watching me with amusement in his crimson eyes. “Leaving her in darkness wasn’t a good idea.”

“You think she would have been less vicious had we appeared in the light?” The antlered Fae with the long red hair snorts. His fingers close around the handle of the ax in his chest, and he tugs it free with a grunt. Blood drips from the cut—much less blood than I expected. “My first time in a physical body for centuries, and already it has been damaged.” He throws me a look of supreme annoyance.

“Perhaps you should reassure her of our good intentions,” says the tallest Fae with the purple hair and spidery claws. His dark brows slant inward, and his mouth forms a grim line. He looks anything but well-intentioned.

The antlered Fae, Helix, strides toward me, his silken voice harder now. “Calm yourself, mortal queen—”

I yank a short sword from the rack and brandish it at him, my breath hissing through my bared teeth.

He raises his eyebrows and casts a pointed look at the big one with the ox horns, Abraxas. “You see? Mortals are savages. They react this way no matter how we approach them.”

“You act as if I’ve never done this before,” Abraxas rumbles. “I have nine hundred and ninety-nine completed tasks on my record, just like you. Remember, she is a special case. And that means we must handle this carefully—oh fuck.”

His last two words come as I lunge forward and drive the short sword into Helix’s abdomen, right in the groove between his twin rows of perfect abs.

I shove the sword in a little deeper—and then I make the mistake of looking up, into the enraged face and glowing amber eyes of the beautiful male I just tried to kill.

His powerful hand clamps around the back of my neck and he lifts me off my feet easily, as if I'm a tiny doll who has fallen from a shelf and needs to be set in her place. Something pops in my spine, but there's no pain. I'm not dead... yet. I don't dare move or fight back, though, not with that massive hand wrapped around the back of my neck. One flex of his fingers, and my spine would snap.

The redhaired Fae's lip arches in a sneer. "Brat," he hisses. "No wonder you've been marked for punishment."

The metal of his rings is cold, but his fingers are unexpectedly hot, and his eyes flicker as if he's lit by an inner furnace.

"Helix," says Abraxas warningly. "Put her down. She is a queen."

Helix lowers me slowly, keeping his eyes locked with mine. "Pull out the sword, human."

I grip it and pull. It's wedged deep in his flesh and bones. They claim to be ghost warriors, yet they seem corporeal enough. Their bodies are a recent thing, judging by what I've heard. And I'm a "special case." Lucky me.

With a grating, sickening tug, the sword pulls free, and Helix grunts softly as it comes out. There's something sexual in that sound, and I grit my teeth harder.

Marleigh has told me of the Fae's obsession with sex, their need for it. They are boldly sexual beings, willing to rut anything with holes. I must be on my guard.

Personally, I prefer to care for my own sexual needs. My preference is men, but I rarely find one who doesn't irritate me beyond reason, so when I need pleasure, I use my fingers or the cock-shaped toy that resides in a drawer beside my bed. It's quicker, less messy, and doesn't involve talking or personal complications.

The Fae male is still holding my gaze. The light of his orange eyes intensifies briefly, and his nostrils twitch.

"You're so tiny," he says derisively. "I can hardly imagine you to be guilty of the crimes you're charged with. You couldn't

hurt a kitten.”

A frustrated squeal grates between my teeth, and I tense as if I’m about to shove the sword back in—but he vanishes his torch-staff, grabs both my wrists, and bends them until I cry out and drop the sword. Furiously I hitch up my knee and slam my foot into his crotch. He barks out a sound of pain, and I nearly fall over, utterly shocked because the sole of my foot encountered a very long, very hard *something* between his legs.

He’s slightly bent over, seething over his sore cock, while his companions stand aside with arms folded, watching. I throw my best punch at his face and immediately whimper at the pain that shoots through my fingers.

Holding my injured hand to my chest, I stagger back. “Leave now, and I won’t call my guards.” I speak the words as forcefully as I can, but cold dread seeps into my heart at the thought of my human guards facing these monstrous warriors. It would be like a swarm of puppies yapping and nipping while three great hounds stared down at them, unperturbed.

“Your guards won’t do you any good, Majesty,” says the big dark-skinned male in his deep, soothing voice. “We could simply take on ghost form again and vanish from their sight. If you’ll give me a moment, I’ll try to explain.”

“I already explained,” snaps Helix. “She is responsible for ordering the murder of the Fae in this land, and she treats her people unjustly. Unless she changes not only her ways, but her heart, her doom will come to pass, as Paemon has foreseen.” He looks at me again. “We are your only chance. Submit to the instruction and correction, or you will regret it.”

I clench my teeth harder over the word “submit,” and pain shoots through one of my back molars. “I am the queen. I submit to no one.”

Helix’s eyes flash, and he grins suddenly. The effect on his appearance is so breathtaking my jaw drops.

“Challenge accepted,” he says. “You’ll be spending the first three days with me, though these two might show up occasionally. We’ll begin your lessons tonight. If you’re done plunging blades into my body, we can get started.”

But the words of Abraxas ring out in my mind, clear as a bell. *Your guards won't do you any good. We could simply take on ghost form again and vanish from their sight.*

Sounds good to me.

“Guards!” I shout, backing away from Helix. I seize the bell-cord on the wall and pull sharply several times. “Guards, to me!”

I can hear the guards crashing against the door in my sitting room. Damn. I forgot I locked it. I run from the training room to unbolt it and let them in.

The three Fae don't stop me, and when I re-enter my training space with a handful of guards, there's no one to be seen. The room is bathed in total darkness. One of my guards lights a lamp, and I notice the axes and sword are back in their places, without a trace of blood on the blades.

My guards look at me the way I expected—with caution and confusion, tinged with satisfaction because I reproached them earlier for claiming to see the Wild Hunt, and now I'm imagining intruders in my chambers. I don't mention the word “Fae,” but I warn the guards to watch for any strangers slinking through the palace halls.

Now that I can't see the Fae warriors right in front of me, I begin to doubt myself. Like I told my guards, the senses can cheat. Perhaps I imagined it all. Lack of sleep, too much stress about border security, talk of Fae hiding in the woods—maybe I hit my head while training and dreamed the whole thing.

Once my guards have gone back to their posts, I lock the door to the training room and cross the parlor to my bedroom. This used to be my parents' suite, and even though I had the mattress, bedding, and bed curtains replaced, something of their presence still clings to the room. I hate it.

Determined to forget all about the encounter, imaginary or not, I slip on a sheer black nightdress. Despite my earlier terror, my ridiculous body remembers the glorious masculine beauty of those three Fae, and my pussy feels warm and sensitive. I consider touching myself before sleep. But picturing the Fae while playing with my clit is an obscenity I can't stomach, and

for some reason, I can't bring any other tantalizing images to mind. Frustrated, I yank all the curtains into place around the huge bed and lie in the center, staring up at the dark canopy.

Insomnia plagued me often at school, and it has worsened since I took the throne. For a while I drank nightly, to calm my brain so I could rest, but I began to fear I was becoming dependent on the liquor, and I refuse to be like my mother.

My spinning thoughts are just beginning to merge into restless dreams when a light erupts in my mind—no, in my room. There's a bright glow beyond the dark bed-curtains, far too strong to be a lamp.

Is the room on fire?

A shadow passes across the glow—an enormous, antlered shadow, pacing slowly along the left side of my bed. The silhouette is so crisply outlined I can see his handsome profile, the curve of his pectoral muscles, the slope of his abdomen.

His shadow glides along the foot of my bed, his arm outstretched, fingers rippling over the curtains. I don't know what terrible light is shining behind him, but it seems to encompass the entire chamber.

The shadow grows larger as he turns and paces along the right side of my bed.

I shrink back against the pillows, sliding my hand over to the secret compartment in the headboard where my father used to store a couple of knives. He loved knives. Knives were the only gifts he ever sent me at school.

Pushing open the door of the compartment, I clasp one of the daggers I hid there—a favorite of mine, with a serrated blade.

Claws slide into the crack between the bed curtains. He's moving slowly on purpose, tormenting me, hoping to terrorize me.

Fuck that.

I scramble out the other side of the bed and let the curtains fall shut behind me. He'll find the bed empty, and maybe that

moment of surprise will give me a chance to try killing him again—if an incarnated ghost warrior can be killed.

Or maybe I should just run. Every wall of my chamber is translucent, glowing, as if the walls are glass and behind them are living, dancing flames. Nothing appears to be burning, but it's certainly not a reassuring sight.

I dart around the corner of the bed, intending to make for the door—but a golden chest blocks my way.

“Hello, brat,” Helix says softly, in his honeyed voice. “It’s time for your first lesson.”



Being stabbed fucking hurts.

I haven't possessed a body for a very long time. During my centuries-long ride with the Wild Hunt, each of my missions has been accomplished in ethereal or spirit form.

This one is special. Like the two companions I've been assigned, I have completed nine hundred and ninety-nine missions across dozens of realms in the course of my service to the Hunt, and this will make it one thousand.

The one-thousandth mission is the most important by far. Our squadron leader, Nocturis, has granted me this body for several hours each day to remind me what's at stake—what I could earn if this mission is a success.

I could finally earn my chance at a second life.

Usually, our tasks are considered successful whether the subject experiences a change of heart or falls to judgment. But it must be a conversion this time. If my fellow warriors and I fail to turn our subject, it means we've learned nothing during our time as riders—that we are beyond hope. That we do not deserve another chance.

Much as I hate to admit it, Abraxas was right. I shouldn't have opened this dialogue with darkness and fear. I thought to soften the human, to make her weak and receptive through intimidation, but she only became more violent and intractable. She's a vicious little thing, as evidenced by the way she is currently stabbing my chest with a serrated dagger.

"Why—won't—you—fucking—die?" she pants, yanking the dagger out and inspecting the gashes in my skin. The wounds she left earlier are gone, but she has made about a dozen new ones.

Something about the ferocity of her attacks makes me wretchedly hard. It's not that I like her—far from it—but there's a primal intensity in the way she resists me, and I can't help thinking she would fuck as wildly as she fights.

I used to be charming, a very long time ago. I could make women melt on the spot, entice them with gentle words until they let me slip inside them. I need to find that part of myself again—the charming, irresistible Helix.

The queen is pulling my hair now, clawing my skin—wrenching, grasping, clutching, trying to injure me in any way she can. She's wearing some flimsy scrap of black gauze, and I can see her breasts bouncing through the sheer fabric. Her lithe, taut body is rigid with anger.

I react at last, taking her upper arms in my hands. "Stop that. Haven't you realized it's no use? Or are you stupid?" The last few words skate across my tongue before I can stop them.

"*You're* stupid," she snaps. "Waking someone out of a sound sleep and expecting them to...what? Submit? You'll find that I don't submit. Not for anyone."

The long-dormant predator in me perks up at that, rising eagerly, licking its lips.

Oh, you will submit.

No... no, I can't think that way. Breaking her spirit isn't my goal here. I seek a change of heart that will make her a better ruler.

The Fae are not known for their morality, although the Seelie have their own rigid code of behavior. But the god-stars who made us—who made all the realms—have a code of their own, and though they do not curb us in life, they often make their displeasure with us known after death. My sins were so numerous and terrible that I drew their attention and secured my place in this torturous afterlife, chained to duties I would have despised during my centuries of corporeal existence.

I've been performing those duties for ages, sometimes alone, sometimes with an assigned partner. I carry warnings to the living of all races and species, in all realms—warnings that if they don't change their ways, judgment will fall. Sometimes I change the course of a life, and when that isn't possible, I either mete out punishment or leave the natural destruction of that soul to continue its course.

But my time with the Wild Hunt is drawing to an end—for better or for much, much worse. My fate rests in the sharp-nailed hands of this cruel little queen, and I will do whatever I must to ensure her conversion.

That means I need to control my temper.

"I am a ghost specializing in the pivotal moments of the past," I tell her calmly. "Abraxas deals with all things present, and Paemon reveals the future. You'll be spending time with each of us over the next nine days."

"I don't want to." She recoils, her eyes wide and furious. "What right do you have to torture me like this? Am I going mad?"

"No." I fight the rising impatience in my chest and keep my voice smooth, unperturbed. "A citizen of your kingdom used a magical relic to summon the Wild Hunt, to call down justice upon this land. We can be called in other ways, too, and sometimes we linger nearby in times of war, upheaval, or celebration—but in this case, the summons was compulsory. We have no choice in the matter, and neither do you." Against my better judgment I add, "Trust me, I'd rather not be here."

Oddly enough, that seems to calm her a little. She draws back even farther, watching me warily, but there's a spark of

interest in her eyes now. “This is about my campaign to eradicate the Fae?”

“That, and other things.”

“The Fae are cruel, and they possess frightening power. They are a threat to my people, and I refuse to ignore the danger like my parents did. Protecting my people isn’t wrong, and you’ll never convince me that it is.”

“The longer you argue with me about it, the less sleep you’ll get tonight. Take my hand.”

She looks at my outstretched fingers as if I’ve offered her an oozing skull covered in rotten flesh. In fact, she looks at all of me that way—as if she can’t stand the sight of me.

“No,” she says, with a slight shudder.

That shudder wrecks my fragile composure. At her sign of revulsion, something inside me snaps.

I used to be glorious, desirable, irresistible—and this mortal worm *shudders* at the thought of my touch?

“Have it your way.” My staff appears in my grip, its tip flaring brighter with the heat of my anger. I seize the girl’s wrist in my other hand and drag her with me, straight toward the window. “Walk with me,” I say through a manic grin, while she thrashes and curses, trying in vain to break my hold.

The curtains part and the window opens soundlessly. The two of us sail out, rising swiftly up, up into the night sky. The girl screams, but we’re already transitioning from the present to the past, and no one but I can hear her now.

My staff sends out pulses of light, each ring widening and racing off into the distance, pulse after pulse marking the number of years as we retreat into her past. I keep my limbs straight and the staff outstretched, while I maintain a firm grasp of the girl’s wrist. She’s flailing wildly, not even trying to fly with dignity. Her white legs kick the air as if she’s battling it, and hoarse screams break from her lips every few seconds. As I watch, the wind lifts her gauzy nightdress, and I catch a brief glimpse of her delicate black panties.

Need grips me by the balls.

I haven't had a body of my own for so long. Haven't had sex in ages. I want a woman, and she's the nearest available.

But I don't think the others would take kindly to me fucking our subject. Not when there's so much at stake. And there are other reasons I can't indulge my desire with any woman I may encounter during this task.

With a monumental effort, I face forward again.

We're sailing into the earliest point of her life—autumn, twenty-three years ago. My staff carries us toward a castle with sharp towers, its pennants streaming raggedly in the cold wind.

“My uncle Narash's castle.” There's a note of fear in her voice. “Why are we here?”

“Wait and see.”

We sail through frosted double doors and land in a large chamber where a woman lies sweating on a bed, half-covered by a sheet. A few maids bustle nearby, two of them tending to her needs and one wiping the ooze off something white and wrinkly, wrapped in a purple cloth.

The girl—I suppose I should get used to calling her Lauriel—stumbles as we land on the rug near the fireplace.

“What the fuck,” she whispers, her voice strained. “That's my mother. But she looks so young.”

“This is the night you were born.”

“They can't perceive us, can they?”

“No. They can't see, hear, or feel either of us.”

A man in embroidered robes strides into the room. “Is it done? What is it?” he barks.

“A girl, Your Majesty,” replies the midwife, holding up the bundle. “The new Crown Princess.”

He peers down at the baby's pale, pinched face. “A girl,” he says, in a tone of deep disappointment. “And a puny one at that.”

“She arrived a little early, yes,” says the midwife. “But I believe she'll be all right. Nothing a parent's love can't fix.” She

holds the baby out, but when the king doesn't reach for it, the midwife turns back to the queen.

“Oh, I couldn't possibly,” says the queen, waving her away. “I'm much too exhausted. Give her to the wet nurse. Bring me wine—the best Narash has in his cellars. I've abstained for so long, and I want to get fucking drunk. And someone clean up this mess... ugh.” She shudders. “Birthing an heir is such a disgusting business. Clarence, you're a fool if you think I'll ever do this again. If only I'd gone into labor at home, not here in this gods-forsaken place...”

A strangled laugh erupts beside me, and I look down at Lauriel. She's rubbing the wrist by which I dragged her here.

“You thought I needed to see this... why? I already knew I wasn't the child they wanted. They made that pretty fucking clear every day of my life.”

“I don't always choose the visions,” I tell her. “It's more of an instinct. The staff and I work together to select the parts of your life that are most important to understanding your current state.”

“My *state* is ‘too-busy-to-be-bothered-with-this-nonsense.’” Her tone is hard, but there's fragility in the way she keeps rubbing her wrist. Perhaps I held onto her too tightly. I'm not used to my own strength in this body.

My torch hums in my hand, pulling me, an indication that there's another vision to observe tonight. I usually limit myself to two or three per night, but with this being a “special case,” as Abraxas loves to remind me, there's no telling what might vary from my usual methods.

“Come on.” I hold out my arm, more like a courtier this time. “Walk with me.”

“I'd rather eat glass.”

Irritation heats my blood again, but it's mingled with arousal because her tits are far too visible through that stupid black nightgown. I should have insisted she wear something else. I can't alter it—illusions aren't part of the magic I'm permitted to use.

“Why do you despise the Fae so deeply?” I demand.

She scoffs, but her eyes follow the midwife, carrying her infant self out of the room. “Ask your magic staff to show you that story.”

“It will, when the time is right. Now will you take my arm, or shall I carry you?”

With an expression of supreme disgust, she gingerly loops her arm through mine. We soar out of Lord Narash’s castle, across white fields glistening with snow and dark forests heavy with the silence of winter.

Back to the capital city we glide, where Midwinter Glee is in full swing four years after the Princess’s birth. Every market square in the city is a hub of joyous, raucous delight, and the revelry spills along the streets. Snow-laden rooftops sparkle under the starlight, and blue smoke curls from chimneys, scented with the aroma of roast goose, sizzling pork, spiced fruit, and stewed pumpkin sprinkled with cinnamon. Torches and lanterns fill the streets with a merry golden glow, and the dancing voices of stringed instruments quiver on the air.

In spirit aspect, I have all my senses except touch and taste, but in corporeal form I possess the full set, and they’re far stronger. The queen and I may be veiled from perception, but we can still perceive everything around us, and for a moment I’m dazzled by the crystalline snow, the hectic glow of the bonfires and lanterns, and the fragrance of food. My staff won’t allow us to stop—it has a destination in mind, but I angle it and guide us lower, sweeping closer to the sights and sounds.

“How does this work?” The queen’s stiff tone breaks my enjoyment. “If this is a vision, how can we see and smell everything?”

“I call it a vision, yes, but that’s not precisely true. We are actually here, in the past. The Wild Hunt operates outside time, you see—in a different phase of existence, as it were. And on missions such as this, I’m allowed to carry my subject with me, into that alternate plane. We exist physically, corporeally in this world, at this time, but we’re out of phase with the people we see, beyond their perception.”

“And when you’re a ghost, can you go anywhere you like?”

“On rare occasions, when we’ve done especially good work, we are allowed a little free time to wander realms and observe what we please,” I reply. “But without a body, and with limited means of interacting with our surroundings, it’s more of a torture than a pleasure.”

“You have a body now.” She glances at my chest, her eyes lingering on the tiny gold bars through my nipples. We were allowed some say over our appearance for this task, so I took care to adorn myself like I used to when I was alive. Abraxas and Paemon copied their nipple piercings from me. I suppose I should be flattered.

“I may have a body, but it isn’t truly mine.” I close my lips tightly, aware that I’m veering precariously close to things I’m not allowed to say.

Of course she senses as much, and presses the issue. “Whose body is it, then? You stole a body?”

“No! It’s me, but not mine.”

“For as much as you like to talk, you’re being dreadfully vague. Tell me what I want to know!” And she digs her black pointed fingernails into my bare flesh.

“Ow! Bitch,” I snap.

“Dick,” she snaps back.

The flaming staff pulls us right through the wall of the palace, into its central courtyard where a more riotous party is going on, and then into the great hall where the king and queen are dancing among scantily-clad nobles and courtiers. Many of them wear gaudy, bejeweled headpieces or masks. We’re carried through it all, amid the screams of laughter, the splash of wine, and the thump of dancing feet, to a back hallway heavily papered and carpeted in crimson.

A small figure stands by the wooden door to the great hall, one eye level with the keyhole. The child is thin and pale, with a messy tumble of black curls.

A woman approaches, carrying a candle. “Come, Princess. You know you’re not allowed here. Back to the nursery.”

The tiny Princess turns, her great dark eyes mournful. “It’s Midwinter Glee. Can I have my own party? With gifts? I heard everyone gets a gift at midnight.”

Pity fills the woman’s eyes. “Your mother was very clear, Princess. She said that you were to go to bed early, without a fuss. Now come along.”

But as she reaches for the child, the Princess ducks out of reach and pushes her way through the door, into the great hall. She runs, swerving among the dancers, while the maid calls for her to come back.

My staff draws us along, following the child’s progress until she reaches her mother and tugs at the silk and lace of the queen’s scanty dress. The child inadvertently tugs too hard, and the bodice slips, exposing her mother’s breast.

A slap follows, sharp and loud. The queen’s face is flushed with anger, with drink. She pulls her dress back into place and turns away as the maid hurries forward to seize the Princess and hustle her away. The Princess’s hand covers her cheek, but as she leaves, her hand drops and I see the bruise—her mother’s Midwinter gift to her.

The sight does not affect me. It is merely one strand of the web I must weave to alter this human’s heart. I do not pity her—many have had far worse upbringings than hers.

Before I faded and became a ghost rider, I was Unseelie. Empathy is not one of my best qualities.

The staff in my hand is quiet now, which means we may observe and discuss the vision at our leisure. I’d rather return to our time, where I can more fully enjoy my body and its senses.

The young queen doesn’t speak as we take to the sky and glide back through the years to the present. When we land in her chamber, the windows close behind us, and the curtains draw themselves shut against the night.

I have a couple more hours until dawn, when I return to ghost form. If I can make a little progress with the girl, I may

have time to enjoy a stolen meal or to stroke my cock in some quiet corner.

But the moment the curtains close, the Queen shoves me backward.

“Why would you show me that?” She’s trembling, her eyes cracked with pain. “That is my earliest memory, one I hate, though it’s by no means the worst.”

“It shaped how you see the world, did it not?” I ask coolly. “So it’s key to understanding why you behave the way you do—like an unbroken colt or a rabid dog. You wanted your mother’s love and attention, which she refused to give you. She cared more about her own pleasure and freedom. That’s why you are... like *this*.” I arch an eyebrow, surveying her from head to toe.

“So you understand me now?” she hisses. “That’s all there is to know? I’m that simple. Tell me, bastard, do you know the ending of a book just by reading one or two pages?”

“I don’t read often, being a ghost and all,” I say dryly.

“You know what I mean.”

“Of course I don’t presume to know everything. I have three days and nights to learn about you, after all. But I doubt there will be many surprises in store. You’re a rich girl, born to privilege, who believes that she has been badly used and that such poor treatment gives her the right to treat everyone else with equal harshness. Women like you are all too common.”

Her slim fingers curl into fists. “I. Am not. Common.”

I give her a lazy smile. “Ah, but you are. I’ve seen hundreds of you across the realms.”

That’s not exactly true, but it seems to rile her, and I’m finding that I like her riled. Her pale cheeks take on the prettiest flush, and her eyes sparkle with uncontainable rage.

I sense the attack coming, and I catch her by the throat as she charges toward me. I place her against the wall and hold her at arm’s length, so her bare feet can’t reach my crotch.

She chokes in my grasp, clawing at my hand. After a few seconds I lower her to the floor, but I move in swiftly, pinning

her body against the wall with my bulk before she can retaliate.

Strangely, she doesn't struggle. She goes very still.

And then I realize that she's ice-cold, every inch of her. I can feel the chill of her skin through the flimsy nightdress she's wearing. Her nipples are pebbled, pressing against my stomach.

A bolt of intense craving snakes down through my belly into my cock.



He's warm.

That is the only thought in my head as Helix crushes me to the wall with his body; he's so deliciously, impossibly warm, like a furnace of satin skin and packed muscle. His long red curls drape over his shoulders, framing his handsome face as he stares down at me like a man taken by surprise.

He is no man, though. And as much as I would like to remain here, soaking in his warmth, I need to get away. The sight of his antlers makes me cringe, sends a twist of panic into my gut. I can't be touching someone like him.

With a violent shudder I come to life, pushing at his shoulders, trying to shove him away. "Get off me, you piece of shit."

"You're such a fucking brat." He jerks back, orange eyes flaming.

"And you're a sadistic fiend." I stalk away, snatching up a robe. It helps a little, but I'm still shivering from our freezing flight, and I can't help yearning for the heat that emanates from his skin. The walls in my room are no longer glowing, and the

only light in the chamber comes from his staff and from a single lamp, which he must have ignited by magic.

I could ring for a servant to build up the fire. Or I could summon my maids and have them prepare me a hot bath. We have hot running water in the royal quarters—I could fill the bath myself. It's not likely that I'll be able to sleep now anyway, and the thought makes me want to scream and cry. I'm so exhausted already, and this bastard had to steal my precious few hours of rest.

"I *hate* you." The words fly out of me, each one a dagger.

"The feeling's mutual, Majesty." He gives me a sweeping bow, mockery and anger sharpening his features. He looks deeply offended, and I'm not sure why, but I'm glad of it. I want to hurt him deep, deep, where it doesn't show—like he hurt me tonight.

"I'm taking a bath," I announce. "You will leave."

For a moment I think he's going to argue, but then he says, "Fine. I'll be shadowing you tomorrow, and then we'll have another lesson tomorrow night."

Shadowing? I do *not* like the sound of that. But at least he's leaving. Small mercies.

When he vanishes, I hurry to the bathroom. I'm half-crying as I shuck off my nightdress and panties and turn the taps. The water gushes into the big copper tub—my parents' tub, large enough to hold two people facing each other. They liked to bathe together, or with others. Disgusting.

I try to blot them out of my mind as I choose soap from a bowl and climb into the bath. The soap smells of lavender and vanilla. Half my hair has already fallen out of the braid, so I release the rest and lather it thoroughly. Then I hold my breath and lie back under the water, letting the heat relax my muscles, right down to my very bones.

When I sit up, someone says, "Greetings, my lady," and I scream.

There's a broad-shouldered, grinning male right next to me, his thick brown arms propped on the edge of the tub. Abraxas,

the big warrior with the deep voice. His huge right shoulder bears an intricate tattoo all the way down to the elbow, and there's another complex tattoo wrapping around his left forearm.

I snatch a small washtowel from the table by the tub and hold it across my breasts. The swirling, milky trails of soap in the water conceal the rest of me.

"Apologies," Abraxas says cheerfully. "Didn't mean to startle you. Helix told us you were planning to bathe, and I wanted to ask if I might trouble you for a turn in the bath. It's been so long since I had the pleasure of hot water."

I stare at him, utterly speechless.

A voice sounds outside the bathroom. "My Queen? Are you well? I heard a scream, and a voice—"

Instantly Abraxas's body changes, shifting to a filmy, smoky form. I can still see him, but he's indistinct—wispy at the edges, a thing of shifting shadows.

No use calling the guard in to witness yet another instance of *nothing*.

"I'm fine," I call back. "I slipped in the tub, but I'm all right."

"Would you like me to summon your maids to attend you?"

"No. I'm perfectly capable of bathing on my own," I reply sharply.

"As you wish, Majesty." Footsteps recede, and a door closes in the distance.

Abraxas solidifies again.

"So..." I manage, "Abraxas..."

"Call me Brax."

"Brax... when I'm done here, you want to bathe?" I'm scarcely able to comprehend the request. It's so simple, yet so audacious.

"You'd have to remain in the room, or I can't retain this form," he says, with an apologetic grin. "You see, if it's our night with you, we can stay embodied from midnight until

dawn, whether we are in your presence or not. Take Helix, for example—your guide for tonight. He visited us for a quick update, and then I'll wager he went off somewhere to enjoy his physical body. If it's not our turn to be your guide, we can still take corporeal form between midnight and dawn, but only when we're in your presence. There's not much time left before dawn, and by the god-stars, I love a good hot bath."

"You're insane," I whisper.

He chuckles, a deep, rich sound that penetrates my very soul, warming it from the inside. His red eyes glow like Helix's, only they're kinder, more cheerful.

"I could wait until you're done, then bathe while you're in the room. Or if you want to save time, I could join you now," he suggests. "We could talk about what you saw tonight."

Maybe it's the exhaustion, but I can't answer him just yet. I'm not done staring.

His shoulders are massive arches of muscle, his collarbones look like great iron bars, and his pectorals are so immense I don't think both my hands could cover them, even with the fingers splayed.

My gaze wanders from his broad chest up to his smiling face. His white hair is shaved up one side of his head, and tumbles over his brow on the other side. He wears less jewelry than Helix, but a few rings grace his thick fingers, and gold studs decorate his sharp ears. Those ears and the scarlet ox horns remind me that he's Fae—otherwise I might be tempted to let him join me.

"You're fucking cute, you know that?" he says, his grin broadening. A dimple pops into his cheek. "I hope Helix wasn't too hard on you tonight."

Pain streaks through my heart, and my cheek stings from the memory of my mother's palm. That wasn't the only time she struck me, but it was the first.

The smile drops from Brax's face. "I see," he says slowly. "A tough night already, eh?"

His pity reawakens my anger. “How *dare* you come in here and disturb my privacy? And how dare you ask favors of me—you, one of the monstrous torturers sent to destroy me?”

“But we aren’t trying to destroy you.” He leans in eagerly. “We’re trying to save you from—well, I can’t say, exactly, but you’ll find out when it’s your time with Paemon.”

I think of the tall, gloomy Fae with the purple hair and the spidery claws, and fear snakes up my spine. I shrink lower in the bath.

Brax watches me, soft longing in his eyes as he surveys the steaming water. He isn’t trying to take advantage of me. He truly wants a hot bath.

I toss around reasons why I should deny him. I don’t like granting favors, especially when they don’t involve any benefit for me. But at last I mutter, “When I’m done, you may have a few minutes. I’ll turn my back.”

“Thank you.” He presses both palms together and gives me a fervent, grateful nod. “I am in your debt.”

“This is not a bargain, Fae,” I say quickly. “Nor is it a mercy. Now turn around, and wait.”

“I understand.” He’s still smiling as he turns away, which irritates me so much that I stay in the bath until the water is only lukewarm. Then I climb out, wrap myself in a towel, and sit on a stool by the counter, smoothing cream onto my face while Abraxas strips off his dark pants. He didn’t appear with his sword and belt. Doesn’t consider me much of a threat, apparently. Or perhaps his sword, like Helix’s staff, serves a different purpose.

In the mirror, I catch a glimpse of him—a huge expanse of brown back, a pair of toned ass cheeks, and long, strong legs. He steps into the bath, and I smirk, knowing how tepid the water is. But a moment later there’s a flicker of flame and the water begins to steam. The fucker re-heated it with magic.

He lowers his big body into the copper tub with a sigh of delight.

I swivel around on the stool. All I can see of him is one brawny, tattooed arm and his horned head, tilted back against the edge of the tub. His eyes are closed, and he looks utterly blissful.

Memories churn through my mind—memories that sour the pit of my stomach. Faerie faces, shrieking with laughter, sharp teeth gnashing. Blood on claws. The thumping of bodies.

I had a momentary lapse, showing this monster kindness. I fell prey to his smile and his physical beauty. The Fae are truly manipulative, even more so than I realized, and I'm letting one of the wretched beings *bathe* in my room, in the very tub my dead parents used.

If he can't retain corporeal form outside of my presence, I will simply remove my presence.

Angrily I rise from the stool and stride out of the bathing room.

I wait for a moment, then look back in.

Abraxas has disappeared.



My morning begins like any other, with a simple breakfast of two eggs and a cup of strong coffee. Again, I could almost imagine that my visitors were nothing but a dream, except for the soreness of my wrist where Helix gripped me.

After breakfast I go to my study—not my private one, but the official one near the throne room. There I confirm that the cancellation notices for Midwinter Glee have been sent out, and then I dictate an edict for Kratchet. It concerns the elimination of several dozen palace employees. My parents tended to bloat the ranks of the palace staff with various hangers-on and “consultants” who contributed absolutely nothing of value. So I’m lopping off those rotten branches in an effort to save money.

The scritch-scratching of Kratchet’s pen grates on my nerves until I finally shout at him to fetch another. I cannot stand small repetitive sounds, particularly not abrasive ones. They drive me to a state of near madness. Sometimes I can bear it, but this morning I’m operating on too little sleep.

Kratchet tries two more pens, and when neither one pleases me, he scurries off to fetch others from the clerks’ hall.

I rise from my chair and walk to the standing desk where Kratchet works. I make him stand because he’s always

complaining about being cold. He's less likely to be cold if he's standing. It's for his own good, really.

In low tones, I reread the edict aloud.

"It's brutal," says a silken voice.

My head jerks up, and there's Helix, leaning against the door frame in all his antlered beauty. His hair pours over one shoulder in a flaming waterfall, but it isn't quite as brilliantly crimson as it was last night because he's in his misty spirit form—visible and audible only to me.

"It's not enough that your kind took my parents from me, that I've been thrown into this role unexpectedly, and that I'm forced to endure your loathsome presence at night—I must be haunted during the day as well?" I slam the paper back onto Kratchet's desk. "The god-stars must hate me."

"My loathsome presence?" He arches an eyebrow.

"Surely I can't be the only one who has found your company detestable."

"There have been some. But they're usually not quite so open about it. There's often a healthy dose of fear that softens their dealings with me."

"Well, I'm not afraid of you." I cross the floor to my own desk and slide into the chair. When I pick up my coffee mug and take a sip, there's nothing left but air. I hate my life.

"I did tell you I would be shadowing you by day," says Helix.

I slam the coffee mug down and stare at him. Pale shadows stream from his body, melting into the air. Even when he's standing still, he seems to be constantly in motion, mists swirling perpetually over his skin and along his edges. Now and then his features shiver and blur before growing distinct again.

"What did you mean, it's 'brutal?'" I ask.

"Your edict. Ending the employment of so many people at once, during the dead of winter."

"It's necessary."

"Is it?"

“My parents took anyone they liked into their employment—anyone who owed them a favor, or had a cousin’s cousin at court. It’s unsustainable, paying these high salaries to so many people who never actually *do* anything.”

“Surely there are some who contribute. And perhaps others were taken on because they needed the help.”

I scoff and pick up another sheaf of papers—merchant bills I’m supposed to sign. “There are far too many expenses. So much money flowing out and not nearly enough coming in. I have to stop the hemorrhage before it’s too late.”

“So this is easier.” He crosses his arms. The movement is slow, blurred, and his fingers turn smoky and amorphous for a moment until he settles into the new position. “It’s simpler for you to just cut them all off. But the right choice would be to take the time to investigate, to pluck off the actual leeches while retaining those who contribute, or those who have no other recourse but your mercy.”

“I don’t have time for that kind of investigation. Do you realize the weeks that would take?”

“Then appoint someone trustworthy and compassionate. Someone who can eliminate the idle fools who suckle at the royal breast, yet someone who will also ensure that no one truly in need goes unaided.”

“Ew. No one suckles at the royal breast.” I make a gagging sound. “This is simpler—a clean break. If I find that someone is indispensable, I’ll hire them again.”

“If they’ll rejoin you.”

“They will. I’m the Queen. They won’t have a choice.”

“You’re a merciless bitch.”

I glare at him. “Fuck you. You don’t actually care about any of these people. You’re simply spouting the rhetoric you’ve been taught to spew at people like me. You judge me, and yet you couldn’t care less what happens to my subjects. I’m doing this for the good of the kingdom as a whole—for our survival.”

“Survival is important,” he says smoothly. “Compassion is more important.”

“Is it?” I plant both palms on the table and rise, incensed. “When was the last time you felt compassion for anyone?”

His eyes widen slightly and his mouth opens—but then he shuts it again.

“That’s what I thought.” I sink back into the chair—just in time, because Kratchet is back with the pens.

I finish dictating the edict, and Kratchet presents it to me for my signature.

“Masterfully worded as usual, my Queen,” my clerk says, though he holds the document as if it’s a poisonous thing. “Shall I deliver it for the scribes to copy, so it may be distributed throughout the land?”

I’m about to say yes—I want to say yes, if only to irritate Helix—but something stops me.

I hate that Helix was right about this. It’s brutal to cut off so many people from their income during the darkest and most difficult time of the year.

The ghost Fae is still there, lingering in the doorway, inspecting his claws. He doesn’t look at me.

“Take it to the clerks’ hall,” I tell Kratchet. “But put it somewhere safe until I’m ready to send it.”

“As Your Majesty wishes.”

There’s an itch in my brain, a growing unease that I need to soothe. As soon as I’ve tidied my desk, I leave the study as well. Helix stalks at my side along the corridor, so close his arm brushes mine—but instead of hot, smooth skin, I feel nothing but a misty coolness. I’m fairly sure he could float along the ceiling or through walls if he wanted, but he maintains the pretense of walking.

He’s bare-chested again. I want to ask if he owns a damn shirt, but my guards are trailing behind me and I don’t want to look delusional. I suppose I should be grateful his spirit form has pants on.

The two bodyguards who are with me today have taken this morning shift many times. They know where I’m headed.

The royal treasury is the only part of the palace that isn't on one level, but it's still accessible by a long chain of switchback ramps that a wheeled chair could navigate. I take the stairs instead, descending into the subterranean cold.

The guards standing before the treasury gate step aside without a word from me. They're used to my visits here. At the end of a wide hallway is another door, which I unlock by adjusting several notched wheels to just the right position. I unlock the third and final door with a tiny key concealed in one of my rings.

My bodyguards know better than to follow me inside. They take up positions on either side of the door, while I enter and pull it shut behind me.

For a moment I stand in the pitch black, inhaling the cool, metallic, earthy scent of the chamber, as familiar to me as my favorite perfume. Here in the inky darkness, I can pretend that the Wild Hunt does not exist, and that I'm not being haunted.

Maybe Helix can't follow me in here. The treasury is supposed to be warded against the Fae—a precaution set in place long ago, when the palace was first built. But then, there are supposed to be warning systems throughout the city to notify everyone of Fae intrusion, and those seem to be utterly useless against the Wild Hunt, whether they are in corporeal form or not.

A lantern and matches are always waiting for me in a nook to the right. I'm about to reach for them when several glowing orbs drift into the air, spreading throughout the cavern, illuminating the safest space in my kingdom. Apparently Helix can do some magic in ghost form.

As I suspected, he can float, and he glides past me to an open area. On the stone floor stand rows of neatly stacked coins, fifty to each column. Beyond the stacks are piles and bags of coin I've not yet counted.

He touches down lightly on the central pathway that cuts through the treasury. "What's your purpose here?"

"I like to know exactly what I have." Not wanting to trust his Fae-lights, I light my lantern anyway and carry it to the spot

where I last left off—a spot marked by the presence of an hourglass. “Most days I allow myself one hour to count the gold and tally the resources in this room.”

“Surely that could be accomplished by a treasurer and a few assistants.”

“My parents never knew exactly what they had. They couldn’t be bothered.” My tone takes on a derisive twist. “They trusted others to take care of everything, and so they were often robbed or fooled. I refuse to be like them. I will know everything that I have. I will master it all myself.”

Helix gazes around at the piles of coin, the chests and bags, the distant rows of shelves and cabinets. “This will take years to inventory if you insist on doing it all yourself.”

“Shut up, or leave.” I seat myself on the stone floor, turn the hourglass over, and pick up a bag of loose coin. It isn’t marked with any particular quantity, which is absurd. Everything in this kingdom is in such a disordered state.

It’s my parents’ fault. They were too occupied with hunting, traveling, and more salacious activities, and they delegated too much of the kingdom’s functions to various advisors and managers. Several of their closest counselors were killed in the Fae attack that took their lives, and I’ve been reluctant to replace them, because I have no idea whom to trust.

As I dump the bag of coins out beside me, the musical ring of gold on stone soothes the itch in my brain. I trail my fingers through the coins and scoop one up. This coin has passed through many hands, and its edges are worn satin-smooth.

I find the spot on the floor where the next tower of fifty coins should be, in perfect line with the other stacks. I start with round, crisp coins that will sit neatly atop each other. Uneven coins go back into bags in quantities of a hundred, each bag tied tightly and marked with “100” in black paint from a small pot that I keep near the hourglass.

For an hour nearly every day, I operate like this, counting coins in perfect silence. This quiet period is one of the rituals that has enabled me to survive the past two months. No one can disturb me here... well, except for the antlered Fae ghost who

keeps flitting through the room, inspecting one thing or another. There's a faint whooshing sound as he moves, a stirring of the air.

It doesn't take long for him to grow bored and return to me. He drapes his long body on the floor and props his head on one hand. He remains there, staring at me; and after several minutes, he begins to hum.

I endure it for as long as I can before barking, "Stop!"

"Don't you enjoy music?"

"Not here. Not from you."

"You wound me."

"Good."

He sighs. "I'm trying to be charming today, but you're making it very difficult."

I perch the fiftieth coin on top of the forty-ninth and look up at him. "That's because I have magic eyes."

"Magic eyes?" His brow rises.

"Yes. They can see right through bullshit."

He scoffs. "It's not bullshit. I'm really trying—"

"Of course you are. Calling my edict 'brutal,' telling me I'm a merciless bitch—*so* charming."

"Ah, fuck." He sighs and rolls onto his back, lacing his hands behind his head. "I used to be better at this. I think it's your fault. You're so damn irritating I can't find my rhythm. And you seem to find the very sight of me nauseating, which can only mean you have very poor taste in men. Perhaps you prefer women?"

"No."

"Then I don't understand it."

I set the first coin in place for the next stack, then lean back to inspect it before nudging it slightly. Much better.

"You're Fae," I tell him candidly. "I hate your kind. Always have, always will."

He's quiet for a moment, then says, "I used to know Fae who felt the same way about humans."

"I have reasons for my hatred."

"I assumed you must."

"The Fae don't belong in this realm, and neither does magic. I plan to drive all sorcerers beyond the borders of Revallen and remove the Fae among us."

"Kill them, you mean."

"If that's what it takes."

He sits up. "And you'd hunt me down and kill me, if I were alive and residing among these Revallen Fae?"

"They are not Revallen. And I daresay the Fae do the same to humans who end up in Faerie."

"That is true. I've seen it done. Participated in such things myself, in the past."

"Yet you'd judge my actions."

"Just because the other side would do the same doesn't mean your actions are right."

"Right?" I snort. "As if the Fae care about right and wrong." This conversation is getting far too close to the source of my hatred, the memories that haunt me more terribly than he ever could. I hate that he's probably going to show me those memories, and make me relive the worst moments of my life. I hate that he'll be there, observing with his judgmental orange eyes.

"Where's your staff?" I throw at him.

"Elsewhere. I can summon it as needed."

"And fire? All of you can wield fire, and those orbs of light?"

"Yes. Our magic is limited to what we might need to complete a task, and fire is useful in a multitude of ways."

"Hm." I return to stacking coins, feeling as though I've successfully ended the conversation.

Counting things is calming for me. It steadies my breath and my pulse. But it's slow, because sometimes I have to count a stack twice or even three times to be sure I've got it right. After re-counting a third time, I always force myself to move on to the next one.

Helix rises and begins to pace back and forth, which annoys me.

"Can't you go somewhere else?"

He shrugs. "I could."

"Then do so."

"I'm supposed to watch you and learn about you."

I throw back my head and groan. "Tell me which citizen summoned you to this kingdom. I want to have a word with them."

"And then you'll stab them through the chest?"

"Probably."

He laughs, and it shocks me so deeply that my hand jerks and my stack of forty-five coins topples sideways.

"Fuck," I whisper, beginning the process again.

He doesn't speak to me anymore—not in the vault, and not during my inspection of the castle guard in the icy courtyard afterward. During my lunch of thin soup and a slice of bread, taken alone in the royal family's private dining room, he amuses himself by creating finger mustaches on the faces of my relatives, depicted in rows of gloomy paintings throughout the room.

"You're a queen, yet you eat like a pauper," he comments. "Abraxas would think it unforgivable. He loves food—we all do, but from the way he talks, I believe he prefers it to sex." He chuckles as though that is the most ridiculous thing in the world.

"A hearty meal *is* better than sex," I say aloud, and the servant who just refilled my water glass glances at me sharply before hurrying away.

Shit, now she'll repeat that to everyone in the servants' quarters. The mad queen, talking to herself about sex. I massage

my temples, feeling the start of a tension headache.

But Helix ignores my concern, staring at me with disbelief in his eyes. “You think a meal is better than a good fuck?”

“A person can survive without sex, but not without food.”

“Yes, but—ah, this explains it all. You don’t like sex. That’s why you aren’t attracted to me.”

“I never said I don’t like sex. And I already explained that I hate you because you’re Fae. It has nothing to do with your beauty.”

Mistake, oh, that was a mistake—I should never have said those words. *Your beauty?* Oh gods. Why, why did I say that?

Helix saunters closer, a smirk on his ghostly face. “You think I’m beautiful.”

“I acknowledge that some people might think you beautiful, the way some people think spiders or serpents are beautiful. Personally, I’d rather kiss a toad.”

His eyes burn, half offended, half hungry. “I’m sure that can be arranged. Perhaps we’ll have you kiss several toads, until we find you an unexpected prince you can take to bed. I’m beginning to think that’s what you need, little queen—a good hard fuck by a man who knows how to deal with brats.”

My stomach flips at the words. I’ve never been spoken to this way in my life. There were certainly some licentious comments flung in my direction at school, but nothing this bold or challenging, not even when I did take someone to bed. And no one but my parents has ever called me a brat to my face. Helix says the word with a kind of dark relish, like he both hates that quality in me and yearns to stamp it out himself.

“I don’t need to be fucked,” I say in a low voice, lest a servant be hovering nearby.

“Ah, but I think you do.” Helix leans over the back of my chair. I swear I can feel the chill of his ghostly breath in my hair. “You need someone to take you beyond yourself, to seize control of your body and fuck you brainless. You need a man to bend you over and fill you up, to make you crave release so badly you forget your own name. You need someone to stroke

those pretty lips until they open, and then thrust himself into your mouth and pump until you gag—yet you don't protest, because you crave the taste of him. And after he spills his load down your throat, you look up at him, and all you can say, through the tears streaming down your cheeks, is 'May I please have some more?'"

I'm squishing my thighs together as tightly as possible, but quivers of arousal are thrilling along my pussy and I can't stop them.

"Would you like more, Your Majesty?"

I jump, staring blankly at the servant who has approached the table. "I... um, no."

She nods and gathers the empty dishes.

Helix is across the room now, smirking, braiding a lock of his long red hair.

"I'm holding court this afternoon, and I have two meetings," I tell him. "Don't distract me."

"Maybe if you'd been nicer to me today, I would heed that request," he says silkily. "But as it is... I don't think I will."

He doesn't.

He spends the entire afternoon perched on an empty chair in the council room, toying with his nipple piercings while the Aclerian ambassador reports on various trade difficulties. Later he lies full length on the table, amid the city officials gathered for their monthly report to the Crown, and he runs his own hands over his ghostly chest and stomach before cupping himself between the legs and arching his back, groaning like he's having the best orgasm of his life. No one else can hear him, but I can't seem to concentrate on anything, and I can't rebuke him aloud. I end up dismissing the meeting early and fleeing to the throne room—only to see him drifting along the rows of pillars, his red hair flowing around his shoulders like a fiery cloak. Throughout the next few hours he comments on every supplicant's request, and loudly recommends what he calls "the just and fair course of action" in each case.

By the time court is over, I'm ready to murder him.

I can't murder a spirit, so I head straight for Jaik Marleigh's chambers. Normally I wouldn't invade his privacy, but he's off dealing with Wickenwood Fae and I'm desperate. I need more information about the Wild Hunt, about Fae in general. I need a way to get these three ghosts off my back. I can't kill them, but maybe I can destroy them somehow.

A hunt through Marleigh's study reveals far too many tomes about the Fae for me to absorb, so I snatch one promising volume from his desk and take it back to my room.

Helix didn't follow me to Marleigh's rooms, nor does he appear during my brief dinner or my training session. I'd consider it a relief, except I know he's coming back later to show me more harrowing visions.

After the exercise, I freshen up and dress in a clean pair of soft leggings and a black shirt—a better choice for magical travel than my scanty nightdress. I braid my hair as well, since the wind will likely toss and tangle it as we fly tonight.

Dread coils in my belly as I wonder what memories the bastard will show me with that godsdamned staff of his. To distract myself, I curl up in bed and dive into the book about Fae history and habits. It's so much more interesting than Alcinore's *Strategies for Masterful Rulership* that when the clock strikes midnight, it takes me a moment to realize what that means.

Light flares in my room, heating the very walls to incandescence—but I'm ready this time. My bed-curtains are all pushed back, wide open, and when Helix appears in my bedroom doorway, I only jump a little.

The mere sight of his tall, toned body, his crown of antlers, and his glorious red hair ignites all the rage and frustration I felt earlier today. He's *sauntering* across the room, a maddening half-smile on his beautiful fucking face.

"You are a *menace*," I hiss at him, rising grandly from the bed—or rather the movement seemed grand in my head, but the reality is anticlimactic since I have no fine gown, shoes, or crown. Damn it, I'm too short to dominate him, even with my spine straight and my chin lifted.

He looms over me, his antlers casting strange crooked shadows on the ceiling. His eyes are alight, glowing like orange coals.

“You can’t keep doing that,” I tell him stoutly.

“Doing what?” His honeyed tone sends a thrill through my body, and I frown more furiously.

“Distracting me during meetings. You want me to run this country properly, don’t you? How am I supposed to do that with you faking orgasms on the council table?”

“A bit of harmless fun. I can get serious when I need to.”

“Promise you won’t do it again.”

He laughs. “I won’t swear any such thing.”

“You *must not* do it again.”

“You don’t control me, little queen.”

My heartbeat is racing, racing, and my cheeks are flushed—I want to scream. I can’t bear his insolence. I can’t stand not being able to manage this, to *make* him listen to me and obey me—why the *fuck* is he smirking at me like that?

His tongue slips out, pink and glistening, and wets his lips. He smiles wider, sharp canines showing.

And I lose my fucking mind.

I launch myself at him with a screech of fury, beating at his bare golden chest with my fists. I grip his hair and yank it viciously, claw at his eyes, ram the heel of my hand against the underside of his nose. I scratch him, pummel him, throw myself at him over and over in a futile attempt to knock him down—as if pinning him to the ground would be some sort of triumph.

My guards don’t come in. I warned them earlier not to enter, no matter what they heard, unless I specifically called their names. They probably think I’m pleasuring myself. But no, I’m beating myself senseless against a titanic wall of Fae muscle and bone.

Helix fends off a few of my attacks and endures others, but finally he takes me by the shoulders and picks me up, holding me at arm’s length.

“Feel better?” he asks.

“No.” I spit at him.

He glances down at the wet spot on his chest. “That was rude.”

I twist around and clamp my teeth onto one of the long fingers gripping my upper arm.

“Shit!” he barks. “You bratty little bitch!”

I kick him in the crotch. Again.

With a sudden burst of anger he hustles me over to the wall, pushes me against it, and pins me there, my breasts and belly crushed against the plaster. He spreads one big hand over the whole side of my head, shoving my cheek hard against the wall. He moves in, corralling me with his body, his heated skin a threatening furnace at my back.

“Promise you’ll stop tormenting me during meetings, or you’ll get *this* reaction every single night,” I say, panting.

He’s breathing hard. His voice isn’t silken anymore, it’s low and ragged as he says, “I’ll promise nothing. You will learn to behave, because you must. Not because you want to, but because this is about your very survival. Do you understand, mortal? We are your last chance. I’ll grant you, I was petty today—I teased you, only because I wanted to see your reaction—to see if there is anything in your heart besides anger, selfishness, and that obsessive need for control. You didn’t crack a smile. You are a churning mass of anxiety and rage. There is nothing else inside you.”

“You haven’t been inside me,” I gasp, wrenching against his hold. “How would you know?”

He sucks in a startled breath, releases a short laugh. “You’re funny sometimes. I don’t know if you realize it.”

“Few people understand my sense of humor. Mostly they think it’s too dark, or too inappropriate.”

“Very inappropriate, especially considering that I can’t be inside you.” There’s a richness to his voice, a heavy warmth as he speaks near the curve of my ear. I shiver.

He pulls back, his hands falling away from my face and my arm. “There it is again. The shiver of disgust.”

Not disgust. Not this time.

Breathless and flushed, I turn to face him. He has drawn himself up to his full height and he’s eyeing me disdainfully, but I could swear there’s a hint of pain in his eyes. As if I actually hurt his feelings.

Which means I won the fight, after all.



That night, Helix takes me to my boarding school, the Argemont Institute. I’m almost relieved, because as long as we stay in my school memories, I don’t have to fear the worst parts of my past cropping up.

Ever since I was sent there at nine years old, school was a refuge for me—more my home than the palace ever was. When I lived with my parents, I kept trying to win their affection and gain their attention, even though I knew it wouldn’t work. At school, they were far away, so I couldn’t torture myself with pointless effort. Instead, I spent my time securing the loyalty of a tight circle of friends—though perhaps they were only sycophants, after all. I endured their confidences, but never told them any of my deepest secrets. Most of the girls I grew up with left school by the age of twenty or twenty-one, so by the time news of my parents’ death came to me, I was nearly alone, surrounded by younger students. The couple dozen or so who remained from my year were either repeating classes or enduring the monotony and minutia of specialized courses.

I kept my schedule full of such courses, particularly those related to history, math, and governmental structure. Horseback riding or training took up the rest of my time.

Though the last couple years at the Institute were rather dismal, I do have warm memories of the place. Helix and I are

watching my eleven-year-old self in the dining hall, conversing with four other girls whose faces are as familiar to me as my own. The smell of the thickly-breaded, over-salted pork chops they sometimes served us fills my nose, and my mouth actually waters. I used to cut the pork chops into small bits and eat them with the roasted potatoes, which never had enough salt, and together with a few spoonfuls of new peas, it made a delicious meal—one of my favorites.

I glance up at Helix, noting the tightness of his mouth and the hunger in his eyes.

“Can you eat any of the food?” I ask him.

“Not in a memory.”

“So this is torture for you.” I give him a wickedly satisfied smile.

He huffs a short laugh. “You’re so cruel.”

“Just figuring that out now, are you?”

“Tell me who they are.” He points to the girls sitting with me.

“That’s Gloris,” I say. “And that’s Zea, Ikaria, and Chilyn.”

“And how many of them are still your friends?”

My throat tightens. I can’t reply.

“None, then,” Helix says quietly. “Let’s move closer, so we can hear them.”

Garlands of holly and evergreen drape the rafters of the dining hall, and there’s a long table at one side of the room, laden with platters of small iced cakes. Each cake is decorated with bits of sugared fruit and chopped almonds—a traditional Midwinter Glee dessert.

Shit... this is the last day of the first semester. The final meal before the holiday break.

I try to hang back, but Helix pulls me forward.

“I can’t wait to go home!” squeals Zea, clasping her chubby hands. She has a round, rosy face and bright, kind eyes. Of all the girls, she clung to our friendship the longest, and by

the time it was over between us, the light in her eyes had dimmed somewhat.

I did that. I hurt her.

I don't care, I don't. It's her own fault for cozying up to someone like me, for pitying me. I don't need anyone's pity.

"My parents live in the Emdolon Mountains," pipes up Chilyn. "Gloris is coming, too, and we're going sledding down Mount Virurat. Are you sure you don't want to come, too, Lauriel?"

"Sledding?" My eleven-year-old self cracks a mocking laugh. "That's for babies."

The girls are quiet for a moment, and then Zea ventures, "But you are going home this year, aren't you, Lauriel?"

"I've decided not to," says my past self coolly. "My mother is ill, so it will be dreadfully boring. Such a long trip just to mope around the palace for a week or so. Not my idea of a holiday. I'd much rather stay here, where everyone can fuss over me." I giggle, and the other girls join in half-heartedly.

I know what lies behind the smug smile of my younger self—the dark knowledge that I wrote to my parents, begging them to let me come home, and they told me to stay at school. Or rather, they told my father's clerk to write to me. I could always tell when it was the clerk replying, and not one of my parents. My mother's letters were short, scattered, and rare; my father's were long lectures, with a hefty dose of rebuke. The clerk at least tried to be kind.

"You could have spent the holiday with a friend," Helix says. "Why did you refuse the invitation?"

I shrug.

He turns, takes my chin in his hand. "Don't do that. You're a grown woman—analyze your own emotions, your choices."

Angrily I pull away from him and stare at my younger self's downcast face as my friends continue chattering about their Midwinter plans. None of them take any more notice of my mood, except Zea, who keeps casting me anxious little glances.

“I suppose it was pride,” I mutter. “They had to believe staying at school was my choice. I couldn’t bear for them to know the real reason and pity me... or despise me.”

“Despise you?”

“If the king and queen of the land did not want me, there must be a reason, right?” I say bitterly. “Something must be wrong with me. I must not be worth loving. If I told those girls the truth, they would realize they had been fooled into being my friends—that I wasn’t worth the time or effort after all.”

“I’d wager they knew you weren’t wanted at home.”

“They may have suspected, but they didn’t know for sure.”

“So you lied to your friends out of pride, rather than spending a pleasant holiday with one of them.”

“My parents wouldn’t have allowed it anyway. They’d have had to hire extra guards, make travel arrangements—it was easier for them to leave me at school, where there was plenty of security.”

“But you never asked?”

When I don’t respond he says, “Let’s see another midwinter.”

Helix and I are whirled away to an upstairs room—a very fine room, with thick, soft rugs, luxurious furnishings, and glittering candelabra. Silk stockings hang from a half-open drawer, and a large wooden chest, also open, reveals a tumble of finely crafted toys—the emblems of my parents’ affection, or perhaps their obligation.

I’m twelve in this memory, lying facedown on the satin sheets of my beautiful bed, in a room much prettier and richer than any other room at the boarding school—and that’s saying something, since most of the other students were also from wealthy families.

My twelve-year-old self is soaking the pillow with my tears, sobbing my heart out. A letter lies beside me.

Helix advances, peering at the swirling script. A short missive from my mother. I don’t need to read it: I know its

contents by heart. The lines of that letter echo in my soul every day.

Lauriel,

In answer to your last letter... no, I will not be coming to visit during Midwinter Glee. It's rather selfish of you to ask, when you know how much this festival means to me! It's about indulgence and luxury and parties, none of which are affinities we share. I think we'll enjoy it more apart than we would together. Stay in your cozy room at school and enjoy the gifts your father and I sent. Merry Midwinter!

“She couldn't have known how heartless that was,” I whisper. “How cruel.”

Helix looks up, firelight glinting in the gold bands on his antlers. “And if she knew?”

“If she knew...” My hands creep over my heart, clutching the fabric of my shirt into a crumpled knot as the familiar rage rises in me. “If she did, she deserved the end she got.”

“You mentioned that Fae were responsible for your parents' death. What happened?”

My ribcage seems to tighten around my lungs until I can hardly inhale. “Shouldn't you already know?”

He shakes his head. “They give us basic information about our subjects—sometimes more, sometimes less. In your case, we're meant to discover most of it ourselves. Some sort of challenge to prove that we're worthy to—” He hesitates, biting off the end of the sentence.

“Worthy to *what*?” I press. “Why am I a special case? You say someone called you to this kingdom for a reckoning, but I know there's more to it than that. There's something you're not telling me.”

“It concerns me and the other two spirits. Not you.”

“Fine.” I release my grip on my shirt and cross my arms. “Then you'll have to wonder about my parents' fate, unless your staff chooses to show us that memory.”

Helix's jaw tightens, a muscle flexing at his temple, but before he can say anything else, someone enters the room. It's

Bretta, a woman who served as maid and nurse to me during my first few at school.”

“Oh, Princess,” she says gently, sitting on the edge of the bed where my twelve-year-old self is sobbing. “I’m so sorry.” Her hand floats just above my back, as if she wants to rub it but she’s afraid to. The reason becomes apparent when my former self springs up and scoots away as if she threatened me with fire. My young face is tear-stained, my black hair tousled.

“Sorry?” I screech at her. “I don’t accept *pity* from the likes of you. Get out!”

Bretta stays put, and though her features tighten, her eyes remain soft. “You’re hurting. I was hurt too, as a child. Sometimes the best thing you can do is talk about it to someone who understands.”

“You *don’t* understand,” young Lauriel exclaims. “You could never understand. Go away, or I’ll call the guards and have you locked up. Get out, get out, get out!” I fling pillow after pillow at Bretta as she rises and hurries from the room.

I stand there, staring at the red, twisted, tear-slicked face of my child-self. I remember that moment, but I’ve never seen it from this perspective—never thought about it from Bretta’s point-of-view.

“You were treated cruelly by your parents,” Helix says in a low voice. “And you had every right to be angry. But you turned your rage against the wrong people, despising everyone who showed you kindness. Pushing them away, in your pain and pride.”

“How could I model anything but cruelty, when even the kindness of others came at a price?” I respond in a choked voice. “I could never trust that anyone was treating me kindly out of pure goodness. They usually wanted something—money, popularity, esteem, a connection to the Crown.”

“But that woman had nothing to gain from the kindness.” Helix points to the door by which Bretta left. “Her motives were pure and compassionate. Yet still you rejected her.”

“I wanted to be left alone,” I whisper, my voice barely audible as my past self lunges from the bed, seizes the toys from

the toy chest, and begins flinging them against the walls, smashing them one after another.

Helix takes my hand and we whirl away.

His staff carries us back to the present, to my bedroom. When our feet touch the rug, I try to jerk my hand from his, but he holds my fingers firmly. “I hope you learned something tonight.”

“What, exactly, was I supposed to learn?”

Still gripping my fingers, he takes my face in his other hand. “That you are a cruel, vindictive person. You could not control the wickedness of others, but you *could* control how much you let it shape you. You could have tried to be kind, to be a better person than your parents, but instead you chose meanness and anger, even toward those who meant well. You blame your family for what you have become—for the torment of anger in your heart—but they are not the only ones at fault. You *chose* to become this person.”

Something cracks inside me—a dark crust hardened over a bleeding truth that I’ve always known. Helix’s words shatter that crust, and the truth is laid bare, raw and undeniable. He isn’t saying I am to blame for what I endured, but he’s saying I could have reacted differently. I could have been angry—rightly so—and yet tried to be kinder. Tried to be *better*.

But how can you be compassionate when your heart is bruised? How can you summon the energy for kindness when your soul is empty and you have nothing left?

I didn’t have the heart to be kind, so I chose anger, because anger is strength. Anger is never letting someone else mistreat you again, never letting them have the power to hurt you. When I’m angry, I don’t think about fear or pain. The anger is a bright furnace, a roaring heat that devours all other emotions and sensations.

“You’re one to fucking talk.” The words seep through my gritted teeth. “What do you know of kindness? More importantly, what do you know of disappointment, of despair, of a hurt so deep that violence and rage feels like the only relief?”

Helix goes utterly still, every part of his body rigid, transfixed. He stares at me as if something in him has shattered too—as if some cosmic realization has exploded through his soul and he has been pierced by a thousand shards.

“Do you know how we become *this*?” he says through tense lips. “How a Fae turns into a ghost rider for the Wild Hunt? It’s not a reward... oh no. This is a punishment reserved for Fae who were especially despicable in their lifetime.”

His hand slides from my jaw to my neck, and I stay perfectly still, like a small creature of the forest sensing the waking of a predator. I am transfixed, trapped—hanging on the edge of his words, sensing my own impending ruin.

“I’ve killed everyone I’ve ever fucked,” he says softly.



Lauriel stares at me, half-horrified, half-intrigued.

I lick my lips and continue. “It’s true. I’ve murdered every sexual partner I’ve ever had. I always felt stripped raw during sex, like my very soul was naked, and I couldn’t let anyone live after they’d seen me that vulnerable.”

She swallows, her slender throat working under my hand. Her eyes narrow slightly, as if she doesn’t quite believe me. As if she’s pushing me to explain further.

“Fine... there’s more to it than that.” Gently I stroke the column of her neck. “I always felt misshapen inside, half-made, as if something I should have been born with wasn’t there. It wasn’t the usual apathy or careless cruelty of the Unseelie—this was something else, something worse. I’d go for years without feeling attracted to anyone, and then one day I’d see a beautiful Fae woman and become fascinated with her. I’d watch her for a while, dissecting her personality, identifying precisely which qualities drew me in. Then I would make contact. I would be charming, kind, and clever, with just enough of an edge to keep her interested. The women could sense I had a unique kind of darkness, and that would only make me more irresistible. I lured them in every time.”

I move my hand back up to Lauriel's chin, brushing the pad of my thumb over her soft lips. Her breath puffs against my skin in warm, quick bursts. She's almost panicking, but not quite. Not yet.

"With each new prospect, I was convinced she was the one I'd been looking for," I continue. "The one who could give me the sharpest, clearest heights of pleasure—and beyond that, the one with whom I'd feel whole. The one who could step into the jagged emptiness of my heart and fill that space perfectly and completely, because she was made for me, destined for me."

Lauriel's pupils are dilated, her eyes bigger and darker than ever. Her pale skin has gone whiter than usual. She is listening with every fiber of her being.

I shift my other hand to hers and I trace my fingertips lightly across her palm.

"Then we would fuck," I whisper. "As my climax hit, I would know, with the keenest pang of despair and anger, that she wasn't the one. Nothing latched into place—I wasn't carried beyond myself into the farthest realms of bliss—I did not heal inside. Still broken, still unsatisfied, I would roar my pain aloud. Sometimes I would weep. And after witnessing my fractures, after seeing me unravel, after failing me so deeply, the female I fucked could not be allowed to live."

I'm caressing her wrist now, feeling her rapid pulse through the thin skin.

"I killed a hundred and sixty-three Fae women before one of my victims' brothers managed to end me," I say. "And when I faded, instead of finding the Realm of Peace, I was given over to the Wild Hunt. Since then, I've paid for my sins. I've wandered endless realms as a ghost rider, witnessed the worst miseries and travesties any of the universe's beings can concoct. I've been forced to learn a new way of thinking. I've been remade slowly, taught to recognize that what I considered a failing in others was really a failing in *me*, a deeply-rooted flaw in the way I, as a male, viewed females. I should never have expected them to fix me."

"So you're enlightened now," she says caustically.

“Maybe. We shall see. I think, as you’ve pointed out, I’ve gained comprehension but not compassion. When it comes to real empathy—that, I have not yet achieved.”

“And you told me all this, why?” she snaps. “You think we’re alike somehow? You, the serial killer, a condemned ghost, and me, with my anger?”

“You’re a murderer, too.”

Terror springs into her eyes—terror, and guilt. “It’s not the same thing.”

“The blood of the Revallen Fae is on your hands.”

“It’s justice,” she blurts out. “For what they did. To my parents, to people I loved—” Her voice cracks.

I’m about to push farther, but something tells me to back off. To let her consider what she has seen and heard tonight. Perhaps, after all this time, I have learned some wisdom.

“I’ll leave you now,” I tell her. “You don’t want me here, and I may as well take advantage of my hours of physicality.”

“Don’t fuck anyone,” she says quickly.

A smile twists my lips. “Luckily I’m only attracted to one woman at a time. No, Majesty, I’ll find a quiet place in which to indulge in a wicked fantasy or two, alone.”

“And who is the subject of these fantasies?” she asks, in a strangled voice.

I release her neck, my fingertips brushing across her breast as my hand falls to my side. My lashes lower as I look intently, significantly into her eyes.

Her gaze flares with realization, and two bright spots of color flame in her cheeks.

And then I vanish from her presence.



The moment I vanish from the Queen’s bedroom, I shift to ghost form and summon my horse to carry me to the spirit realm. For the most part, it is a chaotic void, crisscrossed by stormy tunnels of cloud that take our Hunt from one realm to the next. As riders, we are not usually allowed to rest or remain in one place—but when we are actively pursuing a subject with such high stakes as this one, we are given a sort of meeting spot—a hub where we can gather to strategize. For all three of us, this is our thousandth task, and so we’ve been permitted a building I call the Hovel—a one-room structure perched on a billowing cloud, in the middle of endless whirling galaxies, collapsing stars, streaking comets, and writhing shadows.

I can sense the great army of the Wild Hunt, galloping somewhere far away, toward a distant realm. But here in the Hovel, Paemon and Abraxas have been awaiting my return. Abraxas is playing a guessing game, apparently with himself, since Paemon steadfastly refuses to participate in any amusement that doesn’t directly involve our task.

“You’re back!” shouts Abraxas, leaping up. Paemon’s only sign of interest is pushing himself upright, away from the wall against which he was leaning. Not that he has to lean against anything in spirit form, but habits are difficult to break, even after centuries.

“Tell us everything,” Paemon demands in his sibilant voice.

They have as much riding on this as I do, and we must work together if we’re to save the girl and ourselves. So I give them both an update, as I did last night.

“You were too hard on her,” says Abraxas, frowning.

“On the contrary,” Paemon replies. “I think he has made excellent progress.”

“I’m going back to enjoy the rest of my physical hours,” I tell them. “Last night I took food from the palace kitchens, but tonight I think I’ll go elsewhere for a meal.”

“You’re going to *eat*?” Abraxas groans. “Fuck, I want a hearty meal so badly. Do you think if I went to the Queen, she would order me some food?”

“Did she let you enjoy the bath last night?”

“Well, no, but...”

“There’s your answer.” I stretch, cracking my neck and shaking out my shoulders. “I don’t think she’s one to grant favors. She gave me quite the beating earlier.”

“That’s because you’re an asshole,” says Paemon quietly.

“True. An asshole, a murderer, a fucking all-around wretch.”

“As we all are.” Abraxas lifts a fist as if he’s making a toast.

“To assholes and second chances,” I say, balling my own fist and knocking it against his. His knuckles are cool and misty to the touch, but in this spirit realm there is substance to them. “Come, Paemon—for luck.”

He hisses faintly at me, but then he curls his hideously long, clawed fingers into a sort-of fist and bumps his knuckles with mine and Brax’s.

“Has she had enough time to think?” Brax says. “I’d like to pay her a visit.”

I move past him to the only piece of furniture in the Hovel—a small table, on which two devices stand. One is a clock from the human world, to help us keep track of how much time is passing in our subject’s realm. The other is a large, glossy orb, filled with swirling black smoke. After looking at the clock I’m about to reply to Abraxas—but then I bend, peering into the orb.

I wasn’t imagining it. There’s a thread of golden light undulating through the black smoke.

“So you *did* accomplish something.” Abraxas leans past me, peering at the orb. “Fuck yes.”

“Don’t do anything to ruin it,” I warn him.

“When have I ever ruined anything?” He gives me a wink and claps my shoulder. Despite the smokiness of his hand, I can feel how big and powerful it is—bigger than mine, though we’re about the same size physically. He’s slightly broader in the chest and shoulders.

Paemon is taller than both of us, with a languid elegance Brax could never dream of possessing. Whenever we’re in the Hovel together, I find myself watching the way Paemon moves, the sway of his hips, and the floating glory of his long purple hair. There are threads of silvery-white in that hair, and I’m tempted to sink my fingers in, seek out the pale strands, and separate them from the others.

Fuck, I’m staring at him. And he’s watching me, his eyes slitted with suspicion.

“I’m off,” I say abruptly and duck back outside to mount my horse, Enbarr, who’s pawing at a bit of cloud, waiting for me. I need her in order to ride between realms, but once I’m back in my subject’s realm, I dismiss my horse. Here in the mortal world, I can transport myself to various places, as long as they’re not too far from Lauriel’s location.

For the site of tonight’s carnal indulgence, I choose an inn on the outskirts of the capital city. I appear in the pre-dawn darkness of the inn’s rear yard, with only a three-legged dog and a half-insensate drunk as my witnesses.

The inn appears to be closed, but doors are not a problem for me—I can either unlock them with magic or pass right through them. I phase into spirit form and pass through the wall of the house, regaining physical form once I’m inside the empty kitchen. A few coals are still glowing in the fireplace, but otherwise the room is deserted. Opening the pantry door, I ignite a small orb for light.

A covered dish sits on a shelf in the cool shadow. It looks promising, and when I lift the lid, there’s half a cold ham-and-potato pie, well-peppered. I fetch a fork and devour most of it before digging into a small jar of fruit jam. I help myself to a wedge of cheese, too, and snag a bottle of ale for the road. I don’t feel guilty about not paying for the food—after all, if my

work in Revallen succeeds, these people will have a far better queen. Sating my appetite is the least these people can do in return for my efforts on their behalf.

Perhaps that's selfish of me. I ponder it for a moment, searching my heart for empathy. Finding none, I shrug and walk out of the kitchen, down the hall to the back door. I can't bring the bottle of ale and the cheese through the door in ghost form, so I unlock it and stride off toward the barn. At least it will be warm there, even if it smells. I've pleased myself in worse places. I'll climb up to the loft and find a place to enjoy my cheese, my ale, and my cock until dawn.

The barn is exactly what I expected it to be—rank-smelling, steamy with the warmth of the animals. But once I climb the ladder to the loft, there's a sweetness to the hay that's not unpleasant. I shake out a cloak I took from a peg by the barn door and lay it down, partly draping the hay and partly covering the floor. I settle back against my makeshift throne and take a long swig from the bottle.

Tomorrow will be my last day with Lauriel, and that night we'll face her worst memories—the ones she doesn't want to relive. My staff hasn't given me a clear picture of them, but I have a sense of their heaviness, their importance. I can't help wondering how she'll react. There's an expression she gets sometimes that I particularly like—a tightness of her delicate features, a primming of her small plump mouth, a fierce yet haunted look in those big dark eyes. I like it when she's concentrating, too—thick lashes drooping over her eyes—that sharp, determined, lovely little face—and that abundance of glossy ebony hair. I love it even more when she's utterly feral with rage, when the blood flushes her cheeks and her chest, right above the swells of those perfect breasts...

Grimly I cork the bottle. I intended to drink more deeply, but thinking of the Queen has sent desire pounding through my blood, and I need relief. Last night I was painfully hard for hours, and when I got a little time alone I jerked my cock frantically, desperate to come for the first time in centuries. There was a brief sensation of pleasure, but nothing truly satisfying, and I ended up more frustrated than sated. But

tonight I plan to indulge more slowly and deeply. Perhaps that will make a difference in the end result.

Placing my refreshments nearby, I unlace my pants and let my cock pop out. It's long and thick, exactly as I remember it. Like Paemon and Abraxas, I chose to take on the same form I once possessed, with a few minor embellishments. There's a small gold bar through the sensitive area just beneath my cock, and when I flick it, a groan of pleasure rolls through my chest. I made my choice well.

Nocturis, leader of our squadron, gave me a strange look when I requested the piercings, but he didn't object. He's probably had many odd requests from hunters on their Final Task. Nocturis operates under Cernunnos, who in turn reports directly to Andregh, god of balance, the god-star who originally established the Wild Hunt. Oddly enough, he is also the god whose worship is most prevalent in Revallen. I wonder if the Queen worships him too. I doubt it. She doesn't seem like the type to worship anything but herself.

Gods, I'd love to see her worship me. My fingers are a poor substitute for her pretty red mouth sliding along my cock.

I think I've scented arousal on her a few times, but I can't be sure. Other strong emotions can overpower such delicate fragrances, and with her, the primary scent is the harsh spice and unrelenting heat of her anger, mixed with the scent of pomegranates and oranges. There's another layer of scent, too—the oil she uses to polish her blades, and the vanilla soap that washes the sweat of training from her body. I focus on my memory of her scent, blocking out the reek of the barn, as my body tenses and my hand strokes faster, faster.

I can see Lauriel staring at me, a furious challenge. I picture the shape of her breasts beneath the thin nightdress, the glossy waves of her black hair, the indignant gleam of her dark eyes, the flash of white teeth between her scarlet lips as she argues with me. The way she pummeled me, tore at me, bit me—ahh—the graze of her nails, the indomitable force of her small, lithe body—fuck, I'm coming.

I angle my hips so the streams of cum fly across the hay. There's so much of it, more than last night. As the pleasure

washes over me, I groan aloud. It's good, but not intense. Mild relief, but not true satisfaction.

My fists clench, and I nearly weep because it's not enough. My body and my mind have fixated on Lauriel. I need *her*.

I can't have her. What if I yielded to my old habits and tore open her throat afterward? All would be lost—for this kingdom, for Lauriel, for me and for my two fellow hunters.

Limp and despairing, I lie on the cloak and stare up at the rafters of the barn. "I want you," I whisper, and to my shame, two hot tears of frustration escape my eyes. "I want you, you beautiful little brat. I want you so badly I can hardly breathe."

Not bothering to refasten my pants, I yank the cork out of my bottle of ale and gulp as much as I can without taking a breath. A gasp lurches out of me at the burn of the liquor—this body isn't used to it.

Which means I'll be drunk faster.

I grin, and lift the bottle to my mouth again.



My brain won't let me sleep. It churns through what I witnessed tonight, over and over, replaying Helix's words in my head like an endless refrain.

At last I toss off my sheets, lift my rear, and work my leggings down over my hips until I have full access to my pussy. I don't bother with the cock-toy tonight; my fingers will do. I'm in a heated state already, and I need to relax.

I start with long strokes up my slit, gliding through my own wetness. Then I circle slowly, tantalizing my folds, before I finally touch the little bud at the top.

This is the moment when I usually picture some strapping guard, or one of the lean, pretty, languid boys back at school.

But I can't picture any face besides the handsome one I've seen all day—the arched lips, twisted up in a mocking smile—the long dark lashes dipping over orange eyes, the magnificent flowing mane of scarlet curls. The satin-smooth, golden tan of his skin, the tiny bars through his tight nipples, the veins and bones of his big warrior's hands—his wrists, forearms—oh gods

This is wrong. So wrong—I shouldn't be picturing Helix while I do this—he'd be so pleased about it—he'd grin, and lean in with a heated softness in his eyes and mockery in his mouth—I can picture him watching me, and I—oh—

“Fuck you, you stupid ghost,” I gasp, and I come on my fingers, my thighs clamping tightly together while I writhe and whimper.

The curtains at the end of my bed rip apart, and a huge figure fills the space. Light floods the room behind him.

I squeal faintly, whipping the sheet over myself.

It's not Helix—this figure has dark skin and short hair, partly shaved up the left side of his skull, with white locks tumbling over his right eye. His red rams' horns gleam as he pushes the curtains wider.

“Abraxas!” I gasp. “Why do you keep showing up when I'm naked?”

“Happy accident?” He grins. “I'm glad you're not asleep yet.”

“If I had been, you'd have woken me. And I hate being woken. I get little enough sleep as it is.”

He sits down on the end of my bed with a deep, sympathetic chuckle. He untucks the sheets and blankets, reaches beneath them, and seizes one of my bare feet, pulling it into view and beginning to massage it. I almost yell at him to stop, but then I forget to, because the warmth of his huge hands feels amazing. He seems to know exactly where to press to ease every bit of soreness from walking around in high heels all day.

“When I was alive and I couldn't sleep, I'd have a midnight snack,” he says. “We're far past midnight, but I'm sure your servants would bring you something if you asked.”

“They would,” I say reluctantly. “But I've had dinner.”

“What did you eat?”

“A small bowl of porridge and some tea.”

“Fuck, that's not enough food to keep a bird alive, let alone a busy queen.”

“It’s enough for me. Besides, I’m one person. There’s no need for the kitchen to cook up fancy meals just for me.”

Abraxas laughs, and the sound is so warm, so genuine, I almost smile. “Most royals have the exact opposite approach,” he says. “I think in this one area you can be a little selfish.”

“I’m sure the royal chef would perish from delight if I asked him to cook me a full meal,” I admit.

“There you have it! Let’s ring the kitchen now and ask for something!”

“But they’ll all be in bed!”

He nods, approval shining in his crimson eyes as he puts down my left foot and starts rubbing my right one. “Thoughtfulness. Very good. Tell me, how often do you summon them in the night?”

“Never.”

“Exactly. Just this once, I think it will be all right to ask for something. Not a feast, mind you—whatever they can send up quickly.”

“Wait a minute.” I narrow my eyes at him. “You want me to send for food so *you* can eat it.”

A boisterous laugh shakes his shoulders. “No, little queen. I want the food so we *both* can eat it.” He lifts my foot higher, then bends low to kiss my toes. A tiny thrill of pleasure runs through me at the touch of his mouth. He has thick, luscious lips, and they look so smooth and soft—I wish he’d kiss my foot again. Maybe even suck one of my toes. I’ve never wanted anyone to do that before.

“Fine,” I murmur, pulling my foot away reluctantly. Under the sheet I adjust my clothes, and Abraxas doesn’t mention it, though I’m fairly sure he knows exactly what I was doing when he showed up.

I ring the kitchen bell, and within a handful of minutes a sleepy-looking maid hurries into my bedroom. Abraxas stands behind me in spirit form while I request the food. “Ask for some wine,” he adds. “And make sure whatever food they bring is

more savory, less sweet. We want it to fill your belly, not keep you awake.”

I manage to restrain my glare until the maid has hurried off again, and then I turn to Abraxas. “I *hate* it when you talk to me when no one else can see or hear you.”

“Would you prefer me to stay corporeal?” He winks. “Might cause a few questions.”

“Of course not!” I sweep past him with my most regal air. When I’m alone, I usually sit in my favorite armchair and eat off a tray, but since I’m dining with someone else, the arrangements should probably be more formal. I pull back the curtains concealing the breakfast nook and begin moving stacks of papers off the table.

Abraxas clears his throat. “What are you doing?”

“Preparing this area for the meal.”

His joyful laugh rings out again, and I panic, rushing over to him and reaching up to press my thin fingers over his mouth. “Hush! The guards will hear you!”

His lips part, and one of my fingertips slips between them. Gently he takes my wrist in his huge hand and moves it from his mouth. “We’re not eating at a table in the breakfast room, love.”

“We’re not?”

“No. We’re eating in your room, on the floor by the fireplace. Come on.”

Before I can protest, he crouches, wraps both arms around my thighs, and lifts me straight up off the floor. I gasp and hammer my fists against his shoulder, but it’s like pebbles bouncing off a whale.

When I’m bound by his arms like this, the brutal strength of his body is terrifying. But he’s so damn *gentle* with me—a stark contrast to Helix’s bruising grip. I forget to keep hitting him, and when he sets me down on the thick rug near the hearth, I stay put. He stirs up the fire with a twitch of his fingers, then tosses a couple pillows from the bed to the rug.

He eases his bulk into a sitting position across from me and smiles, as if he and I have always been the best of friends.

“I like you better than Helix,” I say suddenly, without meaning to.

His eyes turn molten. “Luckily for both of us, it’s almost my turn. One more night with Helix, and then you’re mine.”

Why am I so wildly aroused again? My underwear is slippery, and I don’t like the feeling. It makes my skin crawl.

“I’m just going to—freshen up,” I say breathlessly, and I bolt for the bathroom. Once inside, I take off the soaked underwear and tuck it into the basket where I place clothes that need laundering. I dry myself thoroughly and then pull the leggings back on. There. I’m nice and dry now, and no giant ghost Fae is going to make me wet again.

When I return, the maid is already standing in my room, holding a heavily laden tray.

“Set it down there.” I point to the rug where Abraxas is lounging in his smoky ghost form. “And then go get some sleep.”

“Thank you, Majesty. Oh, and the chef sends his compliments and his gratitude. He was thrilled to warm and garnish these portions for you, and hopes you will do him the honor of letting him prepare more dishes for you in the future.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. I haven’t tasted any of it yet. You’re dismissed.”

“And thank you,” whispers Abraxas.

My teeth clamp shut, refusing to let the words out at first, but I manage to force them through. “Thank you.”

My maid looks surprised. “My pleasure, Your Majesty. Since you’re having difficulty sleeping, shall I tell the others to wake you later than usual?”

“I have meetings—obligations—”

“I can ask Kratchet to reschedule them for you.”

“Say yes,” Abraxas urges.

“I suppose, just this once...”

“Yes, my lady. Wonderful.” She bobs a curtsy. “Enjoy your meal, and may you rest well.”

When she leaves, I turn back toward the fireplace, feeling rather stunned.

Abraxas has already uncovered a plate of roast chicken and is sinking his teeth through the crispy, browned skin. “See what happens when you respect those who serve you,” he says through a mouthful of white meat.

“I suppose.” I plop down onto one of the pillows. “I’m beginning to think you’re a bad influence. You’ll turn me into a lazy slob who snacks in the wee hours, sleeps until noon, and never gets anything done.”

“Nonsense.” He pops a grape into his mouth. “You’ll be well-fed and better rested by the time I’m done with you. Nothing wrong with enjoying a little carnal pleasure, especially if you’re giving your body what it needs. You’ll be a kinder ruler with a full belly and several hours of sleep.”

“What if I don’t want to be kinder?” I ask, accepting the chicken leg he hands me. “What if I don’t care what these people think of me? I simply want to accomplish what must be done. Their feelings about it don’t matter.”

He shakes his head, but he only says, “Take a bite.”

It’s been ages since I ate any meat or poultry. I have to admit it smells divine.

Slowly I bite through the crackling skin into the juicy chicken. Flavor fills my mouth—rich, delicious, warm.

“Oh shit,” I murmur, chewing slowly. “Oh my gods.”

“This next.” Abraxas picks up a thin slice of cold, salted roast beef.

“Wait,” I moan, taking another bite of the juicy chicken. “Just wait.”

“Damn, woman,” he says, eyes twinkling. “Watching you eat is fucking hot.”

And then it happens.

I feel my lips stretching, widening. My mouth is still full so I take care not to show my teeth—but it's a smile.

I've smiled many times since my parents' death—usually in derision or mockery. But this smile is pure and warm, and I forgot how it felt, to smile like that.

“*There you are,*” Abraxas says quietly, with an answering smile.

He doesn't explain what he means by that, or overload my weary mind with any more talk of kindness and morals and such. For the next half hour he plies me with creamy cheese, flavorful nuts, and tender meat. I'm not even sure when we transition from me feeding myself to him placing the bits of food between my lips.

He's been partaking heavily of the wine, and as I lean back, pressing my hand to my full stomach, he reaches a brimming cup toward me. “Have some of this. It's delicious.”

“Maybe a little.” As I reach to take the cup, he lets go a second too soon, and red wine splashes down my front, soaking me from collarbones to thighs.

“Shit!” I stare at my dripping hands and wet clothes. “What is wrong with you? Clumsy oaf!”

“Apologies, Majesty.” But he's obviously trying not to laugh.

“It's not funny.”

“It's a little funny.”

“Here, spill something on me.” He gestures to his broad chest. “You'll feel better, trust me.”

He probably thinks I won't do it. But I pick up a clump of discarded chicken bones with gristle still clinging to them, and I hurl them right at him. They strike his chest, leaving a greasy smear before tumbling into his lap.

He chucks a grape at my knee. I take a strawberry and smash it onto his left pectoral, smearing the glistening red fruit over the rich brown of his skin.

“You little—” He dives for the bowl that once held some of the chef’s best soup, and flicks the last drops at me.

“Bastard!” I fling a piece of cheese and crow with triumph when it hits him on the nose.

“Enough,” he rumbles, and lunges forward, tossing me over his shoulder again as he rises from our picnic. “Time to clean you up.”

“No!” I twist and kick at him. “I can clean up on my own.”

“Unlikely. Queens usually have maids to help them bathe and dress, don’t they? Think of me as your maid.”

The contrast of his words with his deep, rich, male voice makes me gasp a laugh even as I shudder with fascinated delight at the way his voice *felt*, vibrating through his body into mine.

He totes me into the bathroom, lighting the lamps as we enter. With my body still slung casually over his shoulder, he adjusts the levers for the hot water. I set my elbows on his shoulder and prop my chin in my hands, resigned to waiting.

When the temperature pleases him, he sets me down and inspects himself. “I’m a mess, too. I guess we’ll both have to bathe.”

“This was your plan all along,” I accuse him. “You act nicer than Helix, but you’re sneakier. What were you in your previous life? A con artist?”

He’s still smiling, but something changes in his eyes. “A butcher.”

“Of animals?” But my heart is already sinking, already suspecting the answer.

“Of people. Fae, human, it didn’t matter. Mostly Fae. There was a war, you see, and I took great pleasure in being the brawler, the berserker, the dealer of death. I used to laugh as I hacked limbs from bodies. I would return to camp covered in splashes of blood from the wounds of a hundred men, and my servants would have a warm meal, a pretty woman, and a hot bath ready for me.”

With a glance at the steaming bathwater, I shrink back a step, and he nods, as if he expected the recoil. “You should fear

me. I could pluck your limbs off as easily as one might pull a feather from a bird.”

“But you can’t kill me,” I breathe. “Because I’m your task. Your mission.”

He nods. “That’s true. And I only killed in battle, even during my lifetime. I would never harm a defenseless human unless we were actively at war.”

“Not even a bitch-queen like me?” I vent a dry laugh. “I’m sort of at war with the Fae. I’ve given orders for them to be driven from this land and killed if they resist.”

“Maybe you deserve death. But I believe everyone should have a chance to change.” His deep voice is tender, almost mournful. “I myself have changed. Why should I steal that opportunity from others?”

Maybe it’s exhaustion, or the fact that my brain has had far too many things stuffed into it today, but I can’t find coherent words to reply.

When I don’t answer, Abraxas moves in, his fingers finding my waist and gathering up the wine-wet folds of fabric. He lifts the shirt, drawing it up over my head, and I don’t protest, even though I’m wearing no corset underneath.

Next he sinks to one knee and pulls down my leggings, baring my pussy to his view. As I step out of the leggings I notice a muscle along his massive jaw twitching. It must be hard to restrain himself, especially after so many centuries of incorporeal existence. Especially when he could do anything he likes to me, easily.

“I’ll join you in the bath, if you consent,” he says, low.

This is dangerous. He is Fae, one of the creatures I hate. He uses magic, which I despise as unfair and unnatural. I should reject him... and yet he has softened me by massaging my feet, feeding me, making me smile. Every part of my weary body wants to be against him—I want to drape myself across the expanse of his bulk and draw energy from his strength. I want him to fling me around like a doll, use me...

I pull those thoughts to a halt. I need to decide, and I know that if I let him join me in the bath, I'm consenting to more than a quick cleanup after our food fight.

I don't like taking men to bed, in part because of the possible complications—but in Brax's case, there won't be complications. He'll be gone in a week or so.

And he's not one of the rogue Fae of this land—he's something else. So perhaps, just this once, I could make an exception.

"Get in," I tell him austerely.

"As you wish." He starts unlacing his pants, and I hold my breath, because I desperately want to see his cock and yet I think I might faint if I do.

When his length bobs free, I nearly gasp.

Gods-shit. It's fucking enormous. I'm not sure all of that would even fit inside me. It swings heavily as Abraxas climbs into the tub, and I catch a glimpse of his huge balls as well.

"Scared?" he says bluntly, with humor in his eyes.

"No," I snap. "Just wondering how you walk around with that thing."

"It's easy enough when there are no beautiful, feral women around to tempt me."

"Feral?" I snort. "I am a queen."

He laughs, then releases a deep hum of satisfaction as he scoops hot water over his chest, cleaning off the food I threw at him.

"Come in here." He reaches for me. I don't want to wash my hair again, so I pause to bundle it on top of my head. Then I hold his hand briefly as I climb into the tub.

He's immense, and his legs take up more space than I thought. I consider sitting at the opposite end of the tub, but in a fit of recklessness I settle my bottom between his thighs, with my back toward his chest. The underside of his cock rubs against my spine.

We're both conscious of it, but he doesn't speak as he picks up a bar of soap and slides it across my shoulder blades. "Breathe, love," he murmurs. "There's so much tension in these pretty shoulders. Let it slip away."

The glossy glide of the soap relaxes me, but after a few seconds, he sets it aside and begins to massage the muscles of my back and neck. Relief trickles through me like honey, a slow melting sensation that's so seductive I don't protest when his big hands slide beneath my arms, over both my breasts at once. He slicks them with soapy water, rubs them over and over, squeezes them gently.

"You've got a beautiful pair of tits." His hands slide lower, stroking along my waist under the water.

One large hand dives between my legs, and I jerk with surprise at the delicious power of the fingers cupping my pussy. There's no scrape of claws—he must have withdrawn or vanished them.

"What are you doing?" I whisper, but I'm already leaning back against his chest, angling my hips to give him better access.

"I'm fucking you with my hand, love. Just like you want me to." He pokes one finger inside me, then a second, finding the slippery wetness deep within, where the bathwater hasn't washed it away.

He's *stroking* the inside of me—massaging my inner walls, sinking deeper and then curling his fingers. The unfamiliar flexion in my belly, along with the pressure on my clit from the heel of his hand, is making me squirm. I begin a soft moan—and then I bite it back, embarrassed, angry with myself.

"Don't hold it in, love," growls Abraxas. "Make those sweet sounds."

His two central fingers continue stroking inside me while the heel of his hand grinds over my clit. After a moment he eases out of me and begins to massage my pussy, working round and round with just enough firm pressure. His fingertips shift to my clit, and instead of playing with it tentatively, he palpates it for a moment, like he's getting a sense of its size and shape—

and then he begins to wiggle it with his fingertips, lightning quick, a hectic rhythm that sends the water into a splashing frenzy. I release a little moan of surprise, because it's as if he took my latent arousal and lured it right to the forefront—dragged me mercilessly, expertly, right to the edge of an orgasm before I realized it was happening.

And then he grabs my hips, lifting me up, over his cock. I tense, but he doesn't push inside me—instead, he pulls me back and sits me in his lap with his cock poking up between my thighs, right against my pussy.

He places one huge hand on each of my thighs, pinning them tightly together, and then lifts me bodily, easily, moving me up and down so that his cock rubs through the tiny opening between my thighs. He's using my thighs to stroke himself, and I love it. I love the gigantic power of him, the fact that he can use me like this so effortlessly. My breasts bounce each time he lowers me back down to his lap—water is sloshing out of the tub—neither of us care as he fucks himself between my thighs, faster and faster.

“Shit,” I half-sob as his length surges against my pussy. I'm gripping his arms as he lifts me up and down, clinging for dear life. “Shit—oh fuck—” I throw my head back and come, my pussy trembling against the thrusting bulk of his cock.

I glance back down just as he bucks upward, and his cum spurts out, a thick white fountain that splashes my cheeks, my lips, my breasts.

A thunderous groan rolls from him, and he jolts underneath me, shoving his cock up through the tunnel of my thighs one more time. His dick is so long that a good portion of it sticks up past my legs. I stare at the plump, dark head of it, coated in creamy white.

“Did I get some on you, love?” He scoops water in his palm and rinses my face and chest.

I'm too breathless to tell him I don't mind being covered with his cum.

Heaving a satisfied sigh, he ducks his head to kiss my shoulder. “That was fucking divine, love. Usually I'd make you

come again, but since it's nearly dawn, I need to get you tucked in bed before I leave."

Quickly he rinses both of us before lifting me out of the tub. He towels me down, then rubs a fluffy towel over his gorgeous body as well.

I watch him, mesmerized by the flex of his muscles, by the magnificent lines of his body, by the woven black lines of the tattoos against his brown skin.

At last he finishes drying himself and wraps another towel around me before propelling me out the bathroom door into my bedroom.

"I've never been treated like this," I tell him.

There's a laugh in his voice. "Like a fuck-toy?"

That's not what I meant at all. I meant the massage, the food, the kindness, the care...

"I won't allow it again," I say haughtily.

"Of course not." He whips the towel off my naked body, scoops me up, and tucks me into the sheets. I could fight him, of course. Not that it would do much good, but I could resist on principle. Strange that with Abraxas, I don't feel nearly as angry or inclined to fight as I do with Helix. So I let him settle me on the pillows and cover me up.

"Sleep well, love." Abraxas bends and presses a warm kiss to my forehead. He dims the lights in the room, and then he's gone.

I have never felt so relaxed. Sleep settles heavily over my eyelids, but my last conscious thought is of that tender kiss.

I almost wish he had stayed.



Helix appears late the next morning as my maids are hastily applying cosmetics to my face. He drifts into my room *through* the full-length mirror beside the dressing table, his antlers and limbs streaming shadows and mist.

“Sleep is a fucking waste of time,” I bite out.

It’s intended for him, but my maid Arin says soothingly, “Now then, Your Majesty—it’s good to take some time for rest. You’ve been working yourself too hard.”

“That’s what a queen *should* do,” I say. “I won’t be the kind of ruler who hosts endless parties, attends a myriad teas with air-headed noblewomen, and thinks of little but her next extravagant gown or opulent tiara.”

My maids exchange glances. They know I’m talking about my mother, but they’re afraid to speak ill of her in front of me. And they’re right—I’d probably punish them for their disrespect if they dared insult my family to my face.

“Go,” I snap. “It’s good enough—go!”

Arin shoves one last pin into my hair and checks that the small black tiara is secure, while Krissa hastily packs up the cosmetics. I rise from the chair, smoothing the low-cut black

gown I chose for today. A black choker circles my neck, and thin bands of leather radiate from it, connecting the choker to the daring neckline of the dress. My shoulders are bare, my upper arms circled by more leather bands, and my forearms are encased in puffed half-sleeves of black tulle, ending in flared cuffs. Platform boots complete the dramatic outfit, making me taller.

When my maids scurry out of the room, Helix drifts forward and flicks one of my dangling earrings. “Slept late, did we?”

“It’s not my fault,” I say tightly. “Abraxas.”

His eyes narrow. “How long was he with you? What did you do?”

“We had a meal.”

“And?”

“None of your business.” Nose in the air, I spin away from him and head for the door.

He darts in front of me, his features shifting, rippling with smoke. “You fucked him.”

“As I said, that’s not your concern.” I pass into the hallway and head for my first appointment—a meeting that had to be delayed because I slept in. I don’t know what came over me last night, but it can’t happen again. I can’t become the indolent queen my mother was. I have to keep saving money, hoarding coin—it’s imperative. I need to be awake and active, learning everything there is to know about the complex workings of this kingdom, figuring out where we can trim the excess, reduce waste, and make all the systems of the government and economy more efficient.

I’ll sleep when I’m dead.

Helix sulks during the first few hours of my duties, which involve meetings and one hour holding court. I skip my counting session in the vault, even though breaking that routine unsettles me more than I like to admit.

Following the court session, I withdraw to my father’s study with several ledgers and maps, ordering my guards to wait

outside. I have a book for notations, plenty of pens, a bottle of ink, and a cup of hot tea. Normally this would be a relatively peaceful hour or two of much-needed privacy, but with Helix in the room, I'm robbed of that quiet.

"What's the point of all this?" He waves his hand to the books.

"I'm reviewing expense records for the upper provinces."

"Why?"

"So I can prepare stricter regulations to govern their spending. I might need to increase taxes again, too."

"Because you want more stacks of coin in the vault?"

"Yes. I need to amass as much money as possible, as quickly as possible."

He perches on the edge of my desk. "Why?"

"Because we're going to need it."

"Why?"

"Are you a *child*? Stop asking me 'why.' I have good reasons for everything I do."

"Did you have a good reason for fucking Abraxas?"

I glance up. His handsome face is tense, his lips pressed into a thin line.

"Oh my gods," I say slowly. "Are you *jealous*?"

"No," he scoffs. "That's absurd. If I were jealous that would mean I want you, and why would I want someone who insists on mauling me, biting me, and kicking me in the balls every chance she gets?"

"Only an idiot would want that. So of course you do."

"You're saying I'm an idiot?"

"The biggest of idiots."

He bristles. "I'm more intelligent than Brax."

"Define intelligence."

Helix stalks away, grumbling, and I take a moment to admire the abundance of red curls cloaking his back. Why is his damn hair so gorgeous? The lowest ends brush a very shapely backside, clad in snug deerskin.

“You seem a bit distracted,” I goad him. “Aren’t you supposed to be lecturing me or something? Surely the idea of Abraxas fucking me isn’t so disturbing that it would make you forget your mission?”

He whirls, stalking straight toward me so fast that I reach for the dagger strapped to the underside of the desk.

“Forget this paperwork,” Helix orders. “You’re coming with me. Now.”

“But... it’s not time for memories yet,” I protest.

“I’m aware of that. This is something else. Now come on. I need a mirror.”

“There’s one in the corner by that plant.” I point to it. “So my father could check his appearance before leaving the study.”

“That’ll do. Don’t scream.” Helix purses his lips and whistles, a curiously distant and echoing sound. “It’s time for you to meet Enbarr.”

I’m about to ask who Enbarr is when black smoke begins to cascade from the mirror in the corner—pouring onto the floor like ink, then rising and coalescing into the shape of a huge horse. Red eyes of living flame wink open, and the horse tosses a mane of rippling white mist, baring huge pale teeth. My father’s study is big, but this ghostly creature fills most of the empty space in the room and makes everything else seem small.

“This is Enbarr.” Helix lays his hand on the nose of the ghost-beast. “She’s been my horse since I joined the Wild Hunt. She was once the noble steed of a great king, and earned her place in the afterlife by feats of courage in battle.”

I swallow hard, set down the dagger, and leave my chair. Cautiously I approach the horse. I’ve always loved horses—my boarding school had stables, and I used to go riding almost every day. But I’ve never had one of my own. This mare may be

a ghost, but she's exquisite, majestic. Her very presence draws me in.

"So for her, a place on the Wild Hunt was an honor, not a punishment like it was for you." I extend my hand slowly toward the mare.

"I wouldn't touch her," Helix advises. "She doesn't care for mortals—she's liable to roast your hand and then gobble it up."

But the mare is nosing toward me. Her nostrils are the size of my fist and when she snorts, hot steam puffs from them.

"Shit," I whisper. "You're a beauty, aren't you? Look at you... you're magnificent. A queen among horses."

The horse rumbles and shoves her nose against my hand. She's a ghost, so the sensation is odd—a misty, slithering sensation against my knuckles. But when I open my hand and hold it vertically, she shoves her nose against my palm and this time I can feel her. It's as if she solidified a bit, just for me. A thrill of delight passes through my chest.

"Our horses can take physical form when they want to," says Helix, in a tone of quiet wonder. "I was going to ask her to, but I thought she'd take more persuading."

"One queen recognizes another," I murmur, stroking the mare's nose.

"You're far nicer to her than you are to me." Helix crosses his arms, looking highly offended.

"That's because you're an asshole," I mutter. A chortling rumble from the horse sounds for all the world like she's laughing. "See, she agrees with me."

"Enough," he says. "Look, Enbarr, I summoned you here to be my ally, not to take her side."

Enbarr snorts at him—a puff of fiery sparks—and the black gauzy half-sleeves I'm wearing catch fire.

The mare recoils immediately with a faint whinny, like an apology. Helix makes a snatching motion with his hand, as if he's scooping the fire up and closing his fist tight to snuff it out. The flames disappear.

“Fuck.” He sweeps toward me anxiously. “Are you hurt?”

“No.” I tear off the ruined sleeves and inspect my flushed skin. “Just a little steamed.”

His fingers drift over my arms, leaving behind a sensation of cold mist.

“Oh,” I breathe. “That actually feels good.”

“Really?” He repeats the motion. “Like this?”

I look into his face as he bends over my arms, brushing his ghostly hands along the inflamed skin. He looks so serious, and his dark-red brows are furrowed with concern. His white teeth pinch a bit of his bottom lip, locks of his scarlet hair tumble around his bare shoulders, and the angle of his antlers matches the questioning tilt of his head.

My heart thrums like a plucked string, an affectionate pulse.

He’s showing empathy and concern. Which makes me feel closer to him. Is that what empathy does? It prompts people to like you?

When my servant Bretta showed me empathy, I felt no answering affection for her. Maybe my hurt and anger were too strong back then—or maybe I was simply too young to sort out my emotions. So why am I responding to Helix this way? Is it only because he is physically attractive?

Yes, that must be it. I allowed myself too much sexual freedom last night, and the result is this foolishness.

“Back off,” I say tightly.

Helix’s hands slide down my arms, and his pale, misty fingers slip through mine before he withdraws. “Whatever you say, brat. I was going to offer you a ride on Enbarr, but perhaps you’re not interested.”

My stomach flips with excitement. A ride on this beautiful ghost-horse? “Where would we go?”

“Through the mirror, between realms.”

“But... how could I survive that?”

“If I tried to carry you through, you would die—but a horse of the Wild Hunt can safely transport the living between realms. As long as you remain on her back until we reach our destination, you’ll be perfectly fine.”

I gaze at him doubtfully. “Maybe you’re trying to kill me.”

A gust of exasperation bursts from his lips. “I thought I’d made it clear that I have a stake in this task. If we cannot change your heart, the other two riders and I will...” He bites his lip again. “I can’t explain what will happen, but it’s bad.”

“Interesting.” I tap my lips with one finger. “That’s not much incentive for me to change, since I’d rather like to see you suffer.”

“Once you see the future Paemon has to show you, that will be incentive enough.”

“Then why not start with him and his visions? Seems like that would be quicker and easier than all this rigmarole.” I throw him a scathing glance.

“Because we’re not seeking a temporary change spurred by fear,” Helix says, in a tone of thinning patience. “Lasting change must have a deeper foundation.” He beckons to Enbarr and she advances, tossing her head. Her mane glistens like a shower of snow, like starlight.

“Which realm are we visiting?” I ask.

“It’s not a realm, exactly. You’ll understand when you see it.” He makes a sweeping gesture toward Enbarr’s back. “In ghost form I can’t help you mount, so you’ll have to manage on your own.”

With the aid of the desk chair, I manage to climb onto the mighty horse. Despite the ghostly wispieness along her edges, she feels solid enough. In this position, with my skirts scrunched up, my black netted stockings and garters are bared to Helix’s view.

“Nice legs, for a brat,” he comments before taking his place behind me.

To my surprise, once he lands in the saddle, he’s less ghostly, more tangible, like the horse herself. He feels a bit

different than he does in true corporeal form, but he's *there*.

Between Enbarr's large proportions and Helix's bulk at my back, I feel distinctly doll-sized. And Helix makes it worse by commenting, "Such a tiny imp," and tugging a lock of my hair.

"It's not my fault," I throw over my shoulder. "You saw my birth. I was born early, and I've always been small."

"I never said your size was a bad thing," he replies. "But clearly you're sensitive about it."

"I've always wanted to be the tall, regal type," I admit. "The kind of woman who can look down at my enemies. As it is, I've had to be content with attacking their vulnerable parts from beneath."

"I know all about your attacks on vulnerable parts," he says dryly, taking up thin, misty reins and swinging Enbarr's head toward the mirror. "Hang on, Your Bratfulness. I'll have you there and back again within an hour."

Enbarr leaps forward, as if she's jumping a fence during a race—but her hooves don't touch the floor of the study again. Instead, she springs right through the mirror, shifting into smoke as she goes.

I'm not sure what happens to me. I'm conscious of a rushing wind, a swirl of milky-white mist and black shadows. And then all three of us leap straight out of that swirling mist into the gray sky above Revallen. The cold air bites at my skin.

"Mirrors bend light, so they can serve as doorways to the sky—like shortcuts for the restless dead," Helix explains. "From here we'll head up into the clouds, and then enter the space between the realms."

"The space between the realms," I murmur. "Sounds cosmic, and dreadful."

"Parts of it are. There are monsters lurking in the great Beyond, but the area we'll be visiting is quite safe—provided you stay on Enbarr's back until we're inside the Hovel."

"The hovel? I was rather hoping for something finer."

He laughs. "I call it the Hovel, but it's not terrible. Just rather small and plain. For the purpose of our mission, it is

tethered to your world's time. It offers our trio a place to meet, to converse, and to wait."

Anticipation skitters through my belly, partly from the speed at which we're sailing through the cold air and partly at his words. "So the other two riders will be there."

"Why else would I take you there?" Helix's voice carries the keen edge of intent, with a hint of gleeful malevolence. "You and Abraxas are going to explain exactly what happened last night."

I'm about to retort, but I nearly choke on a gasp as Enbarr leaps through a thick bank of cloud and my vision turns to a white blur. The cloud is wet and cold, and I instinctively shrink backward into Helix's warmth, even as I punch his thigh. "You tricked me! I thought this ride was for fun. I didn't know it was going to be an interrogation."

A nasty chuckle vibrates through his chest, and I jam an elbow into his ribs. I plan on doing it just once, but he makes a pained grunt that pleases my vengeful heart, so I jab him a few more times. With an angry growl he switches the reins to one hand and grabs my throat with the other. "Stop it, devil."

"*You're* the devil," I gasp.

"You know what I don't understand?" he snarls. "You claim to hate the Fae, and yet you allowed Brax to touch you, while you continue to attack *me*."

"Brax has been *nice* to me."

"I could be nice."

"When you're nice, I know it's fake. Just an act."

"You know what I think?" His hand tightens on my neck. "I think you prefer it when someone is mean to you. It justifies your own behavior, your rage. And that's where you're most comfortable—in a place of rage."

"Fuck you!" I buck against his hold, and then two things happen at once.

First, my bottom presses against the bulge between his legs. Unmistakable. He wants me, even in this form.

Second, I jerk too far to the left and slip off Enbarr's back.

Or I *almost* do. I'm sliding, I'm falling—and quick as a blink, Helix yanks me back against him—locks me there with one sinewy arm across my chest.

“Don't fucking do that again.” His voice sounds strange, panicked.

My whole body is still thrilling with the terror of that almost-fall—a near-death moment. I stay motionless while Enbarr gallops upward through the heavy gray blanket of the winter sky.

We break into a sunlit world with mounds of pearly white cloud below and a vast deepening blue above.

Enbarr charges straight toward a huge pile of puffy white clouds, and when we ride through them, we burst into a new space—a vast emptiness strewn with long trails and tunnels of smoky cloud. It's dark, and yet not dark, because stars have been flung through the space in glittering bucketfuls, and bright suns whirl in the unfathomable distance.

My brain is spinning, barely able to comprehend where I am. The sheer scope of this space, this void between realms, is dizzying. I don't know how I'm able to breathe or exist here—some magic Enbarr carries with her, as Helix said. But the very act of looking into depthless *nothing* skews my brain, warps my thoughts and my vision until I'm clinging to Helix's thighs out of pure stunned terror. He and I are mere dots in all this yawning space, and that's a freakish horror I can scarcely grasp.

And yet... feeling this tiny is an unexpected relief. Back in Revallen, I am the ruler, the one with the highest responsibility. Here, I am nothing. All the petty monarchs along our borders are equally insignificant. The quantity of coins in the vault, the number of lanterns lit in the gardens at night, the taxes and the expenses—none of that matters out here. I can't even worry about any of it. My mind is a mercifully blank expanse of thrilling terror and clear, pure relief.

“It's awful,” I whisper. “And beautiful.”

“It's perspective,” he replies. “I thought you could use some.”

“Don’t pretend you had a noble motive for this.”

“My motives are usually two-fold. I’m a complicated being.”

His haughty tone irks me, so I shift in the saddle, grinding my ass against him. “Not as complicated as you’d like to think. How are you even hard in this form?”

“It’s part of the torment we endure,” he mutters. “As ghosts we can experience desire, but without the possibility for relief. Most of us have learned how to suppress it.”

“But not you.”

“Even in life, I only felt desire for women who interested me. I’ve suffered from such impulses a few times since I died...” His silken voice drops lower, softening. “But never this intensely.”

A tiny thrill traces through my clit at those words. Maybe I’d feel it more strongly if we were anywhere but *here*, galloping along a narrow cloud-path through a mind-bending, starry void.

“Look.” Helix points ahead to a flat island of pale cloud amid the Nothing. On that island is a strange building, like a large gazebo with pillars and a peaked roof. It looks as if it was built by someone who had a cursory acquaintance with human architecture and tried to blend a cottage with a cathedral.

Enbarr sails through the arched entrance—there’s no door to be seen—and skids to a halt on the tiled floor. Abraxas, who was spinning his sword in midair, lets it fall to the floor with a clang and stares at me and Helix. Paemon is sitting in a shadowed corner, his thin, pale torso half-cloaked by his long purple hair. His long claws twitch, and his eyes open, but otherwise he doesn’t move.

“What are you doing, Helix?” Brax exclaims. “You brought her *here*?”

“Technically, there’s no rule against it.” Helix swings down, but leaves me on the horse. I’m not sure what would happen if I dismounted here, so I stay put.

Brax's deep voice is tinged with concern. "This isn't how it's done, ever. We could get into trouble if Nocturis finds out. Take her back at once."

Helix smiles, and my skin warms at the wicked fire in that grin. "Speaking of getting into trouble—why don't we tell Nocturis what you did with the queen last night? How you not only visited her, but fucked her, too?"

"What?" Paemon looks up.

"Ah, so you didn't tell him. Why not, Brax? Ashamed of yourself?"

Abraxas draws himself up to his full height and levels his gaze at Helix. His voice is slow, melodic, and divinely deep. He could melt the clothes right off me with that voice alone. "I am not ashamed. We had a delightful time together. I gave her what she needed from me—what she can't get from *you*."

Helix's claws flex. "And what is that?"

"True kindness. Humor. Fun. And yes—pleasure."

"You think I couldn't give her pleasure."

Brax picks up his sword. "Nocturis told me about you when I was chosen for this task. I know what happens to the women you take, Helix. I doubt you could trust yourself with one, even now, after all this time. You're still afraid, aren't you? Afraid that if you fuck someone, you'll do what you've always done—rip out her—"

Helix flies at him with a roar, the flaming staff appearing in his hand. Abraxas blocks the blow with his sword, and a shower of sparks rains from both weapons.

I'm dreaming. I have to be dreaming—I can't be here, in this wayside resting point between realms, watching two ghostly riders of the Wild Hunt battle each other... over *me*. I can't decide if I'm furious, terrified, or flattered.

So instead of deciding, I simply watch the flex of straining male bodies, the bulging muscles, the bared teeth and flashing eyes. Sights like this are why my ancestors used to hold tournaments, where brawny men battled in the arena...

Then my gaze travels beyond them, to a table bearing two objects—a wooden clock and a large, glossy black orb with a strand of gold twining through it...

The impossibly tall figure of Paemon cuts off my view of the mysterious orb. He walks over to the other two riders, who are trading fearsome blows with their weapons... and then he whips out all his claws, splaying them wide before jamming them through the throats of both his companions—four claws stabbing into each rider's neck. Abraxas and Helix sputter and choke, but they don't bleed. In this strange liminal space, they are not quite spiritual or physical, but something in between. Still, Paemon's action breaks up the fight, at least for the moment.

Quietly Paemon strides back to me. He pauses by Enbarr's head first, bowing deeply to her. After a moment, she chuffs and bobs her head, as if giving him permission to mount.

He's behind me a moment later, wheeling the horse around and galloping out of the Hovel, back down the spiraling cloud-path toward my home realm.

"That was a quick visit," I mutter. "Why did Helix even bring me here?"

"To confront Brax, and to show his own defiance of the rules." Paemon's voice lingers over each *s*. "But he should not have taken you from your realm. There is much at stake, and our focus must remain on your salvation, not our own foolish desires." "You think they're foolish to desire me?"

"Of course. Copulation with a subject is pointless, and only serves to complicate matters. There is work to be done, yet they play ridiculous games."

"Work to be done," I echo. "Yes. Neither of them seem to understand that. I wasted time with Abraxas last night, and with Helix just now..." I shake my head. "When I think about how much I could have gotten done today, and yet I've accomplished almost *nothing*..." The crushing heaviness of guilt and obligation crash onto me again, weighing my mind and heart like a physical burden.

Once we emerge through the mirror, Paemon dismisses Enbarr, and she leaves the same way she came.

He lingers, though, gazing around at the towering bookshelves, the rack of maps, the stacks of ledgers and paperwork. When I seat myself behind the desk again, he stands at my side in perfect stillness and silence while I read through the first page of records and write down a few notes.

As I start the second page, he reaches out with one ebony claw, longer than my forearm, and points first to one line, then two more. “They should eliminate this expense, and restrict costs here and here,” he says quietly. “The rest are essential.”

Frowning, I skim over the page. “That’s exactly right. Could it be that one of you ghosts is actually helpful?”

He surveys me gloomily, his delicate features unmoving. His body is paler and thinner than the other two, and he has one additional piercing—his navel. It only makes the lean strength of his toned abdomen more noticeable. White rams’ horns curl on either side of his head, and around his neck he wears a string with a tiny white bird skull as a pendant. Gold bracers circle his wrists, and more gold decorates his pointed ears.

His hair is even longer than Helix’s—a sheet of dark purple, threaded with silvery-white strands.

“Who were you, in your old life?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer. But his thin lips turn down slightly, as if he’s displeased with me for inquiring.

“Fine, don’t tell me.” I write a few lines and flip the page of the ledger. “Help me with these next pages?”

For two hours we work in tandem, Paemon with his ledger and me with a second one. I pause my own work every few minutes to jot down the items he points out and then turn the page for him. With two pairs of eyes reviewing the data, the work goes faster.

When Helix still doesn’t return, and Paemon makes no move to leave, I rise from the desk and announce, “I’m going to the vault now.”

No response. But as I exit the study and make my way below, Paemon glides along just behind me.

He doesn't comment on the contents of the vault, or my strange habit of stacking the coins in rows. But when he notices me re-counting each stack, he moves closer and murmurs, "Leave that to me."

From then on, whenever I make a stack of fifty coins, I let him double-check the count. He seems to be as meticulous as I am, which is a relief. I also enjoy his silence, and his ability to be utterly still.

With my mind eased and my anxiety lessened, I return to my rooms, but one of my maids is waiting just outside the door.

"Majesty." She curtsies. "The chef has prepared a fine meal for you in the royals' private dining room. Nothing too big," she hurries to add. "Just a little something he hoped you might enjoy. He'd be honored if you would partake. You don't have to change into a dinner gown—it's quite informal."

I'm on the verge of declining, but then I feel Paemon's cool presence shifting nearer. He speaks one word, a chill of ghostly breath across my ear. "Yes."

Thanks to him, I accomplished far more today than I thought I would. I suppose I owe him something.

"Very well," I tell the maid. "I will come."

When I look up at Paemon's ethereal figure, towering above me, I could swear his grim mouth looks a little softer.



“Arrogant fool!” I slam my fist into Helix’s jaw. It’s a solid blow, and sends him back a step, but there’s no satisfying crunch like there would be if he were in corporeal form.

“Lecherous ass!” Helix roars back, with a swift punch to my kidney—or where my kidney would be if I had true flesh at the moment.

We abandoned our weapons some time ago and we’ve been brawling outright for what feels like hours of mortal time. Our attacks cause pain in this form, but it passes quickly since we can’t do each other any real physical harm. Everything in the Hovel is an imitation of reality. I hate it.

“You—fucked—her,” snarls Helix, with three more punches to punctuate his words.

“I told you, we played with each other,” I growl. “She needed it. She requires care, not just a constant bombardment of lectures and painful memories.”

He pulls back, glaring at me. “You don’t understand her at all. She has a keen mind, and the way to her heart is through her head. That’s how we’ll effect change—not through orgasms and midnight feasts.”

“You’re just jealous because you didn’t think of it sooner.” I toss the white locks of my hair out of my right eye and give him a grin that’s mostly a challenge.

“Didn’t think of it?” He laughs, breathless and pained. “I’ve thought of nothing else since I first laid eyes on her. She’s a gorgeous, sexy little brat who’s begging to be tamed. It’s all I can do not to teach her like she needs to be taught.”

“As if you’ve ever successfully tamed anyone. Or if you did, you didn’t get to enjoy the result very long, because you killed every woman you stuck your dick into.”

Anguish crosses Helix’s face. “You keep saying that. And I keep telling you I’ve changed.” His eyes shimmer, almost as if there are tears in them. But we are ghosts, and we cannot weep.

I’ve seen many a Fae warrior shed tears beneath my blade, crying for mercy. I never heeded any of them. Never cared. Sometimes I laughed aloud as I flayed them alive.

But I’ve changed too. And though I barely know Helix, the pain in his eyes softens my heart.

Fuck his pretty face.

“You say you’re different now,” I tell him. “Prove it.”

“How?”

“Fuck the queen, if she’ll have you. See if you can do it without killing her afterward.”

His eyes widen with shock, then darken with doubt.

“See? You don’t trust yourself. After all this time.” I nod, triumphant. “Work on her mind if you must, but leave her physical needs to me. She may have had servants since she was born, but they were only fulfilling a duty. She’s had no one who truly cares about what she wants and needs.”

“I’ve spent more time with her than you have,” he retorts.

“But not as much time as you could. Where were you last night while I was tending to her? Off drinking and stroking your cock, eh?”

He charges at me, but I fend him off with one arm. My waist and hips are narrower than his, but my arms are bigger,

and I take pride in that.

Helix sidesteps and tries for a headlock, but I twist and face him. We're nose to nose, gripping each other's arms, each straining to shove the other back a step. Neither of us will give.

His eyes blaze amber, shot through with gold, like orange tea swirled with honey. His scarlet hair brushes my skin like silken threads. My body tightens all over, cock included. Arousal is possible in this form, but satisfaction isn't.

In my former life, I sometimes felt arousal during battles or training sessions, especially with well-matched opponents who were my size or bigger. I always took women to bed, though. No reason for that to change just because of a red-headed prick with beautiful eyes.

"Back the fuck off," I snarl.

"You first." His lips are a breath from mine, bent in a crooked sneer.

There's an echo where my heart should be—the ghost of a heartbeat, faster and louder than usual. It booms through my chest until I can hear nothing else, until I can see nothing but the malicious arch of Helix's mouth.

He relaxes ever so slightly, his eyes darting down to my lips, his sneer fading.

"We are deeply fucked—all of us," he whispers.

"Not yet," I say, low. "But I'd like to be."

Helix's eyes dilate, and he licks his lips.

"Still at it, then?" Paemon's cool voice cuts through the air.

Helix and I step back from each other, and he picks up his flaming staff, clearing his throat.

I jerk my head toward him. "Torch-boy here thinks he knows how best to handle the queen."

"He does," says Paemon quietly. "We all do. Why do you think they sent three riders to perform this task, when they usually send one, maybe two? It's because she needs something from each of us. Only by working together can we accomplish this."

Helix scoffs, glancing away.

“We will all continue to care for her—mind, body and soul—past, present, and future,” Paemon says. “Tonight is the final night to enter her memories, Helix. I suggest you make it count.”

“What about him fucking her?” Helix points at me. “We should tell Nocturis.”

I vent a booming, caustic laugh. “And while we’re at it, we’ll let him know you brought a mortal here on Enbarr. You endangered our subject’s life—I gave her a damn good orgasm. We are not the same.”

Helix glances away, his face twisted with guilt.

He likes the little queen. He truly does—perhaps as much as I do, or more. Sympathy wells up inside me—the by-product of centuries, knotted into the very fabric of my fucking soul during my lengthy service to the Wild Hunt.

“I meant what I said, about proving yourself,” I tell him. “I think you can do it. You say you’ve changed—I believe you.”

Helix’s head snaps up, his brows bending. “You don’t know me. Riding near each other a few times during the Hunt doesn’t constitute a friendship. Besides... even if I wanted to try it... she hates me.”

I chuckle. “Do you want to know what she was doing when I arrived in her room last night, shortly after you left her? She was in bed, pleasuring herself, and she said, ‘Fuck you, you stupid ghost,’ right as she came. Trust me—she wants you.”

Helix is frozen, transfixed, a strange look on his face.

“It does not matter whom she wants,” Paemon interrupts. “Keep your focus on the task at hand—revealing the memories that made her who she is. You’ve changed hundreds of hearts with memories alone, haven’t you, Helix?”

He bows his antlered head briefly in assent.

“Then do it again. Abraxas will not interfere tonight—he will wait his turn.” Paemon casts me a warning look, and grudgingly I nod. “Remember what is at stake, for all of us. If we succeed in this, we’ll receive the great reward we’ve been

hoping for since we joined the Hunt. And if not—you know what happens.”

All three of us fall silent.

If this fails, we don't drift away into a state of quiet nothingness with our ancestors, or find the Realm of Peace. We will be fed to one of the great beasts that live in the In-Between, in the void between worlds. There, in the bowels of a cosmic monster, our souls will be corroded and digested. We'll be aware that it's happening, gnawed by anguish for millennia—unable to fight back, unable to brawl or bellow or claw our way out. Eventually only scraps of us will be left, and oblivion will be a relief as we are finally absorbed into the monster.

We must prove ourselves worthy, or we are doomed to a fate more cruel than our restless existence in the Wild Hunt.



My stomach keeps twisting, contorting with sickening thrills, hollowing out with waves of raw, nauseating terror. I get loose bowels when I'm especially anxious, and I have to run to the bathroom three times during the final hour before midnight. After the last time, I take a quick bath to wash off the cold sweat that has broken out all over my body.

I spent a reasonably pleasant afternoon with Paemon, and I had a delicious dinner. But none of that matters now, because Helix is going to show me my very worst memories tonight—I just know it.

I don't want to see them. I can't relive them, I *can't*—and yet I don't know how to escape this.

Ten minutes until midnight.

I sit cross-legged on my bed, gnawing at my fingernails. First I draw the curtains, and then I rake them open again.

The memories are crawling out of my mind's recesses already, like slimy, poisonous creatures that leave traces of their toxin on me as I try to shove them back down. I think I might throw up.

Seven minutes.

I'm going to have to face it again—every vulgar, grotesque, sickening detail. I'll have to see their faces when they—and I'll have to see *him* again... shit, shit shit...

And Helix will be there, watching it all...

I can't do this. Can't sit here—I have to go. I have to run.

Leaping off my bed, I race into the training room, snatch a cloak from a hook, and shove my bare feet into boots. Then I unbolt the back door, the one leading to the gardens.

Two guards are strolling past, deep in conversation. They startle when I emerge, and one says, "Your Majesty..."

"As you were," I gasp. "If you follow me, you lose your heads, I swear it."

Eyes wide, they glance at each other uncertainly. I turn and flee along the garden path as fast as I can.

I just confirmed to those guards that I'm the mad, wild queen they believe me to be. And right now, I don't care.

I run at top speed, my breath puffing white in the frosty air. Despite my short legs, I'm fast. I'm deep in the garden already, pelting along the path between two tall, dark hedges, when I spot something that makes my heart seize up.

Between the hedges looms a broad, dark figure, cloaked with shadows and impossibly tall, his antlers like black branches against the rising moon. His eyes are two orange stars.

Fuck.

Hitching a panicked breath, I turn and flee down a side path, between evergreen shrubs sculpted into sinuous figures, like naked dancing bodies. My mother's idea, and the gardener's artistry.

A coiling cloud of dark smoke erupts from the snow at the end of the path, rising and solidifying into the same familiar shape—hulking, draped in darkness, and crowned with antlers. This time there's a flicker of fire—the glow of orange flame atop a tall staff. Behind that flame, two amber eyes glow steadily.

I want to scream.

“Lauriel.” Helix’s voice glides through the biting winter air like honeyed smoke.

“No,” I whimper. “No.”

I scramble through a flowerbed, my boots crunching across the brittle, dead stalks, and I duck behind a large elm. Peering around it, I catch sight of the cloaked figure a dozen paces away.

Holding my breath, I set my back to the tree and hope he’ll pass me by. A stupid hope, because he can track me, follow me anywhere. I can’t run from him. I can’t escape this.

He appears in front of me, shadows uncoiling from his shoulders, orange eyes flashing. “Lauriel, stop running from me.”

In his left hand he grips the staff—the beacon of my doom. With his right hand reaches for me, and I cringe back against the tree.

Frowning, he lowers his hand. “I don’t have a choice about this any more than you do.”

“I don’t believe you. Why can’t you three bastards just leave me alone?”

“Because the fate of your kingdom—”

“Yes, yes, my kingdom is in jeopardy. You don’t think I know that?” I’m shaking, my voice cracked with cold and fear. “Why do you think I’m piling up all that treasure, trying to find ways to amass more wealth? It’s because I know where this leads! I know I’m the tiny weak queen, the one that all the neighboring kingdoms believe to be easy prey. They’re watching us, Helix. Soon one of them will make a move—they’ll invade, start a war—and I’ll need that gold to fund our resistance and to buy allies. That’s why I’m saving every coin, ruthlessly cutting back everywhere I can and forcing the districts to do the same. I’m trying to save us. And I need the Fae *gone*, because we can’t be fighting enemies both outside our borders and within them.”

I choke on a sob, tears rushing hot down my cold cheeks.

“Lauriel,” Helix says gently. His free hand cups my shoulder.

I knock it away. “Leave me alone! Leave me to manage the fate of the kingdom—go back to your Hunt!”

Desperation constricts my heart, and I make a wild grab for the object of my dread—that terrible staff. I snatch it right out of Helix’s fingers and make a break for a small stone fountain several paces away. The water in it is filmed with ice, but I flip the staff upside down and jam it in, cracking the ice and shoving the flame into the water beneath.

The fire goes out with a satisfying hiss.

Helix screams.

It’s a shrill, echoing scream—an unearthly, keening shriek that sounds far away, even though he’s right behind me. I whirl, still clutching the staff, still holding it in the water.

He’s on the ground, his cloak outspread under him. His body contorts, limbs jerking and joints popping, his beautiful face stricken with horrified agony. Another scream rips from his throat as one of his antlers snaps clean through—and then the fingers of his left hand break, one after another, with a series of sharp cracks.

The staff.

It’s his weakness as well as his power.

I yank it back out of the half-frozen fountain. The tip ignites again, so bright that when I blink, I can still see its white-hot glare behind my eyelids.

Helix stills on the path, panting. The antler that broke off dissipates into smoke, but another forms, growing out of the stump. His broken fingers straighten again, and his joints pop back into place.

He hauls himself upright, breathing hard.

I stand there, holding the staff. Waiting for him to lunge forward and take it back.

“When we were recruited, we were each given a weapon, the source of our power,” he says hoarsely. “They gave me the power of the past—the staff of memories. Abraxas possesses a sword that grounds him in the present. Paemon has his claws, pointing to visions of the future. In addition to those abilities,

the weapons provide our superiors with a way to punish us if we misbehave, or if we don't learn quickly enough—or if they feel like it.”

The memory of my mother's palm colliding with my face leaps into my mind. She didn't strike me often, but when she did, my face was bruised for days afterward, and sometimes my neck hurt.

But I refuse to feel sympathy for the ghost who's destroying my already-damaged life.

“You deserve punishment,” I tell Helix coldly. “You're a murderer.”

“I was.” He unpins the cloak, lets it fall, and it too becomes smoke. Without it, he stands before me bare-chested, his mane of scarlet hair and his broad shoulders silvered by moonlight. “Do you want to punish me, Lauriel? You may, if it will help you endure what you must face tonight.”

I can't admit it aloud. But I nod.

“You believe that causing others pain makes your own agony easier to bear.” He drops to his knees on the snow-sprinkled cobblestones. “Go on. If this is what you need, torture me.”

Without hesitation I flip the staff upside down and thrust its flaming tip into the fountain again.

A cry of agony rips from his throat, and he bows over. I watch in fascinated horror as his spine creaks, as each vertebra thrusts a spike of bone through his skin. He rolls over, his broken back arching, and I gasp as his ribs extrude from his chest. Blood sprinkles the snow. His wrists break with two resounding cracks.

I don't care that he's hurting, I don't *care*—he's Fae, and a murderer—he's planning to torture me with visions—he has ruined my life—he deserves—he—

But seeing him hurt like this *hurts me*. I try to steel myself against the feeling, but it overwhelms me—pity, longing, compassion, mercy.

“No!” I scream the word, pulling the staff out of the fountain.

Its tip ignites, the fire strong as ever, and I prop it hastily against a tree before kneeling next to the broken Fae male.

He’s healing already, but his eyes are glazed with wretchedness, with pain.

“I’m sorry,” I gasp, my fingers hovering helplessly over his body. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

“Do you feel better?” he chokes out.

I shake my head, penitent tears scorching my eyes. When he sits up I try to assist, and he pretends that it actually helps, when we both know he’s much too big for me to prop up on my own.

“Whatever you see tonight, I will bear witness,” he says.

I will bear witness.

I hadn’t thought of it like that. When I pictured this, I imagined him with his lip curled, eyeing the visions haughtily or even hungrily—but his words feel companionable, almost supportive. I’ve kept these secrets for so long—I’ve never trusted anyone with the memories. Maybe, just maybe, it will help to have someone else who knows. Someone outside of my family, my kingdom, my school. Someone who can observe without judgment. Even if he is Fae.

I pick up the staff and hand it back to Helix.

“Are you sure?” He gives me a faint smirk. “You caught me off guard before. I won’t let you get your hands on this so easily again.”

“Take it.”

He accepts the staff, and I inhale his scent—like fresh apples, mingled with the crisp scent of snow and cold night air.

I’m strengthened, somehow. More ready than I was. Maybe torturing him did help, or maybe it was the moment of mercy. Either way, I feel closer to Helix—less like he’s the enemy and more like we’re fellow travelers on this midnight journey.

He wraps his arm around my waist this time—tugs me close to his side. His heat spills into my body, warming me.

Then he lifts the staff, and we whirl away into the past.

I'm nine years old, and we're in the palace.

We follow my childish figure down a corridor, toward the sounds of dance music and lecherous laughter. I can remember so many nights when the palace hallways echoed with those sounds. I rarely got up the courage to investigate—I was practically a prisoner in my rooms from dinnertime onward. But my night guard had indulged in too many drinks—a failing for which he was later imprisoned—and I managed to evade the other two guards in the corridor.

Helix and I pass a clock in the hallway—three in the morning.

My nine-year-old self manages to slink past more guards, most of whom are either drunk, deep in conversation, or busy trying to sneak a look at what's going on beyond the curtained entrance to a room that was always closed up and locked during the daytime. My mother called it her “riot room.”

My younger self sidles through shadows, ducks behind a big guard, and slips inside, hiding behind a statue in a shadowed alcove.

Helix's staff draws us both into the riot room as well.

There's an orgy unfolding. And not just any orgy.

I remember thinking the horns were headdresses and the leering, beautiful faces were masks. And then I realized the truth—that my parents had invited Fae into the palace. To fuck.



The following scene contains some disturbing sexual imagery and graphic violence witnessed by a child. Skip to the next scene break if you want to avoid it.

Lauriel's memory is a Fae revel of the worst kind—as Unseelie as it gets. She shrinks against my side, and something inside me shatters when I see her past self, hiding behind the statue, witnessing sights that even Fae children are not allowed to see.

Her mother is nude, splayed on the bed while a Fae male fucks her with the blunt, ridged horn protruding from his forehead. Meanwhile, Lauriel's father the king is on his hands and knees, slobbering around another Fae male's fat cock. This male is the largest in the room—a starkly beautiful Unseelie with scales decorating his cheekbones and covering half of his throat. His left arm is far bigger than it should be—like the claw of a crab, but green, veined with glowing purple. Scales coat his left side and travel partway down his thigh. His bald head is crowned with many short, curved spikes, and he has a long, thick tail. More naked bodies are hunching, rolling, and writhing throughout the room, while nude musicians play low, sinuous melodies.

“Shit,” I whisper.

But that's not the worst of it.

With a shaking finger, the grownup Lauriel points to where two female Fae are eating long strips of a human servant's flesh. Elsewhere in the room, more humans are being used, devoured, broken, lacerated—whether voluntarily or under enchantment, I can't tell. When the humans are near death, the Fae heal them, sometimes with potions and sometimes with a blend of spit, piss, and cum.

There's magic in play, too—orbs of light dancing overhead, diamond sparkles raining down, bursts of colorful spellwork urging on the height and duration of each orgasm.

Lauriel's mother comes with a shriek of ecstasy. As she lies dazed and panting, the male with the horn climbs onto the bed beside her and begins sucking blood from her wrist.

The king is on all fours now, rutting into an antlered Fae female while the big Unseelie male fucks him from behind.

And then the king sees his little daughter hiding behind the statue.

He doesn't call a halt to the activities.

After he comes, he wipes himself off and orders a servant to take the child back to her room.



The memory whirls away, but we're spun into another before we have time to breathe, or speak.

This time, it's her uncle's castle again, and Lauriel's nine-year-old self is walking through the forest with a red-cheeked woman—a nanny or a maid. Both woman and girl look exhausted, their eyes sunken as if neither has slept all night. It's early, perhaps an hour or two after dawn.

“There now,” says the woman. “A nice bracing walk on this cold morning, and now maybe you’ll be able to take some rest. A little breakfast, and then a nap, eh?”

Young Lauriel shakes her head. Her tiny face is deathly white. “Whenever I sleep, the dreams come.”

“Dreams of what, lass?” asks the woman—but before the child can answer, there’s a whoop and a cackle, and the murmur of voices. Several figures are leaving the castle by a tower door—figures notable for their inhuman good looks, their wings, their claws, and their horned heads. Some have the arms of furry beasts or the jointed legs of enormous insects.

I recognize the big horned male with the scales and the clawed arm. He has a nude body slung over his shoulders—a girl of perhaps seventeen in human years. He carries her like a hunter might carry a doe. Her head dangles, bobbing loosely with his gait, and when a momentary breeze carries the wind away from her face, nine-year-old Lauriel gasps. “That’s Melria,” she exclaims. “That’s my cousin!”

She runs forward, despite the nanny’s attempts to hold her back. “Stop!” she screams, in the thin, shrill voice of an enraged child.

Admiration pulses through me. She’s so young and small, faced with a monumental threat, and yet she is so brave.

“Well, if it isn’t the Crown Princess.” The big Fae male greets her with a serrated smile. “Hello, toothsome. Want to come along?”

“What are you doing with Melria?” the child demands, but her voice trembles.

“Oh, ah...” The Fae looks at his companions and chuckles. “Your father gave her to us, as a treat.”

“But she’s not yours, or his,” the little princess insists. “Put her down.”

“Not likely.” He looks at the trembling nanny and his eyes narrow. “Run home, tiny one. We’ll leave you be, out of friendship with your father...but your nursemaid is coming with us. She’s seen too much now, and that’s your fault.” He nods to

the others, and two of them pounce on the red-cheeked woman, stifle her screams, and bundle her into a huge sack.

“Put her down!” shrieks young Lauriel. “She’s mine! I need her!”

The horned Fae bends, chucking Lauriel’s chin with his scaly green claw. “I’ll give you something in exchange—my name. It’s Varthil. You’d do well to remember and respect it... you’ll be screaming it someday, a decade or two from now.”

Lauriel’s lip trembles, but she says stoutly, “A name isn’t worth a whole person. I still want my nurse back, and my cousin too.”

“You won’t see them again,” Varthil leers. “But you’ll see me. I’ll come for you, around age sixteen perhaps. You’ll be more fun then. Juicy and delicious.” He leans in and licks Lauriel’s cheek with his long yellowish tongue, and I nearly combust with rage on the spot.

When he walks ahead with the others, a Fae woman advances, her head lowering on a snake-like, flexible neck. She sweeps poison-green claws beneath the princess’s chin. “I’ll tell you my name too, so you’ll have something to fear,” she hisses. “I am Asekith. Breathe a word of this encounter to anyone, and we’ll strip you bare, boil you soft, and slurp you down. Princess or not, no one can hide from us. Betray this secret, and we will devour everyone you love.”

With shrill peals of laughter and snatches of lewd song, the Fae procession continues into the forest.

The scene spins away, and Lauriel and I are back in the present—not in the dark, frozen garden, but in her bedroom. The fire is still burning, and shadows dance across the dark, glossy wood of the paneled walls.

Lauriel pulls away from me immediately, retreating toward the bed. Her fingers find the fringe of the bed-curtain and play with it nervously.

“That visit to my uncle’s castle happened two months after the orgy,” she murmurs. “My parents barely looked at me during those eight weeks.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” I tell her. “They should have been more private and careful about their debauched cravings.”

She pinches her lips together. After a moment she says, “When my cousin disappeared, I was too scared to say anything about what I saw. My father and mother pretended to be very worried—even offered some of their soldiers to help my aunt and uncle search for her. But I began to think of other disappearances that had occurred back home, at the palace—my favorite maid, a guard who was kind to me, one of the young squires at court. I worked up the courage to approach my father and ask him if those people were ‘lost’ the same way Melria was. He turned white as salt, and they sent me to boarding school two days later.”

“He was afraid you were putting the pieces together. He wanted to cover his tracks.” Anger swells in my heart, hot as fire. But I am supposed to be helping Lauriel handle her own rage, so I manage to grit out, “And perhaps he wanted to protect you, as well.”

“Maybe. But they left me to deal with what I had seen, *alone*.” Her voice shakes. “Do you have any idea what that’s like, for a human child of nine years old? To carry that kind of knowledge, to remember images like those, and not be able to speak of them to anyone, for years? To know that my own parents were responsible for such atrocities—that they consorted with *monsters*? Do you understand how it feels, to know that I am their daughter, the fruit of their foul tree?” Tears glitter in her eyes. “You can’t know, and you can’t understand, because those are *your* people. Your kind.”

“The Unseelie are a vicious race,” I say quietly. “Our passions are unbridled, and our desires can seem unnatural. Many of us have no respect for humans, and would just as soon rape and devour them as speak to them. But not all the Fae are like that. The Seelie are nobler, kinder—they value life, even if they think of humans as lesser animals.”

“And you’re Seelie now?”

I sigh, kneading my forehead with my fingertips. “Sometimes I think we draw the lines too sharply between

Seelie and Unseelie, between right and wrong, good and bad. I am something between or beyond the two.”

She nods, her dark brows bent inward. “I think I am, as well.” She tugs at the bed-curtain sharply, then says, “Do you understand now why I ordered the extermination of the Fae from this land?”

I’m about to respond, but a pulse from the staff snatches my attention. “Shit—we’re not done yet. Come here.”

Lauriel recoils into the shadow of the bed-curtain, her dark eyes wide and wary. “I don’t want to.”

“One more vision,” I urge. “And then—then we’ll go to your training room and I’ll let you beat the shit out of me.”

She scoffs, but there’s a glint of interest in her gaze. “I have a counter-proposal. Promise we’ll spar together, and you won’t take it too easy on me?”

“Agreed.”

Stiffly she walks forward to me and puts her arm around my waist.

A soft thrill passes through my chest.

I clasp her shoulders, and the staff carries us aloft, through swirling shadows and streaming light, until we land in a cold dungeon—damp stone, the reek of mildew, the clank of metal.

Lauriel clutches my left wrist, and I tense, afraid she’ll grab the staff. But she only breathes, through pale lips, “Not this one. Not this one, please, Helix, not this one!”

“Your Majesty.” A tall man with jet-black hair and steely eyes bows to Lauriel—adult queen Lauriel. Through the staff I sense this vision’s place on the timeline—about four weeks ago.

“Fae-hunter Marleigh,” replies the queen. “You sent word that you found the Fae I described?”

“One of them, Majesty. The female, Asekith. She was part of a larger group. If you’ll come this way.”

The young queen glides after him, her bearing flawlessly regal. “And I trust you dealt with the others as we discussed?”

“Of course, Majesty.”

“Good.”

Marleigh opens a heavy wooden door fitted with a metal grate for a window. In the large room beyond, torchlight gleams on shackles, manacles, and racks of torture instruments.

Hanging from chains bolted to the ceiling is the Fae woman with the poison-green claws and the serpentine neck. An iron muzzle is locked around her lower face, its edges hissing steam as the iron bites into her sensitive flesh. Her ankles are chained to the floor, keeping her legs slightly spread.

“She can’t hurt you,” says Marleigh, pointing to a metal band around the Fae’s throat. “That collar has iron embedded in it too, and I’ve spelled it to restrain her magic. You are free to work your vengeance as you desire.”

“Thank you. You may go, Marleigh.”

But the Fae-hunter hesitates. “May I ask, Your Majesty, how this one harmed you?”

“You may not,” the young queen says sharply. “Now begone! You have more Fae to find, yes? Get busy hunting them—particularly the one I spoke of—the male, Varthil, with the green scales and the spikes, and that hideous claw.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

Marleigh leaves the room, pulling the door shut with a creak and a clang that reverberates through the stone.

“Helix,” whispers Lauriel. “Let’s go. I don’t want to see this.”

“But you already have,” I reply. “And she’s in your power now. What can she do to you?”

“It’s not that.” Lauriel’s voice is taut with dread. “It’s what *I* do to *her*.”

The Queen Lauriel from a month ago surveys her prisoner. She’s much smaller than the Fae woman, but the lethal hatred in her eyes makes her seem ominously threatening. “Do you remember me?”

Asekith narrows her eyes, then nods.

“That’s right,” says the young queen softly. “I was the little Crown Princess in the forest all those years ago. You stole my cousin—the only family member I actually liked.”

Queen Lauriel glides over to a small table, on which lies a leather parcel. She unfolds it, revealing a row of iron tools—corkscrews, clamps, spikes, pincers, knives, and shears.

“I can only imagine what you and those other beasts did to her,” says the queen. “And I’m not going to give you the chance to tell me. All I want from you is pain.”

She lifts her eyes to the captive, and my breath catches. Gods, she is beautiful like this—ruthlessly, gloriously, powerfully beautiful.

“Marleigh tells me your kind are fairly resistant to pain, so I expect it will take me a little while to find what truly unmakes you,” says Lauriel quietly. “But that’s all right. We have plenty of time.”

I glance at the present Lauriel, the one glued to my side. I don’t think she realizes that her cheek is pressed against my bare breast, her mouth temptingly close to my nipple piercing. No, she’s focused on watching herself in the recent past. The hollow ache in her eyes sends a spike of pain through my heart. I don’t want her to feel like this. I wish I could prevent it, but I can only endure with her while she views the memory.

Queen Lauriel cuts away every scrap of clothing on the Unseelie female’s body. Then with a pair of shears, she begins snipping between the Fae woman’s legs.

The staff doesn’t activate, so we’re forced to watch it all—the excruciatingly slow dismantling of Lauriel’s victim, piece by piece, until the deed is done, and the queen is soaked from head to toe with the ink-dark blood of the prisoner.

Past Lauriel hauls in a long, shuddering breath, and then she walks slowly out of the torture room, dripping as she goes, leaving bloody footprints behind her.

“I’m going to be sick,” Lauriel whispers, and my staff mercifully whisks us back to the present day, right to her bathroom. Lauriel bolts to the sink, and I snatch her hair back as she bends over and vomits up the contents of her stomach. To be

honest, I feel like joining her. When I killed people, it was swift, if not painless. I tore their throats out with my teeth, usually. Bloody, but quick. What Lauriel did to that Fae in the dungeon—it was one of the worst things I’ve seen, and I’ve witnessed plenty of terrible acts.

Lauriel spits, takes a cup from a shelf nearby, and turns on the tap, washing the vomit down before rinsing her mouth and placing a dab of mint paste on her tongue. Then she stares at me in the mirror, her expression haunted and hollow. “I see it now,” she whispers. “What you’re trying to show me. I’ve become the thing I hate.”

“It’s not too late to change that. You’re clever enough to know when you’re wrong, and to make smarter choices in the future.”

The ache in her gaze hardens immediately, shifting into a glare. She tugs her hair free of my hands and bumps my leg hard with her hip, a clear indication that I should back away. “I’m clever enough to know when I’m wrong?” She scoffs harshly. “Or maybe I’m smart enough to know exactly what I’m doing. When I get my hands on that other Fae, Varthil, I’m killing him the same way, because he deserves it, and because I’m the fucking queen, the one with the power. His miserable life will be in my hands, and I will shave him down to bones, just like I did with her.”

Well... shit. My hopes were rising for a moment there... I dared to think, just for a second or two, what it might mean if my fellow riders and I succeed in our task. But then I took a wrong step, spoke a wrong word, and she shielded her heart again.

I can’t think about the reward, or let myself hope for it. My sole focus must be Lauriel. Her salvation, and her survival.

It strikes me suddenly that her survival means more to me than my own.

I have no idea when the shift in my priorities occurred. But it’s fucking terrifying.



Helix eyes me cautiously, like he's trying to figure out my sudden change of mood. I hate the way he's looking at me—like the servants and guards do, like I've lost my shit. Like he's... scared of me.

“Follow me,” I order, and to my surprise, he obeys.

I hate that he doesn't protest. I despise the tender concern in his eyes, and I want it to change—I want him to smirk at me again and call me a brat. I need his sly, smooth tone and his caustic comments like I need air in my lungs.

As we enter the training room, Helix sends light-orbs sailing ahead of us to light the space, and I hate that he has magic and I don't. I hate him for making me suffer through the worst moments of my life again, in vivid detail. I hate him for walking sedately behind me, for smelling like apples and fresh air. I hate him for *existing*.

The minute we step inside, I stride to the weapons rack, seize two throwing axes, and hurl them into his chest.

He grunts, surprised and obviously pained, but these wounds don't cause him agony like the staff did. Maybe I

should get my hands on it again—but as I lunge toward him, he winks and the staff vanishes from his hand.

“Shit,” I hiss, skidding to a halt.

He wrenches both axes out of his chest and flings them back at me. They spin past my ears, a whistle of lethal speed, and embed themselves in the wall.

“You missed,” I taunt him.

“I meant to.”

His arrogance, his utter confidence in his own skill, his ability to heal—I despise it all, and I’m jealous of it all. “I fucking hate you,” I seethe.

“I’m not surprised.”

Venting a harsh sound of frustration, I retreat to the weapons wall, yank blade after blade from the rack, and send each one streaking toward him. Some of them he catches or dodges, while others strike him full-force, making him snarl—and gods, I love that snarl.

He’s prowling closer, barely slowed by my onslaught, his claws twitching at his sides. His teeth are bared—they look longer, sharper. I’m scared out of my skin, and so furious I can hardly breathe. My heart is pounding so hard I think it might burst straight out of my chest.

Only big weapons are left on the rack, and the mat is littered with gleaming blades. I wrench a huge spear from its bracket, ignoring the strain in my biceps as I heft it.

“Come and get me, motherfucker!” I scream, and Helix charges.

I feint and duck, and I almost run him through with the spear—almost. He seizes it—lifts it up so that I’m dangling off the floor, still gripping the spear stubbornly, kicking my feet. Helix grins—the mocking, tilted smile I wanted to see.

It heals me a little.

“What now, brat?” he says silkily. “Give up?”

I swing my whole body backward, then swing forward and drive both boots straight into his chest, against the ax-wounds

that are still healing.

“The *fuck!*” He staggers backward, lowering the spear. I let go, drop to the ground, and slide along the mat, hooking his ankle with my foot as I skid past. Any normal man would have tripped at the sudden jerk against his footing, but Helix is like a massive tree rooted in the forest.

I’m behind him now, so I leap up, jump onto his back, and lock both arms around his throat.

He huffs a protest, but I sink my teeth into the thin cartilage of his long, pointed ear. Gold studs and rings clack against my teeth, and his blood glazes my tongue—hot and unexpectedly sweet.

“You hell-bitch,” he barks, and grabs me with both clawed hands, trying to tug me loose. When that doesn’t work, he lets himself fall backward, like a felled tree. I release his ear, let go, and roll free just in time to avoid being crushed beneath him.

“You could have killed me,” I snap.

“If I wanted to kill you—”

“Don’t say it!”

“—you’d be dead.”

I groan, and Helix laughs, springing lightly upright from his prone position. I blink, trying not to show how impressive that move was.

“Want some more?” He beckons, eyes twinkling, lips quirked in a taunting grin.

“More? I haven’t even started.”

“Then let’s make it interesting. From now on, every time someone draws blood, the injured party takes off a piece of clothing.”

I tilt my head. “Unfair. You’re much stronger and faster than I am.”

“I promise to restrain myself to the strength and speed of a human male of this size,” he says, one hand splayed over his heart. “I swear on my horse. And you have an advantage—you’re wearing more clothes.”

I may not be able to pin him, but if he's holding back, I should be able to keep him from drawing blood. "Fine. But the boots each count as one piece of clothing."

"The deal is struck. Let's seal it with a kiss."

"Let's not."

He pouts a little. "Very well. You may have a small weapon, since I have these." He rattles his claws.

"I'll take two weapons, because you have sharp teeth as well. And your antlers."

"Very well."

We clear the mat of the weapons I threw. Then I choose two short daggers and face him, my feet solidly grounded and my knees bent.

We circle each other, and then he darts in, slashing at me with his claws. My right dagger deflects the sharp nails while my left blade jabs toward his side. But he's swift, and twists gracefully out of the way. Another sweep of the claws, and I block his forearm with mine, swinging around behind him and *almost* slicing his back—but he whirls and kicks my wrist, sending the dagger flying out of my hand. I dive to the floor, whipping the other dagger across his calf, right above the low boot he wears, right through his doeskin trousers.

He tries to grab me but my feet are flying, kicking—I scurry out from his range and jump to my feet. "Got you."

He checks his leg and holds up a fingertip with a tiny smear of red on it. "Impressive." He pulls off a boot and tosses it aside.

I lunge across the mat and rescue my other dagger, but the risk doesn't pay off—I'm still wearing a cloak, and he seizes it, winding it rapidly around his forearm and yanking me close.

He flicks a pointed nail along my cheekbone. "One for me."

"I'll consider it a favor and get rid of this thing." I whip the cloak off. "Come on, then."

With a saucy smile, Helix saunters toward me, flexing his fingers. “You may as well strip down to your bare skin right now.”

“Not happening.”

He whirls into a roundhouse kick, his crimson hair like a whipping flame. In the blur of movement while I’m dodging his legs, I forget about the antlers. Some of them are blunt, rounded, but a sharper one nicks me across the knuckles.

“Fuck,” I hiss. I really didn’t think it through when I demanded that each boot count as one item of clothing. I was thinking it would give me more time, but with as thick as my soles are, it only puts me dreadfully off balance. But unless I want to lose my shirt or pants, the boots are my only option. I wish I’d worn socks with the boots, or added a belt over my tunic, but I dressed simply this evening—a loose tunic, a light chemise, panties, soft leggings, and these confounded boots.

Helix laughs when I tug one of the boots off and limp toward him again.

“I’ll let you remove the other if you like,” he offers.

“No,” I snarl, and then I fall flat on my face at his feet.

He jumps back warily, but when I cry out in pain and grab my ankle, he approaches again, concern furrowing his brow. “Did you twist it?”

The second he’s within reach, I cut him, right across the back of his hand.

Irritation and betrayal flash in his orange eyes, and he pitches his second boot across the room with angry vehemence before attacking me like a feral beast. He’s everywhere at once, and I can’t be sure if he’s keeping to our bargain or using a little of his Fae speed. His thumbnail cuts the back of my wrist, and he barely gives me time to take my other boot off before he charges me again.

My muscles scream as I parry his blows, dodge beneath his big sinewy arms, roll out of the way of his long legs. His bare feet are not as big as I’d imagined—they’re narrow, neatly shaped, with a pronounced arch that I rather like.

Not that I have much time to admire them—I'm barely holding my own. I've always dreamed of having a sparring partner who would challenge me, and now that I do, I'm wishing I'd never agreed to this.

Earlier I vomited up the delicious dinner the chef made me, so I'm running on nothing. My thighs are starting to tremble, and the muscles of my arms burn. My fingers feel as if they've been welded to the dagger hilts.

Helix lunges in, grabbing me, and even though I jab one blade just above his hip, into the braided tattoo on his flank, he manages to sink his nails into my upper arm *and* deliver a nip to the curve of my neck.

He springs away before I can do him any more damage. "I got two on you," he says. "You got one on me. Take it off, Your Majesty."

Shit.

I pull my tunic over my head and toss it away. Helix looks disappointed when he sees I'm wearing a chemise beneath, but I'm not about to ditch that until I have to.

Next I slip off my leggings and kick them aside. Thank the gods I'm wearing panties tonight.

Helix drags his gaze up my body, lingering on my toned thighs, my trim waist, and my breasts.

"Now *you*," I challenge him.

"You asked for it." He bites his lip, smirking at me and holding my gaze while he unlaces his last piece of clothing—his pants.

And of course, he's wearing nothing beneath them.

I'm staring at a naked Fae warrior, all golden tanned skin and swelling biceps and hard slabs of muscle. Not to mention that magnificent cock jutting out between his thighs, with a bit of gold glinting beneath the tip, right where the head meets the shaft. He's fully erect, and fully, heart-stoppingly gorgeous.

The memory of my parents' orgy sours the back of my mind—but he looks so different from that grotesque scene. He's so clean, crisp, and powerful. His body practically glows, and

his eyes burn with living flame. And his hair—gods, his *hair*. I want to sink my whole self into that shining hair, feel it flowing over my bare skin.

I can smell my own sweat—faintly bitter, but tempered with the remaining starflower fragrance of the perfume I spritzed on my wrists after my bath.

And I can smell him—a scent of fresh apples and winter air, blended with a tantalizing golden warmth that somehow has its own fragrance.

Another flush of heat races over my body, intensifying between my legs. I bundle my hair at the back of my neck with both hands, enjoying the cool air against my sweaty nape. But I have nothing to tie back the unruly black waves.

“Allow me.” Helix plucks a long strand of his own scarlet hair and edges toward me. “No tricks, I swear.”

I flinch, but he looks sincere, so I let him step behind me, collect my black locks, and wind his own hair around them to hold the mass off my neck. His hair must be stronger than normal human hair. I don’t think a single hair from my own head could do the same job.

As he’s standing behind me, tying the last knot, the warm head of his cock nudges against my lower back, leaving a tiny smear of wetness.

I shiver.

It’s not disgust this time, but he seems to take it that way. I hear him suck in a breath between his teeth.

“I’ll go,” he says tightly. “I’ve lost the game anyway.”

I whirl around, my heart hammering. “It’s not over yet.” With difficulty I force my eyes up to meet his.

Whatever he reads in my gaze makes his jaw flex and his eyes flare brighter. “Very well. On guard.”

The instant he says it I slash toward his chest with one of my daggers, nearly carving him open. He leaps back just in time. “Fucking brat!”

I snicker and lunge again—but he catches both my wrists with such ease it’s painfully apparent he could have overwhelmed me anytime he wanted to, even without using his full strength.

He walks me backward to the wall while I strain and struggle to break free from the wrist-grip. He keeps pushing me back until my shoulder blades brush the flat weave of a tapestry.

Helix takes one of the daggers from my hand, and the other falls from my nerveless fingers.

The cold point of the dagger pushes against my breastbone, just enough to prick through the skin and release a drop of blood.

“One,” whispers Helix.

He draws the knife downward, ripping through the threads and fabric of my chemise until it falls to the floor.

He lets the knife fall and releases his grip on my wrists.

I lower my arms, half-dazed, barely able to look away from his face, his *face*—there’s a fervent tenderness in it that steals my breath, my hatred, and every saucy retort. I stand against the wall, wordless and waiting.

Helix cups me beneath the arms, thumbs grazing the sides of my breasts, and he lifts me up until I’m nearly eye level with him. My breasts brush against the silken bulk of his pectorals.

He moves in, pinning me to the wall with the burning expanse of his broad chest, and I automatically lift my legs, hooking them on either side of his waist, right over those tempting tattoos.

His mouth glides over mine, a light graze of delicate skin, awakening a wild yearning, an unspoken need quivering on my parted lips because I have to know how he tastes, or I might die.

Then he crushes my mouth with his, and he bites my lip with his canines—a sharp pinch, a burst of blood.

At the same moment, his claws slit both sides of my panties.

This is maniacal, and so unhealthy after the trauma I relived tonight—and yet both my arms are winding around his neck, through that glorious hair, wrapping him tight, holding his mouth to mine.

Kissing him is like having every steely bit of myself immersed into a blazing furnace, where it turns slowly molten and malleable, glowing with golden-orange heat. My entire body reacts with a violent, buzzing surge of need—the need to be shaped by him, molded to fit him. When Helix moves to break the kiss, I grip the back of his skull and seal my lips harder to his. He groans softly in response, breathing amber heat and the sweetness of apples into my mouth.

He reaches down and tugs at the ruined scrap of cloth that was my underwear. It's wet, useless. It slides away easily, and then it's just *him* there, his hard, bare cock pressed along the groove between my pussy lips.

I break the kiss, gasping at the tantalizing contact.

“Little brat.” His teeth scrape over the curve of my ear. “What do you want?”

“There's nothing I should want from you,” I breathe. “Not after *that*.”

He knows what I mean—the memories of my past. Everything I am has been laid bare before him.

“Maybe you *should* fuck me,” I whisper. “And then kill me, like you killed your other lovers. Death is what you think I deserve. It's the revenge you want, after I played with Abraxas.”

His whole body tightens. “Don't speak another male's name while I'm between your legs.”

“I only gave him part of myself. But you want all of me, don't you?” Breathless, flaming, I touch the little gold bar through his nipple.

His cock flexes hard against my pussy.

“What if I tease you like this—” I swivel my hips, rubbing my slick sex along his sensitive length— “and then I say no to you?”

He groans, gripping my body with both hands and hitching me a little higher against the wall.

I feel the tip of his cock brushing against my opening, ready to plunge in. “Stop,” I gasp.

He halts, practically shaking with the force of his need to be inside me. His silken voice is ragged now. “Do you really want me to stop?”

“No,” I confess, a wretched whisper. “But give me a knife first, so I can defend myself if you try to kill me afterward.”

A broken laugh cracks from him. “You want me so badly you’re willing to risk your life?”

“No.”

His amber eyes fracture for a second, but then I say, with all the blood-soaked longing of my sinful soul, “I *need* you that badly. More than I’ve ever needed anything...even revenge.”

He nuzzles along my profile, tugs my lower lip with his teeth. “A dagger won’t save you from me. You know I could break you in half.”

“Fine. Do it then.” Tears slip from the corners of my eyes. “Fuck me until I break.”

He turns his antlered head aside with a furious groan of frustration. But I grab his jaw and yank his face around until he’s looking at me again.

“You leave me unsatisfied and I swear I’ll kill you,” I whisper harshly. “I swear, if you don’t fuck me, I *won’t* change, and then you and your hunters will fail, and terrible things will happen to you. I know you’re afraid of some awful fate. Unless you get inside me this second, I’ll make sure it happens.”

Helix laughs, disbelief and lust thickening his voice. “You think you have to blackmail me into fucking you?”

With a sudden upward thrust of his hips, he rams into me—pops through the tight opening, pushes all the way in. I scream faintly and clutch two handfuls of his hair, my mind whited out by the feel of him, the stretch of my insides, the intense flutters dancing over my clit.

“Now it’s done, for better or worse,” he says in a strangled voice. “Me—inside you.”

“Yes,” I whimper. “Yes, yes. Fuck me, fuck me...”

With a low cry of vindictive triumph he shoves deeper, and a molten thrill surges through my lower body. I’ve been fucked before, but never like this. Never with so much at stake, and somehow my entire being comes to soaring life because I know this climax might be my last. He might be the literal death of me.

My muscles tighten around him involuntarily, and Helix’s huge cock flexes inside me.

“Shit,” he exclaims brokenly. “Gods... you’re perfect. You feel like the end of everything—it’s like fucking the velvet cunt of Death herself.”

“You’re insane,” I whisper.

“I’m Fae, and a ghost of the Wild Hunt.” He chuckles hoarsely, pulls back, then rolls his hips forward. He’s fucking me, pumping deep and slow, while one hand holds me steady against the wall and the other slides warm and hungry over my breast. “Damn this gorgeous little body—*damn you*—you’re my blissful end, Lauriel. My darling oblivion.”

There’s something so unbearably, strangely sweet in those words, and delicate thrills race through my clit again. But I can’t quite shake the gnawing unease in the back of my mind.

“I’m going to regret this,” I whisper. “I’m acting just like *they* did—my parents—prey to the primal sexuality of the Fae.”

“You’re not your parents,” Helix says in a choked voice, thrusting with punishing force. “And if you say that again I’ll pull out of you and spank your ass rose-red.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“I absolutely would.” He fucks me harder, until I’m sure that all my bones are going to be jolted loose, and yet it’s exactly what I need, what I crave—to be pummeled like this, impaled on a cock bigger than I ever imagined could fit inside me. I reach up and grip Helix’s antlers, right at the base where they disappear into his silken hair, and I used them as leverage,

as an anchor point while the need inside me twists tighter, tighter—

Helix grinds inward, his muscled abdomen creating the friction I need against my clit, while the incessant pumping of his cock inflames every sensitive part of me. I'm held in place by his impossible strength, fully invaded by him. My mind isn't blurred and my will hasn't been stolen. I almost wish he'd ensorcelled me into this—then I could truly despise him for it. As it is, I mostly despise myself.

“I hate you,” I hiss, gripping his antlers, trembling on the verge of tears, on the edge of bliss and oblivion.

His eyes burn into mine, and that silken voice glides into my very soul. His hand squeezes my whole breast gently, an encompassing warmth. “And yet, you're letting me fuck you,” he says softly. “You're letting my filthy Fae hands grope this beautiful body. You're letting Fae cock invade this lovely pussy. And you're enjoying it.”

A moaning whimper is my only answer. The muscles between my legs are tightening.

Helix fucks me faster, and with a sharp, shattered cry I come, shuddering around him. The uncoiled tension is a whiplash, snapping back through me, a wild gush of relief washing through my belly. The bliss keeps coming, wave after wave.

As my body tenses repeatedly, Helix gives a mighty groan and comes hard, ramming tight inside me. His forearms slam against the wall on both sides of my head, and he bows forward, his harsh, panting breaths bursting over my lips.

His eyes are squeezed tightly shut, his brow furrowed. He's panting in an odd, harsh rhythm.

His confession echoes in my mind: *I've killed everyone I've ever fucked.*

Fear slithers cold in my belly, disturbing the warmth of my afterglow. My fingers slip from his antlers, sliding down through his beautiful red hair. “Helix?”

He's still panting, but his eyes flash open, shining into mine with a manic, fiery gleam.

I read my death rite in those eyes.

"Helix, don't." My voice is barely a breath. "That rage doesn't control you anymore. You've changed, remember? You're different now."

He growls softly, and his perfect lips twitch back, revealing savage white teeth. "I've changed," he says thickly.

"Yes. And if you changed—if you really did—that means anyone can. Even me."

Impulsively I lean forward and kiss him. His lips relax, and his snarl softens into a low hum of bliss, of peace. There's an answering twitch of his cock, a sudden flexion, and more heat spills from him into me. He shudders, releasing a startled moan at the extra dose of pleasure.

I wrap my legs tighter around his waist and throw both arms around his neck again, binding us together.

I think he's past the moment of peril now. His breathing has shifted to a cadence of relief, of grateful bliss. A lump of cold iron in my chest is easing, melting under the force of his heat. Locked together with him, my mouth sealed to his, the edge of my anger is dulled, and the pain of my memories is blurred, softened.

I could swear I feel a hot tear on my cheek, and I don't know if it's his or mine.

Helix slides his warm tongue into my mouth, testing the edges and points of my teeth. Then he leans back, smirking. "Human teeth are so small and cute."

"Put your tongue in my mouth again and I'll show you how cute they are."

He laughs. Then slowly, eyes locked with mine, he draws his thick, softened cock out of me. I gasp as it slides free and his cum spills down my inner thighs. There's so much of it.

He sets me down and backs away, devouring the sight of me standing there naked, traces of blood here and there, my

thighs slick with his release. Fuck, I can even smell his fragrance on my skin.

“Pretty little Fae-fucked queen,” he murmurs.

It begins to sink in with renewed force—what I just did. With one of the Fae.

“I should—find a contraceptive tonic,” I say.

He tilts his head quizzically, a smile quirking his mouth. “I’m technically still a ghost. And even if I wasn’t, I’m not in heat. You can’t get pregnant by a Fae who’s not in heat.”

“Oh. Convenient.”

“Very.”

“Speaking of consequences—you’re very sure you won’t rip out my throat?”

“The urge has passed. And what’s more—I don’t think I’ll ever feel it again.” There’s a yearning intensity in his eyes, a tender violence. “After hundreds of years, I’ve found the answer to that urge. A cruel happenstance, but there it is.”

I don’t understand what he’s saying, but I know I want more of his glossy, smooth skin against mine, more of the magnificent hardness of his muscles, more of his strength, more of his abundant, gorgeous hair. I want his long legs, his thin feet, his skinny toes. I want the sharp ears decorated with so much jewelry, and the corded forearms, and the pert nipples, and the gleaming orange eyes. And even the branched brown antlers.

“Come to my bed,” I command him.

“You’re giving me orders?”

“Yes.”

He chuckles. “That’s not how it works. It’s nearly dawn, which means our time is at an end. You belong to Abraxas now.”

My heart sinks, like it’s been plunged into an ice-cold bath. At the same moment, the familiar heat of rage sears my lungs.

He’s leaving. Of course he is.

Fuck him.

Helix gives me a crooked smile. “Are you going to miss me, brat?”

“Not at all.” I keep my voice steady and cold as I pick up my clothes. “I like Abraxas better anyway. So... I won’t see you again?”

I ask that question without looking at him, as I face the door of the training room.

“Maybe once more.” His voice is soft.

Once more.

The rage splits my heart in two, scorches the inside of my head, pushes burning tears into my eyes.

He did this on purpose... made me weak for him, and now...

Of course he doesn’t want to stay with me. Who would?

I keep my back turned to him as I stand there naked, with my clothes in my hand, his scent between my legs, and the single strand of his scarlet hair knotted around mine.

“I hate you so much,” I say in a strained voice—and then I run to my room.



I don't return to the Hovel. I call Enbarr and ride the cloud-paths through the Void, pausing occasionally to battle one of the monsters of the In-Between, simply because I need to *fight* something.

As I ride, as I fight, I ponder the moments I just shared with Lauriel.

I thought I'd gotten past my murderous craving. I convinced myself that the centuries I've spent with the Hunt purged me of that terrible need.

I really thought I was strong enough, or I wouldn't have fucked her.

But I was wrong.

The moment I came inside her, when my climax fell just short of satisfying, the same disappointment and rage roared through my blood, hot and virulent. I felt the same surge of betrayal, of vengeful agony. My teeth ached with the need to plunge into the sweet, tender flesh of her neck and *rip*...

It was a habit, deeply ingrained—a ritual, one whose claws were apparently still lodged in my throat.

The orgasm still wasn't quite enough. It wasn't the perfect satisfaction I craved, and rage spouted up, choking me, forcing my jaws apart.

And she knew. Lauriel saw it in my eyes.

She understood that I was about to kill her. Understood there was something missing—not in *her*, but in *me*—and I couldn't bear to let her live, having witnessed my frailty, my wickedness.

She spoke to me, and her tone meant even more than her words—a calm, steady tone, colored with empathy. Because she knows rage, this human queen. I witnessed the horrific outworking of her anger in that dungeon. She understands the colors and the weight of anger, the chains with which it can bind the soul.

She murmured words to me. *If you changed—if you really did—that means anyone can. Even me.*

To her, I became the embodiment of hope. And when she kissed me, I yielded.

I seized my inner monster in both hands—throttled him until he burst into shadows and ash. I gave up my expectations, my eternal ache for wholeness, my rage at never being fully satisfied, my plan for any future. I gave myself up to be one thing only—the hope she needs. The servant of her salvation.

And something locked into place. My body responded with a swell of pleasure, a sweet fullness, and my mind, my soul, my entire purpose became excruciatingly, blessedly clear.

I was utterly satisfied, body and spirit, for the first time in my long existence.

She is the one I was hunting for all those centuries—the one who can make me whole. I finally found her.

Or perhaps I finally became someone deserving of wholeness.

What Lauriel and I shared tonight was visceral, vital. Both of us, knowing each other's darkness to the uttermost, and connecting in spite of it—no—*because* of it.

I know what true connection feels like now, and I will probably never enjoy it again.

I swing my staff through the eye-studded limb of a Void-monster, watching the satisfying burn of my flame through the smoky flesh. Some call these creatures sluaghs—entities made from the remnants of wicked, diseased souls, the offal of various realms, slowly digested and absorbed into great masses with one sole purpose—to consume any remnant of life, consciousness, or individual thought. In parts of the In-Between, especially those governed by less merciful god-stars, the sluaghs populate the Void thickly, or join into a single massive entity and take on a more centralized purpose. Here, they are occasional wanderers, and permitted prey for restless hunters like me.

I've seen so much of the universe that the human world Lauriel inhabits seems ridiculously tiny sometimes. And yet, when I'm there in physical form, it's comforting, like a favorite armchair. I want to linger.

But lingering isn't possible. Rest isn't possible. Outside of the Hovel or my duties with Lauriel, I am condemned to wander, ever restless.

“Helix.”

My name echoes through the cavernous nothing, rippling along the pathway of cloud on which Enbarr and I have paused. It should be impossible for sound to carry out here, and yet, when I'm on Enbarr's back, it does.

The sluagh I was fighting rolls over and drifts away, its severed limb floating downward into the distance. Or perhaps it's floating upward. Directions are relative here, and few laws of science or magic apply, except those imposed by the god-star in charge of this cluster of realms. In our case that is Andregh, a god-star known for his love of balance and opposites.

“Helix!”

My name is called again, and I turn Enbarr around.

Paemon is riding along the cloud-path on Hellor, his enormous black steed. Hellor has no misty white mane to soften his appearance—his tail and mane are dead-black, a banner of inky shadow streaming away into the void. He has the fangs of a

man-eating kelpie and four red eyes. Instead of reins, Paemon controls him with a net of delicate shimmering threads—like spiderwebs, or like the silver strands of Paemon’s hair.

Atop Hellor’s back, Paemon looks slimmer and paler than ever. His long purple hair flows out to the side, whipped by the wind that forever flows along the paths of the Wild Hunt.

“You didn’t return to the Hovel after your shift,” he says.

“I needed to be alone.”

“I need to show you something. Come.”

He doesn’t wait for a reply—merely twitches the spiderweb reins stretched across Hellor’s muzzle. The two of them whirl around and charge back down the cloud-path.

These paths through the Void are visible only to those who ride a horse of the Wild Hunt. They change in form sometimes, taking on new curves, loops, or plunges. Enbarr enjoys a fresh challenge—she always snorts with delight when a familiar pathway shifts into something different.

Paemon’s steed plunges along the route in huge bounds. Enbarr is smaller, but she’s determined not to be outdone. She kicks up her heels and races along the twisting path so fast that wind screams past my cheeks. I laugh and lean forward, urging her on, carried out of my worries in spite of myself.

Enbarr has been my one constant companion since I joined the Hunt. Whether I’m riding with the whole army of hunters, partnered with another spirit, or traveling alone, she is always there. She has a sweet, willing spirit, and we are perfectly attuned.

“Fly, my beauty,” I urge her. “Let’s show them what we can do.”

With an excited whinny, she leaps forward, bounding doe-like through the clouds. Another whinny—more like a ghostly horse-scream—and we pull abreast of Paemon and Hellor.

“Race you back to the Hovel,” I challenge him.

He throws me a look of supreme disinterest, but Hellor whinnies his agreement and takes off with giant bounds.

“Come on,” I yell to Enbarr, and she does her best. But even ghost horses have their strengths and weaknesses, and it turns out she’s no match for Hellor once his mind is made up. He and Paemon reach the Hovel just before us.

I slide off Enbarr’s back and give her a consoling pat on the neck. She and Hellor screech at each other and rear up, hooves clashing with a ghostly thunder.

“Take it outside,” I order them, and they charge out again, leaping away into the Void.

Paemon stands in the center of the Hovel, beside the small table. There’s an ethereal grace in the way he stands, in the angle of his hips, and the turn of his lovely profile as he gazes down at the orb. Among the shadows swirling inside it are more than a dozen strands of glittering gold.

“I don’t know what you did last night,” he says in his soft, hissing voice. “But it’s working.”

I stare into the orb, my heart swelling as I note how many new strands of gold have overtaken the darkness.

“I fucked her,” I say quietly.

When I glance up, Paemon’s face hasn’t changed. There’s no judgment. No reaction.

My gaze wanders down the planes of his body—lean, austere, beautifully carved, as if he was neatly cut from the finest pale stone. His navel is pierced and a small jewel dangles from it.

“Do you feel desire at all?” I ask him suddenly, half-envious.

He turns his head. Drops his gaze to my feet, and draws it deliberately upward, along my body, until he reaches my eyes. “Yes,” he says.

Oh.

Fuck.

In this form, desire is a gut-wrenching need, an all-encompassing buzz of unsatisfied longing. I left Lauriel’s presence not long ago, and yet when Paemon gives me that

lingering look, I feel the twist of need through my spirit, the surge of energy through my ghostly form.

“Don’t look so shocked,” he says. “It’s not just you. I’m attracted to intelligence and strength. You, Brax, and the mortal—all of you possess those qualities.”

“Intelligence? Brax?” I hook an eyebrow, and Paemon’s icy demeanor shifts, his lips twitching up at the corner.

“Brax is clever in his own way,” he says. “My attraction to each of you means nothing. It will never come to fruition. You and Abraxas are allowing yourselves to be distracted by the brief carnal pleasures available to you now, while I am keeping my sights set on the future—the pleasures I could enjoy for decades if we succeed.”

“But if we fail, at least Brax and I will have enjoyed eating and fucking one last time,” I counter. “You should grant yourself a little joy, as well. Perhaps when it’s your turn, you’ll have a chance to—”

“To what?” He gives me a cold stare. “To pleasure myself, or touch Lauriel? With these?” He holds up his wickedly long claws, which encase his real fingers like armor. If he takes the claws off, he immediately feels horrific pain—much like the torture I endure when my staff is submerged in water, or the agony Abraxas feels if his sword is sheathed. Brax and I can banish our weapons temporarily without pain, but Paemon must wear his constantly.

“Stop looking at me with such pity,” he hisses. “I’ve always valued pain over pleasure. Not like you and Abraxas.”

“Let me feel this compassion.” I reach toward him, and though he recoils a little, he doesn’t step away. “Empathy is new for me.”

He tenses, hissing, but he doesn’t protest.

When the three of us interact in the Hovel, we have more physicality, since we share a phase of existence. I wrestled Brax, and I can touch Paemon, too. My claws glide through his hair—like purple silk threaded with silver... yet there’s a gossamer quality to it. “I’d like to touch your hair when you’re in physical form,” I say. “Your hair... and other things.”

A pause, and then he asks, “Have you taken a male before?”

“No.”

“I enjoy both males and females,” he whispers. “Male bodies are usually harder, but they have their soft, tender places—their warm spots. I like finding those sensitive areas.”

“Spoken like a torturer. Isn’t that what you did in your past life? Not the sensual kind, though—the real thing.”

“Yes.” Paemon pulls away, and his ghostly hair slides from my fingers. “I excelled at extracting delicate pieces of information, but I also had a nasty habit of eating bits of whoever I was questioning. I always felt that there was a space inside me—a hollow that was screaming to be filled, and when I consumed parts of other beings, the void quieted for a while. That foul practice, along with my rabid delight in causing pain, brought me to the Wild Hunt.”

He paces back to his usual corner and leans against the wall, while I try to cope with the fact that I just found my mate, my soul’s missing piece, and yet I’m feeling tender and aroused with my fellow hunter as well.

“I think something is fucking wrong with me,” I say.

Paemon gives a light, sour laugh. “I tell you I used to torture and eat my victims, and you think something is wrong with *you*?”

“She changed me.” I stalk across the room and stare out into the star-swirled Void. “The little brat-queen made me feel more deeply than I ever have. I *understand* you, Paemon. I know that aching hollow in your chest, because I’ve felt it inside myself, too. I’m bound to her now, and I’m pulled to you, and I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t thought about fucking Abraxas once or twice. What is happening to me?”

“Whatever is meant to happen,” he says coolly.

“Well, it’s damn confusing. And I don’t think I can... endure it.” The last two words are a confession I didn’t plan to release—the core of my fear. My time with Lauriel is over, and the sweet, sorrowful hunger I feel for her will never be sated.

Nor will I have the chance to explore anything further with my fellow riders.

I am done. Finished. I had a life once, and I wrecked it spectacularly, for myself and so many others. I don't deserve another chance.

"Come here," says Paemon. "I want to try something."

Glumly I wander over to his corner. He sits down cross-legged and pats the space on the floor in front of him. Frowning, I sit down with my back to him.

A moment later something probes delicately through my hair, separating a strand.

His claws. He's parting my hair with his claws, laying locks over each other in a sequence.

He's fucking *braiding* my hair.

"No." I start to move away, but a blade-sharp claw presses against my throat. In this form it wouldn't kill me, but it would hurt.

"I'm bored," Paemon whispers. "Sit still."

"Fine." I cross my arms over my chest. "You're next."

A soft chuckle. "Tell me of the clever queen and her memories."

I hesitate. So far I've updated my fellow riders on everything I've witnessed in Lauriel's company—but tonight was painfully intimate. I don't want to betray her trust, even to save her soul.

It's as if Paemon can read my mind, because he says softly, "You're concerned, not just for our mission, but for *her*."

I can't speak. No silken words slither over my tongue—no honeyed phrases can disguise the truth.

Paemon guesses it anyway. "You love her."

"I shouldn't."

"There is no harm in it, as long as your purpose remains the same," he says. "Revealing her secrets to me is not a betrayal. You and I share a goal, and should share information."

Knowing her past may help me be a better guide to her when it is my turn.” His voice sinks so low I can barely hear him. “I care for her too... more than I should.”

That quiet admission convinces me.

“Very well.” I settle in, lulled by the click and glide of Paemon’s claws through my hair. “There’s a lot to tell.”

“I am listening.”



A few hours of sleep isn't enough, especially when I keep waking, tormented by the subconscious awareness that I let myself *want* someone and they left, because of *course* they did. They always do.

What I did with Helix was deeply transgressive, running counter to everything I believe about the Fae—every decree I've made regarding them. I'm morosely conscious of that as my maids prepare me for the day, as I take a few bites of porridge, as I leave the palace and climb into my carriage for my weekly tour of the city.

Abraxas hasn't shown up yet. It's a relief, honestly. My connection with these ghosts of the Wild Hunt hasn't played out like I expected... not that I had very clear expectations to begin with.

Since the day is cold, I ordered a closed carriage, but it has wide windows so I can wave to my subjects. We'll stop at a few key points throughout the city, including the Temple of Andregh, god of balance, where I'll be expected to attend worship and then visit my parents' crypt. I'd rather stick pine needles into my eyeballs than do either of those things.

As the carriage rattles down one of the city's main thoroughfares, I wave absently while taking in the sights. Snow blankets the gables and windowsills of the shops, which line the street in long rows of four-story stone buildings. The stonework varies from faintly pink or gleaming white, to smooth gray or burnt orange. The sky is overcast, so many of the shop owners have left their outdoor lanterns lit—a despicable waste of fuel, but I have to admit the golden light does add cheer to the gray morning.

My people walk the streets, bundled in overcoats, wrapped in scarves and shawls, with mittens on their hands and baskets over their arms. On a street corner, a vendor is selling cups of a steaming beverage. His chalked sign reads, “Josek’s Best Cider! Celebrate Midwinter Glee! Get your Festival Cup here,” with several flavors listed below, including “Apple Glee, Cinnamon Cheer, and Orange Zest.” He’s passing it out to buyers in plain wooden cups decorated with painted holly sprigs.

Midwinter Glee has been canceled: as we drove along I saw several public notices posted to that effect. The city watch deserves commendation for spreading the word promptly.

Which means this cider-selling bastard cares nothing for the command of his queen.

I slide open the hatch in the carriage wall that allows me to speak to the driver. “Stop the coach.”

“Yes, Majesty.”

As I slide the hatch shut and turn back around, I startle sharply at the sight of Abraxas sitting on the bench seat across from me, one leg propped across his knee. His sword is nowhere in sight, and his body has that telltale fogginess at the edges, which means he’s in ghost form, perceivable only to me.

“Why are you stopping here?” he says. “Surely you’re not going to harass that poor vendor.”

“He’s defying me by advertising Midwinter Glee when I’ve canceled it.”

“You’ve canceled the official holiday and the festival events, yes. But you can’t prevent people from celebrating in their own way.”

“Watch me.”

As the carriage halts, I fling open the door before my guards can open it for me. My boot barely touches the carriage step before I’m on the snow-flecked cobblestones, marching toward the vendor’s cart, with my heavy black-velvet skirts clutched in both hands.

Abraxas strides alongside me. “Wait one moment. Before you rebuke him—just stand here for a minute, and watch.”

But my guards are already announcing me. “Her Royal Majesty, Queen Lauriel of Revallen.”

The half-dozen customers waiting in line by the cart recoil with low exclamations. There’s apprehension in their eyes as they bow to their monarch. Only two months since my parents’ death, and already I have a reputation. These people know I’m not to be trifled with, and their frightened deference pleases me.

Except—one person doesn’t seem frightened of me at all. The burly, bearded vendor gives me a red-cheeked grin and comes out from behind the cart, wiping his hands on a pine-green apron. His heavy woolen coat bears red patches on the elbows and shoulders.

“Well, now! Isn’t this an honor!” He bows. “What can I do for you, Your Majesty? Would you care for a special blend? Finest cider in the city!”

His jolly demeanor reminds me a little of Abraxas, though this vendor is thickset in a softer way. He looks as if he would hug me if I asked him, and do a hearty job of it, too.

“I like this fellow,” Abraxas says.

“Of course you do,” I snap aloud. Then I remember no one else can hear Brax. “Of course you have the finest cider,” I amend. “But your sign there—”

“Oh, I can make other flavors for you! Anything you like!” says the vendor eagerly. “Would you fancy a twist of peppermint? A dose of rum? A sprinkle of lemon peel or a dollop of honey?”

“No!” I exclaim. “Enough! I’m not here for your swill—I’m here to remind you that there is no Midwinter Glee. You are

operating under false pretenses, in defiance of a royal edict, and I'm forced to shut you down." I turn to my guards. "Confiscate this cart and everything in it. See that this vendor goes straight home."

The vendor's smile unravels, disbelief waking in his eyes. "But... this is my livelihood. I'm doing no harm, just bringing a little cheer—"

"How dare you defy your queen?" One of my guards, Grimmald, steps forward, fist upraised. I've noticed he enjoys defending the smallest slight to my name and station. Or maybe he just likes hurting people.

As he hauls back to punch the vendor, I spot two small curly-haired children standing nearby, tucked against their mother's skirts. They're each holding a cup of steaming cider. In their dark eyes I see the stricken shock of two little souls who were having a lovely day shopping with their mother—until *I* arrived.

I'm the one spoiling their simple joy.

"Grimmald," I snap. "Enough."

But I'm too late, and he doesn't stop. His blow sends the burly vendor staggering backward, blood seeping from his cut lip.

As Grimmald turns toward me with a smug smile, I lose my mind.

I strike him full across the face with my palm, then backhand him again. I'm wearing many heavy rings today, so I know each slap hurts.

"Majesty," he gasps.

"Go back to the palace," I hiss. "Pack your things. You're dismissed from your post."

Grimmald hurries away, holding his cheek.

The vendor is staring at me. Everyone is staring at me.

I don't make sense to them. I'm unpredictable, unreliable. Terrifying.

“Keep your cart,” I say coldly. “Change the sign to something besides Midwinter Glee.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” The vendor bows. “Thank you.”

I turn on my heel, gesturing for my guards to mount again and take their places on either side of my carriage. Then I duck back inside, close the door, and pound on the wall as a signal for the driver to go.

As the carriage rattles to life, I jerk the curtains shut over every window. Frantic breath hisses between my teeth, and I bend over, pressing one hand to my stomach and the other over my mouth to stifle the long, strained sobs wheezing from my throat.

What am I? Who am I? What am I doing?

Why do I act like this?

Is this who I want to be?

I tried to stop Grimmald’s attack—to keep the children from seeing it. And instead they witnessed both his blow *and* the manic violence of their queen, the woman for whom they are supposed to feel loyalty and respect.

I thought I desired my people’s fear, but maybe I don’t. Yet earning anything else from them seems like a monumental, impossible task. Fear is easy to instill. Loyalty, respect, honor... love... those are so much harder to cultivate, and I don’t think I have the energy for the task.

“I can’t do this,” I whisper through my clasped fingers.

In the gloom of the coach, Abraxas materializes. He leans forward from the opposite seat, elbows braced on his knees. He’s shirtless, of course, every rich brown curve and angle of his muscled torso on full display. But it’s his eyes that capture me—vivid red, the red of apples and autumn leaves. Warm red beneath crisp white brows. He scrapes his teeth over his full bottom lip and it emerges, damp and kissable.

“You tried, back there.” His deep voice rolls over me like a blessing.

“I didn’t try enough.” The words rasp from my throat. “I ruin things. I ruined my parents’ lives by being born. By being a

small, weak girl instead of a big, strong son. I ruined their debauched fun with my curiosity. And I'm afraid I'm going to ruin this kingdom, but I *have* to prepare us for war—war that is inevitable because of *me*, because of what I am. I have to be the mad, wild queen, don't you see? It's the only thing holding back the other kingdoms from invasion. They're watching me. As long as my reputation is one of terror and unpredictability, they hesitate. The minute they think I'm weak, soft, or kind, they will strike."

"That may be so," Abraxas murmurs. "But when or if they do, what kind of people will put up a better fight? Revallens who have been terrorized, beaten down, and robbed of joy and charity? Or those who love their queen and are grateful for her mercy?"

"But I'm not merciful to myself either," I say hoarsely. "I don't expect anyone else to sacrifice things I'm not willing to give up. I'm hard on them, yes, but I'm hard on myself, too."

"Maybe that's part of the problem."

"I won't be self-indulgent like my parents."

"Did I say you have to be?" He releases a half-sigh, half-laugh, and rubs the back of his neck. "You don't have to be one extreme or the other. We're heading for the temple of Andregh, aren't we? God of *balance*? Perhaps you'll learn something there, if you're willing to be taught."

"What if I'm not?" I mutter.

"Then I'll have to reinforce the lesson." He grins, and damn it—his smile is like lightning, like a bright shock to my heart. I almost want to smile back.

"Do one thing for me, love," he says. "Send a message back to the palace and request a feast tonight. Tell them to invite your five favorite people in this city. Their rank and role do not matter—just choose your five favorite people."

"But I don't want to. I'd rather eat alone and read."

"Nonsense. You've isolated yourself for too long."

"I'm around people all the time."

“Not in the way that’s healthiest for your soul. You need connection, love, and I’m going to see that you get it.”

I’m about to protest again—but he’s right. I may never have fully trusted anyone at school, but I did have friendships, especially during those first years. I miss the conversations, the camaraderie, the sense of being a member of a close-knit group. Maybe I should try to find that feeling again.

“Fine,” I relent. “When we reach the temple, I’ll send the message.”

“Better start thinking of your five favorite people,” Brax suggests.

It’s trickier than I expected, but I manage to design the list. My two favorite chambermaids, Arin and Krissa; Lodraed, a female bodyguard who seems especially dedicated to her role; Kilda, a clever woman with a dry sense of humor who’s in charge of the city’s water supply and sewage disposal, and Orseau, the palace tailor, who in the short period of my reign has crafted me many garments that fit both my body and my personality beautifully.

“Can I invite six?” I ask Abraxas. “Marleigh should be there. He’s supposed to return today.”

“You can do anything you like, love,” he replies.

When we pull into the temple courtyard, I climb from the coach and give the message to one of my guards, who rides off toward the palace. Abraxas drifts out of the carriage and vanishes. No matter. He’ll reappear when he’s ready—probably at the most inconvenient moment.

Taking a deep breath, I face the Temple of Andregh, god of balance.

It’s a work of art, truly—a dark, monumental edifice rearing high into the gray winter sky. Every tower, every peaked window, every carven pinnacle is perfectly symmetrical. Each stone was cut, measured, and polished with painstaking precision to ensure an exquisitely flawless fit.

In the center of the courtyard is a great sculpture—a large stone ball, with a slab of stone delicately balanced atop it. On

one end of the slab, the tiny figures of naked humans climb up one another, the topmost of them reaching toward the sky. At the slab's other end is a tree, whose branches and roots reach equally high and deep—and somehow the two, nature and humanity, remain in perfect balance, keeping the slab poised on the stone ball beneath it.

The sculpture never fails to amaze me. Designed by one of our kingdom's most renowned artists, it is over seventy years old now, meticulously maintained by the Priesthood of Andregh.

I doubt the priests will welcome me with much enthusiasm. My mother used to give liberally to the temple, especially at this time of year—but it wasn't out of any overflow of pity and kindness. She gave out of guilt, trying to compensate for her year-round excess. Still, to the Priesthood, who serve the poor of the city and the surrounding countryside, coin from a selfish hand does as much good as coin from a compassionate one.

I have not been overly wasteful, so I refuse to be overly generous.

At my command, one of the guards fetches my offering from beneath the seat of the carriage and hands it to me. It's a small chest of coin—*very* small. Gripping it in my hands, I pace slowly across the courtyard to the temple doors.

The building seems to soar above me, to bow over me like some ominous cloaked figure, its spires like warning fingers that signal my impending doom. From somewhere inside, I hear the echoes of a solemn chant—men's deep voices gliding through endless bars of melody in deference to the god.

My guards keep pace with me as I mount the temple steps, cross the foyer, and move into the sanctuary. The impossibly tall windows behind the altar contain panels of faceted crimson glass, which paint the white-tiled floor in triangles of blood.

Behind the stone altar stands the statue of Andregh—poised on one foot, his arms stretched out at odd angles. Each arm bears long strings of woven prayers, jotted on tiny strips of paper, bound with thread, and then twisted together.

The god's face is smooth, beautiful in its stony symmetry. I pause, suddenly struck by how very Fae he looks. Perhaps the

sculptor was familiar with a faerie or two.

The smell of incense invades my nose, settles in my lungs. Cardamom, viveda, dammar, and jasmine. The temple near the school burned a similar combination on the night of every full moon. Instead of Andregh alone, that chapel had statues for a number of different gods. I never had much use for any of them, but I liked the fragrance that hung heavy in the chapel on those nights.

Here in Andregh's temple, worshipers with offerings stand in neat rows, each row marked by black tiles on the sanctuary floor. Their presence means a rededication rite is about to begin. At least I have not done the High Priest the dishonor of being late.

He comes toward me from the altar, as he must. He's expected to greet royalty whenever they arrive.

"Your Majesty." He bows briefly.

"Priest." I hand over the chest, and he passes it to a young boy wearing temple livery.

"You honor us with your presence." The words leak between the priest's stiff lips.

"The god honors me with his blessing," I reply, as I'm supposed to. Accompanied by my four remaining guards, I turn and walk to the left among the pillars, into the gated box where the royal family worships. There are several padded benches there, as well as two large cushioned chairs. My parents attended worship rarely, and when they did, it was always in the company of many lords and ladies-in-waiting—at least from what I can remember. My parents' funeral two months ago was the first time I'd set foot in this place for many years.

As my guards take up positions around the royal box, I sink into my father's chair, and immediately Abraxas appears in my mother's. I can't speak to him in this place, nor do I want to. I give him a pointed glare, hoping that will keep him quiet.

In the shadows beyond the pillars, along the edges of the sanctuary, the choir of priests continues to sing. Their words are slow and drawn-out, a theme repeated in a myriad of different ways.

*Between grief and glee,
Between need and greed,
Between me and my enemy,
Lies the truth.*

*Between blindness and sight,
Between morning and night,
Between health and blight,
Lies the center.*

*Between truth and inference,
Between same and difference,
Between sneer and reverence,
Lies the truth.*

*Between hate and obsession,
Between want and possession,
Between answer and question,
Lies the center.*

The High Priest stands behind the altar and begins the sacrifice of balance. It's gruesome, and involves him placing the bloody organs and entrails of a white rabbit on either side of a golden scale, until the perfect balance is achieved. The rabbit's skin is laid over the raised knee of Andregh's statue.

I have no idea how the practice of animal sacrifice is supposed to please Andregh. I've never liked it, but some traditions are too entrenched for me to abolish this early in my reign. At least such sacrifices only occur twice a year—midsummer and midwinter.

While the robed choir continues to drone, worshipers come forward to present their gifts. Some bring coin, while others bring illustrations of balance—a perfect snowflake, a neatly-cut log of wood, a perfectly round cake, a plump fish with fins that match each other exactly, a basket of symmetrical potatoes. The offerings honor the god, and the priests will pass most of it along to the needy.

One woman brings her twin babies for the High Priest to bless. In our kingdom, identical twins often join the priesthood together and serve at one of the chapels, shrines, or temples throughout the land. Their symmetry is viewed as the highest sign of Andregh's favor.

Personally I've always thought the reverence for identical twins to be rather silly.

"What am I supposed to be learning here?" I whisper to Brax.

"Look at the worshipers' faces as they deliver their gifts," he replies. "None of this is required. It is all done willingly, knowing that each gift will help someone in need. See that woman, there—so excited over the symmetry of a squash?" He chuckles. "And the High Priest is so kind to her, showing equal enthusiasm. Look how happy the woman is!"

"As if Andregh gives a fuck about a squash," I say under my breath.

Abraxas sobers, looking at me. "He cares about the spirit of the gift." At my frown of surprise, he nods. "Oh, yes, I've met him. In fact, he's one of the most personable and involved of all the gods. He has many realms to oversee, but he enjoys looking in on this one from time to time. I daresay that's why he's going to so much trouble to ensure that this kingdom, which is devoted to his worship, will survive and thrive under your rule."

Questions pile up swiftly in my mind, and even though I want to scream them all at Brax, I force myself to maintain the softest of whispers. "I thought you came to Revallen because a citizen summoned you."

"The citizen summoned us with an ancient relic, which used to reside in Faerie," says Abraxas. "That relic came from an isle that has been of particular interest to Andregh lately. He and some of the other gods imprisoned a rogue god there—it's a long story, and only pertains to you because when that rogue god was defeated, two people from that isle traveled here, to Revallen. They were met with cruelty and suspicion by your Fae - patrols, and they decided to give the ancient relic to one of your people, as revenge. Your subject used the relic to call the Wild Hunt upon this kingdom."

“You lost me somewhere,” I murmur.

“It’s complicated. But know this—none of what has happened to you lately has been by chance,” Brax says. “It’s all part of a plan.”

From across the sanctuary, the High Priest is eyeing me while he accepts another gift, so I seal my lips to prevent the words of disbelief and protest from pouring out. The Priest is too far away to hear my whispers to Brax, but he might see my mouth moving.

Brax notes my silence and chuckles. “You can shout at me all you like later. Won’t change the truth.”

I ignore him pointedly while the offerings conclude and the High Priest delivers a brief homily on the joys of giving to those in need. I try not to let his words affect me, but two sentences in particular strike deep into my soul, despite my best efforts.

Wealth and power are not meant to endure, but to evolve. They should flow downward from hand to hand, seeking out those most in need of resources and agency.

Part of my soul, buried deep under layers of betrayal and anxiety, echoes the sentiment. And I’m not sure what to make of that.

After the homily, I rise and leave the sanctuary first, as is my right. The Queen does not have to wait to file out of the building with everyone else.

After the red-lit gloom of the church, the pale gray of the winter sky is a stark contrast, like the bite of fresh cold air in my lungs after the smoky incense.

I turn right and walk along the edge of the courtyard to the graveyard gate, brushing my hand along the top of the wall and watching clumps of snow tumble from the edge. When the cold stings my hand too sharply, I pull my fingers back into the shelter of my heavy cloak. The cloak has a large hood which I haven’t used all day, but I lift it now and settle it over my hair and the small crown I’m wearing. For this part of my outing, I don’t want anyone watching my expressions too closely.

My guards open the graveyard gate for me. Two of them walk ahead, scanning the area for threats. They each wear swords and carry small one-handed crossbows, easy to fire and reload.

While most of our dead are burned to ash, the royals are always buried. I don't understand why. Seems less respectful to let someone's flesh rot off their bones. But these customs were established long before my birth, and I'm expected to follow them.

"I intend to set a different precedent when I pass away," I murmur, half to myself. "No burial for me—just a quick, hot fire."

"When the Fae die, we turn gray and crumble to dust," says Abraxas cheerfully. "Human mortality is so... messy."

"Don't forget smelly," I mutter.

He laughs—a big, rolling, contagious laugh that immediately fills me up with warm, golden merriment. "Right. All those gases being released in one final concert." He makes several farting sounds that are so accurate, so human, and so very un-Fae that my whole chest swells tight with restrained laughter. Somehow I manage to hold it back until we get inside my parents' crypt.

"Stay outside," I gasp to my guards, and I haul the stone door shut. Then I explode into peals of laughter. If my bodyguards can hear me at all, they probably think I've gone even more insane than usual.

Abraxas is laughing too, his huge shoulders shaking. The moment my laughter begins to fade, he makes another farting sound that sets me off again.

"I don't know why I'm laughing," I wheeze, tears oozing from my eyes. "It's not even that funny—and so inappropriate because we're in my parents' fucking tomb."

"Shit, that's right." He pinches the bridge of his wide nose. "We should probably stop. You stop first, and then I will."

"All right." I suck in a deep breath. "All right. I can stop this foolishness. I am the Queen, and I—"

He draws himself up to his full height and says, in a fake, high-pitched, feminine voice, “I am the *Queen*, and I do not make merry, nor do I allow anyone *else* to be merry.”

That voice, coming out of his big, barrel-chested warrior’s body, is too much. I collapse into giggles again, my eyes weeping more tears of helpless laughter. I can’t remember the last time I laughed so hard. Maybe never.

“Stop,” I choke out. “My stomach hurts—gods, don’t do anything else.”

“But you’re so cute when you laugh.” He gives me a broad, sweet grin. “So damn fuckable.”

“What?”

“Did I say fuckable? I meant adorable.” He winks.

I laugh faintly, but that word brings back the memory of my interlude with Helix last night, and my mood drops, like a stone plummeting into a cold, cold well.

“Lauriel.” His smile disappears, replaced by concern. “What is it?”

“Helix fucked me last night,” I say quietly.

“Shit. And he didn’t—well, obviously he didn’t kill you.”

“No.”

“And you—was it—” Brax winces, rubs the back of his neck again. “Did you—I mean, did he—”

“I was a goddess for several shining moments. And then I was human again. Breakable.” I glance down at the small cut across my knuckles, already scabbed-over and healing. The cut from Helix’s antlers.

I walk past Abraxas, feeling the misty chill of his ghost form as I approach the twin plaques marking my parents’ final resting place.

“I never saw their bodies, you know.” I splay my hand across the cold, smooth marble of my mother’s plaque. “I only got the letter, describing how it happened.”

Brax's deep voice is soft, serious. "How did it make you feel?"

"Furious. And glad," I whisper. "And relieved. I was fucking *relieved*. I felt free and trapped at the same time. I don't think that's how children are supposed to feel when their parents die."

"You feel how you feel," he says simply. "No one can tell you otherwise. You can pretend, but your emotions remain what they are. They have reasons and value, and they require no explanation or justification to anyone."

Tears shiver along the lower edges of my eyelids. "I think I've been waiting all my life for someone to tell me that."

He's quiet for so long that I finally look up. There's a storm of grieved tenderness and warm affection in his eyes. "Fuck, I wish I could hug you," he whispers. "Wrap both arms around you and squeeze—kiss you until you smile, rub your feet, tickle the laughter right out of your body."

My whole skin aches for that contact, for *touch*. I can practically feel my bones crying out for him.

The humor we shared was a flood, carrying away the vestiges of any walls I had built between us, leaving me unprotected. But maybe I don't need those walls, because he *is* a wall. A guardian glowing with strength, generosity, and laughter, to defend me against pain.

"Wait until tonight," I murmur. "And maybe I'll let you do all those things."



The royal chef has outdone himself. Really, he has gone too far.

Sparkling fruits decorate each smoothly-frosted layer of the towering cakes placed at intervals along the table. There are

platters of oysters and haunches of roasted meat, a ham glazed in gleaming syrup, dishes of seasonal fruit sprinkled with crystal sugar, and bowls of tiny potatoes and new peas drenched in buttery sauce.

Five of the guests I invited are standing awkwardly in front of their chairs, waiting for me to sit down—and I'm waiting for Marleigh. I'm a bit peeved he's late. It's disrespectful. But he did just return from a journey, so I suppose he had to make himself presentable.

In the corner, three musicians guide their bows lightly over strings, sending delicate music through the room. The melody is so faint, so tentative, I feel like screaming.

I whip my head toward them. "Play like you mean it. Not as if you fear your instruments will explode from a firm touch."

The lead musician swallows nervously. "Yes, Your Majesty."

They play louder, more assertively, and my rising anger fades, soothed by the confidence. My guests, on the other hand, look slightly more anxious—except for Kilda, manager of the city's water supply. She seems perfectly at ease.

Just as I'm about to lose my temper and order my guards to drag Marleigh to dinner, booted footsteps clack on the tiles of the hallway, and Marleigh himself strides into the room. He has jet-black hair, a square jaw, and keen, narrow eyes that glitter darkly as he surveys the gathering. He wears a sumptuous green-velvet suit and cloak, trimmed with black braid. Every finger bears a heavy ring, and thick bracelets clink at his wrists.

"Commander," I say coolly. "Kind of you to join us."

"My apologies, Majesty," he says with a smooth bow and an ingratiating smile. "I had to wash the Fae blood off my hands."

Behind my chair, Abraxas growls his disapproval. He's floating there in ghost form, spying on me as usual. Despite our moment of hilarity in the crypt, I'm not sure I want him to witness this dinner. It's sure to be a disaster.

I take my seat, and when my guests do the same, the servants come forward to offer us the first course—a creamy orange soup made from winter squash, garnished with spices and a swirl of sweet cream. When I taste the first spoonful, I nearly moan. It’s so light and frothy, yet there’s a satisfying substance to it as well. I can’t imagine anything tasting better.

“Tell the chef I want to have this every day for the next week,” I tell one of the servants.

He looks surprised. “Every day, Majesty?”

“Yes. When I love something, I want to enjoy it often. Why would I eat something else when this is the best soup I’ve ever tasted?”

He bows, smiling. “I will pass your compliments and your orders along to the chef.”

“I’m the same way,” Kilda says from the end of the table. “I eat three eggs and a piece of ham every morning. If I have anything else, the day doesn’t seem to go as well.”

“I only wear Angelian cotton,” admits the tailor, Orseau. “It’s delicate, and lends itself to the tiniest of stitches. I don’t like the feel of seams on my skin.”

I turn to him eagerly. “That’s why the clothes you make are always so comfortable. The seams are barely noticeable, and everything is so soft.” A compliment surges to my tongue, and for once I let it out. “You are a treasure, Orseau.”

A cool, misty touch on my shoulder—there, and yet not there. “Well done,” murmurs Abraxas.

I can’t help smiling a little.

Not that I need his approval.



My heart swells with warmth and pride as I watch Lauriel. When she composed the guest list for this dinner, the Queen chose people whom she respects for their skill, for the dedication they bring to their work. It makes sense—she is dedicated as well, even though she is misguided in some areas.

She’s about to ask the tailor something else, but Marleigh clears his throat. “You’ll be glad to know, Majesty, that I conducted a very successful raid on your behalf.”

I snort aloud. The fucker doesn’t like not being the center of attention. I’ve met plenty of his kind before. Even if he wasn’t a hunter of Fae, I wouldn’t like him.

“Did you clear out the entire nest of Fae, then?” Lauriel asks. She doesn’t sound as pleased at the prospect as I thought she would.

“We drove one group of Fae deeper into the woods,” Marleigh says enthusiastically, as if it is the best news in the world. “We believe they are headed for the border, which means they will no longer trouble you or your people. We were able to capture some of the slower folk and finish them off, including some spawn.”

“Spawn?” says Lauriel sharply.

At her tone, Marleigh’s smug grin cracks a little at the edges. “Fae that are not yet fully mature.”

“You mean children. You killed some children.”

Oh shit.

Marleigh clears his throat. “Your Majesty’s edict is quite clear. If the Fae will not move on, they must be exterminated.”

“You told me the Fae never birth children outside of their home realm.”

“He’s right,” I whisper to Lauriel. “They usually don’t.”

“Well, these rogues—they don’t always follow the rules.” Marleigh takes a swallow of wine. “What’s done is done, eh? They were monsters anyway—reptilian eyes, scaly skin, bat wings—all manner of deformities.”

“Unseelie children,” I breathe. In all my years as a bloodthirsty killer on the battlefield, I never once hurt a child. Children are precious. They are to be protected, always.

One of the women at the table speaks up. Pinned to her shoulder, she wears the royal crest of Revallen—a pair of golden scales—and judging from her burly frame, she’s probably a guard. “I’ve been meaning to ask you something, Commander Marleigh.” Her dark face is tense, her eyes bright, as if what she’s about to say could have consequences. “You witnessed the demise of our dearly departed King and Queen, did you not? I have encountered so few people who actually saw what happened. The counselors in the room with them were slain, and it seems their bodyguards were either killed on the spot or died in their beds hours later. I believe you’re the only one who survived the attack, isn’t that true?”

Lauriel’s fingers tighten on her fork.

Marleigh nods, his face heavy with sorrow—fake sorrow, I’ll bet my sword. “Such is the way of the Fae, Lodraed. Their virulent magic remains operative even after they’ve moved on.”

“You can’t be the only witness to survive the incident, Commander Marleigh,” Lauriel says. “The reports I received at school—”

“—were absolutely accurate, Your Majesty.” Marleigh nods again, lifting his cup as if to toast her good health. “As for being the sole survivor, I can only believe that the gods must have wanted me alive so I could assist you in ridding our land of this Fae plague.”

But the guard Lodraed isn't done. I can see her fingers trembling, but she speaks again anyway. “It's just odd, the way it happened. You were so new to the palace, Commander. A consultant on magical issues, recently hired by the Queen.”

“If only they had hired me sooner, to place effective wards around the palace grounds and the entire city.” There's a hint of steel in Marleigh's voice now—a warning to Lodraed. He wants her to back off.

Lauriel perceives it, of course, clever woman that she is. She looks from the guard to Marleigh and back, her eyes narrowed. Clearly there's some new information here—facts she didn't have before.

“Yes, it's a pity,” the bodyguard says, her voice cracking for a second before strengthening again. “Strange, too, that after their complicated history with the Fae, the royals should suddenly decide to erect wards against them. I've worked here for fifteen years. I've seen things—” the guard looks toward Lauriel— “things I never spoke about, out of loyalty to their Majesties. And I'll say it straight out now, what I should have told you when you first arrived, my lady—that something about the King and Queen's death didn't sit right. The patrol schedules—they were changed, and the order was blotted from the record books.”

“The Fae are cunning in their use of invasive spellwork,” says Marleigh. “Which is why, Your Majesty, we should discuss further arrangements for your security, now that I have returned. I've taken the liberty of drawing up some plans—”

Lauriel's voice cuts through his soothing tones. “Why do I need more security if the Fae are headed for the border and their threat is diminished?”

He clears his throat. “It's possible they won't head straight for the border, Majesty. They may take it into their heads to turn elsewhere. They're primitive folk, and they do love their blood

vengeance. But have no fear—I can ensure your safety. Pay no mind to the fearmongering of ignorant soldiers—they have no real understanding of the threat—”

“Then you should educate them,” says Lauriel silkily. “You’ll spend the next week teaching the palace guards everything you know about the Fae, both their strengths and their weaknesses—the good and the bad.”

“The good?” Marleigh raises his eyebrows. “There is no good in them, as you well know. You’ve seen their foulness. You’ve punished it with your own fair hand.”

There’s darkness in his voice—a suggestion of a secret he and Lauriel share, some knowledge he’s holding over her head. I would guess it’s the torture and death of the Fae woman Helix told me about—Asekith was her name, I think.

“Enough talk of murder and Fae,” Lauriel says in a strained voice. “Lodraed, you and I will speak tomorrow. Let us try to enjoy this meal.”

The others at the table obey her command and devote themselves to devouring hot buttered rolls with honey, delicate slices of venison in sauce, and thick servings of cake. Lauriel nibbles at the food, but doesn’t eat as heartily as I hoped she would.

“If I were in my corporeal body, I could do such damage to this feast,” I mutter.

She can’t reply without the others hearing her. After the awkward small talk winds down and the dinner ends, she beckons to a servant and whispers something I don’t quite hear, because I’m watching Marleigh closely as he sips the last of his wine. Something about him unsettles me. I’ve encountered enough snakes and backstabbers to know one when I see him.

Lauriel dismisses the other guests, then the musicians. Marleigh rises but lingers by the table, playing with his wine glass. When Lauriel moves to leave the room, he intercepts her.

“I hope that guard did not trouble you too greatly,” he says. “I didn’t want to say anything in front of the others, but—from what the captain tells me, Lodraed is prone to hysteria. She’s going through the change of life, you know—as women her age

do, and it makes her a little—” He twirls his finger near his temple and gives Lauriel a rueful smile.

“Does it now?” Lauriel smiles too, but hers is dangerous—a naked blade. “Tell me more about how being a woman makes one prone to worries and hysteria.”

“Now, now... it’s not just my opinion, Majesty. It’s a proven fact. You know well enough how certain monthly changes affect a woman’s mind. It’s the same in Lodraed’s case, only greater. Her fellow guards say her entire personality has changed. Were it not for knowing the physical cause, I might almost suspect that she’s been ensorcelled.”

“Is that what you suspect?” says Lauriel icily.

“I could call at least three witnesses here right now to attest to her odd behavior,” says Marleigh. “So unfortunate. So sad. I’m told she has children—perhaps she should have stayed with them instead of pursuing the role of a guard. Some women are better suited to a life at home than the strenuous responsibilities of other work, you see, and—”

“Commander,” says Lauriel in a strangled tone. “Leave my presence.”

He frowns, clearly offended. “But, Your Majesty—”

“Get the fuck out!” she screams, both fists clenched. She even raises one hand, as if she’ll strike him.

And then I spot something odd. As Lauriel lifts her fist, the two guards flanking the door of the dining room step forward—but Marleigh puts a hand behind his back and waves them off. They withdraw at once, resuming their former positions.

Lauriel couldn’t have seen that gesture from her angle. She doesn’t realize what it means.

Her guards weren’t coming forward to defend her, but to protect Marleigh. And they obeyed his silent order to back off.

I shouldn’t be surprised that he’s undermining her authority; it’s the first sign of the fate Paemon has predicted for her. So far he has only seen glimpses of the future, nothing very distinct—but I think I’ve spotted the instigator of the rebellion that will bring Lauriel down.

If her people loved her and were loyal to her, Marleigh's scheme would be much harder to enact. But as it is, there are precious few who care about the sharp-tongued young queen.

Fuck me... I am one of those precious few. I want to stand behind her in my physical form, to enfold her in my arms and glare at Marleigh—to knock sense into those disloyal guards with my fist.

But I can only watch as Marleigh gives the Queen a stiff bow and strides from the room.

Lauriel goes straight to her chambers, and two of her maids arrive to help her change into simple training clothes. These are not the maids who came to dinner—they are the less favored ones, apparently. I'm eager to watch Lauriel change, but she gives me a glare that could frighten a ghost, so I turn my back while she dresses.

I'd half-expected to see the guard Lodraed waiting near Lauriel's rooms, eager for an audience. She has clearly been afraid to air her suspicions until now, and I suspect she has more to say. I'm not sure why she chose to confront Marleigh at dinner, but I respect her boldness, even if it wasn't the wisest decision. She put a target on her back by voicing her concerns so openly.

After Lauriel dismisses her maids, she heads for the training room and begins a series of complex combat moves in front of a long mirror in the corner. The fluid grace of her slim body is mesmerizing. She packs a surprising amount of strength into that slight frame, and I'm not immune to the way the bustier she's wearing hugs her breasts, keeping them in place while she practices. Well... mostly in place. They're large breasts for her small size, and they can't help but jiggle and bounce temptingly as she moves. My hands could probably span that little waist, but those thighs are surprisingly thick with muscle, and her hips—*gods*, she is flexible. I love the sight of that beautiful black hair swinging unbound, like glossy ink—

Fuck, I need to focus.

"I must visit the others," I tell her. "I'll be back at midnight."

She breaks form for a second, her balance faltering. “You’re going to see the others? Why?”

“I believe your guard was telling the truth, and I think she’s in danger. I want Paemon to watch over her, in case anyone tries to have her assassinated.”

“You really think Marleigh would do that?” She turns to face me, her eyes churning with anger and betrayal. “He’s my commander, Brax. My closest advisor.”

“I know. But you don’t trust him anymore, do you?”

“I suppose not.” She rubs her forehead. “Even if she is in danger, what can Paemon do? He’ll be in ghost form.”

“He can distract or frighten an attacker if it comes to that. At the very least he can summon me to the spot and I can dispatch the attacker.”

“Wait, you... kill people?”

“We sometimes have to kill in pursuit of our goals. The kills are sanctioned by the Hunt, as long as we have good reason. Sometimes we’re even given specific targets to destroy. Have you never heard the tales of people dying when the Wild Hunt is nearby?”

“I suppose, but—they’re stories, legends—”

I gesture to myself, smiling. “A story and a legend stands before you in the flesh—well, *almost* in the flesh. One more hour.”

She scoffs and shakes her head. “Calling yourself a legend... ridiculous.”

“At least you can admit that my cock is legendary in its proportions.”

“I’ll admit no such thing.” But she blushes, and that pleases me immensely.

“I’ll be back by the twelfth stroke of midnight,” I tell her.

She prims up her mouth. “Come back, or don’t. Makes no difference to me.”

I give her my warmest grin, and have the pleasure of watching her eyes widen and soften under its influence. “Now then, love,” I say, low. “You don’t really mean that.”

“I do,” she insists. “I’d much prefer it if you went away and never came back. Your specialty is the present, isn’t it? What can you possibly show me tonight? It won’t be anything I haven’t seen.”

“Oh, sweet little queen,” I chuckle. “You’d be surprised.”



As soon as Brax leaves, I ring for a servant and demand that Lodraed be brought to me. If she really is in danger, I can keep her with me until Paemon arrives to watch over her. And even if she isn't at risk, I'd like to talk with her more about what she said at the dinner table. It's troubling that she wouldn't have told me her suspicions sooner. But then, I haven't made myself particularly available for such confidences.

I continue my training regimen until I realize it's been nearly an hour with no sign of Lodraed. When I ring again, a maid ducks into the training room, her face apologetic. "We've been looking for Lodraed, Your Majesty. Can't seem to locate her yet, but we'll send her in the moment she's found."

"No," I say quickly. "No visitors after midnight. When you find her, place her under protective guard, and tell her she is to come to me first thing tomorrow."

"Yes, my lady." The maid bows a curtsy.

As she turns to leave, another servant enters, rolling a silver cart. "Here are the dinner portions Your Majesty requested."

“Put the cart in the sitting room,” I command. “And then leave me. Let no one else disturb me tonight, unless the palace is burning or the kingdom is being invaded.”

The servant and the maid exchange confused, curious glances. I’m sure my strange late-night habits have been remarked upon by the staff, feeding the notion that I’m either mentally unhinged or involved in sickening debauchery like my parents.

The latter theory hits a little closer to the mark than I’d like.

What if I told my subjects the truth? That I’m being boldly haunted by not one, not two, but *three* Fae ghosts? Marleigh would laugh—I can hear his disdainful chuckle now. He would explain to me, in his most condescending tone, that “the Fae do not become ghosts. They fade and shatter, and their ashes blow away on the wind.” I’d become a cautionary tale to the servants and guards—the mad, mysterious queen, visited by imaginary beings.

The servants are still staring. Something about their hungry expressions, greedy for any bit of gossip, drives me to my limit.

“Go, idiots!” I snap, and they scurry away, closing the door to my suite behind them.

“Ah, Lauriel,” says a deep, disappointed voice behind me. “Just when I thought you were learning a bit of kindness and cheer.”

“That’s right,” I sneer without turning. “I’m a fucking disappointment, so why should I even try?”

“Don’t do that.” Brax’s voice is harder now. “Don’t twist it around so you can play the victim.”

He glides around to face me, still in ghost form. My eyes linger on his huge biceps, which bulge even more now that his arms are crossed. I remember how those big arms felt around me in the tub—how those thick fingers palpated every sensitive spot between my legs...

“Stop ogling me, Lauriel,” he says sternly, in a tone I’ve never heard him use before—a tone so powerful and

commanding my gaze immediately snaps to his face. Oh yes—he's looking very un-jolly now. Very sober and unhappy.

“Did Paemon find Lodraed?”

“He will. Don't change the subject.” His black brows lower with disapproval. “Did you know that our tasks often involve punishment?”

I scoff. “Punishment? I thought that came at the end, if I refuse to change.”

“Sometimes it does. But along the way, we are fully authorized to mete out other chastisements as needed, if our subject is proving especially rebellious, stubborn, or disobedient. Helix punished you in his own way during your time with him.”

“You mean the constant annoyance?” I hook an eyebrow. “And what's your style of punishment?”

“The physical kind.”

I stare at him. “What?”

“It's a last resort. But I must say, your treatment of your servants just now makes me want to put you over my knee.”

“You wouldn't dare,” I grit out. “Besides, that sort of chastisement isn't effective. My mother often struck me as punishment, and I think it made me more angry than obedient.”

“I don't believe such things should be done to *children*.” He frowns deeper. “I didn't agree with that, even when I was a bloodthirsty butcher. But a swat or two on that pretty ass when you're especially stubborn might make a difference.”

“I assure you, it will *not*.” The illicit quiver of my pussy says it *would* affect me, but not in the way he intends.

“I usually have to punish men—very wicked men who deserve the pain.” He surveys me thoughtfully. “You're a unique case.”

“I am a *queen*,” I say as grandly as I can—though a little breathlessly because I'm still thinking about being slung over his knee, his big warm hand smacking my bottom— “I am a *queen*, and you'll not lay a hand on me unless I allow it.”

“You allowed it the other night.” His full lips tick up at the corner. “You were damn willing to have my hands on you, in fact. Ah, there it is—warm roses blooming on those cold white cheeks. Are you blushing at the memory of my cock squeezed between your thighs, Majesty? My cum swirled in the bath, your pussy trembling beneath the water—”

“Stop,” I whisper. I take two steps back on the training mat, but he eats up the distance between us with half a stride. A chill mist skates across my skin—his ghostly aura. He’s the mountain and I’m the slender sapling, caught in the winds of lust rolling off him, every fiber of me shuddering even as I deepen my roots and cling to my dignity.

I won’t yield. I won’t.

And then—fuck him—he *smiles*, glorious and glad, rich and seductive. Thrills chase each other through my belly, and I can’t catch a deep breath.

“Let’s you and I make a pact.” His voice is low, magnetic, the gravel at the bottom of a deep, dark lake. “You behave yourself tonight, and you’ll be rewarded as I see fit. Disobey me, and you’ll be punished—also as I see fit. No excessive pain, no permanent harm. All of it for your own good, and with your consent. Do we have a bargain?”

“I’ve always been warned against bargains with faeries,” I murmur.

“Good news, love. I’m not strictly a faerie. I’m a ghost.”

A ghost. A dead thing, shadowing me by day, taking carnal form at night so he can what—fuck me? Punish me?

“Why do you even need physical form to help me?” I ask. “Couldn’t you do it all in ghost form?”

“Of course we could. We usually do. But this—”

“—is a special case,” I cut him off. “So you keep saying. But none of you have explained to me exactly what’s happening on your end: why you get these physical bodies at night, and why there’s so much at stake for you. Don’t bother denying it—I know you gain something from this too. And if you fail—”

something terrible happens, doesn't it? What could be more terrible than death?"

Abraxas gazes at me, his smile now tinged with sadness. "So clever. You could make such a great queen."

"So you won't tell me."

"I can't. Not yet. But if you'll accept the bargain, I might be persuaded to give you a hint, as one of your rewards."

"Oh." My face must fall a little, because Abraxas laughs heartily.

"Don't worry, love, there will be other, more salacious rewards as well."

Hope leaps in my heart again, even as I protest, "I didn't mean that—I wasn't—ugh! Fuck you. Fine, I will agree to the bargain."

"The bargain is struck." His tone changes, hollows out, and at the same moment, the clock in my sitting room begins to strike midnight.

Abraxas seems to grow taller and swell larger, looming over me, shadows streaming from his great dark body. Red light flashes from his eyes and mouth, and for a second I can see his skull—empty eye sockets and white bone. My heart sticks in my throat, and when his great sword appears in his hand, glimmering with scarlet fire, I cower before him. A cold wind rushes through my training room, dousing the fire like a snuffed candle.

I shut my eyes.

The last stroke of twelve vibrates in the silence.

"Lauriel." A deep, quiet voice. Big warm hands on my shoulders.

There's light again, glowing through my eyelids, so I open them cautiously.

The fire is lit, blazing merrily, and judging by the flood of golden light through the sitting room door, that fire is blazing as well. Brax is his usual size—huge, but not monumental or terrifying. He holds his sword, but it isn't flaming.

“What *was* that?” I shrug his hands from my shoulders. “Were you trying to scare me?”

“Maybe a little.” He gives me a half-grin. “Think of it as a warning, or a revelation that we’re taking it easy on you. As ghosts we can look far more terrifying than the forms we’ve taken in your presence. With some of the souls we confront, fear is the most effective motivator.”

“It is with many people, I daresay. I’m certainly fond of using it.”

“Not so fun when it’s used on you, eh?” He winks. “But never fear, we’re in for a night of adventure and merriment, you and I! Time to take a different view of the present!”

Suddenly I remember the silver cart in the other room. “Before we go, I have something for you.”

Brax looks startled. “For me?”

Unwrapping the black cloth strips from my wrists, I head for the sitting room. “Come on.”

When I reach the cart and begin lifting the lids of the covered dishes, Brax halts and stares, his mouth agape. He looks so comically surprised I can’t help smirking a little.

“It must have been torture for you to smell the feast and watch us eat it, when you couldn’t touch a morsel,” I say stiffly. “So... here.”

His scarlet eyes lock with mine. “Lauriel.” My name melts from his tongue like butter, like rich liquid gold. His gaze is growing more intense, more delighted by the second.

“It doesn’t mean anything.” I back away as he advances, keeping the cart between us. “I’m *not* softening, I swear. This doesn’t mean I like you at *all*, or that I care about your feelings —”

He catches me in both huge arms, lifts me right off my feet, and whirls me around. I shriek faintly, but it’s almost a laugh.

“Stop it, stop, stop!” I gasp, my small fist hammering his bulky shoulder.

Laughing, he carries me over to my favorite armchair and drops me into it. He braces both hands on the armrests and looks deep into my eyes. I'm motionless, panting, utterly captive to the beauty of his face, the pride in his eyes.

"You showed thoughtfulness and kindness," he says, low. "For that, you deserve a reward."

His lips close with mine. Broad, soft lips—rose-petal soft, and so warm I want to cry. He kisses me tenderly, like he really cares, like he—

But he doesn't. None of them actually *care* about me. They have a stake in this, that's all. I must remember that.

But it's hard to remember when the tip of his tongue nudges my lips apart and slides into my mouth. It's even harder when I'm breathing his breath, tasting the cinnamon-sugar flavor of him. He's a furnace of power, of muscle, of glorious male brawn and I want him with a craving that's utterly primal. I *want* so hard that I find myself arching out of the chair as my body tries to close the distance between his hips and mine.

He breaks the kiss, gives me a last soft peck on the lips, and turns to the cart of food. I straighten my spine and square my shoulders, trying to pull myself together and appear less desperate for his cock. Shit, what has become of me? This is Fae enchantment, no doubt.

"You've spelled me," I say sharply. "The three of you—you've tricked me into lusting for you."

Brax tries to speak, but his mouth is too full. He holds up a finger, gulps some wine, then says, "We've used no such trickery on you, love. It wouldn't be fair play."

"Then—I don't understand it." Frustration edges my voice. "I never used to want sex with actual men. I've done it, but it's always disappointing. They're so annoying—either too eager for their own pleasure or too servile and submissive. I've always hated it, and preferred to please myself. But now—I'm... I don't know..." I push myself out of the chair and head for my room. "You stay out here and stuff yourself. I'll be back shortly."

"Lauriel." Again the sternness in his tone, the note of command.

“What?” I snap.

“Don’t touch yourself.”

My cheeks flame. I suppose I made it rather obvious what I was planning to do. “I’m just changing my clothes.”

“I mean it. Tonight, pleasure is something you must earn. Disobey me in this, and I will have to punish you.”

With a searing glare, I slam my bedroom door and lock it.

I peel off my training clothes, throwing each piece onto the rug angrily until I’m naked. Who is he to tell me what to do with my own body?

After climbing onto the bed, I reach into the drawer where I keep my toy cock—a smooth piece of polished stone, the perfect shape and size. Sometimes I wish it was more pliant, but it fills me up when I crave something long and thick inside.

Lying back on the pillows, I arch my legs and spread them wide. Then I push the head of the toy between the lips of my pussy. I’m so wet that it slips in easily.

But I don’t get it any further inside me, because my bedroom door magically unlocks and bursts open. Abraxas charges in, reaches my bed in a single huge stride, and yanks the toy out of me with a *pop*. Then he rolls me over onto my belly and slaps each cheek of my bottom once.

I squeal with rage and try to flip over, but he leans on me, holding me down, one large hand cupping my ass.

“You agreed to this,” he says. “We struck a bargain. Do you wish to revoke your consent for both the punishments and the rewards?”

I blow hair out of my face. “No.”

I think my answer surprises us both.

“Very well.” Brax gives my ass cheek a light squeeze. “Leave the door open, and get dressed. We have much to see before dawn.”



I could devour twice the amount of food on the little silver cart, but I content myself with what's there, finishing the last of the roasted venison just as Lauriel emerges from her bedroom, simply clad in a tunic and leggings, with her black hair loose, flowing down to her waist in shining waves. Her usually snow-white cheeks are still stained rosy, and I'll warrant her bottom bears a similar flush. Fuck, the way I want to bend her over and bury myself deep inside her—but I can't. I have work to do.

"You'll need a coat or a cloak," I tell her. "Possibly a scarf and mittens."

She rolls her eyes, ducks back into her room, and returns a few minutes later, draped in a thick cloak with a big hood. There's a red scarf around her slender throat, but her fingers are bare.

When I summon my sword to my hand again, Lauriel eyes the weapon shrewdly.

"That's your weakness, isn't it?" she asks. "It can be used to cause you pain. How?"

I hesitate, but if I'm to fully gain her trust, I must give her mine in return. "This sword must never be sheathed. If even a

part of the blade is covered, I suffer—worse if it’s entirely sheathed.”

“And your superiors in the Wild Hunt—they’ve used this against you before? To punish you?”

“To teach me. Yes.”

“Seems as though you three have been poorly treated during your time with the Hunt.”

I shake my head. “We all deserved it for the pain we caused others.”

“But you were conscripted into this Hunt against your will, were you not?”

“We are fortunate to serve as emissaries of justice and retribution,” I answer carefully. “Without our work, the realms would be far worse places than they are.”

“Hm. So how does it work, your sword? How does it show us the present?”

With a grin, I stretch out my arm, holding the tip of the sword up as if I’m about to land a blow. “Watch.”

I swing the sword, following a downward arc, and the air splits at the tip of the blade, carving a gash in the very fabric of time and space. Beyond, through the widening slit, Lauriel and I glimpse a city street with snow-trampled sidewalks, lighted shop windows, and bustling pedestrian traffic.

“This is our destination,” I tell her. “The events you’re about to see unfolded near you today, though you weren’t aware of them.”

“Still—it’s the past, isn’t it?” She cocks an eyebrow at me. “The recent past, but not strictly the present.”

“If you want to be technical about it—”

“I do.”

“Very well. It’s your recent past. Now take my hand, and let’s be off.”

Her slim fingers feel so tiny, so breakable. I try to ignore the quiver in my heart as I lead her through the aperture I

carved, into the streets of the capital.

“There you are, see?” I point to the royal carriage passing by, flanked by guards on horseback. “You’re waving.”

“I thought I was smiling more,” Lauriel says slowly. “I look positively miserable.”

“You don’t have to smile all the time. But if you’re trying to look pleased about seeing your people, then yes, a wider smile might be a good idea.” I shove my sword into the loop on my belt, at my left hip. With my right hand I draw Lauriel toward an arched tunnel between two shops—a cut-through to the next street.

“We’re not going to follow my carriage?” She hurries after me as we skirt around two gabbling women with bonnets and baskets, dodge a child rolling a large hoop, and duck through a cluster of men in coats and top hats, smoking pipes and discussing the recent tax increases.

“Why would we follow your carriage? We already know what happens with the cider stand and the guard. No, we’re going to see your clerk.”

“Kratchet?” She sounds completely confused. “Why would we go to see him?”

“Since you were out in the city this morning, he had half a day off—a rare occurrence for him. I want you to see how he spent it. Ah, there he is now.”

Kratchet is a man of medium build, with olive skin, dark eyes, and black hair. His sideburns extend to the corners of his jaw, and a mustache arches across his top lip. On one arm he carries a shopping bag, and to the other clings a small black-haired girl, about nine years old, with the same olive complexion and large brown eyes.

I pull Lauriel into step behind Kratchet and his daughter. Thanks to my link with the sword, I already know where this vision is headed, so I begin preparing Lauriel for what she will see.

“Notice his coat. Threadbare, patched at the elbows. And his boots—cracking at the seams. He works as head clerk for the

queen of the land. Why is he so poorly attired?"

Lauriel pulls her fingers out of my hand. "He wears livery at the palace, and he has a decent coat that goes with it. He could wear that."

"You think he wants to wear his livery around town, proclaiming himself as the servant of the Queen—the one who writes down all the stringent laws and unpleasant edicts?" I snort. "You think that would make him popular with his fellow citizens?"

"Maybe not, but I'm sure he could buy himself a better coat. I pay him a reasonable wage, considering that all he does is take notes. It's not a specialized skill—anyone could do it."

"Anyone could do it? Anyone could take down every word you say with perfect accuracy and pristine spelling, sometimes writing for hours on end, while standing in a chilly room? Gods, if I had his job, I'd be fucking miserable."

She squirms a little. "Well... when you put it like that... still, I think I pay him fairly."

"Do you know how many dependents he has?"

"A wife? A child?" Lauriel nods to the little girl.

"A wife and six children."

"Six? What possessed him to have so many? That's where all his money goes, of course."

"Two of the children are his sister's. She died three years ago, and he took them into his home."

Lauriel's lips tighten. Her silence is better than words—she's thinking it over, considering Kratchet's situation.

Ahead of us, Kratchet's daughter suddenly slackens her pace, her eyes fixed on a shop window. Behind the frosty glass, outlined by golden lamplight, stands a doll with olive skin and black ringlets, dressed in a fine blue gown.

Kratchet follows his daughter's gaze, and a pained expression crosses his face. The girl looks from the doll to him.

"I don't want it, really," she says, patting his hand. "It's just pretty, that's all."

“I’d buy it for you if I could,” he replies.

“Maybe for my birthday?” she asks hopefully, but when his shoulders droop, she hurries to say, “Only if the Queen pays you some extra money. Hellia’s father gets a bonus during Midwinter Glee. Maybe the Queen—”

“The Queen doesn’t give bonuses,” Kratchet says stiffly. “And if she did, we’d use it for your brother’s medicine, Mara. You know that.”

“Yes, I know. It’s all right, Papa. At least we’ll get to go to the festival together. Midwinter Glee is my favorite time of year. I love the lights, and the music, and the shows! Oh, and the fireworks!” Mara gives a little hop of delight.

Kratchet’s shoulders slump even more.

“He hasn’t told his children that Midwinter Glee was canceled,” Lauriel says slowly. “Why not?”

“Because it would break their hearts. And they have little enough to look forward to.” I draw my sword again, slitting the air and guiding Lauriel through the gap as we step into a narrow street lined with shabby tenement houses. Kratchet and Mara have just mounted the steps of one of the tallest and gloomiest buildings on the street, and he’s holding the door open for her.

Lauriel and I follow them inside, up a creaking staircase, and down a hallway whose stained plaster reeks of old grease and pipe smoke. Kratchet unlocks a door near the end of the hall, passes through with Mara, and then closes the door.

I carve another portal into the dwelling beyond, bringing Lauriel with me.

It’s a cluttered room with a jumble of boots and shoes in a wooden bin by the door and a few thin cloaks hanging from pegs. A tiny fireplace and two lamps illuminate cupboards, shelves, and a sink to the right, and cot half-concealed by a curtain to the left. In front of the fire, two worn couches face each other. The low worktable between them is strewn with crumpled papers, bits of charcoal, balls of yarn, half-finished knitting, and a wooden top with most of the paint chipped off.

The woman bending over the fireplace straightens as Kratchet enters the room with Mara. “Oh good, you’re back! Did you get the orange peel?”

“I did, and the cabbage too. And the bread. Prices keep going up, though. It’s a smaller loaf than last time.”

The woman’s lips pinch together and the light in her dark eyes dulls a little, but she nods. “We’ll make do. Hand me the bag and then clear all that off the table so we can eat. Mara, go downstairs and call in your brothers and sisters. They’re in the alley with the neighbor boys.”

Mara runs back out into the hall while Kratchet follows his wife’s directions. As he transfers items from the table to a large basket, she eyes him keenly.

“Your hands are bothering you again,” she says. “I can tell.”

“The cold makes my joints worse,” he says.

“Writing all day in that drafty palace certainly doesn’t help.” She huffs an irritated breath through her teeth. “Why the queen won’t keep the place decently warm is beyond me.”

“It would be expensive,” says Kratchet.

“Then she could at least let you wear fingerless gloves.”

“It’s not part of the livery. The chief butler wouldn’t allow it.”

“Maybe he would if you explained why—”

“I don’t want to do this with you again, Faesli,” says Kratchet wearily. “Not today. You’ve never been to the palace. You don’t know how things work.”

“I don’t see why you can’t just ask—”

“Because she thinks I’m disposable!” His voice rises sharply. “If I make trouble, the Queen is likely to fire me on the spot. She’s already planning to fire dozens of people—most of the palace’s adjunct staff and consultants, including Resh Jaeggan and Gris Othai.”

“Oh gods.” His wife touches her chest. “Why?”

“No reason, except she considers them unnecessary weight. It’s always the same with her—every decision is about saving money.”

“But Jaeggan and Othai... what will their families do?” whispers Faesli. “Do they know they’re being let go?”

“Not yet. The order hasn’t been sent out—I don’t know why. She had me write it all down, and then told me to hold it for some reason. I tucked it away on a shelf in the clerks’ hall.”

“Maybe she’ll change her mind,” Faesli says desperately.

“I doubt it.”

“If she cuts them off, we have to help them.”

“With what money?” Kratchet lifts his hands. “I’m already going without my joint salve because Talin needs his medicine more urgently. The children keep growing right out of their clothes and shoes. The doctor has been kind enough to postpone the bill for his last visit, but he needs to eat too, so we’ll have to pay him eventually. Meanwhile I’m paid half the salary of one of those oafs who play dice in the palace gatehouse all day.”

A barrage of thick, wet coughs sound from a doorway, and Faesli startles, turning in that direction.

Kratchet drops the yarn he’s holding into the basket and sets it aside. “I’ll go. You’ve got the dinner to finish.”

Lauriel hasn’t spoken a word, nor does she comment as I draw her into the bedroom, where we watch Kratchet beats his son’s chest, coaxing out the accumulated sludge from his lungs. When he returns to the front room, his wife is grimly setting out two large dishes of steaming food and a plate of flat bread, torn into pieces.

When Kratchet approaches her, she speaks in a low voice. “Have you thought about what I said last night?”

“Magic is outlawed in this land, and the Fae are being exterminated,” Kratchet says. “Having contact with sorcerers or Fae could do more than get me fired from my post. It could doom us all. Besides, you know the Fae do not heal humans, not without demanding a terrible price. They would likely ask for one of the other children in return for healing Talin.”

“I know,” his wife whispers. “I would never agree to that, never.”

“Nor would Talin.” Kratchet rubs her back. After a moment he says, “We have to tell the children tonight, about Midwinter Glee being canceled.”

His wife bows her head, pinching the bridge of her nose. Then she lifts her face, her eyes shining with determination. “The Queen may have canceled the festival, but we’ll have our own celebration right here.”

Kratchet’s half-chuckle is bitter. “With what?”

“With anything we can find. Rags on a string will make colorful pennants. We’ll beg some candle stubs from the neighbors, to brighten the place up. I’ll send Pezal and Zairu to the Brimglade to see if they can find any nuts to roast, and maybe some greenery to hang on the walls. The grocer might give me some old apples we can use to make cider. It’s happening, and you may as well make up your mind to help me. Surely there’s some castoff finery or leftovers you can scrounge from the palace.”

“Well, I could ask the tailor or the wardrobe manager for scraps, but I would feel—”

“Fuck how you feel,” she says crisply. “Don’t let your pride get in the way of helping me do this for the children. Gods know they deserve to be happy, and so do we.”

Kratchet looks at her for a moment, then hooks a hand around the back of her neck, right beneath the knot of her hair, and pulls her in for a kiss. “Bless the ancestors for bringing us together,” he whispers. “You always tell me what I need to hear.”

“Same to you,” she whispers back, and her lips tremble.

Into that tender moment burst a gang of children with cold cheeks, loud voices, and bright eyes. Their mother shouts at them to wash their hands while Kratchet goes to fetch Talin from his room. They all settle in on the floor around the low table, even the sick boy. There’s no excessive petting of Talin, no making him feel *other* or separate from the rest. He’s nudged playfully by his sister, and when he darts his hand in to grab a

of meat from the communal bowl, he and his brother fight over it before dividing it in half at their mother's insistence.

Kratchet and his wife eat, too, but sparingly, obviously intent on making sure the children get their fill. My heart swells with sympathy and a fierce admiration for their strength as they battle through life. They deserve to have their struggle lessened, their minds eased. And there's one person who can help with that.

I've been so caught up watching this family that I nearly forgot about Lauriel. She's standing beside me, but she isn't wearing the soft, sympathetic expression I hoped for. Her fists are clenched, her eyes hard.

"Are we done here?" she says tightly. "Can we go now?"

Anger spikes in my chest, and sorrow, too—sorrow for *her*, that she is so callous, so damaged that she can't feel compassion for these people.

I swear I'll *make* her feel it, if it's the last thing I do.



I've seen enough.

I'm ready to go back to the palace right now, march down to the vault, grab a bag of coin, and take it to Kratchet's family myself.

I like them all, damn it. I like Kratchet for pursuing his duties without complaint, and I like his wife for her indomitable spirit, and I like the half-dozen black-haired, raucous children who are scooping the last smears of sauce from the dinner dishes with bits of bread.

But if I give them money openly, everyone else will want a royal handout too. I have to be careful. I need to be sure that I retain plenty of treasure to buy us allies, weapons, and supplies in case we're invaded. If only I could do both—be generous *and* frugal. Achieve the perfect balance.

I'll find a way to give Kratchet a large gift, even if I must do it secretly. But I need to get back to the palace and figure out how to arrange it.

“Are we done here?” I say to Brax. “Can we go now?”

He turns, glowering. Then, without another word, he carves another portal and tows me through it, into the corridor of the

tenement building. A lantern by the stairwell provides the only light.

“You’re worse than I feared,” Brax rumbles, pulling me toward the stairs. When we reach them, he lays his sword aside and sits on the top step. “Take off your cloak.”

Frowning, I remove it. He grabs my wrist and with one fluid motion, bends me over his lap. His fingers skate along the backs of my thighs, pulling my tunic up to my waist. Then he drags down my leggings and panties together, baring my bottom to the chilly air of the hallway.

“What the fuck?” I gasp. “What did I do?”

His hand claps my right cheek with a loud smack. “You asked to leave.”

“Yes, because—”

Another spank, on the opposite cheek. The contact stings, but it doesn’t really hurt. He could damage me deeply, this giant Fae warrior, and yet he’s being so gentle his punishment has almost no impact.

A trickle of arousal runs along the seam of my pussy as he smacks me again. His palm doesn’t leave my skin—instead, he smooths it over the round globes of my ass.

“You must endure the lesson, and learn from it,” he growls. “Do not try to escape the discomfort of seeing what your choices have done to real people—to your own subjects.”

“I wasn’t!” I protest. “I wanted to get back to the palace so I can arrange a gift for them.”

His hand clamps over my right cheek. “Are you lying to me to escape your punishment?”

“No!” I squirm across his lap.

“Then you do have compassion for that family?” Brax questions.

“Of course. I’m not a monster.”

“Good girl.” Thick, strong fingers dab my pussy and I gasp, thrills lighting up my whole body. Brax chuckles and continues fondling the soft lips between my ass cheeks. “But

you should have explained your intentions.” Another smack, and then he massages my pussy again. I release a whimper, then clap my hand over my mouth.

“No one can hear us or see us, love.” A quick, sharp pat to my ass, and then he rubs his big hand over the delicate folds of my sex, letting the middle finger dip between them. Wetness begins to spread as he plays with me. “Fuck, little queen. You’re so wet.”

He removes his hand from my pussy and when I hear a quiet hum of pleasure, I look up to see him *licking* my wetness from each of his fingers. He grins, his red eyes and curled horns flashing in the lantern light. His hair gleams white as snow. He’s so fucking handsome that *looking* at him makes me even more helplessly slick.

Something bumps against my belly as I lie there, across his lap. His cock is bulging up between his thighs, prodding my stomach.

“I need to get control of this and get back to the task at hand,” he says thickly, as his fingers travel the line of my pussy over and over, closer and closer to my clit. “Tell me to stop. Tell me there’s more work to be done tonight.”

“We have more... work... to do,” I breathe. “But... don’t you dare stop.”

“You smell so good,” he mumbles, and then he grips my thighs and lifts me, turning me around on his legs and hauling my bottom higher until he’s nuzzling between my ass cheeks with a deep groan of pleasure.

I half-scream, because I can’t be quiet, not while I’m experiencing sensations this wildly exquisite. His broad tongue strokes into me—slow, rhythmic, warm—then he shakes his head a little and nuzzles farther in, tongue swirling as if he’s licking the bowl that once contained his favorite dessert.

“Fuck!” I shriek breathlessly. “Fuck, fuck!” My breasts are squished against his thighs, my ass high in the air, and I’m gripping his knees with both arms while he holds my pussy to his face.

Then he hoists me higher—changes the angle of his tongue—and hits the bud of my clit.

“Yes,” I sob. “Yes, yes, yes—” and I cry out as I come, shrill and helpless, seared by a white-hot burst of flawless pleasure radiating through my belly.

Abraxas doesn’t put me down, not until he’s done savoring me, not until I’m a limp, melted, sobbing mess. Then he lowers me and tenderly pulls my leggings and tunic back into place. The crotch of my leggings is immediately soaked.

I can’t stand upright, so he gathers me in his arms and holds me until I stop shaking.

“I remembered human pussy tasting especially good.” Brax’s voice rumbles through his chest, making me quiver again. “But I’ve never tasted one as delicious as yours.”



When I’ve recovered, Abraxas tells me there’s more to see before I enact my plan for Kratchet’s family. He takes me to the temple of Andregh, where the priests are giving away the offerings from the day’s worship, donating to needy families and taking little for themselves. He takes me to the relief house, where people without shelter can have a blanket, a bowl of soup, and a roof over their head for the night.

“I don’t know how we’ll stay open without Midwinter Glee donations from the Crown,” says one of the workers.

“We’ll make do, as we always have,” replies another. “The royals may have donated at Midwinter, but did they help any other time of year? Of course not. I’d hoped the young Princess would be different.”

“She *is* different,” concedes the first woman. “Instead of throwing debauched parties, she’s hoarding every coin that

comes to the Crown. At least her parents spent it back into the economy, even if they were selfish lechers.”

It’s strange to hear my parents criticized so openly. Back at my boarding school, everyone was careful not to express such opinions where I could hear them. I’d heard whispers of discontent, of course, but the more homes and shops I visit with Brax, the more I realize that the people of this beautiful country are more than frustrated, more than sad. They are deeply depressed, and very, very angry.

We travel the countryside, from farms to inns to mansions, and everywhere the story is the same. Rich, poor, or in-between—old, young, or middle-aged—nearly everyone in the kingdom is furious about the cancellation of Midwinter Glee. Some of the more remote towns, farthest from the surveillance of the Crown, are still planning to hold their festivals, despite my edict. Others plan to host private parties.

It grates on my pride to see their defiance, even as I grudgingly admire it.

“I always thought of Midwinter Glee as my mother’s festival—one I was never allowed to attend,” I tell Brax. “I knew it wasn’t *hers*, of course—it’s a nationwide holiday everyone loves, an ancestral tradition going back generations. But I suppose it always felt like Mother’s own event, one more thing she could ban me from. It never belonged to her, though—it’s bigger than that. It’s important to everyone.”

Brax rumbles low in his chest, but he doesn’t actually answer, nor does he urge me to reinstate the festival. I’m glad of that, because it already stings that I’m thinking about revoking my edict. It feels like weakness to go back on the decree and let the festival happen. And paying for the capital’s celebration out of the Crown’s coffers is going to set me back.

If I’m going to allow Midwinter Glee *and* control the expense, I’ll have to be involved in planning the festival—which sounds horribly time-consuming and stressful on top of everything else I have to do. But it’s either that, or I relinquish control and allow my mother’s usual planning committee to have free reign, spending as much as they like.

I’m fucked either way.

Once again, the enormity of my task crashes onto my heart like an iron weight. My duty is to rule this country well. It's what I've been training for, more or less, though my classes at boarding school were tailored to the level of leadership required for running an estate or a merchant business—things my noble classmates would need to know. There were no classes for running an entire kingdom.

I should delegate, of course, but two months hasn't been long enough for me to learn whom I can really trust at court. With most of my parents' council killed during the attack that took their lives, I've been primarily relying on Marleigh, and now I suspect that was a mistake.

I need help, but I don't have time to find it. I'm barely managing to keep my head above water with the daily flood of tasks. Getting to know the court on a personal level will take time I don't have.

All these thoughts churn through my mind as I stand with Brax in the common room of an inn, listening to peddlers, farmers, and tinkers discuss the latest policies for border security.

"The raiders from Ithaya are gettin' bolder," says a peddler. "And there's no use asking the Queen for help. Eben from Lirac went to see her, and she sent him off without so much as a howdy-do or a tip of the hat. She didn't much care that the Ithayans are killing his folk."

"I spoke to him too, when he passed through here," adds the innkeeper, who stands beside the table, polishing a pitcher. "He was damn discouraged after his audience with Her Majesty. Said something odd, though. He told me she'll be gettin' what's coming to her, soon enough."

The other men lean in closer.

"You think he's pondering some sort of rebellion?" mutters one.

"I don't know," the innkeeper admits. "But if he stood up and gave a speech on it, I'd listen."

"Aye." The peddler nods in agreement.

The village leader they're talking about—it's the man I turned away a few days ago. What if he's fomenting a rebellion, planning to take me down? Is that the terrible fate my three ghosts keep mentioning? Am I going to die in a coup, at the hands of rebels?

"Is there no one in this kingdom who has a good word to speak about me?" I whisper.

Brax's hand tightens around mine. "Not tonight," he says quietly. "Dawn is approaching, and you need a few hours' sleep." After a moment he continues, "I wish I could say tomorrow night would be easier. But it won't. You have other subjects in Revallen—not just human ones. Next time we will visit them, as well as the border villages."

My heart sinks. "A sneak peek of future delights," I say dryly. "Helix never let me know what to expect during our nights together."

Brax chuckles and slits the air with his sword again, opening a crack through which we step into my bedroom. The opening seals immediately... and that's when I realize we are not alone.



I've been gliding along the palace hallways and through its grounds for hours now, searching for the woman I'm supposed to protect—the guard Lodraed. By listening and lurking, I've learned that she was scheduled to keep watch on one of the north towers tonight, but she never showed up for her shift.

As ghosts, we can easily find the subject of our task, but when it comes to locating other humans, things are not so simple. I have the guard's name, and an image of her imprinted in my mind by Abraxas. I hope it's enough.

The ability to briefly imprint a face in another rider's mind is a privilege I've experienced only a few times before, when I had to work with a partner. I prefer to accomplish missions alone—quickly, and with minimal entanglement. Associating with other beings only leads to troublesome complications, like tiny mistakes in an equation that skew the result, or a scalpel slicing just a hair too deep, resulting in the premature bleed-out of a victim.

I do not seek out friendships. I've enjoyed the solitude that my work with the Wild Hunt provides. We sometimes ride in great numbers, which I don't mind, because I find it easier to be alone within a crowd. It's more difficult to maintain a careful

distance in a small group, like the trio I've been forced to join. I am not sure what came over me in the Hovel—why I let Helix get so close to me. Why I... braided his hair.

Perhaps the sight of the new gold threads in the orb turned my head, made me temporarily wild with hope.

But such recklessness is not my way. It will not happen again.

Helix and Brax don't seem to understand what's occurring—the way we're being manipulated, the way threads are being tugged from our essence and knotted tightly with the heartstrings of our subject. But I can see it happening.

The queen *is* lovely—I'll admit that much. So are the two males I must work with. More than that, each one of them appeals to me on a visceral level. I know that soft, clinging sensation in my soul, that quiver in my spirit. I've felt it before, though never this strongly. In the past I've always been able to fend it off, prevent it from taking hold. But at my core there's a cold dread... what if I can't resist this time?

They may have ensnared me already.

I drift to the north tower again, floating through its stone wall and rising up to the parapet. A lone guard stands in the cold wind, clutching his cloak to keep the shearing wind from whipping it open. He looks irritated that he has to stand in place of the absent guardswoman.

I can choose to show myself in ghost form whenever I please, and for a moment I consider it. This human might have information that could help me find Lodraed.

But before I can decide, something catches my eye.

The palace stands near the edge of the capital, with a few wealthier neighborhoods between it and the outer wall of the city. Beyond that are more homes and fields, and farther still lies a long stretch of dark forest.

Deep in that forest, a light glints. Just for a moment. It's like the wink of a firefly, and at this distance would be barely perceptible to human eyes. But to the eyes of a Fae, a ghost, or possibly a sorcerer, that light is a beacon. It's a peculiar color—

a lavender glow with greenish edges, most identifiable with a conjured wisp—a Fae forest guide.

There are Fae in those woods. But why would they come so near, when they know of the Queen's crusade against them? Why would they risk discovery? And to whom might they be signaling?

The Fae use wisps in many ways, such as guiding friends to a specific location for a revel or a meeting—but in this realm, wisps are most often used to lure humans to their doom.

We weren't given much information about the Fae who reside in this land. We were merely told that they were being treated cruelly, massacred and forced from their places of refuge by a queen who despises them. Part of our mission is teaching Lauriel that not all Fae are wicked, and that they should be respected and treated justly, rather than murdered on sight.

One thing is clear: there is a faerie in those woods, either luring innocent humans or signaling to someone in the palace. Either possibility is disturbing.

With a rush I soar off the top of the tower. The wind of my passing strikes the guard in the face, and in my haste I let a little of my form become visible to him—a swirl of dark hair, a wisp of pale smoke. He gasps, but he doesn't shriek or raise an alarm. Humans, for some reason, are reluctant to tell each other when they've seen a ghost.

I glide over the city to the thick outer wall, then sweep low above the roofs of the houses clustered beyond its shelter. As I fly, I glimpse the light again, in the same place. Whoever it's supposed to summon or lure hasn't responded yet.

Slowing my speed, I float into the barren forest, my bare toes a handbreadth above the snowy ground. Helix and Abraxas wear boots, even in their ghost aspects, but I've never liked footwear of any kind, no matter what form I'm in.

The crooked black skeletons of bushes jut above the scattered snow, and the edges of drifted leaves protrude above the white fluff like bits of dried brown skin. All around me rise the trees—so tall their majesty awes me a little. This is an old forest, first seeded in some ancient era of this realm, when the

paths between the mortal world and Faerie were more numerous and well-traveled. There's a whisper of magic here yet, a power shifting beneath the somnolent trees.

There's the wisp again, right ahead. I drift toward it, then hesitate as hoofbeats pummel the forest floor with dull insistence, and a cloaked rider passes by me, coming from the city, plunging into the depths of the wood.

Ah, this must be the one for whom the wisp was conjured.

He's carrying something across the back of his saddle—something that smells like a mortal, but with a heavier aroma of panicked sweat and fresh blood. A prisoner.

I could interfere now, but I prefer to wait and understand this story before I act.

I sail along above the rider, my ghostly form passing through solid black tree trunks as though they were mist.

We travel across two frozen streams, past thorny thickets, into a hilly part of the forest, guided always by the wisp, which glides ahead of the rider and marks the path.

More lights appear ahead—tiny orbs of orange flame dancing in the dark. Bursting into a clearing, the rider pulls his horse up short.

Three dozen Unseelie stand in the clearing, all of them dressed for war. The biggest of them has a bald, spiked head, scales along part of his body, and a gigantic claw for an arm. The other shoulder bears a pauldron, and a breastplate covers his chest. At his belt hang twin axes.

“Took you long enough,” he snarls at the rider.

“What is the meaning of this, Varthil?” exclaims the rider, throwing off his hood. He's black-haired, steely-eyed. Though he is human, there's a faint hum of power about him. A sorcerer, then. “I told you, I need time.”

“You're out of time. We move tonight.”

“Tonight? We've barely an hour until dawn, and we agreed it would be best to carry out any attack under cover of darkness! Besides which, I need time to sway more of the guards to my side—not to mention I was recently accused of conspiring to

murder the royals, so the Queen has her eye on me. I need at least a week to soothe her into compliance before I take any further action.”

“Your problems are not mine, Marleigh,” growls Varthil. “Have you forgotten the great debt you owe me? It must be paid, with your life or hers.” His voice cracks with raw anguish. “You let the Queen torture and kill my mate. I need my revenge.”

“It was a mistake, as I’ve told you,” Marleigh replies. “At your request, we’ve been rounding up your rivals, eliminating the Seelie encampments. But your Asekith was in one of those Seelie camps. I didn’t recognize her as your mate until we got back to the city and the prison cart was unlocked. At that point, I couldn’t release her—my men knew she was a high-value target, wanted by the Queen. If she hadn’t mingled with the Seelie—”

“She had a friend among them, as I’ve told you,” snaps Varthil. “I ordered her to break ties with that Seelie bitch, but my Asekith always did exactly as she pleased. One of the reasons I loved her.” His lips retract in a snarl. “We will give you one week. At its end, we will enter the castle by the same secret paths the royals once let us use. You’ll remove all the wards you’ve placed on those tunnels, and we will forge into the Queen’s chamber. I’m going to defile her in her own bed.”

“You needn’t be quite so graphic.” Marleigh reaches behind him and loosens the rope holding the bundle to the back of his horse. “I’ve brought you a gift in the meantime—the fool who destroyed the Queen’s confidence in me.”

The bundle falls from his horse with a loud thump and a snap of bone. The body in the blanket rolls out, and I immediately recognize Lodraed, the guardswoman I was supposed to protect. Her neck is crooked, and her eyes are wide and fixed, glassy in death.

Fuck.

“You’ve killed her,” says Varthil, prodding the body with his toe. “But I suppose she’s still warm enough for a little fun.”

“I’ll leave you to it.” Marleigh tightens his grip on the reins and turns his horse. “One week. Don’t call on me before then.”

“Won’t the little Queen be even more suspicious, now that you’ve killed this guard?” asks Varthil.

Marleigh scoffs. “If she is, I’ll soon set it right. She hangs on my every word and trusts me because she has no other choice. Leave her to me.”

He gallops off into the darkness.

Rather than stay and watch the guard’s body be violated and eaten, I glide after Marleigh.

By the will of the god-stars, I’ve discovered the true evil behind the massacres of Fae in this region. Marleigh and a group of vicious Unseelie Fae have been working together, manipulating the young Queen into slaughtering the small bands of Seelie hiding throughout her kingdom. And then they plan to take the throne.

I’ve seen glimpses of the future, but I won’t see it with perfect clarity until it’s my turn with Lauriel. So far my visions have been blurred and confusing—flashes of fighting in the city streets, blood and fire and angry shouts. I’ve seen bits of what looked like a revolution, an uprising of her own subjects—and I’ve glimpsed horrific images of Fae and humans locked in combat—flesh being seared off by spells, teeth punching through skin, blood spraying, claws raking.

I don’t know which is the true future—the human revolution or the Fae conquest. I suspect it will depend on the choices Lauriel makes in the next handful of days, and perhaps Marleigh’s choices as well.

Floating behind him, I follow the Fae-hunter back to his quarters, where he paces back and forth in his study. “Fucking Varthil,” he mutters. “Got to get him out of the way.”

He fetches a book and flips through it, then runs his finger down a page to a spell with a long list of ingredients. Setting the book on a table, he begins rummaging through cabinets and assembling the supplies.

I peer at the book and note the title of the spell. *Impediment Potion: For the Temporary Removal of Powers, Paralysis of Body, and Loss of Speech.*

So he's planning to take out the Unseelie leader, Varthil. Whatever partnership or bargain they had is clearly becoming too perilous for Marleigh's liking.

This may be the reason for the conflicting futures I saw. If Marleigh removes the threat of the Unseelie, he will likely still have designs on the throne, but he may not act on those plans at once. He might ally with dissatisfied citizens of the kingdom instead and gain his crown that way.

No matter what he chooses, we have time. Enough time to finish our work with Lauriel and ensure that she becomes a new kind of queen, one who can triumph over threats from beyond her borders or within them.

I can't tell Lauriel everything I've seen tonight. Knowing the truth of Marleigh's treachery will only distract her from the internal work she must do—the change that is vital to her very survival. It's enough that her trust in him is broken.

But I need to make some kind of report to her about the guard, so I leave Marleigh to his spellwork and return to the Queen's suite.

The room smells like her—light sweat, vanilla soap, parchment, and cinnamon tea. There's a precision to the placement of everything—a studied, almost painful neatness that I suspect her maids aren't entirely responsible for. Lauriel is a creature of habits and rituals. Her very soul vibrates with fierce, anxious purpose, and she finds rest in order, in the control of small details. It's a trait we share. After I counted coins with her in the vault, I felt more rested than I have in centuries.

I've always enjoyed both men and women, and the two hunters with whom I'm partnered are gloriously handsome. In my old life, I would have enjoyed torturing and fucking them for days on end. Lauriel too. I used to extract such exquisite confessions and delicate secrets from my victims. The Unseelie lord I worked for would give me a list of questions for each torture subject, but I always went beyond those. The true artistry

of torture lies in the unfolding of a soul. Some layers are thick, crisp, and pungent—others delicate as onion-skin. I loved eliciting the bloody whispers of an agonized soul as much as I loved teasing out the most intense orgasmic screams.

As I stand before Lauriel's bed, I lift my hands. Each finger is clad in an impossible long, wickedly sharp black sheath—false claws that I should be able to remove, except that doing so contorts my spirit into throes of anguish. Wearing the claws is a punishment, and going without them is unbearable.

Even when it is my turn with Lauriel, I won't be able to touch her like the others have. Unlike them, I can't vanish my claws. A thrust of my fingers into her soft pussy would tear her flesh apart.

It's just as well. She isn't here for my pleasure, nor am I here for hers. Lauriel, Abraxas, Helix, and I will experience either mutual destruction, or mutual restoration. It's that simple. It doesn't matter that she calmed in my presence, or that I felt rested in hers. It doesn't matter that we settle each other, or that our minds work well in tandem, or that we have a similar love for numbers and a similar way of looking at them.

All that matters is the job I was assigned to do.

As I think those words, the air splits wide before me, and two figures step through the portal into the room—magnificent Abraxas, brandishing both his shining sword and an equally devastating grin—and the tiny queen with her fierce, pretty face and her abundance of inky black hair.

A thrill races through my body—a tugging awareness that I'm in Lauriel's presence. If I so desire, I can transform and take flesh.

It's a temptation too great to resist, so I shift into my physical body.

Lauriel looks startled at my presence, but she regains her composure quickly and greets me with a haughty little head-tilt.

I used to love torturing souls like hers. Defiant, determined, resistant souls. It took such a lovely long time to break them down, but when they unraveled—ah, the sweet triumph.

“What of Lodraed?” the Queen says sharply. “Is she safe?”

“She is nowhere in the palace, or the city,” I say truthfully. “Do you know where she lives?”

“A little town not far away, I believe.”

“Perhaps she sensed the danger and went home.”

“Without permission?” Lauriel frowns.

“Oh, come now, you wouldn’t expect her to stick around with a target on her back,” puts in Abraxas. “Let her alone, love. She’ll return when she’s ready.”

When he glances at me, I avoid his eyes. Riders can’t read each other’s minds: we can only share brief images of places or people related to our task. Still, I don’t want to meet Brax’s gaze. I’ll wager he has a warrior’s innate sense when something is wrong, and he’ll know I’m not telling the whole truth.

Lauriel seems willing to let the matter of the guard’s whereabouts rest for now. “Are you two going to stand there and watch me sleep?”

Abraxas laughs, but I don’t. The idea of watching her sleep, or falling asleep beside her, sounds so peaceful.

“I was planning to give you another reward before I leave,” Abraxas tells the queen. Judging by the heat in his gaze and the flush on her cheeks, the reward is going to be his cock or his tongue.

“I deserve a reward,” Lauriel says primly.

“Yes you do, love. But it seems we have an audience.”

As she removes her cloak and boots, Lauriel watches me, keen calculation in her eyes. “Paemon, do you want to stay?”

I swallow, more conscious than ever of her complex scent unfurling through my nose, saturating my lungs. But I am no slave to sexual desire. I can control myself.

“What could he do but watch?” mutters Abraxas. “Especially with those claws.”

Lauriel pays him no attention but approaches me, pulling her tunic off and revealing her bare breasts. They’re large for

her size, heavy and soft underneath, with small pink tips. I've seen many beautiful breasts—all shapes, colors, and sizes. Hers are more enticing because they belong to *her*—to that slender, strong little figure and the intense, vicious spirit within. My teeth are on edge just thinking about taking one of those soft breasts in my mouth, biting into the pliant flesh.

Abraxas crosses his arms, grinning, and my gaze flicks to his chest—to the massive brown pectorals and dark nipples. I'd like to bite him, too—sink my teeth into the solid muscle, run my claws over the firm curves of his ass.

“I asked you a question, Paemon,” says Lauriel. “Speak.”

“No,” I reply. “I do not want to stay. And he shouldn't either. You need rest.”

“I *know* she needs rest,” Abraxas interrupts hotly. “I told her sleep was important, didn't I, love?”

“Yet you're tempting her with sexual pleasure,” I hiss. “Leave her be, and we'll return to Helix.”

“In a hurry to get back to him, are you?” Brax throws at me. “You two were mighty cuddlesome when I showed up earlier. Braiding each other's hair and all that.”

I glare at him. I undid all the braids before leaving the Hovel—except for one, behind my left ear. When he was braiding that one, Helix planted a kiss on the tip of my ear, and even in ghostly form that kiss was like a brand. It sears me even now, marking my heart with a glowing scar I can't explain.

“You should both go,” Lauriel agrees, though disappointment laces her tone. “Will you tell Helix... that is... tell the bastard I don't miss him at all.”

Later, when we repeat the message to Helix, his entire face lights up as if a star has burst into dazzling life inside him. He knows, like Brax and I do, that when the Queen says she doesn't miss him, she means exactly the opposite.



The next day, Abraxas lingers near my throne in ghost form while I hold court. I'm conscious of him there, watching my every act, weighing my every word. Normally I would find that insufferably annoying, but after what I saw yesterday of the need and discontent throughout my kingdom, I don't find his presence quite so irritating. I want him to see that I took those visions to heart—that I *do* care about the wellbeing of my people. So I curb the acid that usually sours my tone, and I try to listen longer to each supplicant before I make a decision. Brax neither praises nor rebukes me, so I assume I'm doing all right.

Today's court session took place mid-morning, and afterward I summon the Captain of the Guard to ask after Lodraed. He shows me a note from her, claiming that she's given up her post and returned to her family.

"Do you believe it?" murmurs Abraxas.

I can't answer him aloud until I dismiss the Captain, so I send the man about his duties and order Kratchet to file all the notes from the morning's session. Once he leaves, I bid my guards to meet me at my study, and I retreat to the dark red hallway at the back of the throne room, walking its length until I emerge in my father's trophy hall. As much as I hate the

memories this place provokes, it's one of the few places I can be truly alone, without servants bustling past or bodyguards hovering nearby.

Pushing back the heavy scarlet curtains by one of the windows, I gaze out at the gloomy day. Snow falls in endless, silent monotony, piling up softly, turning shrubs into mounds of formless white, lining tree branches with fluffy lace. I press my hand to the cold glass, admiring the delicate feathered frost curling along the corners of each windowpane.

Abraxas floats near me, a dark-skinned, cloudy specter quivering with stray shadows.

"I'm not sure I believe that note about Lodraed returning home," I say. "And yet, I can't believe Marleigh would actually harm her. I've thought about it, and perhaps he was partly right. Perhaps she is seeing conspiracy where there is none."

When Brax doesn't answer, I glance sharply at him. "Do you know something?"

He rubs the back of his neck, wincing. "If I did, I couldn't tell you. There are certain things you must discover on your own, and interpret by yourself."

"Who makes up these rules? I think they're nonsensical."

"There's Cernunnos, Lord of the Hunt, and then Nocturis, leader of our squadron," he replies. "There isn't a rulebook, exactly, but through centuries of trial and error we've all learned what is acceptable and what isn't. Our task is to observe, and to reveal perspectives that may change your heart and mind. Sometimes we are allowed to judge the people adjacent to you—to punish or kill them, depending on their offenses. But there's a fine line beyond which we cannot interfere."

"Lodraed must have been wrong," I say. "Marleigh can't have had anything to do with my parents' death. That would mean he's in league with the Fae, but he *hates* them. He has killed many of them personally. It's preposterous to think he'd ever join forces with them."

"Why do you think the Fae turned on your parents?" he asks. "The way Helix tells it, your parents were quite friendly with the Fae—particularly the Unseelie."

I frown a little at the “Unseelie” distinction, and more deeply at the mention of Helix. “So Helix told you and Paemon everything?”

“We all share information, yes.”

“I hate the thought of you three talking about me while I’m not there.” My fingers scrape down the glass with a screech that makes my skin crawl. I turn, glaring at Abraxas. “Tell me the difference between Seelie and Unseelie Fae.”

“Shouldn’t you ask your resident Fae-hunter about that?” he counters.

“I did, once. He told me they were all the same—vile, lecherous creatures who crave brutality and sexual perversion.”

“He lied. The Seelie are a noble race, and they adhere to a strict moral code of their own, though it diverges somewhat from human morality. They are arrogant pricks, obsessively devoted to honor and beauty. I killed a lot of them in my day. Enjoyed it, too. They would always try to make a big speech at the end—a lot of lofty prose, as if they were actors in a play, delivering their final lines.” He vents a scoffing laugh. “I used to love running them through the throat while they were pontificating.”

I smirk a little at the image, and Brax grins—but then he forces the smile away and shakes his head. “Point is, most of the Seelie are decent beings who wouldn’t think of tasting mortal flesh or raping a human. There is a difference between them and the Unseelie.”

“I see.” I chew my lower lip for a second, then ask, “And are they all tough to kill?”

“It depends. Some Fae heal faster than others, and can recover from wounds that should be fatal. Others will die quickly if their healing powers are weak and their energy is depleted. And there are some weapons that can kill a Fae more rapidly—iron weapons, or those that have been spelled against us. Hunters of the Fae often use spelled weapons that prevent us from healing the wounds they make. If you want to be sure you’ve killed a faerie, you’d best wait a moment and see if the flesh starts turning gray around the wound. That means it’s a

mortal blow. When the body turns entirely gray, that's death, and there's no coming back from it. After that, our bodies crack into pieces and disintegrate."

I nod, still chewing my lip. The restlessness in my body is starting to build again, but it's manageable, so I don't head for the vault yet. Instead I go to my study and write up a list of groceries to be purchased and delivered anonymously to the Kratchet family.

I've just finished sealing the order and handing it off to a servant when a guard leans into my study, looking grim. "Your Majesty, there's someone here to see you. She won't take no for an answer."

"She must," I reply. "Tell her to come back when I'm holding court tomorrow."

"By all the gods, I'll have my say now!" A thick-set, round-shouldered woman squeezes past the guard. He makes a show of holding her back, but doesn't force her to leave the study.

I rise from my chair. "What is the meaning of this?"

The woman shakes a plump finger at me. "Twelve years I've worked here. I've been a loyal servant. Have I blabbed about all the wild things I've seen? No, I haven't, but you can bet I will now! Ironing dozens of your father's shirts and pressing hundreds of your mother's gowns—even pressing the damn sheets for the royal bed so they wouldn't have no creases—that's what I do, all day, every day. I got the burns to prove it." She points to a few scars on her flushed forearm. "And then I'm tossed out on my ass? Half the laundering team, axed with no warning and no extra pay, during winter? Thomez, him what cleans the windows and tends the gutters—him and his whole team, kicked into the street? And the librarians, and the palace priestess and her novitiates, and the tile-mender—gone! I'll tell you something, and I say it to your face 'cause I got nothing left to lose—you're no queen, missy—you're a gods-damned *bitch!*"

"Take her away, Bernam," I order the guard sharply. "Thuron, come and help him."

“You want us to take her to the dungeon, Your Majesty?” asks Thuron.

“No, just... set her outside the palace gates.”

The two guards hustle the woman out, while a third guard looks in to check on me. “All right, Your Majesty?”

His words are polite, but there’s heat in his cheeks, a defiant flash in his eyes. He looks—angry. Angry at *me*. What is going on?

“Come in here. What was that woman babbling about?”

“The dismissal notices that were just handed out, Majesty. You’ve dismissed many of the palace’s adjunct staff, and most of the consultants.”

It takes a moment for me to register what he’s saying. “The nonessentials,” I murmur.

“Nonessential?” The young guard’s color heightens, and his lip trembles a bit, as if he wants very much to yell at me and can barely restrain himself. “I suppose that’s a matter of opinion. My boyfriend happens to be one of them ‘nonessentials.’”

“There must be some mistake,” I say breathlessly. “Call Kratchet to me at once.”

He hurries away, and I drop into my chair.

This isn’t happening. That document wasn’t supposed to go out yet; I told Kratchet to set it aside until I gave the word. “There must be some mistake,” I repeat faintly.

Abraxas stands at the corner of my desk, arms folded. “You’re sure you didn’t send it out? Perhaps you were angry, and you decided—”

“No!” I exclaim, leaping up so fast I knock the chair over. “I didn’t give the order! I wouldn’t do that. Not now, not after everything. You know that, Brax... you *know* me.”

His expression is sorrowful. “And yet you dictated and signed the document.”

“Oh gods.” I press my hand to my mouth. “So many people on that list—they’re going to hate me even more now, Brax. The

whole city will hate me—the whole kingdom will, once word of this spreads.”

“Maybe that’s what someone wants,” he replies.

“You think someone released this on purpose? But Kratchet and I were the only ones who knew about it.”

Abraxas jerks his chin toward the open doorway of my study—and there is Kratchet, staring at me with an expression half-confused, half-wary. Fuck... he heard me saying that aloud. He thinks I was talking to myself.

“Kratchet.” I hurry over and grip his shoulders. I don’t think I’ve ever touched him before. “Did you hear about the notice that went out? The firing of the adjunct staff and the consultants?”

“I just heard, Your Majesty. Forgive me, I did not realize you wished for that edict to go out this morning, or I would have seen to it myself.” Despite his respectful words, his olive skin looks a shade paler than usual, and his eyes are stricken with a combination of anxiety, anger, and frustration.

“I told you to hold that document until I gave the word.”

“Yes, Your Majesty, and that is exactly what I did.”

“Then explain to me *how* this happened, Kratchet, because I did *not* give the order for that document to be released or put into effect.”

“You—didn’t?” He glances around the room, as if searching for the mysterious person to whom I was speaking a moment ago. “My lady, are you quite sure? Perhaps you did, and it slipped your mind—or perhaps you are confused. Are you ill? I can summon the palace physician—”

“Kratchet!” I shake his shoulders a little. “I’m not ill. I must know how this happened. After I signed the document, where did you put it?”

“In the clerk’s hall, on a shelf by the east door.”

“Was it anywhere near the trays where the day’s correspondence and notices are placed? Or maybe near the table where the copy-clerks put finished work? Could it have fallen into one of those trays by accident?”

“I don’t see how, Your Majesty.”

“Fuck!” I let him go with a slight shove to his shoulders, and he stumbles back. I pound my forehead with a fist. “Fuck this, fuck all of this! Go home, Kratchet, until I call for you again.”

“Your Majesty,” he ventures. “I swear to you, it wasn’t my fault...”

“Go! I’ll call for you when I need you.”

As he leaves, Brax says, “You can send out an announcement to reverse the edict and keep everyone on the palace payroll.”

“And how will that make me look? I’ll appear weak, mad, and confused. I can’t reverse this, not now—I’ll simply have to manage it somehow. I wish I knew who found that document and decided it should be released. I’m going to pay the Overseer of Communications a visit and find out how it happened.”



Hours later, I’m no closer to solving the mystery. Either the copy-clerks truly don’t know how that particular document ended up in the day’s outgoing business, or they’re protecting someone.

The rage throughout the palace is palpable. Servants whom once veiled their dislike for me now show their hatred more openly in sour looks, outright glares, or harsh whispers as I pass by. I can’t have them all punished or imprisoned for insolence—that will only make the situation worse.

In the early evening, I meet with a few counselors. It’s a smaller group than usual, because I fired several of their number whom I didn’t think contributed anything useful. The rest question me about my new policy with thinly veiled displeasure, and I’m forced to defend the reasoning behind it.

“Whether we agree with this move or not,” says Lord Leredyn, “we are left with the aftermath, which needs to be managed carefully. I’m sure you’re aware, Your Majesty, that the people are already quite displeased with the tax increases you’ve ordered, the rigid business guidelines you’ve set in place, and the cancellation of Midwinter Glee. When I say that this new edict adds fuel to the fire, I mean that as a warning. The first months of a new reign are always a delicate time, and unfortunately this transition hasn’t gone as well as one might have hoped. I’m not saying it can’t be salvaged, but you need to give the people something.”

Another nobleman pipes up. “Perhaps you could reverse today’s edict?”

“You wish me to look foolish and indecisive?” I snap at him. “I won’t be seen as the pliant, uncertain queen who changes her mind from one day to the next. The people have to believe that when I say something, I mean it. When I give an order, it shall be done.”

“Then perhaps severance pay for those removed from service? That might soften the blow and salve some of the anger.”

I sigh. Of course, it always comes down to money. “How much coin will it take?”

The numbers they begin quoting are ridiculous, especially considering how many people I just kicked from their posts. When the meeting is over, the council members are unhappy because I refused to take their recommendations, and I’m unhappy because some hideous twist of fate forced me into this situation, and now I don’t know how to get out of it.

Abraxas has remained quiet most of the afternoon and evening, and by the hard set of his features, I know he’s displeased with me, too.

I order dinner to be brought to my room—porridge and blood oranges and tea. Once all the servants are out and the door is shut, Abraxas finally speaks.

“You’re letting your pride and fear get in the way. Arrogance is the enemy of compassion, Lauriel.” He looks

down at the porridge, lip curled with revulsion. “What is this shit? Have you learned nothing from me, or from Helix?”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, I’ve had a shitty day,” I bite out. “So you can fuck off with the judgment.”

With a sudden rush he glides nearer, kneeling at the arm of my chair. “Yes, you had a shitty day. A terrible thing happened, and instead of managing it with grace and empathy, you reacted with anger and pride. I thought we’d come farther than that, love. I thought you were becoming someone who—”

“Someone who *what?*” Tears lace my voice. “Someone who fits the Wild Hunt’s ideal of a perfect ruler? Tell me, Brax, why should I care what some murderous, lecherous Fae ghosts have to say about the way I live my life? You’re trying to force me into this mold you’ve created, and it’s not working. And maybe I don’t fucking *care*.”

“You cared this morning,” he says. “You did so well during your court sessions.”

“Maybe I did. And then shit happened. Reality will always fuck me up the ass, Brax, every damn time. Don’t you see—I can’t win here. If I make the compassionate decision and hire everyone back, my credibility as Queen is destroyed.”

“That’s your pride talking. Credibility can be rebuilt.”

“What do you know?” I scream at him. “You’re a fucking ghost! And before that you were a mindless battlefield butcher. You spent your days chopping bodies apart and your nights soaking in a tub with a bunch of simpering sluts! Centuries of haunting people doesn’t make you an expert on ruling a kingdom. Stop pretending it does.”

“Stop pretending you can do this alone!” he bellows back. He shoots up to his full height, and his ghost form seems to solidify, his red eyes glowing brighter, the curled tips of his red ox horns gleaming sharper. “You’ve survived terrible things, Lauriel—you’re strong. But you’re also cruel and selfish. You don’t make good choices—probably because no one ever taught you how. But you’re so damn clever, and underneath all that fear and arrogance you have the most beautiful fucking heart I’ve ever seen. I love you as you are, and I will love you even if

you never change. And because I love you, I want you to be the best woman, the best queen, the best and brightest damn soul you can be. Slough off everything that's been done to you—everything that isn't really *you*—and become your true self.”

I grip the arms of the chair, gaping at him. He's huge now, taller than ever. Dark clouds churn around him and lightning flashes in his white hair. His voice is an echoing roll of thunder.

“I'm a butcher,” he says passionately. “A brawler. A fool sometimes, then and now. When I love, I love wholly and simply. And I've set my love on you. No matter what you do, what you choose, I'm yours. Your warrior, your guardian, your ghost. I'll be the voice that tells you the truth when you fucking hate it, and I'll think of you until my very soul is devoured by the Void. You can't stop my love, Lauriel. You can't stop me from having faith, and I believe in you more deeply than I've believed in anyone, even myself.”

Tears are flowing down my cheeks. I've been carved open—split right down my center, the edges pried back to expose my quivering, wounded heart. Slowly I rise, and despite his mountainous height I feel taller than ever.

“Do you mean that?” I whisper.

The first stroke of midnight clangs, but neither of us move.

White lightning flickers in his scarlet eyes, brief and intense. “I mean every word.”

Another stroke of the clock.

I draw in a long, shuddering breath. “No one has ever loved me before.”

The air between us condenses, shrinks, crackles with magic and with an unbearable raw force of longing. I count the remaining strokes of the clock until I can touch him.

The last stroke rings out, echoing through the hectic beat of my heart. Abraxas flashes bright, lightning through shadow—and then he's whole, incarnate, and I throw myself at his chest with such force it hurts.

I don't even know how our clothes come off. We knock over the table, spilling tea and porridge, but it doesn't matter—

he's lying beneath me, and I'm splayed across his large body, and his bare cock is sliding against my pussy.

Both his hands are on my breasts, squeezing, relishing the softness, while I kiss him, savoring the rich heat of his mouth.

"Brax," I whisper between the kisses. "Fuck me."

"I'm big, love. Too big for a little slip of a thing like you."

I'm stronger than I look. And I took Helix, remember? You're only a little bigger than him."

"But I'm definitely bigger?"

"Doesn't matter."

He laughs. "All right, love. If you think you can take me, I won't deny you. This first time, I'll let you ride me, so you can stop if it's too much."

My heart is racing, and my whole body is trembling with the need to be closer to him—to have him inside me, part of me. I lean down to kiss him again, my breasts squished against his chest, my tongue rolling into his mouth. I kiss him until I can't bear the furious heat building in my lungs—can't deny the slick flood between my thighs.

Brax reaches around behind my bottom and runs his fingertips up my pussy. He groans at the wetness coating my folds. When he shows me his fingers, they're shining.

Maybe I shouldn't be doing this with him—not after everything that happened today. But somehow, this feels right. It feels healing. It feels like the only thing in the universe that really matters.

Trembling, needy beyond reason, I rise high on my knees, planning to tuck him inside me, but his body is so thick and his cock is so long that won't work, so I stand astride his waist, legs apart. He strokes both hands up my thighs, bracing me as I lower myself into a half-crouch. I reach down and grasp his cock with one hand—it's so thick my fingertips don't quite touch the end of my thumb.

"I've never seen anything as beautiful as you, right now," Brax says hoarsely.

I can only make a tiny moan in answer, because I'm poking the large head of his cock into my pussy, and it feels so good I want to cry. It pops in all the way, and I lower myself, easing part of his shaft inside.

The stretch makes me gasp. Carefully I slide up a little, then down again, wetting his cock with my arousal. Up, and then down, taking a bit more of him each time, until he's almost sheathed to the hilt. Gods—it feels like he's all the way up inside my belly. The firm, heated bulk of him packing me full is the most exquisite thing I've felt since I fucked Helix.

I sink down again, all the way to the base of his cock. Brax squeezes my bottom, his crimson eyes glazing over with pleasure. "Good girl. How do you feel?"

"Like I was made to take all of you," I murmur. "You fit perfectly. Not a bit of room to spare—just—perfect." I give my hips a little wriggle, and a startled groan erupts from his mouth.

"Gods, love—you'd better bounce on my cock now, or I'm going to flip you onto to your back and fuck you until you can't see straight."

I vent a breathless laugh and lean forward, bracing both palms on his chest. I start bobbing my ass up and down, slowly at first, then faster as the slickness of my arousal makes the gliding motion easier. The lips of my pussy thrill each time his cock slides through them, and whenever I sink all the way down, my clit bumps against the hard slab of his lower abdomen. The impact sends a glittering tingle through my belly, brighter and more intense every time.

Brax gathers my hair, pulls it forward in a black cascade over my shoulder, and cups his other hand over my right breast as I bounce on him. He's gazing at me with adoring disbelief in his eyes, as if he can't believe this is really happening.

Still moving myself along his cock, I lean down, and he raises his head so our lips can meet. Then, impulsively, he gathers me close, wraps me up in both arms, and starts moving his hips, surging up to meet me. His big hand moves to clasp my bottom and urge me tighter against him with every roll of our hips.

“Fucking ruin me, Brax,” I whisper across his lips. “Rip me apart.”

He stiffens, gasps. “Oh gods, I’m coming.” His big body curls tighter around mine, and sudden heat explodes inside me while his cock flexes in my tight channel.

Whining a little, I arch against him, grinding my clit against the flat plane of his lower belly.

“I need...” I whisper. “I need...”

“Oh, don’t worry, love.” His breath is rough and ragged against my lips. He kisses me hard, and his cock pumps once more inside me. “I’m nowhere near done with you yet.”

Brax rolls us both over so that I’m on my back, and without sliding out of my pussy he lifts my legs, propping each of my ankles on one of his great shoulders. My legs look so frail against his bulk. With one hand he adjusts the angle of my hips, then sweeps that same warm palm over my lower stomach, pressing lightly. His thumb flicks over my clit, and I jump, whimpering, “Oh, gods, yes...”

“Don’t call for the god-stars, little queen. Here I am your god, your king, your emperor. Now let’s work on that pride.” He flicks my clit again, then thrusts forward, driving his cock deeper. “Let’s hear you beg for my mercy.”

“Fuck you,” I hiss. “How are you still hard?”

“Perks of being Fae.” He compresses my lower belly with his palm again, and I’m suddenly, wildly conscious of how much space his cock occupies inside my body. He gives me a wicked grin. “Ah, yes, love, there I am, inside you. I can make you come harder than you ever have before, but I want you to yield first. Use that sharp little tongue of yours, and ask me.”

It shouldn’t be this hard to speak a few simple words. But he and I both know what it means for me to ask for my body’s needs to be fulfilled—to let him take charge of that for me and control the intensity of my orgasm.

The moment crystallizes in my mind—and I see it suddenly as if I’m beyond my body, viewing it as the ghost of my future self. Me, lying naked and vulnerable, my arms flung

across the rug and my bottom seated between the thighs of a mighty Fae warrior. His cock is sheathed deep inside me, and my ankles are propped on his shoulders. He's holding the right ankle, occasionally stroking his fingers along my calf.

"Tell me what you want, Lauriel." His voice is a deep purr. "What does your body need?" His hips rock a little, sending a low surge pleasure through my pussy. I'm back in my body again, grounded and glowing and flushed with a violent craving.

"You know what I need," I grit out.

"Say it, love."

"I need to come. Make me come."

"That was an order." He smacks my breasts lightly, and I gasp at the sting, the flare of pleasure. "Don't command me. *Ask* me. Nicely. And remember that I love you."

Those words are the key in the lock, the flame to the wax. I unlock—I melt. "Brax," I whisper. "Please make me come. I need to come."

His palm presses over my lower belly again and he rises on his knees, one hand on my leg, keeping me tight against him while he fucks me, faster than I've ever been fucked—impossibly fast—he's pressing tighter, fucking faster, fucking the orgasm out of me while I shriek, breathless, dizzy, gasping—and I come with a choked scream, with a lightning crack, with a gush of wetness spraying over his cock.

I can't breathe—can't move—my body is paralyzed, pulsing, thrilling—and then the searing shock of ecstasy passes and I slide down the slope into a blissful puddle.

Brax lowers my legs to the floor, pulls out of me, and comes all over my stomach. When I look down, his cum has pooled in my navel and decorates my ribs in gleaming white lines.

"This rug... will have to be... cleaned," I say shakily, between shallow breaths.

"And you should be cleaned up, too, before we make our visits tonight," says Brax. He picks me up and carries me to the bathroom, while I reach up and stroke the ridged surface of one

of his horns with trembling fingers. I've never been so thoroughly wiped out from an orgasm in my entire life.

Brax joins me in the tub, bathing me and then himself. Then he lifts me out and towels me down, taking care to dry every crevice so thoroughly that I begin to want him again, more desperately than ever. But he wraps me in a towel and ushers me into my room, where I get dressed while he goes to put on his boots and pants. I choose a full-skirted dress and a cloak this time—and I naughtily omit the undergarments.

When Brax returns, he props one shoulder against the door frame, watching me comb my hair for a minute before saying casually, "Have you ever taken more than one lover to bed?"

I nearly drop my comb. "No."

"Would you ever consider it?"

I fix him with my best glare. "Do you want to fuck some other woman, and you need me there so you can be corporeal?"

"No!" he exclaims. "You're the only woman I want."

"What then?"

He pushes himself away from the door frame and rubs the back of his neck again—a habit of his when he's feeling unsure or awkward. "I was thinking of Helix. Maybe even Paemon. You think that orgasm was good—imagine being stuffed in all three holes—"

My stunned alarm must show on my face, because he backtracks quickly. "Never mind. I've seen it done—participated, in fact, and the woman always seemed to enjoy herself, provided the males did their work well. But I shouldn't have brought it up. Stupid idea."

"Very stupid," I say vaguely.

But as Abraxas takes out his sword and opens the portal for our first vision of the night, I can't help picturing such a scenario—all three of them worshipping my body together. And I imagine, a little too vividly, how glorious it might feel.



I've always been impulsive. Charge first, hit heavy, ask questions later. Loving Lauriel makes no sense. Telling her that I love her is even more foolish. Suggesting group sex with my fellow riders was ridiculous.

But this is war, like it or not—the final struggle for my very existence, and I'm charging headlong across the battlefield. I'm hitting heavy, I'm fighting for her with all I've got, and if by some chance the four of us make it through this, I can see a future, clearer than anything Paemon has ever glimpsed. I see all of us fitting together, and not just in bed. I see us being *happy*.

Despite the hard things I must show Lauriel tonight, I need to communicate that hope to her. I need to show her the glory that could be *us*.

I don't like hiding things from her—especially not the dark secret Paemon communicated to me and Helix, about Jaik Marleigh being in league with Varthil, leader of the Unseele Fae. Paemon seems to think Marleigh will take Varthil out, or vice versa, and none of it will come to a head until a week from now, by which time we'll have succeeded in our task with Lauriel. Once we succeed, we'll have our reward, so we'll be able to protect her and help her deal with the threat. Much as I'd

like to grab Marleigh's neck and squeeze his spine into pulp, I have to hold back. I need to focus on Lauriel tonight.

Our first stop is the main hall of a gloomy castle. It's an enormous room, with a fireplace big enough to hold three of me standing shoulder-to-shoulder. Years ago, joyful fists might have hammered on the planks of the long table down the center of the room as men and women drank to each other's good health, but it lies silent now, thickly coated with dust. Faded tapestries cloak the stone walls, interspersed with the mounted heads of bucks and wild oxen, of bears and wolves.

On a low couch before the fire sits a thin woman with ebony skin, clad in black. The firelight plays over her features and glitters in her eyes as Lauriel and I approach her. She's staring into the flames, a listless weariness draping every line of her body. A plate of food sits uneaten on a small table near her elbow.

"This event is not from earlier in the day," I tell Lauriel. "This is happening right now."

"That's my Aunt Agys," whispers Lauriel. "She married Narash, my father's brother. Since you've spoken to Helix about my memories, you must know—it was her daughter, Melria, whom my parents gave to the Fae. Uncle Narash killed himself a few years after it happened, and I haven't seen Aunt Agys since I was sent away to school."

"She did not attend your parents' funeral?"

"No. I think she always suspected they had something to do with Melria's disappearance. I don't think my parents ever visited here again."

"She is your family," I murmur.

"By marriage... yes, I suppose."

"She *is* your family," I say, more firmly. "The two of you could help each other, more than you think. She lingers here, hoping her daughter might one day return. If you tell her the truth of what happened, and explain the revenge you took on her behalf, she might be free to move on. She's only in her fiftieth decade. She could do many useful and wonderful things. Yet she remains here, bound by frayed hope and heavy memories."

Lauriel moves closer, gazing at her aunt. A tear slips from the woman's eye and rolls down her cheek, though not a muscle of her face moves.

I lean in and breathe against the woman's temple, and she startles, straightening on the couch. "Narash?" she says frantically. "Darling? Are you there?" And then, in a broken whisper, "Melria?"

"Oh gods." Lauriel covers her mouth with both hands, tears pooling in her eyes. "How often is she like this?"

"That is a question for her niece to answer."

"I'll write to her," Lauriel says. "I never spoke with her much as a child, but I remember her being pleasant enough."

Agys crumples onto the sofa again, as if her bones are too heavy to hold her up. She turns her face to the pillow and begins to weep.

"Come," I say gently to Lauriel. "We have more to see."

With my sword I slice a new aperture in the air. Immediately a cacophony of shouts and clashing weapons echoes through the portal. A slice of a village is visible—cottages, fences, bits of snowy yard and bristling pine. Orange light flares up suddenly, as if something large has been lit on fire.

Lauriel shrinks against me. "Is this happening right now too?"

"Yes. These are your people, under attack. Since you would not send them aid, the least you can do is stand as a witness to their courage."

Her face is whiter than ever, but she nods. Gripping my hand, she walks through the opening.

We're sucked through the portal, from the empty silence of the mournful castle into a scene of open warfare, raging in the center of a snowy mountain village. The air aches in my lungs and crackles in my nose, carrying the deep, dark, bone-freezing cold that only occurs high in the mountains after midnight.

The raiders from Ithaya wear outfits of mottled brown, black, and white, a purposeful guise to better conceal them

against the winter landscape. The peasants of the village wear simple, homespun clothing, and they wield makeshift weapons against the gleaming swords and axes of the invaders. Two cottages are on fire, with a nearby barn likely to go up in flames soon if the first two fires are not doused.

“I thought the raiders were only stealing a few sheep and supplies,” gasps Lauriel. “This is far more serious than the village leader said!”

“He came to you for help because he expected the raids to escalate, and they have. This is a full-fledged attack on your people by a neighboring kingdom.”

A woman stands in the doorway of her home, screaming, beating back one of the raiders with a heavy cast-iron pan. Two more raiders join him, and together they barrel into the woman, driving her into the house. Her screams continue, mingled with lecherous jeers from the men.

Lauriel seizes my arm, her nails sinking into my flesh. “Can’t you do anything?”

I’m already shifting into ghost form, rushing over the frozen ground and sailing into the cottage. Two raiders are trying to undress the thrashing woman while a third tugs out his dick.

“Get her leggings off,” he shouts, with a coarse laugh.

I sweep in close and exhale right on his cock—the icy breath of dead things, the eternal cold of the Void through which I ride. His flesh turns blue, then begins to crystallize white as frost creeps over the flesh.

“What the—what the fuck is happening?” the raider screeches.

I blow another cold breath across his dick, freezing it solid.

The two other raiders are staring, aghast, and the woman takes the opportunity to twist and kick one of them in the jaw. From a bedroom doorway, two children creep out—a young boy holding a small knife, and a girl slightly younger, armed with a stick of firewood. Yelling, they run to their mother’s aid, while

the man with the frozen dick staggers out of the house into the village square, bawling for help.

I glide along behind him, still invisible.

“Witchcraft!” he howls. “Foul Fae magic!”

Nearby, three villagers are battling half a dozen raiders. They’re holding their own with scythes and a quarterstaff, but all are wounded, bleeding—close to being overwhelmed by the enemy.

“Brax!” Lauriel runs to me, her eyes wild and her cheeks wet. “They’re dying, Brax—please—I know it’s my fault. I can’t help them now—only you can stop this. Please, please...”

I’d give her anything. A mountain she took a fancy to... the entire ocean. But I can’t kill the raiders, since they aren’t directly threatening her. There are other criteria that allow the Wild Hunt to kill, but none of those apply here.

Even if I can’t destroy them, perhaps I can end tonight’s battle another way.

I stride toward the center of the village square, where there’s a fountain. It’s partly frozen, but with a sweep of my hand I clear the snow until I glimpse my dim, ghostly reflection in the dark water. Then I whistle sharply.

My silver-gray stallion, Rioch, explodes from the fountain in a storm of black cloud. Dark smoke curls from his giant hooves, flooding the square.

At the same moment I reveal myself—not my carnal form, or my harmless ghost form, but my true, terrible form—the most fearsome aspect I possess as a member of the Wild Hunt.

Lauriel is still shielded from the humans’ perception, but I am not. I tower above the largest cottage—I’m taller than the village’s watch-tower. I imagine myself as they see me—a looming figure in billowing black robes with eyes of fire, horns of flame, and hair white as the moon. When I leap onto Rioch’s back, he rears up to paw the air with hooves the size of wagon wheels, and he screams his rage, tossing his mane. I lift my sword high, and lightning crackles along the blade, crawling to

the tip and then blasting upward into the sky, a stark white stream of endless light.

I can only do this for a moment. I can't hold this form long without attracting the attention of Nocturis, my squadron leader in the Wild Hunt. But a moment is all it takes.

The raiders shriek, drop their loot, and scuttle away into the night. The villagers withdraw from me, their eyes stricken with fear, weapons ready to face a new foe.

But a gaunt man in a ragged coat, with blood on his shoulder and a spear in his hand, stumbles forward, peering up at me.

"Eben," whispers Lauriel. "He's the village leader, the one who asked me for help."

Eben nods once, then reaches under his coat and draws something out. A piece of gold cloth—no, not a cloth—a cap.

A wave of power shudders through me—an echo of compulsion, of command. Rioch's hooves crash to the ground, and he lowers his head. He feels it too.

This is it, then. The golden cap. The Fae relic that summoned me and my fellow riders to this kingdom. It resides with this haggard-looking mortal man.

"You of the Wild Hunt," says the village leader. "I thank you for upholding justice in this kingdom. Go now, and leave us in peace."

The lightning dies on my blade. I bow my head to the man, and then I turn and ride Rioch out of the village, letting myself fade back to invisibility as I go. When I reach the edge of the forest, I float up off the horse's back and give him a quick order to return to the Void. Then I shift back to physical form and return to Lauriel, once again veiled from all human sight except hers.

We stand there for a moment, watching the villagers begin to deal with the aftermath of the fight.

"He's the one," says Lauriel at last. "The one who summoned all of you here. That's what he meant by 'You will

regret this when they arrive to judge you.’ He said that, after I refused to send soldiers to his aid.”

“He has the golden cap,” I tell her. “For the most part, the Wild Hunt rides of our own accord, as Andregh or Cernunnos dictate. But in every realm there are certain charmed items that can summon us. That cap is supposed to remain in Faerie, but apparently someone brought it here and gave it to that poor bastard. He can only use it once, and after we’ve finished our task here, its gold will fade, and it will look like an ordinary hat until he gives it to someone else.”

“Just a few days ago I would have been furious with him,” Lauriel says quietly. “I would have confiscated the cap and had him dragged to the dungeons for torture—and probably death.”

“And now?”

“Now...” She inhales a long breath. “I think perhaps I should thank him. At the very least I will send soldiers out here immediately. And I will write up a message to the king of Ithaya, warning him that if he does not uphold border security and restrain these raiders, we will consider it an act of aggression.”

“Bold words that may actually start a war.”

“That’s why I’ve been raising taxes and hoarding coin.” She looks up at me, desperation in her eyes. “I can feel war coming. I can practically taste it. Most of the cities and villages of Revallen are managing, barely—but my parents left the kingdom’s finances in such a state of chaos it’s pathetic. The funds they did have in the vault were earmarked for parties and entertainment, not the improvement of our defenses, the strengthening of our military, or the welfare of our people. To be honest, if my parents hadn’t died when they did, I believe they would have utterly bankrupted the kingdom. We only survived this long because of my grandfather’s wise handling of the kingdom’s affairs. If only I could have learned from him!”

It’s as if a window in my mind has opened, and I understand her better, all at once. I see clearly what I sensed in her—dedication, foresight, the desire to be a good leader. Her compassion may be buried beneath layers of pain and protective anger, but it’s there.

Impulsively I grab her, draw her to my chest, and hold her there—my fierce little queen.

“I can hear your heartbeat,” she murmurs against my skin. “It’s fast.”

“Because I fucking love you,” I tell her.

She sighs. “I don’t understand why.”

“Because I chose to.”

“But *why?*”

“Because *you.*”

She laughs a little, punches me in the kidney with her small fist. “That’s not an answer.”

“That’s all the answer I’ve got. And now, love, we have one more place to visit before dawn turns me back into a ghost.”



Before we leave, Brax exhales great gusts of his cold, misty breath over the fires in the tiny village. Two of the cottages are burned beyond hope, but the barn could possibly be salvaged. I force myself to stare at the blackened ruins, to feel the truth—that I am partly responsible for the destruction of these homes.

I must do better.

Brax comes to me again, slashes his sword through the air, and guides me through another portal.

We pass from one blaze of torchlight and firelight into another, and I suck in a panicked breath, fearful of more fighting, more death. But the voices here have a different cadence—they're merry, and laughter rings out amid the rippling melody of pipes, the beat of drums, and the sawing of fiddles. Figures dip and sway around a bright fire in a large clearing bordered by tall trees. Between the trees are colorful tents, rigged with ropes and branches.

The figures moving around the fire are tall, slender, and graceful, with faces of all hues—deep umber, black, moon-white, fawn-colored, blue-tinted, pink, and gold. My breath catches as I notice the bristle of antlers, the ruffle of feathers,

the flutter of enormous butterfly wings, and the glitter of jewelry in pointed ears.

These are Fae. But even though a few of them are mostly naked, this isn't an orgy—it's a dance.

“Usually the Fae create their own light,” Brax says, low. “Even the weakest among us can conjure glowing orbs, as many as we need. But in this realm, it's easier to use fire, as mortals do. And some of us enjoy its heat, and the play of its flames. Look more closely, love. See beyond the merriment.”

My attention shifts to the outer edges of the revel, the Fae who aren't dancing. They cluster in shadows, huddled together, arms wound around shoulders, clawed fingers gripping each other as if they're afraid one of their number might disappear. The ears of the Fae girl nearest me look odd, and when I peer more closely I realize the tips have been cut off—forcibly trimmed into a rounded shape. And they haven't healed.

Another Fae near her, a male who looks about the human equivalent of twelve, is sitting propped against a tree. Dark red wounds twist around his legs, carved deep into the flesh, glistening unhealed. He watches the dancers with mournful eyes.

A tall, broad Fae woman strides out of the darkness, accompanied by two others, both armed. The dancing halts at her appearance, and everyone in the clearing looks up expectantly. Her calf-ears twitch as the music dies away, leaving a breathless silence in its place.

“It's true,” she says in a clear, musical voice. “We are the last camp left. Roisgamh's camp was overrun by the hunter and his men. All are dead.”

A low, keening wail begins, wordless sorrow issuing from several throats. But the Fae leader raises her hands. “We will mourn them, but not tonight. Tonight, we will sing, and dance, and share tents with our lovers, and replenish our magic, such as it is.”

“It's no use,” protests one of the males. “Half of us have been wounded or poisoned by that hunter Marleigh. He arms the Queen's soldiers with iron blades, spelled to corrupt us. His

minions have laid traps throughout the forest. We are running out of both room and time. What is your plan for our survival, Fengold?"

The Fae leader glances around. "Ialar voices the questions all of you are thinking, yes?"

The others nod and murmur in assent.

"Very well." Fengold turns and smiles at one of the smaller Fae, who looks perhaps seven years old. "As even the youngest among us know, our transference here was an accident—a spell gone awry during a battle between Seelie and Unseelie. We've existed in this mortal kingdom for decades, hidden but relatively undisturbed, thanks to the royals' fascination with our Unseelie counterparts. But since the arrival of the hunter Jaik Marleigh, and the death of the King and Queen, we've been living on the edge of ruin. All our efforts at resistance have proved futile—Marleigh is too well-versed in our ways, armed with corrupt inventions and backed by the armies of the land. We have no other choice but to go straight to the source of our distress, to the only person who can save us. My plan is to petition the Queen herself for sanctuary."

"The Queen?" exclaims Ialar. "She'll kill you on the spot."

"Perhaps. But it's our only chance. Our numbers are dwindling by the day. Living in the mortal realm has made us more fertile and blessed us with more children than usual—otherwise we might already have been exterminated. But even so, our days are numbered."

"What about going back to Faerie?" asks a reedy-looking woman with green-tinted skin.

"We've looked for an artifact or a spell," replies Fengold. "We've heard nothing of any object or doorway that could return everyone to Faerie. Our best chance is to continue claiming this world as our home, and to beg the Queen's mercy."

"Even if you get into the city, you won't make it to the palace," says Ialar. "Marleigh has wards and charms in place to prevent glamours and to signal the approach of Fae."

Fengold, who has been far more patient with him than I would be, finally lets frustration seep into her voice. “We have to try. Laith and I have created some countermeasures that should help us reach the Queen’s presence and give us a few minutes’ protection so we can appeal to her. I believe that if we show her our skills, our beneficial magic—if we prove that we could be loyal, helpful citizens, she will understand that we are not like the Unseelie. We do not entrap humans, ravage them, or devour their flesh, nor do we concoct harmful plagues and malicious spells, as they do.”

“When?” asks another Fae. “When will you go to the Queen?”

“Marleigh has just returned to the palace after his last raid,” she says. “Judging by his usual patterns, we will have a short respite before he goes hunting again. That is our window of time. I shall begin the journey to the capital at dawn.”

One of the Fae behind her steps forward—a tall male with curly violet hair. “I will go with my mate to beseech the Queen. It is only by Fengold’s foresight and wisdom that we’ve escaped death this long. Her word is my law and my delight.”

Fengold gives him a grateful look, and he reaches out, placing a hand on her back, standing with her to face the others.

A flash of jealousy pains my heart. Here is another leader, trying to ensure her people’s survival—but unlike me, she has a partner to back her up. I want to believe I can stand on my own, but it would be far less wearying if I had someone like that beside me. Someone to watch my back and be a voice of support on my behalf.

“No more talk of this tonight,” says Fengold. “Drink, dance, and kiss the ones you love! Let us forget fear, and delight in the joys of Midwinter! This is one festival we share with humans, and it should be a time of cheer and goodwill!”

She claps her hands commandingly, and the pipers and fiddlers in the group lift their instruments again. The music is half-hearted at first, but it picks up quickly as Fengold and her mate Laith discard their weapons and begin to dance. The song is merry, but there’s a plaintive note in it, an echoing strain of

wistful melody that writhes into my heart and tugs at me with soft urgency.

Without realizing it, I've moved forward, into the circle of firelight. I glance back at Abraxas and frown in confusion when I see what he's doing. His sword is glowing faintly, and he's holding it close to his mouth—he seems to be whispering to it.

“What are you doing?” I hiss.

“Fetching your Midwinter gift.” He props the sword against a tree. “Shouldn't be long now.”

“How can your sword stand there against the tree, when we're intangible, invisible, and inaudible to everyone?” I protest, pointing at the weapon.

“We can interact with inanimate objects,” he says. “Watch.” He walks over to a makeshift table, a plank across two chunks of log. He picks up a mug and a bottle and pours himself some wine. “To your health, Majesty.”

I march toward him and snatch the mug before he's had a chance to take more than a swallow. “I'm the one who needs a fucking drink after all that.” I gulp the liquid, relishing the burn in my stomach. “Helix never told me we could interact with things.”

“It's unwise unless the people around you are distracted. Inexplicable floating objects tend to cause a panic.” Brax winks at me.

Recklessly I refill the mug again—and then I hesitate. “We shouldn't drink all their wine.”

“It's conjured wine,” says Brax. “It doesn't take much magic to create more.”

“In that case—” I'm about to drink it down, but he snatches the mug, swallows it himself, then grabs my hand. “Come on, love. We're going to dance.”

“I don't dance,” I protest.

“Nonsense.”

“I *can't* dance.” Not *here*, not among these beings whose lives I've ruined. “These are Seelie Fae, aren't they? The

harmless ones.”

“Not harmless, love. The Fae are never harmless. But the Seelie follow a code, as I told you. There’s a nobility to them, a reverence for learning, wisdom, and beauty.”

“They’re not monsters.”

“Neither are all of the Unseelie.”

Grief, guilt, and anger swell together in my chest, expanding until I think I might burst. “And I’ve been having them all killed, as if they’re monsters. They’ve been hunted like animals.”

Abraxas turns me toward him—cups my face in both his huge hands. He doesn’t tell me it’s not my fault, because it is.

“The combination of longstanding rage, sudden grief, and supreme power can be a terrible one.” His deep voice is so gentle it brings tears to my eyes.

“They won’t forgive me, even if I grant them sanctuary,” I whisper.

“Perhaps not. But forgiveness should never be a condition of doing the right thing.”

His eyes are the color of roses, soft and sweet—such a contrast to his warlike build. I remember the way the beat of his great heart quickened when my ear was pressed to his chest.

Godsdamn me, I think I love him. Not just for loving me, but for being *himself*. I think I would do anything for him—*be* anything for him—and it frightens me, because I’ve never felt this way about anyone.

“I’ll fix everything tomorrow,” I tell him. “The cruel edict that went out today, and the order for the Fae to be hunted—I’ll reverse it all, and fuck what anyone else thinks of me.”

“That’s my queen,” he murmurs, bending to touch his lips to mine.

His kiss is sunshine in a midnight wood, magic in a world of prosaic gray. Gladness spirals up through my soul, and suddenly I do want to dance.

My hands find his, and I look up at him, a wordless confession in my eyes. Beaming, he draws me backward into an open space, swings me into the rhythm of the music. His hands clasp my waist and he picks me up—I'm whirling through space, through blurred color and glimmering melody, and his face is the center of everything, the one stable, beautiful, reliable thing.

Something that has always been tightly clenched inside me releases. A boat slipped from its moorings, a button popped free of the hole, a knot undone. And I am free.

I have never felt so utterly unafraid.

Music flows into me, along my loosened limbs, and I let it control me, move me, undulate through my body. I don't know the steps of this dance, if there are any, but it doesn't matter, because no one except Brax can see—and everyone here seems to be dancing however they like anyway. Whole Fae families are dancing together—even the boy with the injured legs is tenderly gathered in the arms of a sturdy Fae woman and carried into the merriment.

Despite everything they've endured—what *I've* put them through—these Fae are joyful, united, grateful.

My heart feels as though it's expanding, beyond the grief and guilt, into a new space, wide and wonderful. A space where I can be generous, and kind, and *better*. A place where anything is possible, and it's all because of Helix, and Brax... sweet, big-hearted Brax...

I abandon my dancing and leap for him, locking my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist. He staggers, laughing, and buries my mouth in a hot, hearty kiss.

I think I love you. I want to say it, foolish as it seems. It feels deeply true.

Instead I clasp his head in both my hands and open wide to him, my tongue swirling over his as if it can pass the words silently into his mouth.

I love you. You make me feel safe. You give me hope.

Abraxas wraps my body in his massive arms, fierce yet gentle, kissing me back so passionately I can almost taste his answer.

Then he pulls back, his crimson eyes shining. “Your gift is here.”

He sets me down, takes my shoulders, and turns me toward the forest.

At first, all I see is two pairs of red, fiery eyes. But then, as I squint, I make out the shapes of two ghost horses. Their riders leap down and approach us—one with a mane of red hair and a pair of brown antlers, the other a slim, pale figure with tightly-curved ram’s horns and purple hair down to his thighs.

Helix and Paemon.

“What are they doing here?” I gasp. “Is this even allowed?”

“If it isn’t, we’ll be punished,” says Brax with a shrug. “It’s worth the risk.”

“And it will be worth the agony,” says Helix in his golden voice, approaching me. I swallow, remembering the frantic need between us when we fucked—and suddenly I realize how much I’ve missed arguing with him. Even when he was most annoying, he was like a sprinkle of heated spice in the bland dish of my life.

So of course, when he’s close enough, I punch him in the stomach with all my might.

He grunts at the impact, then chuckles. “Ah, the welcome I was expecting.”

Paemon looms behind him, tall and serious, his long claws twitching nervously at his sides. Impulsively I slip between Brax and Helix, making my way into Paemon’s space, looking up into his narrow lavender eyes. His delicate features tighten, and his throat bobs as he swallows.

In his presence, I feel different than I do with the others. Brax is my protector and makes me laugh. Helix challenges me and wakes my most fiery passions. But Paemon—with him I

feel calm, steady, and strong. He settles me. And with all the new emotions flooding my soul, I yearn to feel settled.

“Dance with me,” I say.

He lifts his hands a little, gazing mournfully at the long claws. “I can’t. Not without hurting you.”

“Like this.” I move into his space, pressing my body against his. “Now put your arms around me, and just keep your claws angled away.”

Gingerly he obeys.

“And now we move.” I slip my arms around his narrow waist—he’s so fucking tall—and I begin to sway, side to side. His hair glides over my arms like a silken cloud as he moves with me.

He smells different than the others—like pages rustling in a candlelit library, like black coffee and spilled ink, like opulent roses on the verge of softening with rot. The music dips and rises around us, slithers into us, and slowly he clarifies while everything else softens into a blurry glow, just as it did when I danced with Brax. Paemon’s slender body is like pale whipcord—slimmer, but no less strong. I can feel his compacted strength as he yields, as he relaxes into the melody and allows himself to surge against me. The tiny bird skull bounces against his chest as he twirls me around, and when I gasp a laugh, he smiles.

He *smiles*.

His lavender eyes crinkle at the corners, and his long white canines glitter, and I can’t breathe.

It’s not only that he’s beautiful—it’s that I made him smile, and I *know*, somehow, that a smile from him is a rare and precious thing.

“You see the future,” I murmur as we flow through the music together. “What have you seen of mine?”

Firelight flashes in the studs along his brows as they contract. The smile is gone. “Don’t ask me.”

“Is it so terrible?”

“Terrible... and approaching much too quickly.”

My breath catches as he spins us both and his claws shift, the bare edge of one grazing my shoulder, opening a shallow cut.

“I’m sorry.” He starts to pull away, but I wrap myself tighter against him and set my cheek to the center of his chest.

“I don’t care if you cut me apart,” I say recklessly. “I want to keep dancing. And I want you to tell me that there’s hope, even if you don’t believe it.”

“We all believe in you,” he says earnestly.

“Because you have to. Because something terrible is going to happen to all of you, if this doesn’t work.”

“It *is* working, Lauriel.” His soft voice curls around my name like a glossy serpent. “Because you are not an evil person, nor a cruel person.”

“I have a cruel streak,” I admit, in a voice so low it’s barely above a breath. “Sometimes I really enjoy making other people hurt. Watching their faces fall, and knowing that I ruined their day. I get a perverse satisfaction from it.”

I’ve never said that aloud to anyone, and I automatically recoil from him a little, preparing for the rejection I know will come.

But he nods, looking down at me with raw understanding in his eyes. “Hurting them lessens your own misery, for a little while. I used to do the same thing. Torturing bodies and souls gave me a thrill like nothing else—carried me out of myself, gave me power. But it never lasted, and afterward I was left just as hollow as before.”

“But it’s *something*,” I whisper. “It’s something, when I feel nothing but dread, anxiety, fear, and this constant, acidic rage.”

“And so you pass those feelings to those around you—your dependents, your subjects. But that isn’t the only way. You have the power to cheer or discourage these people—to make their service to you easy or wretched, a delight or a dread. Your power isn’t only in commands and coin—it’s in your voice, in your expression. You can make a difference with the slightest

change in tone or attitude, with a moment of thoughtfulness or an understanding smile. The influence you wield is more important than any pile of treasure.”

His whispered words sink into my soul, saturating my heart. I feel the truth of them echoed inside me—a truth I already knew, deep down—but I needed someone to *say* it. “I suppose all I need is the courage to try.”

“Courage you have, by the oceanful.” He gazes at me with admiration shining rich in those lavender eyes. “Your strength astounds me. You could accomplish incredible things, if you allow yourself a bit more kindness and generosity. I need no magic to know that your future could be a glorious one. The stuff of legends.”

The emotion binding us in this moment is so much more than physical desire. It’s a need, soul-deep, spirit calling to spirit across chasms of death and time and space.

“I want to kiss you,” he says softly. “May I?”

I don’t know why that simple request makes me want to cry. “Anytime you want,” I reply.

We pause in the swirling glitter of the music, and I rise on my tiptoes for my kiss—but he carefully slides his forearms beneath my rear and lifts me up, without letting his claws touch me. With my hands on his shoulders, I lean forward and tentatively touch my lips to his.

Kissing him is like nightfall with a shower of sugared stars. It’s dark glitter in my mouth, in my mind, in my very soul. There’s wind flowing around us, lifting his hair and mine, as if the universe itself is weaving a spell just for us.

Paemon slips his tongue into my mouth, and the gentle glide sends a thrill right to my clit. I hum with delight and let my own tongue twine with his before questing into the heat of his mouth. He lets me in, and I hitch myself closer to his chest with a little moan of pleasure.

Fuck, I’m getting wetter by the second. My body, my heart—they’re reacting to him like they did with Helix and Brax.

I end the kiss, just barely, leaving enough space between our mouths to whisper, “I’m in trouble, Paemon.”

“Hm?” His eyes look a bit glazed and starry.

“I think I like all three of you far too much. Something is very wrong with me.”

He sighs and kisses me softly, lightly. “There’s a reason the three of us were sent to you. You need all of us—and I suspect there’s something we’re supposed to learn from you as well.”

“From me?” I arch an eyebrow.

“Don’t do that,” he whispers. “It’s far too adorable, especially when I’m trying to resist you.” He reaches up to kiss my eyebrow.

Movement in the corner of my vision snags my attention. When I turn my head, I see Abraxas dancing with Helix. The gliding music has changed to a merry tune, and their dance is a quick one—a jolly clasp of hands, circling and stamping—and then Brax squeezes Helix’s ass, and my eyes widen.

I look back at Paemon. His cheeks are tinged faintly pink.

“Are the three of you—” I gasp.

“Each of us is very attracted to you,” he says reluctantly, as if it costs him something to admit it. “And we’re drawn to each other as well. A fleeting madness, perhaps, born of close proximity and being gifted with physical form after centuries.”

“A temporary madness,” I murmur. “Perhaps one should take advantage of such madness, when it presents itself.”

I can see the struggle on his face—the attempt at resistance, and it almost makes me laugh, because it mirrors my own struggle so well. But I’ve given up fighting this. I’m done pretending I don’t want these men.

“I won’t try to persuade you,” I tell him. “But I’m curious why you seem reluctant, given the Fae’s penchant for debauchery.”

“I don’t mind physical pain,” he says at last. “But pain of the heart—it’s a thousand times worse, and only a fool would open himself to it.”

Our gazes meet and meld, and there's a jolt of unspoken connection between us—understanding, symmetry, kinship.

“Of course it hurts,” I say. “But we can have sex without... anything emotional...”

A smile flickers across his mouth. “You don't believe that. Not in this case—not with us.”

“No,” I admit.

“We are being woven together, the four of us. Whether we're doing it ourselves or it is being done to us, I cannot tell. Resistance is the wisest option—yielding would be foolish and masochistic, given the circumstances.”

“Who doesn't love a little masochism?” Maybe it's the bit of Fae wine I had, or maybe it's the rush of attention and affection after so many years of being rebuffed, manipulated, and befriended only for my position and title... but I'm feeling particularly reckless tonight. I'm aching, in my heart and between my legs, and I need *them*. I want them to surround me, bury me with the weight of their bodies, fill me up in the most carnal way and satiate my heart with their smiles, their words, their kisses.

“I need this.” My admission is hoarse, broken, and I let my pain and craving flood my gaze so he can see it. “I want to feel everything, just once. All of it, overwhelming me so I can't *think*, and I can't worry. You need it too, Paemon. I can see it... I can see *you*.”

He blinks, looks away, his mouth tightening. “Fuck.”

Still seated on his forearms, held at the level of his eyes, I lean in and kiss that grim, reluctant mouth. “Like I said, I won't persuade you. But I *dare* you. I dare you to open yourself and let the pain in. I dare you to be brave enough to love us tonight.”

His eyes flash back to mine, and heat pools in his gaze.

I give him a smile straight from the depths of my dark heart—wickedness and madness, but my lips tremble a little because I want, I want, I *want*.

“Very well,” he whispers. “We can ask if they would be game for a little madness, all together.”

“Yes. And then...”

“I won’t be able to touch you. But you’re welcome to ride my cock, or my face. I’m very good with my tongue.”

He kisses me again, and this time, when his tongue enters my mouth, it divides in two, each section wriggling suggestively.

My heartbeat skyrockets and my breath catches.

Paemon breaks the kiss, letting the forked tongue skitter between his teeth for a second before he retracts it. There’s a sly glint in his eyes now. “I’ll take Abraxas.”

“I’ll dance with Helix.”

He lowers me to the ground, and I move toward Helix, feeling a bit dazed.

I haven’t forgotten any of the pain and peril I’ve seen tonight. But if Abraxas has taught me anything, it’s that I can’t be miserable and stressed all the time. Sometimes I have to do things I enjoy, just for myself. It’s the middle of the night—I can’t very well wake up my servants and start making proclamations right now. So why shouldn’t I take a little time for myself, and fulfill a fantasy I never expected to have?

Besides, who knows if the change in my heart will be deep enough and true enough to satisfy the powers that be? If Paemon’s visions are correct, and I can’t change quickly enough to alter my future, I’ll be dead soon. And I’ll be damned if I pass up this chance to enjoy three glorious Fae males...

Three Fae males.

The words echo in my brain, slowing my steps.

If I do this, I’ll be just like my parents. Addicted to sex with the Fae. Participating in wild orgies.

That’s what my fear and anger are telling me. But another part of me is stronger, clearer.

This isn’t the same at all. This isn’t a debauched, bloody revel with wicked Unseelie who devour flesh and destroy lives.

This is me, connecting with three beings who have become my world during recent days. Three males who, in spite of all

our differences, each understand and support me in their own way. No matter how lecherous and reckless such a liaison might appear to an outside observer, this is something far purer and more beautiful than anything I've had in my entire life.

I don't deserve it—or maybe I do—but either way, I'm going to embrace it as I do everything else—with all the focus and intensity I possess.

There's movement among the dancers—a shifting of the crowd as the younger Fae leave the circle and head to the tents for the night. Their departure signals a shift in the dynamic of the adult Seelie surrounding the bonfire—a more sensual melody, kisses growing more urgent, hands traveling bodies, clothes slipping away.

Helix and Abraxas have seen Paemon and me approaching. There's realization in their eyes, and hunger. Brax grips Helix's shoulder briefly, then turns to Paemon, taking the taller Fae warrior by the waist and moving into the dance with him.

Helix crosses his arms and tilts his head, mischief dancing in his eyes. “Come to beg for a dance, brat?”

“Not at all. Just dancing by myself.” I roll my shoulders and hips to the music, ignoring my inner twinge of embarrassment. This is not something I would usually do, but I'm throwing caution to the wind, and I'm going to fucking seduce him despite his attempts to appear uninterested.

The music spins into a new rhythm, and shouts of approval rise from the crowd of Fae. This tune must be a favorite, and as luck would have it, it suits my goals perfectly. It's a sultry, pounding rhythm, a song made for sex, a melody designed to unravel inhibitions.

I roll my hips in a slow circle, bend and whip back up, tossing my hair, and then I lift both hands above my head and continue circling with my hips.

Helix stalks toward me, his huge chest rising with heavy breaths, his scarlet brows thunderously bent and his eyes aflame. “Stop it, brat.”

“Stop what?” I curl my fingers into my skirts, drawing them up my thighs, exposing my legs. With an arch of my neck

I toss my hair again.

Helix pounces.

The next second I'm on my back on the snowy ground, my cloak pinned beneath me and my hair strewn around me. He doesn't bother to unlace his low-slung pants, just pushes them down, seizes his cock with one hand and throws my legs up, pinning my ankles together one-handed.

Helix groans when he sees that my pussy is bare and wet for him.

He's poised to enter me. He pauses—just one instant when his eyes lock with mine, asking—and the second I nod, he shoves into me and then he's fucking me, right there on the ground, at the edge of the firelight.

I know we're invisible to everyone but Brax and Paemon, but it still feels strange. The ground is cold—snow and trampled brown grass—but I'm still warm from the dancing—warm and breathless and glittering with hectic excitement.

Helix is braced over me, my knees hooked over his shoulders, and he's glaring into my eyes while he thrusts wetly into my pussy. I reach up and grab his antlers, shocked that instead of smooth bone, their texture is almost velvety. He groans when I grip them and ruts into me harder, so fast that I scream a little. His frenzied rhythm is driving waves of sharp pleasure through my body—I've never approached the peak so fast in my life.

"Helix," I gasp. "Helix—ah—"

"Don't pretend this isn't exactly what you wanted," he says, his usually silken voice ragged at the edges—ragged with need for *me*. "Dancing like that... sexy little bitch... beautiful damn brat..."

My eyes are rolling up, my body tensing as waves of pleasure tighten into an oncoming climax. Dimly I'm aware of two figures approaching us—Paemon and Brax.

"Interfere and I'll kill you," Helix snarls, and the ferocity in his tone sends me flying off the edge. I'm convulsing and exploding at the same time—venting little hoarse screams as

ecstasy pulses through my very bones. The orgasm keeps throbbing, flooding me with bliss until I'm dizzy from it.

"I wasn't going to interfere," Brax says cheerfully. "Clearly you're doing your job well. But she's lying on the cold ground. What if I hold her open for you?"

Helix groans as if he can't bear to stop, but then he pulls out long enough for Brax to sit down cross-legged and pull my limp body into his lap. I'm half-reclining against the heated expanse of his skin, my bottom nestled on his crossed legs. "Easy, love," he murmurs in my ear. "That's better, isn't it?" He cups my inner thighs with his big hands and pulls them far apart, spreading my pussy wide.

Helix is panting, his cock flushed and dripping with arousal. He kneels, lines himself up, and starts fucking me again, shuddering with every thrust. "The way I need you, brat," he gasps. "Fuck..."

And then he comes, with one hand gripping Brax's shoulder and the other cupping the side of my neck. Hot cum spills into me, and I shiver at the richness of the sensation.

"Lauriel," Helix murmurs brokenly. "You miracle."

There's no flash of murderous intent in his gaze this time. Instead—shit, he looks as if he's going to cry. His eyes sparkle with tears as he leans in to kiss me—a hot, sweet kiss, while his cock eases out of my trembling pussy.

Brax keeps holding me open, and I feel Helix's cum sliding out.

But as Helix moves back, Paemon crawls in, lowering his mouth to my sex. He licks up Helix's release, and then his tongue divides, one tip quivering over my clit, the other stroking the area around my entrance.

I can't bear it. It's too much, too exquisite. If I'm going to come again, I need more pressure, I need—

"Let me go," I gasp, and Brax releases me immediately. I'm shaking, but I manage to climb to my feet and give a command. "We're going back to my room," I tell them. "And before we do anything else, I'm sitting on Paemon's face."



I lie on the Queen's bed, my arms outspread, my claws far from her soft body.

She has carefully gathered all my long hair and twisted it into a knot atop my head so she won't pull it while she's riding my tongue. I don't tell her that I'd gladly endure any pain just to taste her.

I've opened the floodgates now. I've let the longing out, let the ache inside me expand. There's no stopping it, no denying what I crave.

All of us are naked. Brax took Lauriel back to her room through a portal, while Helix and I rode our horses to the palace, and when we arrived, they were already nude and kissing frantically. Helix practically tore off his own pants and mine, then seared my mouth with a hot kiss. He feels so much better in physical form than he does when we're in the Hovel.

These two Fae and this mortal woman have drawn me in. The way they're looking at me now—admiration, desire, affection—it pierces me more deeply and sweetly than I want them to know.

I'm utterly vulnerable, and yet I know I'm safe. I hear it in Brax's voice as he compliments the length of my cock. I feel it in the way Helix sweeps a warm hand along my leg. I see it in Lauriel's eager smile, in the unusual softness of her gaze when she looks at me.

"Your lower half is unoccupied, Paemon," Brax says as Lauriel carefully kneels astride my face. "Seems a pity, doesn't it, Helix?"

"Surely we can do something about that," Helix replies in his honeyed tones. "What do you think, Brax—a hole for you and a cock for me?"

"Seems fair. Balanced, as it were."

They look at me, seeking my consent.

I don't reply, but I arch my knees and spread my thighs.

With a growl of satisfaction, Brax moves into position, lifting my rear and inspecting my asshole. He reaches forward and cups Lauriel's pussy for a moment, collecting some of her arousal and using it to slick his huge cock. Then he nudges the tip of his shaft inside me.

Taking him hurts. But I've always enjoyed pain as a companion to pleasure, and the discomfort is quickly muted as Helix lies down on my right side and slides his lips over my cock.

At the same moment, the sweet, wet pussy of our little queen descends onto my face. She has her back to the headboard, facing the other two males. I suspect the sight of them will make her come faster, and who am I to deny her the pleasure of watching them use me?

She smells divine—soft floral notes over a deeper, richer scent. My tongue divides, and I control each half separately, tantalizing her clit with one part and sweeping the other across her entrance, over and over. I savor the slickness there, the faint tang of her arousal. I haven't tasted anyone in so long.

Brax is working his way in deeper. He's so big it feels like he's invading my entire body, not just my ass. He seats himself firmly with a final shove, and I gasp into Lauriel's pussy. She

quivers and lets herself settle more securely over my mouth. Her plump bottom is covering my eyes now—I'm blind to everything except the rich female scent of her, while my tongue wanders over her slick bud, through the valley between her pussy lips. And all the while I'm being fucked, slow and impossibly deep, by the huge, hard column of Brax's cock, while my own cock is swallowed into the honeyed wetness of Helix's throat.

I'm no longer riding the endless paths between realms, doggedly pursuing soul after soul, grimly striving to right wrongs and bring balance to the most wayward of souls. I am grounded, surrounded—I'm devoured whole and embraced fully and I want to scream for the joy of it, but I have no breath.

As if she heard my thoughts, Lauriel lifts her body, and I gasp for air.

“Sorry,” she says raggedly. “You're so good at this I almost forgot to let you breathe.”

I haul in another breath and order, “Sit.”

She plops onto my face again, and I revel in the sensory deprivation, the blotting out of my sight, the immediate heightening of every other sense. I lap into her deeply, feeling the initial tremors of her orgasm on my tongue, and my cock hardens still more. Helix is sucking me earnestly, coaxing me to climax, while Brax's heavy groans betray his oncoming loss of control. He rocks into my ass harder, rubbing along a secret inner spot that sends me streaking into ecstasy.

I cry out, my voice muffled by the pulsing warmth of the Queen's little pussy as she rubs herself over my open lips. She's coming against my mouth, her thighs tight on either side of my face. Her sweet moans mingle with Brax's loud bellow as he comes hard inside me.

I come a second time, more of my cum shooting into Helix's warm, wet mouth. He's swallowing—I can feel the suction. He's drinking me down.

If we fail in this endeavor, if I'm banished from the Hunt and doomed to be slowly devoured in the monstrous Void, at least I will have this moment. I'll cling to it until every other

memory has been devoured, until there's nothing left of me but
this violent ecstasy, with these three kindred souls.



Fuck, he's tight. The way his body hugs me, the drag of my cock through his channel with each thrust, that raw friction—I come inside him so hard my thighs shake and a roar breaks from my chest.

When we all climb off him, Paemon lies limp on the bed, his pretty face and long cock shining wet. He looks utterly spent and dazedly happy—like an entirely different person. He's usually skulking in corners, gazing dismally down at us from his ridiculous height.

I like him like this, relaxed and undone.

I lean forward, passing my hand over the taut muscles of his lean torso. When I reach his chest and thumb his nipple, he tenses at my touch.

I grin. Who would have thought the silent, distant one of our group would be so sensitive.

I trace a finger up the underside of his limp dick, and it immediately bobs up, beginning to harden again.

Delighted, I glance over at Lauriel. She's sitting on the bed beside me, naked and soft and so beautiful my heart seizes up

for a second. I turn to her, cupping her full breasts in both hands, taking a moment just to enjoy them.

“Send one of your guards for wine,” I murmur, leaning in to kiss her forehead. “We have an hour until dawn and I plan to melt your mind a few more times before then.”



I'm not sure what Lauriel's guards thought when she went to her door, flushed and clad only in a robe, and asked one of them to fetch a bottle of wine. In this form, when we're not traveling through her visions, we're audible unless we consciously mute our voices to human hearing—and I know I've let myself slip at least a few times tonight. I'm not sure what the guards think of that either, if they happened to catch any of the sounds through two closed doors.

Not that I care. I'm having the time of my life.

Or I would be, if I weren't concerned about Nocturis's inevitable reaction to our night of lust. Though he didn't specify it, I always assumed there were rules about fucking our subject. Granted, none of us have been allowed physical form during a mission before, so I have no prior experience with this type of scenario... but sex with the person we're supposed to convert seems like something that would be forbidden.

For all I know, the four of us are playing with fire—maybe even spoiling our chances for a future existence. But despite my concerns, I can't help myself. I want to keep dancing in the flames until they destroy us all.

My body is flush with wine as I dip my cock into Lauriel's mouth again. She hollows out her cheeks around my shaft, sucking on me as if she genuinely enjoys the taste. When I plant my palm on the top of her head and start fucking her throat, she bites down on me just a little, just for a moment—my sassy girl reminding me who's in charge. I hiss "fuck" at the pain, but I'm laughing, too, because I can't be angry with her in this moment.

She's lying belly-down on top of Brax, with his huge cock stretching her pussy wide, and I'm kneeling beside him, feeding her my dick.

"Did she just bite you?" Brax chuckles.

"She did."

He lets out a big, bellowing, contagious laugh that makes all of us grin, even Paemon. A few moments ago I helped guide Paemon's slender cock into Lauriel's pretty little asshole, and he's still there, gliding deeper inside her while Brax holds her ass cheeks apart for him. Paemon keeps both hands behind him so he won't accidentally skewer any of us.

I love seeing our queen like this—stuffed with the two cocks of my fellow riders. But when Brax laughed, she smiled and let my dick slip out, so I tap her mouth with the wet head of my cock. "Open up, brat."

She gives me a rebellious look, and Brax slaps her bottom, a warning that makes her yelp. "Go on, love, let him in. Be a good girl for us."

A smirk twitches her lips, but she keeps them sealed. Brax spanks her again, the other cheek this time.

I lean down, cupping her chin. "Open. Your. Fucking. Mouth." And I kiss her hard.

She bites me a little, then gives a soft, startled moan as Paemon begins to fuck her ass deeper.

Grabbing a fistful of her hair, I invade her mouth with my tongue, swirling it across her teeth, bathing the inside of her cheeks. She tastes like cum and wine.

Swiftly I break the kiss, and before she can shut her teeth again I pop my dick back into her mouth. She relents this time,

opening her throat and letting me go deeper, but I restrain myself from going as far as I want to. She's tiny, and I'd never forgive myself if I actually hurt her.

After a few seconds, I pull back and let her suck the first third of my cock while I stroke the rest myself. The sight of her rosy cheeks, her sooty lashes fluttering over those beautiful bratty eyes, and her red mouth rubbing along my shaft—god-stars, it's overwhelming. It's the naughtiest thing I've ever seen.

Abraxas is rocking his big body, angling his hips and thrusting into her, deep and slow. "How does it feel, love?" he asks her. "All of us, filling you up?"

"Mmmm," she hums around my cock, her eyes rolling.

"That's our little slut," I murmur, stroking her hair. The ebony waves are tangled from our activities tonight. If I have time, I'll brush it for her later.

Paemon thrusts faster. "I can feel you inside her, Brax," he breathes. "Gods, Lauriel—what I would give to hold your hand right now—to touch you—"

Lauriel whimpers and reaches back, over her own ass, until she touches his hip. She holds onto him while he bucks against her, his whole body tensing, the little pendant at his navel swinging and glittering as he thrusts. He throws back his head when he comes—damn, he's a beautiful bastard. He's panting, his stomach tensing with every breath. I'm so hard it hurts—so close to the edge I can taste it.

But I hold back, because Lauriel and Brax are coming now, together—a chorus of soft shrill whimpers and deep, rolling groans. I withdraw a little, letting her arch and roll her hips with Brax, letting her take her fill of his big cock.

She slumps onto his heaving chest, her flushed cheek pressed to his brown skin.

I give her another minute, and then I can't fucking bear it. "Lift your head, brat."

She obeys, her eyes bleary. She's too dazed from pleasure to misbehave. When I stroke her lips with my cock head, she opens submissively.

“Good girl. I’m going to come on your tongue now,” I say softly, dipping into the slick heat of her mouth. “Swallow my—ahh—my cum—fuck—” I close my eyes, gripping the back of her skull to hold her steady while I stroke myself with my other hand. She keeps her lips closed softly around my cock while the bliss crashes through me in a glorious cascade.

I wish it would never end, and for several moments it seems like it won’t. After the first rush, more cum keeps leaving my body in jolts of keen pleasure. I’m trembling, shuddering, groaning helplessly. Lauriel keeps swallowing, like the determined little thing she is, until I’m thoroughly drained and I pull back. Her pink tongue emerges and swipes the tip of my cock, lapping it clean, and I cry out, startled, as more cum shoots out, painting her lips. She licks it off and gives me a saucy look. “Are you done?”

I collapse on the bed without answering—I’m too breathless.

Paemon pulls out of her ass, but he doesn’t relax. He sits at the end of the bed, looking unaccountably dour. What the fuck is wrong with him?

“Can I keep you inside me forever?” Lauriel whispers to Brax. “You feel so good.”

“I’d love for you to warm my cock all night, love,” he replies. “But you know this has to end.”

A chill floods my skin at the words.

While we were fucking, I could pretend it was forever.

And now it’s over. I can’t ignore our strange reality any longer.

I roll onto my belly and sink my face into a pillow, my heart bleeding foolish wishes.

Every time I’m inside her, I feel whole. I feel deeply, thoroughly satisfied—healed at the core of my being.

She’s the mate I was searching for, every day of my mortal existence. The one I wanted so badly that I killed everyone who wasn’t her.

The others seem confident we'll triumph here—succeed in our mission, and gain our reward.

I wish I could be so certain. If we don't—if this is really the end of everything—how am I supposed to endure losing her?



When I finally, reluctantly pull myself off Abraxas's softened cock and move onto the bed beside him, I realize that Helix is lying face-down, his shoulders tense, and Paemon is looking at me soberly, almost sadly.

Brax, on the other hand, looks perfectly content and thoroughly sated. He tucks both palms behind his head and sighs with satisfaction. "That was the best fuck I've ever had, bar none. We're magic together, all of us. Fucking meant-to-be."

Helix makes a muffled sound that might be a scoff or a sob, or both.

Paemon's sober expression darkens. "He's right. I think we can all agree this has gone beyond anything we expected. Which is why I have to tell you something, Lauriel."

"What?" Helix sits up, long red curls tumbling around his broad shoulders.

"There is something we made Abraxas swear not to tell you," Paemon continues. "Strictly speaking, we are not supposed to mention it. But I can't hold onto the information when it might affect your wellbeing."

"Paemon," Helix says sharply. "Don't."

My heart sinks. Of course, such a dazzling period of happiness must be followed up by some fresh horror.

“I alone will bear the responsibility for telling you this secret,” Paemon says, with a stern look at Helix. “And you must promise not to take immediate action based on this knowledge, or tell anyone what you know. Doing so could be more dangerous than helpful.”

“Very well.” I frown at him. “But I’m mad at you for spoiling a lovely moment.”

“That’s fair.” He smiles faintly. “I do tend to spoil things. Knowing the future, even small pieces of it, tends to make a person unpleasant company.” With a sigh he continues, “Your Fae-hunter, Marleigh, is in league with the Unseelie Fae. They’ve been directing his forces to take out Seelie camps, using the Crown’s might to destroy all the peaceful Fae of the land. I believe Marleigh facilitated the Fae attack on your parents.”

Horror jolts through my chest. “What?”

He nods. “It’s true. I saw him meeting with the Unseelie leader, Varthil—the scaly Fae with the claw. Marleigh killed your guard Lodraed and delivered her body to the Unseelie as a gift.”

“You saw this?” I gasp. “When?”

“Last night.”

“Wait—just wait...” I spin around and glare at Brax. “You knew about this all day, all night—and you didn’t say a word?”

“I needed you to focus on your own personal growth,” he says. “There was no immediate threat—”

“No immediate threat? I have a conspirator and a traitor living in my palace. He has access to every guard rotation, every security measure—he arranged most of them himself! That’s a threat, and it’s pretty fucking immediate.”

“We’re not supposed to share such things with the subject,” begins Helix, and I round on him, my face flaming.

“That’s what I am to you? A *subject*? A mission? That’s not what it felt like when you came on my tongue.”

He has the grace to flush. “I only meant—”

“No!” I rise from the bed, incandescent with fury. “You don’t talk now. *I* talk. For being such self-proclaimed wise warriors, with centuries of experience, you are all incredibly dumb.”

I glare around at them all—three big naked Fae males, every one of them looking downcast and chastened. Helix has the audacity to be hard again, and I fight the temptation to kick him right in the dick.

“You should all be ashamed of yourselves,” I seethe. “Keeping something so important from me, letting me dance and—and fuck—when I should have been at the palace locking Marleigh in the dungeon.”

“You have to be careful how you handle him,” Paemon warns. “He has the loyalty of your guards—some of them, anyway. And he has magic.”

“This is why we shouldn’t have told her.” Brax jabs a finger toward Paemon. “She’ll move against him, and he’ll kill her out of panic! You should have kept your fucking mouth shut.”

Paemon hisses like a venomous snake, but before he can speak Brax pounces on him with surprising grace for someone so large. He slams a fist into Paemon’s face, once, then again, and again. I climb back onto the bed and march across the mattress to them, aiming a kick just beneath Brax’s ribs.

“Stop it!” I order. “At least *he* told me the truth! And I won’t charge in without a plan. Do you think I’m some kind of idiot—like *you*?” Another hard kick.

Brax looks around at me and grabs my ankle. Off balance, I tumble into the space between him and Paemon—a valley of heat between naked male chests and powerful arms.

Paemon immediately adjusts his position, leaning back on his palms so his claws won’t harm me.

“It’s done,” Helix says stonily, leaving the bed and grabbing his pants and Paemon’s off the floor. “No use fighting. It’s almost dawn anyway.”

“I know.” Brax rubs his forehead. “I can feel it coming.”

“Lauriel.” Paemon’s eyes meet mine, tragic and earnest. “Remember what I said.”

How could I forget?

You have the power to cheer or discourage these people—to make their service to you easy or wretched, a delight or a dread. Your power isn’t only in commands and coin—it’s in your voice, in your expression. You can make a difference with the slightest change in tone or attitude, with a moment of thoughtfulness or an understanding smile. The influence you wield is more important than any pile of treasure.

Wise words. And then he opened his heart to me... he was honest with me, more so than the other two...

I reach for him, but his body is already melting away, shifting into ghost form. My hands pass through his misty chest and slam onto the mattress. A hollow ache widens in my heart.

“You need sleep, love,” Abraxas says, drifting away from my bed. “I know you want to make all the changes at once, but you’ve had a long night, and you should try to sleep longer than you usually do. I’ll come to you in the late morning, and then you can yell at me some more.”

“I’ll come too,” Helix offers. “I enjoy the yelling.”

I ignore them and fling myself onto the pillows, covering my head with the sheets.

When I peek out a few minutes later, they’re gone.



I don’t sleep.

The minute they’re gone, I jump out of bed, and I spend the next few hours framing and reframing paragraphs, crafting a retraction of the order to fire the palace’s adjunct staff and

designing a new policy on Fae and magic. I keep thinking of things to add or different ways to phrase things, and after a while my hand cramps up from writing so fast and so much—which gives me a new appreciation for Kratchet and his talents.

Finally I ring for an early breakfast and strong coffee. After I eat, I'll send for Kratchet, and we'll make the documents official.

A few minutes later, there's a knock at my door.

The breakfast couldn't possibly be ready this quickly—and sure enough, one of my guards leans in to announce the presence of Commander Jaik Marleigh.

My lungs seize up, and my heart does its best imitation of a steed from the Wild Hunt.

Why has he come to my chambers? His visits here are rare, and never this early. What does it mean?

I've had no sleep, and I feel myself teetering on the verge of panic. Only for a second, and then I manage to compose myself. There's a dagger strapped to the underside of this chair, and another hidden in the mantel. Those won't be much use against magic, but it's something.

I need to act normal. Pretend that there's nothing wrong.

"Let the Commander in," I tell the guard.

Marleigh is dressed in a full suit, despite the early hour. He bows briefly before saying, with a stiff smile, "One of the guards mentioned a disturbance in your room last night. Is everything all right?"

I'm peeved that my bodyguard tattled to him, but I strive not to show it. "Oh, that was me... training. I couldn't sleep last night. I've had an epiphany of sorts, so I've decided to change our policy toward the Fae." I gesture to the stacks of papers spread across my writing table.

"Is that so?" His smile hardens and widens at the same time. "I beg your pardon, Majesty, but have I offended you in some way? I know one of our previous conversations became rather heated..."

"Not at all," I reply coolly.

“It’s just that, as your resident expert on Fae matters, I feel that I should have been consulted on any such changes in policy. We are so close to fulfilling Your Majesty’s goal of permanently eradicating the Fae from the kingdom—”

“Are we?” I lift an eyebrow. “But we haven’t quite succeeded. So there’s still time to grant pardon and sanctuary to all the remaining Fae in the land.”

His smile drops. For a moment he looks utterly stunned—I can practically see the wheels turning behind his eyes as he ponders my statement.

“This is quite a departure from Your Majesty’s former way of thinking,” he says at last.

“It is. But I suppose you could say I’ve had a change of heart.”

“Indeed? And what precipitated such a dramatic change?”

“Your talk of Fae children, for one thing. We’ve made it clear that any brutality and wickedness from the Fae will not be tolerated—but we’ve been guilty of such savagery ourselves. And it stops now. Today.”

“May I point out that—”

“My mind is made up, Commander.”

His eyes narrow. “Lately Your Majesty’s mind is a most interesting place—reversing major policies, writing up orders and then setting them aside, only to release them at the worst possible time. Speaking to yourself at the dinner table and in your study—making the most disturbing sounds at night. If such events become a habit, one might fear for the welfare of the kingdom.”

It’s the closest he has ever come to traitorous speech. “I advise you to be careful with your next words.”

“Of course, Majesty. I intend no disrespect. But I do hope that once you’ve created the new policy, you will at least let me review it before it goes out to the public. For the good of the kingdom and the safety of all its citizens.”

“I’ll have someone send you a copy,” I say tightly.

He bows again and leaves my chambers, closing the door somewhat more forcefully than necessary.

Something about what he said nags at my brain: *writing up orders and then setting them aside, only to release them at the worst possible time...*

The realization snaps into place. Marleigh knew the order to fire the adjunct staff had been set aside. He must have found it, or someone saw it and alerted him—and he released it, on purpose, to undermine me and make the people hate me.

His treachery doesn't absolve me of guilt—after all, I dictated the damn thing in the first place—but it sheds a new light on things, and corroborates what Paemon told me.

Jaik Marleigh, my closest advisor, my staunch supporter since my parents' demise, is the one who enabled their murder. He's taking me down, too—slowly, so as to avoid suspicion—setting himself up to be the next ruler.

I don't plan to be easy to kill, nor do I plan to yield the last scraps of my subjects' goodwill without a fight. I'll claw my way back into their hearts, and I'll send Marleigh to the afterlife as soon as I can figure out how to safely do so.

I've seen Marleigh do simple spells before, to demonstrate his power, but with magic being outlawed, he limits most of his work to cursed objects and traps, or actual conflict with the Fae. I'm not even sure of the full range of his power. I didn't ask, and at this moment that seems like a gross oversight on my part.

I need something to negate his magic so I can order his arrest. Maybe when Brax and Helix arrive later this morning, I can ask them for ideas about how to subdue a sorcerer. They'll be angry that I didn't sleep, but they'll have to forgive me. This is a delicate time for the kingdom.

Another rap on my door, and this time, it's the servant with my eggs and coffee. The coffee cup doesn't match the plate holding the eggs, and that oversight bothers me. Whoever prepared the meal probably hates me, and the mismatched cup and plate are a tiny act of rebellion.

The old me would have yelled at the servant carrying the tray. But I'm determined to be better, and kinder, so even though

the discrepancy grates against my nerves, I merely thank her and smile. With all the troubles clouding my mind, the smile feels odd on my face, but she seems to appreciate it—she smiles back, though there’s a shadow of worry in her eyes.

I return to the document I’m rewriting, sipping coffee at intervals. As usual, I’m halfway through the coffee before I remember the eggs. They’re cold, but I swallow a few bites anyway. I need something in my stomach—I’m feeling dizzy, probably from so many nights of shortened sleep. Thanks to my insomnia, I’m used to functioning on less sleep than most people. Still, I’m beginning to doubt my ability to make wise choices when I’ve barely had any rest.

My head jerks up, and I realize that my eyes were closed. Shit. There’s a huge scrawl on the paper where the pen trailed from my limp hand.

My eyes are closing again, and my skull feels as though it’s packed with bricks and mortar. I let my head loll back against the chair, and the quill falls from my hand. Dimly I know that the ink is going to stain the chair cushion, but I can’t force my hand to move—to grasp the pen and set it back on the writing table.

I feel sleepy, and yet I’m not really asleep—it’s as if all my functions are slowly shutting down, one by one. I can’t open my eyes, and I can’t move. I can’t part my lips, or moan. I can barely breathe enough to stay conscious.

Something is very wrong. I’ve never experienced a sensation like this.

The door to my sitting room opens.

With a gargantuan effort I manage to lift my eyelids a little—just a crack. Jaik Marleigh is striding into my chambers, accompanied by two of my bodyguards. They’re toting a big chest, and he’s carrying a large doll with a blank gray face and clumsily-stitched limbs.

“The immobilization curse worked perfectly.” Marleigh chuckles. “Don’t touch the coffee mug, lads, unless you want to take a nice long rest like our little queen here.”

Oh shit.

That's why the mug didn't match. That's why the servant who delivered my breakfast wore that worried expression—because Marleigh must have stopped her in the hallway and switched the coffee mugs—probably poured the harmless liquid into a cursed mug.

“Wrap her up, boys,” says Marleigh. “I'll set the illusion doll in place. If anyone asks, she's ill in bed today.”

“How does the illusion doll work?” asks one of the guards tentatively.

“It's similar to a Fae glamour. Once I activate it with a little of her blood and a few strands of her hair, it will look and sound exactly like her for a single day and night. It can even move a little. You can let in a servant with a drink or a meal for her, and the illusion will be able to respond with a word or two. If a physician comes, tell them the queen does not want her rest disturbed, and believes she will be better tomorrow. Given the hate she received for her edict yesterday, no one will question her decision to sulk in bed.”

Marleigh picks up my hand and bites the pad of my forefinger so hard blood oozes from the broken skin. He daubs the wound against the blank face of the doll, then smiles at me with bloodstained teeth, even though his voice is hard with anger. “I know you're still in there and you can hear me. You've forced me to change my plans *again*, you little bitch, and I'm not happy about it. It's riskier this way—riskier for *me*. You're so fucking good at destroying yourself—why couldn't you just keep doing that? Why the sudden need to be generous to the Fae?”

I struggle to respond, but I can only manage a wheeze. How I wish I could spit in his fucking face.

His sneer widens. “I wish I could be there to see what Varthil does to you. You tortured his mate, you know—ripped her into little pieces—so he's going to want to make your misery last as long as possible. But I must stay here and dispose of the servant who saw me switch the mugs—she can't be allowed to blab. Once your disappearance is discovered tomorrow, I'll lead the quest to find the queen. I doubt I'll be able to summon many citizens to help, though—they all despise

you. No one in their right mind would want you back.” He chucks my chin. “Once a sufficient period of time has passed, I’ll step into the role of Kingdom Protector. That’s what we’ll call it at first, until everyone is comfortable with my rule.”

I want to ask what role his Unseelie co-conspirators will play in his new kingdom—but I suspect he plans to double-cross them at some point as well. I also suspect they won’t make that easy for him.

My neck muscles give out, and my head sags forward, my hair curtaining my face. I can’t open my eyes at all now, but I hear Marleigh’s footsteps on the carpet, heading for my bedroom.

“Come on then,” says one of my bodyguards. “Let’s get her in the chest.”

“Should we take those pretty rings off her fingers?” says the other. “Seems a shame to send ’em off to be nabbed by some damn faeries.”

There’s a tug at my hand—rough fingers pulling off my rings. The ring on the third finger of my right hand won’t come off—it’s my royal signet, a pair of golden scales, and it’s been with me the longest. I’ve had it resized three times, but it’s still tight.

“Shouldn’t take that one anyway. It’ll be tough to pawn,” mutters one of the guards.

“I’m taking the earrings.” I feel a sharp jerk at each ear, but thankfully the hooks or the earrings slip out easily and my lobes don’t tear.

Hands grip my ankles and arms, and I’m tumbled into something—probably the chest they carried into my room. I can feel my robe’s sash loosening, the material sliding away from my breasts. There’s a moment of quiet, punctuated only by the guards’ heavy breathing.

“She’s got good tits, I’ll give her that,” mutters one.

“Shut it,” says the other, sounding exasperated. “Let’s get this done.”

There's a thunk, and I can tell from the sudden closeness of the air and the muffled quality of sounds that the lid of the chest has been shut. It lifts abruptly, then bobs along with the gait of the two men.

No one stops them, or questions them. The other servants probably think I've ordered them to carry some treasure or clothes to another room of the palace.

I try to count the steps, the turns. They don't carry me far, and judging by the corners they take, I'm fairly sure we're approaching my mother's riot room. There's the sound of a door opening, then more steps before I'm set down with a *thunk*.

"He said the tunnel is right about here. Hold back that tapestry while I look for the lever."

"Strange, ain't it?" says the other guard. "We all knew the King and Queen was sneaking Fae in here for their parties, but we never knew how they got in."

"That was before my time," says the first guard.

"Yeah, they quit inviting the Fae a couple years ago. Had some sort of falling out with them. I remember the last party they ever had—blood all over the floor—shapes and runes drawn in it, like they was children paintin' with their fingers. And folks used to disappear, especially toward the end."

"Enough with the royals and the Fae," says the other guard grimly. "Commander Marleigh has the right idea—end the monarchy, destroy the rest of the Fae—make a clean break. A fresh start." There's a grinding sound, stone on stone, and a faint whoosh, like wind rushing out of a tunnel. The chest I'm in lurches into motion again.

"How far do we have to carry her?"

"Until the statue of Andregh, he said. The passage is warded against Fae up to that point."

They don't speak again. Now and then their gait grows more uneven and the chest bumps against edges, as if we're descending steps. My body slides forward, then backward.

My mind has stayed sharp so far, but it's beginning to grow murky and muddled as the effects of the spell finally overcome

it. I struggle to stay alert, to focus on the facts.

Marleigh doesn't realize I have three Fae warriors in charge of my future welfare. They'll come for me. They'll find me. I only hope they put a stop to this before I end up in Varthil's grip.

Nauseating images enter my mind—memories of the hours I spent taking apart that female Fae, Asekith—Varthil's mate. Asekith was part of my revenge, but Varthil was the one I urged Marleigh to capture. Now I know why Marleigh never did.

All those years ago, when Varthil took my cousin and my nurse, he let me go, because he had a bargain with my parents. But he promised, even then, that he would come for me—and that threat has shadowed the back of my mind ever since, no matter how many guards and walls hemmed me in.

Once I left the protection of the Institute, I knew I had to destroy him before he came for me. Not just to avenge Melria, but to protect myself. That's why I trusted Marleigh so quickly and completely. I needed someone to secure the city, the palace—to scour the countryside for my worst enemy, in case Varthil hadn't forgotten about his promise.

This time, there are no walls, guards, or wards to protect me. There is no bargain, and there will be no mercy.

I'm being carried straight to Varthil. And in this state, I can't save myself.

The Wild Hunt is my only hope.



In the muzzy darkness of my mind, a voice is speaking.

I have trouble focusing on the words, but the sound sends a low reverberation of dread through my heart, like an alarm ringing dully along my nerves as I struggle back to consciousness.

At first I think I'm in my bed, where I should be—just waking up. Maybe I'm late for a meeting...

No... there's a strain on my arms and legs—a taut stiffness, pain flickering when I try to move. Warm air is flowing against my bare skin instead of sheets—I think I'm naked. My head isn't on a pillow—it's hanging forward. I'm drooling...fuck.

I spit and close my lips, and then I lift my head and open my eyes.

In front of me stands the creature of my worst nightmares. He's just as I remember—the claw-arm, the spikes protruding from his bald head, the scales coating parts of his powerful body.

Varthil. The one who fucked my parents and kidnapped both my nurse and my cousin. The one who posed such a danger my parents sent me away and never let me return.

For one startling second, I'm grateful to them. They were trying to keep me safe...

Or they loved their illicit pleasure so much they got rid of me rather than give it up.

I'll never know for sure which one it was. I'll never know how they met Varthil, how the bargain was struck, and what its terms were—unless Varthil tells me himself, and I'm fairly sure he has other things on his mind.

Things like torture, vengeance, death.

"We meet again, Princess," Varthil says, low and menacing.

"It's Queen now," I reply.

When he smiles, he's almost as beautiful as my three ghosts, but there's a venom in his beauty, a sick perversity. Revulsion curdles my stomach.

As quickly as my recovering mind will allow, I take stock of my situation. I'm naked, standing on the floor inside a large tent. My arms and legs are splayed wide and bound to wooden posts. Glowing orbs float near the tent's peak, coloring its walls a deeper crimson. There's a strange scent in the air—Varthil's scent. Dark evergreen and something bitterly metallic, while I smell faintly of perfume and sweat. At least I don't smell like piss or shit. I'm grateful my body retained that bit of control during my journey here.

Several Unseelie Fae are in the tent with us, standing along the edges, and a few recline on a sofa nearby, apparently eager to watch my torture session unfold. I can hear the faint hum of more voices outside.

I'm trying to make sense of the collection of wings, scales, bestial faces, and reptilian limbs around me when Varthil snaps, "Look at me!" and instinctively I obey.

Acidic hatred seeps through his tone as he seethes, "You killed my mate."

"You killed my family," I retort.

"Your parents had it coming. I owe Marleigh a debt for helping me break the bargain I had with them." His lip curls. "If

I'd had more fighters and stronger magic, and if Marleigh hadn't kept me on a fucking leash with those damn wards of his, we'd have taken control of this kingdom the night we killed the royals."

"So you're Marleigh's bitch," I mutter.

"Speaking of bitches, I kept your cousin alive for a while. She was our camp's pretty little cum-rag for several years, in fact."

Horror blazes up my spine, flares through my brain.

I kept your cousin alive...

For several years...

I was at school, griping about classes, complaining about not going home for Midwinter Glee, while Melria was enduring unspeakable things.

Shit.

Bile hits my throat, but I choke it down resolutely.

"Ah, that disturbs you, doesn't it?" Varthil runs a sharp nail under my chin, slitting the flesh, and I cry out at the sudden pain. "Yes, you could have saved her. Maybe your parents could have convinced me to give her up, but they never tried. Perhaps they assumed she was dead. Or they wanted to believe she was. Easier than the truth." He chuckles. "Mortals are such weak, fickle beings. But they can be good fun. More fun than the godsdamned Seelie."

The others in the tent bellow and jeer in agreement.

"I must thank you and Marleigh for erasing the Seelie from our territory," he says. "Now the way is clear for a new future. Don't worry, you'll live to see it. You, little Queen, are going to be my plaything for a long time. There's a healer in our camp, so we can fix you once you're almost dead, like I did with pretty Melria, and then we can start the pain all over again. But before we begin with the true torture, I'm going to do something I've always wanted to do."

His fist draws back, and he punches me in the face.

I feel my cheekbone and jaw break, teeth crunching in my gums. Blood fills my mouth. I choke on a scream.

Varthil rams his forehead against mine, bone grinding on bone, and he inhales deeply, like he's drinking my fear, relishing my pain. "Mmm, you smell good, little one." He drags his hand up my left side and his great claw up the other. "I'm going to fuck you in every hole. And I'll create some new ones and fuck those too. I'll carve out bits of you and feed you to my people." The onlookers giggle and growl, making hideously eager panting noises, like scavengers ready to pounce, only holding back because the alpha predator is feasting first.

"I'll tear you apart and put you back together, over and over," Varthil breathes in my ear. "No relief, and no end until I'm satisfied."

I'm shaking, weeping, trying to hold my broken jaw carefully to minimize the excruciating pain. But I refuse to give up hope. Paemon, Abraxas, Helix—they'll come for me, before this goes too far... they *must*.

Unless...

Unless this is part of the doom they foresaw for me. Maybe I didn't change quickly enough. I didn't have a chance to fix things, to repair the damage I did through my pain and anger.

Maybe this is my punishment. Maybe it's what I deserve. Because Melria, sweet Melria—she was alive all along, suffering for years, and I didn't know, I didn't help her—oh gods, the pain of that knowledge is worse than the agony in my damaged face.

But I can't break. Not now, not at the very beginning of what might be the worst hours of my life. I have to be strong.

So I do what I've always done when life hurts too much. I call on the red rage inside me—virulent, inexhaustible, roaring like a damn furnace.

At least... it used to be.

Now, when I try to sink into that place, the river of rage is shallower. More like a stream. Barely enough to wet my feet in.

Somehow, unconsciously, I've let most of my anger go. Little by little, as I understood myself and my family better, as I gained perspective on my responsibilities and my people, I became... quieter inside.

I don't feel weaker, though. There is strength in me—it's just coming from a different place now—what was once a broken ravine in my heart, now a vast and beautiful fjord—blue water so deep I will never run out, mountains frosted in refreshing ice.

Some say red is the color of love, but for me it is the blue of winter nights, and the silver of stars. It's the lavender of Paemon's eyes, and the snowy white of Brax's hair, and the black braided tattoos on Helix's skin.

My strength remains mine—always has been, always will be. But I've chosen a new source for it.

Tears are still running down my face. My bones are still broken—I'm still in agony—but I'm utterly calm inside.

I look up into Varthil's vengeful gaze, and his eyes widen with a hint of surprise.

"Tougher than I thought," he says. "Good. It will be that much more fun to break you."



Helix and I stand in Lauriel’s bedroom, staring at the shape beneath the covers.

“She’s still asleep,” I say.

He glares, holding a finger to his lips.

“What? I was whispering.”

“*That* wasn’t a whisper. This is. Hear the difference?”

“No. I can barely hear you.”

“That’s the point—oh, forget it.” He rolls his eyes. “Should we wake her?”

I hesitate, glancing around the room. There’s flawed energy here—something off-balance. But I can’t see anything amiss, or sense another presence. Must be my imagination.

Stepping nearer to the bed, I confirm that Lauriel’s dark eyelashes are closed. Her hand is tucked under her rosy cheek, and her lips are slightly parted as she breathes, slow and steady. She’s so still, so peaceful.

“We’ll let her sleep,” I tell Helix. “We can check in later.”

We vanish from the castle and reappear on top of the thick blanket of gray cloud that cloaks Revallen today. Our horses, Rioch and Enbarr, are still prancing around up there, so we mount and ride back to the Hovel.

Paemon is hovering near the orb on the table, caressing it with his long black claws. The golden, glittering strands occupy almost the entire orb now—but there's still a thick swirl of black left. Our queen's heart has not entirely changed.

“Back so soon?” he asks.

“She's still asleep.” I walk over and place my palm on the orb, feeling the hum of its energy.

“It's not fair,” I mutter.

Helix releases an exasperated sigh. “Explain yourself.”

“I don't know about you two, but usually when I'm given a task to change someone's heart, it's with the understanding that every heart naturally contains both good and evil in a soul. We aim for a preponderance of good, but the person doesn't need to be *all* goodness.”

Paemon nods, his eyes locked with mine. “What are you saying?”

“With Lauriel, we were told this thing has to be solid gold for the transformation to be a success. Is it even possible for a heart to be entirely good? Or are they setting us up to fail?”

“Maybe the orb just represents the portion of her heart that needs to change, with the assumption of some remaining evil,” Helix says.

“Well, I don't like it.”

“Noted.” Helix throws himself onto the floor and waves one hand through the air, watching pale streamers of mist waft from his fingers. “I'm so sick of this form. Now that I've had a taste of being incarnate again, I can barely stand this spiritual existence.”

“Not long now, either way,” says Paemon quietly. “Tonight is Brax's last night with her, and then I'll take over.”

“It’s odd.” I pull my sword from its loop, toss it, and catch the hilt. “I don’t sense any more visions from it. Usually I get a preview of what we’ll be seeing, but this time—nothing. It’s as if my task is already done.”

A voice resounds from the doorway to the Hovel. “Because it is.”

I turn, gripping my sword as if I’m ready for battle—an instinct I still haven’t shaken after hundreds of years. “Nocturis.”

Our squadron leader strides into the Hovel. His skin is pale green, his hair a more vivid emerald. Gold bands and bracers decorate his arms, and he wears a gold breastplate and pauldrons, as well as an elaborately decorated golden helmet.

Paemon, Helix, and I exchange glances. We knew we might hear from our superiors, but I hoped their silence so far meant they were overlooking our dalliance with the Queen.

Helix gets to his feet and offers a flourishing bow. Kiss-ass.

“May I ask why you are here?” he says.

Nocturis walks over to the orb, and Paemon backs away, black shadows thickening around him as he retreats into a corner. It bothers me to see him withdrawing into himself again.

“Why do you think I’m here?” Nocturis turns incisive silver eyes on Helix.

Helix squares his shoulders and lifts his chin. With that defiant stance, crowned with those antlers, he looks so much like a king I want to kneel before him, or kiss him. Maybe both.

“You’re here because we’ve been breaking the rules.” Helix’s voice is steel dripping with honey. “But our methods have nearly achieved the desired result. You should have no complaints.”

“Damn straight,” I say.

“Oh, I’m not here because of that,” says Nocturis. “Not exactly. As you’re well aware, this is the thousandth mission for all of you. Since it’s your last chance, your final battle for your existence, the usual rules do not apply. I believe I said as much when I sent you here.”

He didn't, not in those words—but none of us argue the point.

“You three were given this task together because this young queen has an important role to play. Her kingdom could become a hotbed of anarchy and bloodshed, or a stable hub for trade and development throughout this part of the world. There is much unrest in this land already, so Andregh wishes for you to succeed in this. If you fail, we must find another way to bring balance to this realm.”

He taps the clock beside the orb. “My powers of foresight are far greater than yours, Paemon, and I thought I had perceived all possible futures. But something occurred today which disturbed those futures. An unforeseen shift in the timeline—the rapid unfolding of new events, because of something you three have done. The queen's current state has changed drastically from what it should have been, ending your appointed time with her, Abraxas. We are now moving into Paemon's time. He may have one night with her, or none at all, depending on the outcome of this day.”

“What do you mean?” I take a step toward him, fists clenched. “You're not making sense.”

Helix touches my shoulder, and the contact silences me for a moment.

“I've had no altered visions.” Paemon's voice carries more of a serpentine hiss than ever.

“If you would be so kind as to clarify, Lord Nocturis,” Helix says smoothly.

“First, let me clarify something else.” Nocturis surveys us all with his cool silver gaze. “You three must realize that the Queen is not the only one on trial here, yes? You were matched with her because you were incomplete—each missing some part of what you were supposed to learn during your service with the Wild Hunt. When this mission began, Helix, you excelled at justice and balance, yet you lacked empathy. Abraxas brought mercy, joy, and pleasure in abundance, but remained thoughtless and impulsive. Paemon—you were both perceptive and effective in your missions, but always remained at a distance, keeping yourself closed off, refusing to allow intimacy. In order

for the three of you to be allowed another chance at a mortal life, after your grievous misuse of the first one, you must prove to us that you have learned compassion, wisdom, and vulnerability.”

“I can be wise,” I mutter. “I said some wise shit to Lauriel during our time together.”

Helix shoots me a look that says, “Shut up” as clearly as if he spoke the words.

“And have we proved ourselves?” Paemon asks.

“That remains to be seen. All your efforts will be for nothing unless you discover what has gone wrong today.”

“Lauriel is safe in her damn bed, asleep!” I exclaim. “After what she has endured for the past days—weeks—*years*—she deserves her rest!”

“Asleep in her bed, is she?” Nocturis shoots me a keen look.

I frown and shift my attention to my sword. Our weapons grant us the ability to locate our subjects when it’s our turn to guide them, but I didn’t use my sword to locate Lauriel this morning—I assumed she’d be in her bedroom, preparing for the day, and if not, I planned to check her study or the throne room.

Mentally I synchronize with the sword, but there’s no answering certainty of Lauriel’s location. The sword doesn’t know where she is. Which makes sense, if my turn with her is already over.

“I can’t find her,” I say. “Paemon, you’re her next guide. Can you see where she is?”

He lifts his nightmarish claws and sets the tips together, bowing his head. After a moment he looks up with concern in his eyes. “I can’t find her either, nor do I see any glimpses of the future.”

Helix takes a threatening step toward Nocturis—which shocks me. He’s the obedient one among us, the most dedicated to the laws of the Wild Hunt. “Why can’t we see her?”

“That is for you to find out.”

“Fuck you.” Still glaring at Nocturis, Helix whistles loudly, and Enbarr charges into the Hovel, stamping and blowing steam. “Summon your mounts,” Helix orders. “We ride.”

Paemon and I whistle for our steeds at once, and we gallop from the Hovel in a thunder of hooves and swirling smoke.

Through the clouds we ride, following the same path we took with the whole army of the Wild Hunt just days ago, when we did our first survey of the kingdom. Every time a hunter is assigned a subject, the entire Hunt rides with them to the destination for the first time, before leaving them to their task. Sometimes they linger to observe, especially in times of war or unrest—but in most cases they ride on, forever restless.

My fellow hunters and I streak down through the cloudy winter sky above Revallen, not bothering to veil our forms. We leave our horses and fly down through the rooftops of the palace, straight into Lauriel’s bedroom.

And there she is, her sweet, fierce face smooth in sleep.

“What the fuck was Nocturis talking about? She’s right there.” I gesture to her form. “She’s breathing, see?”

“Is she ill?” Helix steps nearer, brushing a ghostly hand across her forehead. She doesn’t stir.

“Lauriel,” hisses Paemon. Gently, with the tips of his claws, he scrapes the sheets and blankets down, exposing her upper body. She’s not naked like we left her—she’s wearing a ruffled black nightdress.

During sex, I saw several bruises on her body from training, from fighting us, from the roughness of our love-play. A few of them should be showing now, even with the nightdress, but her arms and legs are unmarked.

“Lauriel, wake up,” urges Helix.

She rolls over and blinks at us.

“Are you well?” asks Helix.

“Sick,” she says, in a strangely foggy voice. “Sleep.”

“Before you go back to sleep, we need to talk a little,” Helix says. “We have to be sure nothing is seriously wrong.”

Lauriel stares blankly for a moment, then pulls up the sheets, rolls over, and assumes the exact same position as before—eyes closed, breathing quietly.

“Something’s not right,” breathes Paemon.

I shoulder my way between him and Helix, yanking off the covers and leaning down to bury my face in her crotch.

“Brax!” Helix exclaims.

Even in ghost form, I have a sense of smell, and it’s the surest way I can confirm the suspicion choking my soul.

A nauseating certainty squeezes my gut. “It’s not her.”

“What the fuck do you mean, it’s not her?” Helix’s voice rises.

“She doesn’t smell like our cum, and she barely smells like herself. It’s not her. It’s some sort of twisted magic—”

Paemon and Helix say, “Marleigh,” at the same moment.

“Shit.” If I had a body, my heart would be pounding out of my damn chest, and I’d be shaking with a rush of frenzied energy. I need to fight something, pummel someone—rip off some limbs.

I whirl to face the others. “Where the fuck is she?”



Varthil hasn't raped me yet. He ripped out several of my fingernails, peeled off bits of my skin and ate them, and cut me deep in a few places, but he keeps getting called out of the torture tent to deal with something related to the wards around the camp. The pain in my jaw and face is so great I can barely pay attention to anything except my own misery.

Varthil re-enters the tent, sighing, and inspects his claw. "Where were we? Oh yes—how I met Asekith." He presses the pointed tip of the claw against the flat of my stomach and carves a shallow line through the skin. "True mates are rare, you know, outside of the royal bloodlines of Faerie. Some Fae call their partner their 'mate' because they think it gives weight and importance to their connection, but in most cases it's just posturing. But Asekith and I were true mates. Our minds, souls, and hearts were fused together. The pleasure I got from fucking her—mindbending. We fucked others too, of course, but always in each other's presence, for our mutual enjoyment." He grabs my chin, and I shriek at the sudden pain through my broken jaw.

He leans in, his mouth grazing mine. "I fucking miss her." Then his nose wrinkles and he chokes. "Gods, you smell awful."

He's not wrong. My hair hangs in sweaty tendrils, and my inner thighs are wet where I finally lost control of my bladder amid the pain. The acrid smell of my own blood, piss, and sweat fills my nostrils. So far I've kept most of my screams locked behind my gritted teeth.

"I'm not going to torture *myself* with this foul smell," says Varthil. He stalks to the door of the tent and calls sharply, "Tiryana, come clean the prisoner and heal her," he says. "I'm going to check on the progress of those wards. When you're done with her, tell Calanis and Arien they can have some time with her. Nothing that will draw blood or do permanent harm."

The healer Tiryana forces some foul concoction down my throat, wrenching my broken jaw so badly I nearly pass out. But almost immediately my bones and teeth click back into place, my wounds disappear, and a wave of soothing relief rolls over my body.

Next the healer tosses a handful of blue powder, which sucks to my skin, encasing me in blue light for several minutes. The spell leaves my hair clean and bouncy and renders my body as fresh as it is flawless.

At first, being healed is a welcome respite. But then two Unseelie arrive to torture me with magic—darts of searing light, lashes of wind, and fiery beads that sink into my flesh and burn along my nerves until I can't hold back the screams. As Varthil ordered, none of the attacks actually draw blood, but they leave bruises and red marks all over my newly-healed skin, and the agony is as bad as if they were carving me apart. By the time they finally grow bored of the entertainment Varthil permitted them, my throat feels like it has been scraped by a thousand claws.

The two Fae saunter out of the tent, and I'm left to breathe through the pain as it slowly ebbs.

And still my ghosts haven't come.

Where are they? Although even if they do find me, they won't be able to rescue me until midnight gives them physical form again.

I wish I could rescue myself. But I'm bound so tightly there's no chance of escape, nor is there any possibility of mercy from any of the Unseelie Fae I've seen. Not that I could beg for mercy now, with my throat in this state. I doubt I could speak a single audible word.

Instead, I send up a caustic mental prayer to the god of balance. *Is this what you think I deserve? Is this part of my lesson? Where were you when my cousin was raped and tortured for years? Where was your love of balance then? Or perhaps someone else was doing extreme good somewhere, and that balanced out Varthil's extreme evil, so you didn't interfere? A shitty way of doing things, if I'm honest.*

He doesn't answer, of course, nor will I plead for his mercy.

I doze off a little out of sheer exhaustion, which makes my neck ache. I'm not sure how many hours have passed since I was captured, but when the tent flap whips open again, it's dark outside.

Varthil ducks inside. He's alone this time, and he's carrying a cup.

"You smell better. Drink." He pinches my hair in his claw, yanks my head back, and tilts the cup against my lips. I gulp as fast as I can, but some of the water still runs down my chin. My throat feels marginally better afterward.

"People will come for me," I whisper.

"Marleigh will make sure they don't find us," says Varthil. "If they get close, we're glamoured against human perception. We're even protected from the sharp eyes of the Seelie." He throws the empty cup across the tent and stares at me. "Explain to me why your Fae-hunter said I should also shield your scent and ward the camp against ghosts?"

My heart plummets. "Ghosts?" I rasp. "No such thing."

"That's what I think, too. It's a fucking waste of time and effort, and for what? Because Marleigh says he saw something back at your palace?"

"But you're setting the wards anyway," I point out.

“Can’t be too careful in this realm. I’ve lived here for two decades and I still don’t understand everything. The rules are different. I don’t want to be *here*, you see—” He rushes close to me again, scraping his serrated teeth along my cheekbone, his breath hot on my skin. I cringe away, but he only nuzzles against me more violently. “I want to go *back*. Back to Faerie. I need this kingdom’s resources to search for a way to return. We’re taking your throne, Marleigh and I, and then I’ll kill him before he can betray me. You’ve taken care of most of the Seelie for me, so my only task will be keeping the humans in line and widening my search for a portal, a gate, an artifact—something to take us home.”

His tongue slides down my neck to my collarbone. “You taste good, you humans, and you’re fun to fuck. But you’re such idiots. And your world is poisoned, stunted, full of dead magic. I need to get out. Asekith and I were supposed to get out together. And you—ruined it—” He bites into my shoulder with all his pointed teeth and I scream as those teeth crunch through flesh, scrape bone.

My heart is racing, a frantic beat like a terrorized horse. I can hardly breathe as he chews deeper into my shoulder. In my mind I picture the ice-frozen cliffs, the snowy mountains with the deep blue lake between them. My safe place, my well of strength. Paemon, Abraxas, Helix.

“What time is it?” I gasp.

Varthil unclamps his jaws from my shoulder and pulls back. His lips and teeth are dripping with my blood. “Why does it matter? There is no time for you anymore. There is only your existence, and my pleasure.” Grinning through the blood, he drops a hand to his crotch. “I think it’s time you learn the shape of my cock, just like your cousin—and your parents. But for this, I need an audience. It’s more fun that way.”

With his claw he cuts through the ropes binding me. My legs are so stiff I can’t prop myself up on them—I collapse on my hands and knees in the dirt, and he kicks me with his bare foot. Each of his toenails is a pointed claw. “Crawl, mortal. Crawl out before me like the beast you are.”

If I wasn't so stiff from hanging in those ropes all day, I'd defy him and stand, even if it cost me my life. But I can't physically manage it yet, so I crawl, naked and bruised, out of the tent. The Unseelie jeer and howl as I'm driven into the center of the camp.

Varthil grabs me by the back of my neck with his hand—not his claw, thankfully—and drags me to my feet. “Behold, the Queen of Revallen!”

More shouts and jeers.

But during my crawl to the middle of the camp, some of my stiffness wore off. And the healer did her work well—better than she realized, perhaps.

I'm not my cousin. I'm a full-grown woman, and I've spent years training my body for a moment like this. I feared I would have to face him again, and I couldn't be sure it would be on my terms.

When he lifts me up and cries my title, I whirl into motion. My forearm flies up and back, striking his exposed inner wrist, and as his grip weakens I dive forward, breaking it. I spin into him, face to face, hook a knee to his groin, then pop my knee into his stomach as he doubles over. I bring my elbow down, right where his neck meets his shoulder, drive the first two fingers of my other hand toward his eyes as he's still bent—

It's all so quick, so smooth, so practiced—one blow after another, perfectly timed.

But he's Fae.

He's straightening, a growl of hideous anger rumbling from him—if he gets hold of me I'm dead.

I whirl into a powerful roundhouse kick and strike the side of his face. Bone cracks, and I almost grin but I don't have time—I'm running, running for the widest gap I can see, running with every ounce of strength I've hammered into my body, running for my life.

The Unseelie are shouting, leaping into gleeful pursuit, but Varthil roars, “Stand where you are! She's mine!”

I hear a whirr of something big and fast behind me, and I instantly drop, rolling aside and smoothly jumping to my feet again. I run on, my hands slicing the air, my legs flying, flying—another sound behind me and I drop, rolling again, this time in the opposite direction—he’s so close to catching me I feel the wind of his swiping claw across my shoulder. Thank the gods I’m small and quick.

Faster I run—I’m passing between the last two tents, and the forest lies beyond. There’s a sort of shimmering net in front of me, but I don’t have time to think about what it is or why it’s there—I run headlong into it, and discover I can’t feel it at all. Whatever it is, I pass right through.

I crash against a tree, bruising my shoulder, scraping my palm, but I keep running. Despite all I’ve done to strengthen my body, I’m still vulnerable. Branches lacerate my soft human skin, and I know by the keen pain and the slippery sensation that my bare feet are already bleeding. There was some sort of warmth pervading the Unseelie camp, but now that I’m beyond its borders I’m heart-stoppingly cold.

They say there is no blackness like that of a cave—but the darkness of a forest on a cloudy winter’s night is just as intense, just as terrifying. Not a glimmer of starlight or moonlight is visible, and the camp’s lights are too far behind me now—I can’t see anything. I’m forced to slow down, my heart pounding, my hands fumbling in front of me as I try to keep moving as quickly as I can without smashing against a tree.

“You can’t escape me.” Varthil’s voice booms right in front of me and I scream.

He seizes me, and for a straining, breathless second I’m sure he’s going to snap my neck. But he manages to control himself and simply cuffs me on the side of the head. Dazed from the blow, I can’t fight back as he flings me over his shoulder and totes me back to camp.

The Unseelie cheer raucously as Varthil reappears, carrying me. He takes his time sauntering back to the circle of Fae, then flings me down onto the ground so hard I can’t suck in a breath.

“And now,” he says, unbuttoning his pants. “Witness the degradation of the mortal Queen.” His shadow falls over me,

impossibly huge. He's leering down at me, looking like the monster I've always imagined whenever I used to think of the Fae.

I tense for one final effort. One last defense.

But the ground trembles with heavy footfalls, and the Unseelie Fae begin to gasp and murmur.

"Varthil," says one of them warningly.

Reluctantly he turns away from me. "What is it?"

I prop myself on my elbows, trying to clear my dazed mind enough to run for it again—but past Varthil's leg I catch sight of three figures, advancing into the center of the camp.

Three corporeal figures, thank the gods.

One broad and antlered, with a mane of curly hair down to his waist, carrying a flaming staff.

One slightly bulkier, with sharp red horns, eyes of blood, and hair like snow. A lurid light flickers along his sword.

The third is the tallest, with a river of purple hair and ten long, wicked claws.

And their faces—their beautiful, lethal, murderous faces—each one worth more to me than all the coins in that godsdamned vault.

I don't know how they found me, but they're here, and that's enough.

"Oh gods." I wheeze a laugh, sitting up. "You're so fucked now."

"And why is that?" asks Varthil tightly, with a swift glance at me. "Who are they?"

I give him a bright smile. "The ghosts who love me."



I can't see anything but Lauriel.

I glimpsed her from the edge of the camp, once we caught the scent of her blood. That brief sight of our queen being carried by the Unseelie leader was all we needed to shift into physical form.

She's hurt. I can smell the blood, warm and human, seeping into the dirt. Purple and black bruises paint her white skin.

My heart is with her already, and I rush to join it, heedless of the big clawed bastard in my way. He moves to stop me, and I ram the blazing end of my staff through his gut. The hiss of burning flesh fills the air.

When I wrench the staff out of him, he stumbles aside, staring down blankly at the hole through his belly.

"You won't heal," I say silkily. "These are weapons from beyond this world. Upon your death, if there's a glimmer of good in you, I suspect you'll be offered the chance to join the Wild Hunt and learn the error of your ways. I hope they don't find a shred of worthiness in your heart. I hope you're thrown to the great beasts of the Void."

He chokes, collapsing to the ground, fingers fluttering around the edges of the wound.

I dive to my knees and gather Lauriel in my arms. I kiss her brave, bruised face and then set my mouth to her pretty little ear, while my tears soak into the tangled mess of her hair. “You scared us, brat.”

She pets my shoulder. “I’m all right.”

“You’re not.” My heart aches at the sight of the contusions—aches so powerfully I can almost feel her pain under my own skin.

“Which of you touched her?” Brax roars, brandishing his sword at the group of Unseelie.

“Doesn’t matter,” Paemon hisses, black claws flexing. “We kill them all.”

Until this moment, the Unseelie have watched us with stunned curiosity. But at Paemon’s threat, the muttering and growling begins—dozens of them producing weapons, readying their magic, preparing to end us.

I rise, taking up a position beside Lauriel while the others close around her too. We fence her in with our bodies, and as the Unseelie attack, we whirl into action. Spells and blasts of magic glance off our weapons, each one rebounding toward its sender, inciting the sweetest of screams.

As the Unseelie realize the uselessness of magic against us, they move in closer, bent on defeating us with weapons. There’s a soothing flow in being able to fight against true enemies. I was never much of a warrior—more of a lover and a killer, but I wasn’t bad with a staff, even then. My torch punches through chests, stomachs, heads—whatever happens to be within my reach. I can hear the whistle and squelch of Paemon’s claws as he slashes his way through his attackers. Brax is bellowing in pain, though. Every time he sheathes his sword in a body, he’s stricken with agony. It’s his penance for the butcher he used to be.

“Vanish the sword!” I tell him. “Fight hand to hand!”

With a final groan of pain, he follows my advice, grabbing the next Fae and slamming his forehead against the other male's brow.

Dazed, the Fae stammers, "How did you perceive this place? We're shielded against perception by the Seelie."

"That's where you're mistaken," says Brax, with a malevolent laugh. "We're not Seelie. We're as fucking Unseelie as they come." And with a mighty wrench, he tears off the Fae's head.

It doesn't take long to clear the camp. The Unseelie keep rushing us, right down to the last of them, each one believing that their magic or their skill will be enough to defeat us. They're wrong, of course. Armed with our weapons, fueled by vengeance, the three of us are unstoppable.

Finally all is quiet, and we stand heaving over the piles of steaming bodies. Most of them are already turning gray. Soon fine cracks will form, spreading through the hardened corpses, and then they will crumble into dust.

Paemon, Brax, and I turn inward, facing each other—and we look down at Lauriel. She's sitting in the center of our little triangle, with her knees tucked up and her chin resting on one hand.

She raises her eyebrows imperiously. "Are you done?"

Brax and I crash to the ground beside her, engulfing her and each other in a tangled embrace. Paemon stands stiffly for a moment, then begins prowling through the fallen Unseelie, now and then stabbing his claws into a body to be sure it's dead.

"Without him, we couldn't have found you," I tell Lauriel. "In ghost form, Paemon is the most frightening of us all. We couldn't find Marleigh, but Paemon terrified your night guards until they confessed that they put you in a trunk and carried you down a tunnel."

"They both shit their pants," says Brax with satisfaction. "He scared them so badly they locked *themselves* in the dungeon. Once we got into the tunnel, we still couldn't catch your scent, but we caught wind of the Unseelie and followed their smell out to this part of the forest."

“That’s where we lost all trace of them or you,” I continue. “We began to despair—and then suddenly—there it was. Your scent. Our weapons could locate you again, and they transported us right to the edge of the camp, and we saw that big clawed bastard carrying you back to the others.”

“So when I fought Varthil, and ran from him, it wasn’t a pointless attempt at escape,” Lauriel says, her gaze brightening. “I got beyond the wards, where you could smell my scent, and that helped you find me.”

“You did so well.” I kiss the top of her head.

“But Varthil had the camp warded against ghosts,” she adds.

“True, but it’s Paemon’s night with you, so he could take physical form whether in your presence or not. And once Brax and I saw you, we could take physical form as well.”

“It’s—Paemon’s night?” She frowns. “But Brax was supposed to have three nights.”

“Apparently the Hunt is changing our timeline,” Brax says grimly. “My turn as your guide is done, and Paemon gets only one night. They say it’s because of something we did, but I think they’re just being dicks.”

“Only one night,” murmurs Lauriel, gazing at Paemon. She disentangles herself from me and Brax, rises, and walks to him. She moves stiffly, as if she’s in pain, and my whole body tightens with rage. If I could kill every one of these Unseelie fuckers again, I would.

I jump up, stalk over to the leader, and kneel beside him. Gray has spread over his whole chest and throat, right up to his jaw, but his ears aren’t completely defunct yet, and his eyes are still open, rolling in a death-panic.

I lean down and whisper to him, so no one else can hear. “This is for what you did to my mate.” And with two fingers, I put out his eyes myself.

I watch the gray color roll upward, and then I stamp his skull into dust.



Lauriel stands before me, bruised and beautiful and entirely naked. She shivers. Since we slaughtered the Unseelie, all their spellwork around this camp is fading, including the temperature normalization.

I would give anything to be able to wrap her in my arms and warm her. To touch her with my own fingertips, just once.

We could return to her room and let her dress. But there's a horrible tugging sensation in my chest, and at the ends of my fingers... like black threads knotted around my heart, running along my bones, pulling me into the swirling torment of prophetic vision. Time is precious now. There is little to spare.

"Brax," I hiss. "Fetch her a cloak, and something for her feet."

He disappears into one of the tents.

Lauriel moves closer to me. Reaches out and lays her palm against my chest. "One night. Can you show me everything in one night?"

"I can. But seeing the future isn't like witnessing the past or the present. It is far more torturous to the mind. Nothing holds greater horror for a mortal soul than the raw truth of its

own demise. This will be the most difficult thing you've had to experience... and after what you endured today—" I grimace. "I'm sorry I must do this to you."

Her face is white with pain and exhaustion, but she nods. "Do what you must. I know you're leading me through this for my own good, and..." She swallows, struggles for a moment—"I'm grateful."

Brax returns, dropping to his knees and holding out leather slippers. Once she slides her feet into them, he wraps a big cloak around her shoulders.

By then I can hardly bear the aching compulsion of the oncoming visions. "There's no more time," I gasp. "Helix—Brax—bear witness—"

And then my voice disappears, and I'm growing taller still, shadows pouring from my body like ink, spilling over the ground and rising, forming a great sphere of darkness around the four of us. Lauriel stands at its center, while Helix and Brax take up places behind me. I allow myself to admit that their presence is something I want, something I need—an extra measure of strength for what I must do.

I lift my hands, and threads of shadow glide from the tips of my claws, weaving together to form images that flow outward and take their places in the scene I'm spinning.

It's a classroom—stone walls cloaked in maps and historical timelines, a wooden floor scarred by decades of chair legs scraping across it. A tall, grim-faced woman stands at the front of the room, tapping a yellowed chart with a long pointer.

"Today we learn about the shortest reign in Revallen history—the reign of the Mad Queen," she says.

Instantly the students perk up, straightening in their seats. One girl's hand flies up, and the teacher nods for her to speak.

"Is it true the Mad Queen attended this very school?" the child asks.

"Yes. In fact, I had her in a few classes. She sat in this very room. In that very seat." She points to a desk, and the boy

behind it shudders, eyeing his chair as if it might be infected with evil or madness.

“Queen Lauriel’s rule was a terrible time for the kingdom. During the few months she reigned, she raised taxes, imposed harsh regulations on businesses, and allowed raiders to invade border villages. She even canceled the Midwinter Glee festival.”

The children gasp as if this was the worst crime of all.

“Had she been allowed to stay on the throne, Revallen would surely have collapsed and fallen to its enemies. But Commander Marleigh, the royal sorcerer, saw the danger and gathered allies from various parts of the kingdom. With their help, he defeated the Mad Queen and became Kingdom Protector, then Lord King, and then, after numerous conquests: High Emperor of the Allnation.”

“Bless the High Emperor’s name,” chorus the children automatically, turning toward a portrait on the wall and touching their foreheads.

The portrait depicts a crowned man with eyes of iron and streaks of steel-gray in his black hair and beard. He holds a scepter in one hand and a glowing flame in the other, illustrative of his magical abilities.

“Bless the High Emperor’s name,” echoes the teacher, but her lips press tight afterward, as if there’s more she would like to say about the emperor—not all of it complimentary.

“Tell us more about the Mad Queen,” the first girl begs, but the teacher shakes her head. “There is nothing else to tell, except that she slaughtered nearly all the Fae in the land, and commanded the banishment, imprisonment, or death of everyone with magical abilities. The only sorcerer she permitted to practice was our High Emperor, because she needed his help to subdue and destroy the Fae. What do you think she would have done to him once the Fae were gone?”

“She would have killed him!” exclaims a boy.

“Indeed. But she underestimated his power, and she lost her life. Let that be a warning to all those who would stand against our High Emperor.”

“Bless the High Emperor’s name,” chant the children.

Lauriel has been standing quietly, observing the class, but she steps forward suddenly, frowning, to inspect a map on the wall. “He conquered all the neighboring nations,” she murmurs. “They don’t even have names or capitals anymore. And what are these?” She touches several dark blotches on the map, each labeled, “Barrow-blight.”

Forming words is a struggle, but she must know the truth. “Marleigh enslaved the remaining Fae of Revallen and forced them to help him conquer the surrounding nations. With their aid, he delved deeper into dark magic than any human has ever dared to go, and he woke the Barrow-Blight—a plague of the undead. Those areas on the map indicate places where the Barrow-Blight is all-consuming—areas that have been walled off to protect the rest of the citizens.”

“There’s one near the Institute,” Lauriel breathes, and I flinch, because I know what’s coming—I see it unfolding a few seconds before it happens.

The distant booming crash of a door breaking down. Screams echoing along the hallways. The teacher’s eyes, stricken with realization, with terror.

Another teacher barrels through the classroom entrance, slamming the door behind him. “They’re here, Morica. It’s not a drill.”

The teacher drops the pointer, seizes her desk, and drags it toward the classroom door. “Alvert, children, help me build a barricade. Desks, chairs, anything we can pile up.”

“That won’t stop them,” moans Alvert, clutching his robes. “We’re going to be chewed up and spit out, contaminated, infested, tormented, devoured—”

“Shut up!” She grabs him by the shoulders, shakes him. “Shut up, you fucking idiot, and help me. We knew this might happen—we’ve practiced, performed drills—”

“The drills were pointless. We’re all dead, we’re doomed —”

“The *children*, Alvert,” she hisses. “We have to try to protect them.”

Still trembling, he gives her a weak nod. “All right, Morica. All right.”

The sobbing of frightened students fades as the vision dims, dissolving into formless smoke.

Wreathed in the darkness, Lauriel turns to me, her eyes huge and haunted. “That’s what happens?” she whispers. “If Marleigh takes the throne?”

“If your people remain angry and discontented enough to listen to his promises of salvation—yes.” I want to say more, but the words dry up in my throat, and shadows pour from my mouth instead—another vision, stronger this time and nearer to the present, flowing from my mouth, my fingers.

I try to fight it. I don’t want her to see this. Once, I might have enjoyed forcing her to witness her own death—I’d have reveled in the exposure of her worst fear and delighted in making her so intimately acquainted with her own mortality. But I’m not the torturer I once was. I do not crave her pain, nor will I find pleasure in baring the raw nerves of her tender, wounded heart. After what she has endured today, this is too cruel.

But I have no choice. I am a rider of the Wild Hunt, a purveyor of justice, bringer of balance.

The threads of the vision weave together and form a seamless whole—a scene of chaos and blood.



I can't see Brax and Helix anymore, and Paemon is a horrifically tall column of black shadows, through which I catch occasional glimpses of bone-white flesh. He lifts his right arm higher, shadows trailing from his wrist like endless wide sleeves, and one immeasurably long claw extends, pointing to something behind me.

Slowly, my stomach a pit of dread, I turn.

The scene he wove looks distant at first, but it glides nearer, rushing into place around me, bringing me into this moment of my future. There's none of the sour taste of the past here, or the bright immediacy of the present. This is a possible future, fluctuating at the edges, but tangible enough to be terrifying. This *could* happen. This will be real, unless...

Unless I can change, measure up to the ideal, defy expectations, satisfy the fucking gods.

I'm in my audience chamber. My future self sits on the throne, a naked sword across my lap. A handful of guards stand around me. Five or so.

The double doors shake under the weight of a hundred hammering fists, and the very pillars in the room seem to

tremble with the angry roars from a hundred throats.

I'm not surprised when, with a concussive blast of magic, the doors explode and the mob pours in. My people, my furious, hurting, mistreated people. They suffered, like I did, or worse, and they have centralized that suffering, focused it on me. They think I am the monster they need to kill to make their lives better. They don't know their charge to freedom is being led by a worse monster.

Marleigh destroyed the doors, but he doesn't come for me himself. Wisely he waits. Lets my people do the work of dragging me from my throne.

I watch my future self put up a ferocious defense—cut a few throats and slit a couple bellies before I collapse under the sheer weight of the mob—their overpowering numbers. They tear my hair, rake my skin with their nails, rip my gown to shreds. Knives plunge into the side of my face, my breast, my shoulder, my spine, my gut. I am spilled out, sprays of my blood painting the revolutionaries. No arrest, no trial, no execution. Mine is a messy demise, a rageful ending to a life lived in anger.

The scene shifts, distorts, then realigns, and I see my body hanging from a post, my arms tied to a crossbeam. I'm being carried through the city, so everyone can see the raw wounds and pallid corpse of the Mad Queen.

And they cheer at the sight of my mutilated corpse. I am the symbol of everything that was wrong with their lives. They believe my death will make everything better.

They *cheer*.

It hurts to watch them rejoice. Callous I may have been, but I could have been so much worse. I was murderous to the Fae, not to these people. How could they do this?

Don't they know I was trying, every day, trying so hard I nearly drove myself truly insane working for *them*? Trying to ensure the safety of this kingdom?

If this is how they repay my efforts, maybe they aren't worth my mercy.

But no... I can't think that way. That sort of sentiment is what will lead me here, to this level of degradation.

The vision dissipates, leaving only darkness and roaring wind in its place.

I'm crying—I didn't realize it at first, but my cheeks are wet. Desperately I turn to Paemon, and though I can't see his face, I speak into the swirling darkness where I think it should be. "Can you show me my maids?"

The shadows coil into a new scene—my chambermaids, Krissa and Arin, darting into my bedroom and hastily lighting two candles.

"We've got to hurry," Krissa urges. "Someone else will soon realize these things are free for the taking. Grab whatever you can carry."

Arin stuffs items into a bag—a pearl-handled comb, several lacy panties, a nightgown, silk stockings, a jeweled brooch. Krissa strips the satin sheets from the bed, bundling them into a sack. Then she and Arin seize handfuls of jewelry from a drawer.

"It's no more than she owes us for all the demands, the yelling," says Arin breathlessly.

"Nothing we did was ever good enough for her," adds Krissa.

Pain splits my heart, cracks lengthening and widening through my chest until I can hardly breathe.

"Show me some sadness connected to my death." My voice cracks, shredded by the rushing wind. "Please, Paemon. I can't bear this."

He stretches out both hands, and between the tips of his claws a web forms—colorful threads weaving together until they form a tiny scene. I lean closer, peering into the vision like a child peeping into a candy jar.

It's Zea, my one-time friend and schoolmate. She's sitting at the dinner table with her family, listening as her older brother recounts what he heard of the events in the capital—my death, Marleigh's coup.

“To the abolition of the monarchy!” cries Zea’s brother, lifting his mug high. The toast is echoed enthusiastically around the table by everyone except Zea.

She rises and glares at them. “You forget that Lauriel was a *person*, not just a queen. And she was my friend.”

“Not a very good friend,” chimes in Zea’s sister. “You’ve told me how she treated you.”

“But she didn’t deserve what they did to her.” Zea throws down her napkin. “I’m going to my room.”

“Without dessert?” Her sister looks astounded.

Zea hesitates. “Send the dessert up later,” she replies, and marches out of the room.

One person.

One person was mildly upset about my demise. Almost upset enough to skip dessert.

“Enough,” I say through my clenched teeth. “It’s enough already. That’s the end of the visions, yes? If you’ve quite finished torturing me, I’d like to go home.”

But the wind whirls faster, and the shadows thicken around me. Paemon points again, and this time, when I turn to follow his gesture, everything around me disappears.

I’m floating alone in the great Void between worlds—the star-flecked space where paths of cloud twine between realms, and multicolored splashes of distant galaxies decorate the blackness.

A titanic shape surges in my peripheral vision, and a scream lodges in my throat. It’s an immense monster, parts of it gelatinous and parts composed of the deepest black smoke. Some of its knobby limbs are studded with eyeballs, whirring incessantly, unseeing and wild.

There’s something *inside* the vast bulk of the beast—I squint, trying to make it out.

Half a face, melting into the acidic gel of the beast’s flesh. One brown antler. One orange eye, staring, stricken with anguish beyond words, beyond screams. A little deeper, there’s

a huge brown arm with a tattoo I recognize, its fingers partially decomposed. Still farther, a skein of purple hair threaded with silver, and a pale blob of melted flesh.

Nausea lurches in my stomach, and I gag.

Helix, Abraxas, and Paemon.

This is not my end. It's theirs.

This is what will happen to them if I fail. They'll have their bodies—but they will be condemned to this fate, this slow, agonizing dissolution of body, mind, and spirit. After all they've accomplished, the change they've wrought in themselves and others—this will be their end.

This is the fate of the three ghosts I love.

It's excruciating, soul-splitting. I can't hold myself together any longer—I scream. I scream my rage, my fear, and my panic into the Void, and the Void shatters, the vision winnows away, and I'm left facing the tall, shrouded figure of Paemon. I know it's him, but I can't see his face—I *want* to see his face. I fucking need him.

"Tell me I can fix this." I reach for him, trying to clutch his cloak, his robes—but they are made of shadows, and they slip through my fingers. I can't see Helix or Brax. I want them—I want to know that they're still whole, still laughing and existing and loving me.

"Tell me there's still time, and hope. Tell me this doesn't have to happen. I've changed, Paemon, I have—the three of you changed me in so many ways. These visions aren't set in stone—they're warnings, which means I still have time. I can unmake this future. Tell me I can!"

He doesn't answer.

Frantic, I reach for his claws—the only tangible part of him I can see. But before I can touch them, the wind catches me up in its icy flow, lifts me, whirls me away into a dark oblivion...

Until I crash onto something solid.

I'm lying face-down on the floor beside my bed, still dressed in the Unseelie cloak and slippers, with the sheets strewn around me. The grain of the wood under my palms is a

lifeline, the knot in the wood is a blessing. A single dark-red strand has frayed from the edge of the rug, and it trails across the hardwood like a thread of blood. I pinch it between my fingers before running my palm across the thick weave of the rug.

My body aches from the torment I endured in the Seelie camp.

Which means this is the present, and I'm alive.

There's no concerned exclamation in a low male voice, no strong hands helping me up, no kisses, no rich laughter, no petting of my hair with careful claws. That's how I know, before I even glance around, that I'm alone.

My three riders are gone.

I climb to my feet, trembling. The bedroom is empty, and when I go to the window, a pink blush tints the horizon above the trees.

Paemon showed me my future in one night, as he promised. He and the others plied their gifts of past, present, and future—shared their lessons of justice, empathy, and wisdom—and now they've left me.

Dully I walk back to the spot on the floor with the tangled sheets, and I sit down among them, as if returning to that place could reset something, could summon them into existence.

They didn't say goodbye, and I know they would have, if they'd been allowed to.

They're simply... gone.

"No." I scrunch my fingers convulsively into the sheets. "No, you can't leave like that—you can't. Come back!" I shout the words, heedless of who hears me. "Come here this instant! Come punish me, thrash me, flay me with your weapons if you must... please, *come back*." The last two words are a wretched whisper.

What have I done? I must have reacted wrongly to the final vision.

"Whatever I did, I take it back, do you hear?" I shout at the ceiling. "I'll undo it, I'll fix it, just give them back to me."

But no one answers.

I don't cry. I seethe and scream for several more minutes—and then I remember who set up the Wild Hunt—who governs it. Andregh, the god of balance.

There's a chapel here in the palace. It's been closed up for years, since my family usually went to worship at the temple, but the temple doors won't be open yet, and I need to speak with Andregh *now*.

Leaping up, I dress and braid my hair hastily. I hunt through my drawers, first replacing my rings and earrings, then clawing up handfuls of jewelry—the same jewelry Arin and Krissa stole in my vision. Then I hurry to the door of my bedroom and use my elbow to push down the handle, shoving my way into the hall.

The night guards who betrayed me aren't on duty—they're probably still in the dungeon following Paemon's interrogation of them. Two other guards stand in their place.

I hurry past them, barking, "Follow me if you want," and then I think better of it and adjust my tone to a kinder one. "I'm going to the chapel. If you'd like to escort me, I'd be grateful."

The guards blink and stare at each other. "Are you sure you're well enough, Majesty? We were told you were ill—"

"I'm perfectly fine."

"Of course, Your Majesty."

I shove my handfuls of jewelry toward them. "Here. Take something."

They look positively alarmed at the offer.

"It's all right," I tell them. "I promise I haven't lost my mind, nor will I withdraw the gifts. Take something, will you?"

One of them selects a ring set with a great emerald, and the other cautiously plucks a diamond bracelet from the tangle of items.

"Come on, then," I say. "Off to worship."

They follow me to the chapel and open the doors for me, more eagerly than usual. As they rush to light the candles, I

walk to the altar, puffs of dust rising from the carpet with every press of my bare feet.

At the head of the tiny chapel rises a spindly statue of the god Andregh, balanced on one foot as usual. I wonder if he ever laughs at our human portrayal of him.

I spill the contents of my hands onto the altar and drop to my knees.

“I don’t know if you’re listening, and I won’t stay here long,” I murmur. “But I’ve changed. I swear I have. Whatever reward you promised to my guides—you must deliver it. I will show you the change in my heart—I’ll prove it to you, even if it takes years, decades... even if I have to do it alone...” Tears come at last, stinging my eyes, and I swallow a sob. “Just... don’t hurt them. Please. Don’t subject them to that terrible end, please. Let me perish in any number of miserable, painful ways, but spare them, I beg you. I *beg* you. I won’t keep praying, because I know you despise excess—but please. I’ll do anything. Have mercy on the ones I love.”

I wait a few moments, letting silence punctuate my plea. Then I climb to my feet and ring the bell beside the altar. It summons the old palace priestess, one of the people I recently fired. My edict gave her one week to find other lodgings, so I assume she’s still here.

Sure enough, she comes toddling through a side door, bleary-eyed from sleep. “Your—Your Majesty?”

“Sorry to wake you, Priestess,” I say briskly. “You’ve been rehired, and you’ll remain in service through the end of your days. Please take a piece of this offering for yourself and see that the rest is delivered to the temple, as part of my Midwinter Glee donation.”

“*Part* of the donation?” Her swollen fingers prod the glittering mass of gems and gold. “This amount could buy an entire city, my lady. By the gods—it’s the largest donation we’ve ever received!” She looks up, genuine concern in her red, watery eyes. “Are you quite sure you’re all right, dear?”

Normally I would recoil from such concern with a sharp retort, and I might berate her for not using my royal title. But

the walls around my heart have been thinned, worn down to practically nothing, and her kindness cracks right through them.

Gently I take her arthritic hands in mine. “I’m not all right,” I whisper. “I’m really not—and yet I’m better than I ever was. It’s hard to explain. Please trust that the gift is given with my goodwill, and with all my compassion for the poor of the city.”

She nods, and I turn to one of my guards. “Please send for soldiers to escort the Priestess to Andregh’s temple. They must ensure that the donation reaches the temple vaults safely.”

“Right away, Majesty.”

“And inform whomever you wake that the salaries of every royal guard will be increased by twenty percent, just as soon as I can write down the order.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” With a delighted grin, he hurries off. A moment after he disappears into the hallway, I hear a whoop of excitement.

It almost makes me smile. Almost.

My other guard stands ready, anticipation shining in his eyes. Clearly he’s also thrilled at the prospect of a wage increase. “Where to next, Your Majesty?”

“The vault, and then my study. I need someone to run an errand to a certain shop on Tinker Street—there’s an order I need filled immediately. And send a messenger to Kratchet’s house—tell him he may have today off.”



The sudden announcement about the guards’ salaries was as strategic as it is generous. I want to deal with Marleigh immediately, but I don’t dare. I must wait for word of the guards’ wage increase to spread throughout the palace. It’s not a bribe, exactly—it’s a kindness—but it can’t hurt for them to

know I'm going to pay them more, especially if it comes down to a choice between loyalty to Commander Marleigh or to me.

Meanwhile, I remain in my study, quietly scribbling notes in my own hand. The first is an order for reinforcements to be sent to the border village of Lirac. The next is a letter to the King of Ithaya, bluntly advising him to curtail the activity of the rogues and raiders along the border or I will be forced to consider his negligence an act of war. It's a far cry from my silence thus far. I can only hope that this letter, along with any reports he might receive about terrifying ghosts in the area, will persuade him to see reason and curb the aggression.

Next I write short notes to several of my closest acquaintances from school, as well as a few teachers, inviting them to join me at the palace for Midwinter Glee in one week. I choose the ones who live close enough to make the journey in that span of time, if they so desire—among them, Zea and Professor Morica. I command the Overseer of Communications to send his fastest riders with the invitations, and along the way, the messengers will disperse the word that Midwinter Glee is once again a royally sanctioned holiday.

Lastly, I write to my aunt. It's the longest of the letters, and by the end, I can hardly see, my eyes are so blurred with tears. I hand it off to a servant to be sealed and stamped, for fear I'll drip tears on the parchment.

Aunt Agys may not come. But I said as much as I could in the letter, and told her the rest would need to be communicated in person. If she doesn't come to the palace for Midwinter Glee, I will go visit her afterward.

The servant handling the wax seals glances at me curiously as I wipe my eyes.

"You're surprised that I'm capable of shedding tears," I say dryly.

"Not at all, Majesty. It's not my place to wonder about such things," she says.

Having lived with servants all my life, I know how they gossip. Anything said to one of them is sure to be

communicated quickly to the rest of the palace staff. So I take a moment to choose my words.

“I was wrong about Commander Marleigh,” I say quietly. “Wrong about the danger the Fae pose to us. Wrong in my treatment of faeries, of sorcerers, and of everyone. The notice that was sent out the other day, dismissing so many of the palace staff—that was wrong, too. A mistake. And I’m going to retract it today, even if it makes me look like a fool who doesn’t know her own mind.”

“I’m sure that will make many people quite happy, my lady,” she replies cautiously.

“Some of you probably think me mad, or wicked,” I continue. “I’ve been a little of one and too much of the other, ever since my parents died. But I intend to change that, starting today.”

The girl hesitates, then says in a rush, “Grief does funny things to a person. Even if you’re not exactly sad someone is gone, you can be twisted up inside because the ending was so... unexpected. It’s like a door you can never quite close, and it can drive a person a little mad.”

Dumfounded, I stare at her. “Well... fuck me. That was surprisingly wise. What’s your name?”

“Edora, my lady. Edora Dilber.”

“Well, Edora... would you like to be my advisor?”

She chuckles, blowing on one of the wax seals.

“I’m not joking.”

Her head whips around, her eyes wide. “Your... Majesty?”

“I need people with compassion and understanding close to me. You have both.”

“But I—I’m the daughter of a merchant captain—I kept books for him for a while, before I entered palace service, but I don’t know anything about advising someone on rulership of an entire kingdom.”

“You kept books, you say?” I brush the feathery end of the quill across my lips. “Did you do a good job of that?”

“I did, rather. My father didn’t want me to leave,” she admits, with a blush of pride. “But my mother thought I’d be better off working here. This job at the palace was a grand chance for us, you see.”

“I’ll give you another chance—helping me with the finances of this kingdom. The Council might hate it at first, but we’ll convince them. It’s not as if my parents’ financial advisors were much good. Might as well start fresh.”

“Y-yes, Your Majesty,” Edora stammers.

“If you’ll deliver those notes to the clerks’ hall, I’d be grateful,” I tell her, with a smile that doesn’t feel forced at all. “We’ll discuss your new role soon—once I’ve dealt with a few urgent matters.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.” She jumps up from her seat, gathers the correspondence, and bobs a curtsy. “Right away, my lady.”

I get up from my chair more slowly, trying to steel myself for the “urgent matter”—the most dangerous task I’ll undertake today—the arrest of Jaik Marleigh.

By now, word of my new-found generosity should have spread throughout the palace. It’s as good a time as any to send word to Marleigh and have him meet me in my audience chamber, so I request a guard to summon the Commander on my behalf. The more public our confrontation, the better, if I hope to survive it. As my ghosts warned me, Marleigh is dangerous. Arresting him secretly would be a death sentence, but doing it in front of witnesses gives me a chance, at least.

Marleigh wasn’t in the palace yesterday, when my ghosts wanted to question him. I don’t know where he went, but he must think I’m still in the forest, being tortured by Unseelie Fae. Whatever foul errand occupied him yesterday, he will certainly be planning to “discover” my disappearance today and organize a false search for me. Which means if he hasn’t already returned to the palace, he’ll be back soon.

Once he receives my message, he’ll either flee the city or come straight to me to find out what’s going on. My bet is the

latter. He has invested too much time into this political scheme to run away from it now.

Upon entering the throne room, I post extra guards at various points throughout the chamber. Several of them thank me for the upcoming raise, and I assure them it will be put into effect this very day.

While I'm speaking with the guards, the palace manager enters, looking dreadfully confused. "Your Majesty, I heard you were ill. Commander Marleigh sent a message that there would be no court today."

"Nonsense. I'm perfectly fine. Open the doors, please, and let's see if anyone is waiting." I lift my skirts in both hands and spread them out neatly as I take my seat on the throne.

Despite whatever notices were posted, there are indeed people waiting for an audience with their queen. The first couple are unusually tall, heavily cloaked and hooded.

One of my guards steps forward. "Remove your outer garments in the Queen's presence."

"Very well," says a female voice—it sounds familiar, but I can't quite place it. "But please, don't be alarmed. We mean no harm. We've come to beg the Queen's mercy."

The words click into place in my brain at the same moment her cloak drops. I leap up from my throne, my heartbeat quickening.

I knew she planned to come, yet it's still a shock to see her.

It's Fengold, the female leader of the Seelie, dressed in a worn but elegant gown of ivory and gold. Delicate golden cuffs decorate her sharp ears.

At the sight of her and the tall male at her side, cries break out through the hall, and my guards draw their weapons, lunging forward to attack.

"Stop!" I shout, in my most commanding tone. "No one touches her."

The soldiers freeze, throwing confused glances my way.

Swiftly I descend the steps from my throne and walk toward the two Fae.

“Your Majesty, please—step back,” says one of the guards. “Let us take these creatures into custody.”

I ignore him and advance, my hands outstretched. “Fengold. How wonderful to see you. I was just about to write down a new policy of tolerance and a declaration of permanent sanctuary for the Fae of Revallen. Perhaps you would help me choose the wording that is most acceptable to your people.”

Her mouth opens, and for a full five seconds she doesn’t speak. She turns to stare at her mate, who shrugs, looking as astonished as she is.

“How do you know me?” she asks, her brow furrowing.

“I can’t tell you that just yet. I understand your confusion, and your suspicion—I have been unforgivably cruel to your kind. But recent events have opened my mind.”

I wave off the guards, who reluctantly return to their posts, though they keep their weapons ready.

“Forgive them—they’re not aware of the new policy yet.” I lower my voice. “Rest assured, Commander Jaik Marleigh is no longer in favor with the Crown. I hope to place him under arrest soon, for conspiring to murder my parents and planning a coup against me. Until I earn your trust, perhaps we can operate under the assumption that the enemy of my enemy is my friend—or at the very least, my ally?”

The Seelie leader has regained her composure, though she still looks understandably wary. “That is a reasonable assumption, for now.”

“Good. I must warn you that you’ve arrived at a rather volatile moment. You see, I’ve summoned Commander Marleigh here this morning, and I plan to confront him and hopefully imprison... him...” My voice trails off as I watch the two Seelie exchange doubtful glances. “What is it?”

“Your sorcerer is not particularly powerful without premade spells in hand,” says the male, Laith. “But when he has

such spells on his person, ready to use, he is nearly unstoppable. Does he suspect this confrontation?”

I wince. “He does, definitely. I would have postponed it, but I have no other choice. I can’t let him roam free, knowing his harmful intentions toward me.”

“Here.” Fengold removes a necklace with an odd-looking stone from around her neck and hands it to me. “Wear this. Laith and I each wore several today, to get us through Marleigh’s wards and protect us from his spells. They are the only such charms our people possess, and each one only lasts a short while. We hoped it would be enough to allow us a few moments of your attention, to plead for our people.”

“You have already done that, eloquently,” I tell her. “I can’t explain more right now, but please know that although I can never undo the horror I’ve wrought upon your kind, I will devote my life to ensuring that it never happens again.”

I can’t quite read her expression, nor do I have time, because a servant hurries up to me at that moment. It’s Krissa, one of my chambermaids. Her jaw drops at the sight of the two Fae standing so close to me.

“What is that chambermaid doing in the throne room?” exclaims the palace manager, a hand to his forehead. “God-stars, what is happening today? Has everyone lost their minds?”

“Commander Marleigh just returned to the palace,” says Krissa in an undertone. “He received your message as soon as he reached his quarters, and he is on his way here, accompanied by many guards.”

“Thank you, Krissa.” After a second’s hesitation, I remove two rings from my fingers and hand them to her. “One for you, and one for Arin, with my heartfelt apologies for the way I’ve treated you both, and my deepest gratitude for your service.”

“My lady...” She accepts the rings, a pleased surprise shining in her gaze. “Thank you.”

“Go now, and get somewhere safe. Summon any guards you think would be willing to defend me, and send them to the throne room.” I give her an encouraging nod before turning

back to the two Seelie. “You should find somewhere safe as well. Marleigh and his men will try to kill you on sight.”

Fengold’s mouth curves in a sly smile. “Oh, he has tried that before. What do you say, my love? Shall we stay and see if we can assist our new ally?”

Laith grins, showing razor teeth. “Why not? I can conceal us temporarily with a camouflage spell, so as not to alert him to our presence until the right moment.”

“Good.” I nod to them, and as they slink into the shadow of a pillar, I raise my voice and speak to the guards standing throughout the audience chamber. “Commander Marleigh is coming here as we speak. Yesterday he made an attempt on my life, one I can’t fully explain now, but you may have heard that I was sick. You may have also heard of the disappearance of one Lodraed, a loyal guardswoman—I have reason to believe Marleigh had her killed, because she was suspicious of his role in my parents’ death. If you will stand with me against this treacherous sorcerer, I can’t promise success, but I can promise you that if we triumph, things will change. From this day on, I will strive to be a ruler worthy of the fine soldiers in this room today. Stand with me, and you will not only be rewarded, but respected.” I pause, breathless, my heart thundering in my ears and my limbs feeling strangely light and weak. “Will you help me?”

A moment’s silence. Then one of my guards steps forward.

“My brother rides with Commander Marleigh on Fae hunts,” he says slowly. “During the last one he saw Marleigh burn a Fae child alive, and smile while doing it. Didn’t sit right with him, nor does it with me. I stand with you, Your Majesty.” He bows.

“As I do,” pipes up another guard, and there are assenting murmurs all around. There are more guards on my side now than there were in Paemon’s visions—and I have two Seelie waiting to assist me, too.

“Very well.” I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself. I’ve never had an encounter like this—none of my physical training prepared me for my body’s reaction to the suspense and

the danger. “Does anyone have a weapon to spare? I think I’d feel better with a blade in my hands.”

One of the guards steps forward and hands me their sword, taking out a second, shorter blade for their own use. I thank them, tip my chin up, and walk back to my throne. I don’t sit with the blade across my thighs, like I did in the vision. I stand before the throne, forcing my face into a mask of cool, regal control, despite the turmoil I feel inside.

This isn’t the terrible scene I witnessed—the raging mob breaking down the doors, ripping me apart. I’ve made drastic changes today. I have to believe the course of my future has already changed for the better—and if I survive, that means my kingdom will, too.

Jaik Marleigh cannot be allowed to survive this encounter. He cannot be allowed to take the throne, explore wicked magic, and cause the Barrow-Blight. Whatever happens to me, he must be destroyed. The fate of my people—of those future children in that schoolroom at the Institute—it all rests on the result of this confrontation.

I will end him, even if I die in the process.

As I wait, two dozen more guards filter into the room, taking up positions along the wall and behind the pillars. Some of them cluster around me, flanking my throne, planting themselves on the steps of the dais.

Maybe they’ve heard about the changes I already signed into law this morning, or the raise I’m enacting for the palace guard. I doubt any of those things are enough to warrant them risking their lives against a powerful sorcerer. They’re doing this for me, for the Crown. For Revallen. And their loyalty, despite everything I’ve done, makes me want to weep with gratitude.

I wish my ghosts could stand here, beside me. But I will do this in their names, wherever they are.

Helix. Paemon. Abraxas.

A stamping of booted feet echoes far away, beyond the open doors of the audience chamber. The corridor has been cleared of supplicants, and I can see all the way along its length,

right to the end. I see my enemies round the corner and march toward the throne room—rows of guards, four abreast, with Jaik Marleigh leading the way.

He strides into the room, his cloak billowing behind him and a large satchel slung across his body, bouncing at his hip. He keeps one hand tucked inside it, which only confirms to me that it contains spells and magical supplies.

The fact that he would come to me like this, like a man ready for war, is enough confirmation to my guards that I was telling the truth—Marleigh is after the throne.

He looks angry. I have no doubt he's upset at being forced to play his hand like this. He laid careful plans for a quiet takeover, and I've upended those plans twice now.

Marleigh halts halfway down the long path to the throne. Pillars soar up to the ceiling on either side of him. With all the soldiers behind him, and the billowing cloak, and his perfectly coiffed hair, I have to admit he looks like a king. Like a conqueror.

“You sent me a message?” he says curtly.

“Yes.” I clasp the hilt of the sword in both my hands, its tip touching the dais at my feet. “Yesterday, you poured my coffee into a cursed cup, glamoured a doll to take my form and lie in my bed, then had two of my bodyguards place me in a trunk and carry me beyond the palace limits, where I was delivered to a group of Unseelie Fae for torture and death.”

Gasps of shock and outrage hiss through the hall.

“Lies,” says Marleigh smoothly. “I thought I might have to endure some frenzied conspiracy theory born from your addled brain. Listen to her!” He huffs a laugh, glancing around at everyone. “This is the queen who talks to herself, who cries and laughs alone in her rooms at night, who invites strange men into her bed, who loses her temper at the slightest provocation! This tale is nothing but the diseased fruit of a poisonous tree—the same tree whose putrid roots run throughout this land. It is time for the end of the Anderion line, and the beginning of a new era. We must step forward and embrace this responsibility—the care

of our beautiful kingdom, while this woman goes to some quiet place where she can obtain the mental healing she needs.”

His words spark anger in my heart. I welcome it like an old friend, and I twine it with all my love, my ambition, and my fear. All of those emotions, together, form a core of hot steel at my center, and I’m no longer shaking. I can breathe steadily again.

“You think me mad?” I descend the steps of the dais, channeling all the ferocity I feel into my smile. “*You’re* the mad one. You taught me to hate all the Fae, when in truth there is a difference—Seelie and Unseelie. You and your Unseelie friends were behind my parents’ deaths, and when Lodraed voiced her suspicions, you had her killed.”

Some of the guards behind Marleigh glance at each other, uncertain.

I lift my borrowed sword and point it at Marleigh. “You are the poison. You are the putrid weed that must be uprooted. Yield, and be shackled, or die where you stand.”

“Yield to *you*?” Marleigh hisses, his face purpling. “You’re nothing but a spoiled, power-mad, detestable child.”

I continue pacing toward him, slowly, with the sword extended. “Last chance.”

His hand plunges deeper into the bag, then emerges with a glowing ball of dark red fire in his grip. With a shouted spell, he flings it at me.

Instantly I’m engulfed in flames dark as blood, licking over my skin, burning away parts of my gown. But I feel no pain, so I keep walking, while Marleigh’s eyes widen with alarm.

My guards leap forward, shooting crossbow bolts at Marleigh, but he fends them off with flashes of defensive magic. His soldiers collide with mine, blades ringing and clashing, shouts echoing through the chamber.

Even as Marleigh deflects crossbow bolts and thrown daggers, he finds time to fling two more spells at me. I’m still encased in the blood-fire, still pacing toward him. As the spells

impact my body, the amulet on my chest trembles, as if its defensive power is beginning to fail.

At that moment, two tall figures emerge from concealment, their hands upraised. Vines of living light soar upward from the floor and snake around Marleigh's legs, and skeins of shadow twine around his arms, pinning them to his sides. He roars in protest, but the shadows and the vines slither into his mouth and down his throat, stifling him.

Fengold and her mate walk around Marleigh's contorted body until they can face him. The sorcerer's eyes bulge with terror and recognition.

"You thought you only had to face a few mortals today," Fengold says softly. "A grave miscalculation on your part. We came here as a last resort—a mission we thought might end in our death. But the god-stars have willed it otherwise. Laith, if you would do me the honor of ending him."

I almost protest, not because I want Marleigh to live, but because I'm the Queen, and I should be the one to decide his fate. But without these two Seelie, I would not have lasted a moment against Marleigh. Perhaps this is the price I must pay for their help.

Laith bends until he is nose to nose with Marleigh, who's struggling for air as more vines and shadows flow into his mouth.

"You killed our son," snarls Laith. "We do this for him."

He jerks his hands apart, and the vines inside Marleigh whip suddenly outward, slicing through flesh and bone.

The sorcerer's body falls to the ground in pieces.

As his blood sprays across me and the two Fae, the fire on my skin dies, just as it was beginning to hurt.

The fighting around us ends so quickly it's almost comical. With Marleigh gone, the guards who supported him have nothing—no choice but to surrender and beg for my mercy. I order them all to be taken to the dungeon until they can be questioned.

“Someone needs to clean up this mess,” I add, pointing to Marleigh’s remains. A young guard near me vomits onto the tiled floor, and I reach over to pat him on the back. “And this mess, too.”



Fengold and Laith are my guests for the rest of the day. I hastily assemble a few Council members whom I think are most open to positive relations with the Fae, and we discuss the new policy for hours. At the end of the meeting, I invite Fengold to bring her group to Midwinter Glee at the capital, where my people will be under firm orders to accept and welcome them.

Fengold gives me a worn smile. “Your change of heart is admirable. But you cannot steep a nation in pernicious intolerance and then expect to reverse it all in a week, just because of words on paper. It will take time.”

“Of course.” I nod, feeling rather young and foolish. Just by looking into her eyes, I can tell she has lived centuries longer than I have.

She gazes back at me, curiosity lacing her gaze. “Before I return to my people with this good news, I’d like to know the answer to the first question I asked you. How did you know my name?”

“Stay for a private dinner with me,” I say. “And I’ll tell you everything.”



That night, I sleep better than I have in years.

I'm up early again, this time to visit the vault with Edora Dilber and discuss better methods for inventory and management. Then there is a meeting with the Captain of the Guard and several other officers, to decide how to proceed with the guards who fought with Marleigh. Most of them will be released from prison and dismissed from their palace employment, while a few, like the pair who kidnapped me, will have longer prison sentences.

After that meeting, I return to my throne room, which has been scrubbed to shining cleanliness and smells of citrusy soap, which I much prefer to the smell of freshly spilled guts.

By the time Kratchet arrives—a little later than his usual time—I'm ensconced in my throne, with a lap-desk on my knees, immersed in writing another letter.

Kratchet approaches with slow, scraping steps. “Y-Your Majesty.”

When I look up, he performs a low bow.

I frown a little. “Where is your daughter? I sent word that you should bring her along with you this morning.”

“She’s waiting just outside, Your Majesty. I thought I would come in first, and see what it was you wanted from her.” He looks positively terrified, but his voice comes out strong.

Narrowing my eyes, I curl my finger at him. “Come closer. You’ve heard about the goings-on at the palace yesterday, I assume?”

“The attempted coup by Commander Marleigh, and his subsequent death. Yes, Majesty.” He approaches cautiously. “You’ve been writing your own letters?”

“Oh yes. I wrote many documents by myself yesterday, and today I figured I should do a few more, and spare your fingers.

You have early signs of rheumatism, do you not?”

He winces. “Yes, Majesty. But I assure you, I can continue performing my—”

“Enough.” I give him my most soul-splitting glare. “I have realized, Kratchet, that things cannot continue as they are. It’s simply not sustainable or desirable. And therefore... I have decided to double your salary.”

Kratchet swallows. Blinks. Wheezes, “Beg Your Majesty’s pardon?”

“I’m doubling your salary and including reimbursement for all instances where you or your family must be tended by a doctor or a Fae healer.”

“Fae... healer?” he gasps.

“Oh, yes—did I forget to mention that Fae are no longer to be hunted, and magic is no longer forbidden within the borders of this realm? That pronouncement was drafted yesterday, with the help of a visiting Seelie and her mate. It’s already with the clerks for copying and disbursement. And I’m rehiring everyone who was let go in that other unfortunate proclamation, until I can review their cases individually and determine who should remain part of the palace staff.”

As I’m speaking, a parade of servants enter the throne room, two by two, each pair toting an enormous log for the big fireplace in the east wall.

“Oh good,” I say, dipping my pen in the inkpot. “We’ll have a roaring fire in no time. It’s always far too cold in here. What are you staring at, Kratchet? You look as if you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Are you... quite sure... you’re feeling well, Majesty?” Kratchet falters.

“Why does everyone keep asking me that? Be quick now, fetch your daughter. I want to see her.”

Poor Kratchet looks utterly bewildered and shocked, but there’s a light dawning in his eyes that thrills me, down to my very bones.

Why did no one ever tell me how much fun it is to make people's lives better?

Kratchet hurries out of my throne room, while I put the finishing touches on a very large order of Josek's Best Cider, to be delivered to the palace this afternoon and served to everyone.

When Kratchet returns with his daughter, I lay down my pen and hand the lap-desk to a page. I smooth my skirts and descend the steps of the throne.

"You're Mara?" I ask.

The child dips a curtsy. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Mara, I suspect you like dolls. Is that true?"

Her eyes brighten. "I love dolls."

I nod to a servant who has been waiting nearby, and she approaches, carrying a package wrapped in brown paper and tied with red ribbon. I lift the package from her arms and hand it to Mara.

"This is for you," I tell her. "It's from your papa, paid for out of his Midwinter bonus." I give Kratchet a wink, and he gulps, looking as though he might pass out.

Mara tugs at the paper cautiously.

"Tear into it," I tell her. "I know you want to. A woman who knows what she wants should always go after it with both hands."

She flashes me a smile and rips open the package. Lying inside is the doll from the shop window—the one she admired while on errands with her father.

"Oh my gods," she breathes, a sob in her voice. "Thank you, Your Majesty!"

"Don't thank me. Thank your papa, who works so hard for you every day."

Mara flings one arm around him, the other clutching the doll. Kratchet hugs her tightly, kissing the top of her head and glancing at me with eyes full of relief. He's grateful, but he doesn't quite believe in me yet—and who could blame him? But

in time, he'll learn that this is the new me. Perhaps one day he'll even forgive me for how I've treated him the past two months.

"You'll be paid for your day off yesterday," I tell him. "Take Mara home in one of the royal carriages, and then return here so we can continue making arrangements for Midwinter Glee next week. I expect to see your whole family at the festival."

"May the gods bless you, Your Majesty," he says fervently. "And thank you."



I pass the week in a haze of gift-giving and message-writing, of meetings and festival plans. I'm frantic to right every wrong I've done or perpetuated since I took the throne.

But it's not possible to do it all in one week, even with the help of Edora, whom I've promoted to the role of my chief advisor and Royal Manager. She plunged into her new role with vigor, and recommended two trustworthy bookkeepers to help us keep records of all the gifts I'm dispensing, as well as the contents of the vault. Their meticulous methods would please Paemon as much as it pleases me. I wish I could show him what we've accomplished.

Edora and the bookkeepers aren't the only new hires. Every day this week, I've appointed additional people to help me run the kingdom. I'm designing a new hierarchy—a system so strong it could function smoothly without me, as I hope one day it will.

It will take months to solidify each role, years to fully realize my vision. I *know* I can't do it all at once—yet I can't stop running full-tilt, racing against some perilous future, chasing the faint hope that I might see my ghosts again, that I might get some assurance they've been spared from their awful fate.

In honor of Brax, I dine each night with a randomly collected group of palace staff—all different levels and responsibilities. After dinner, I train ferociously, picturing Helix's gorgeous, punchable face, and I crash into bed so exhausted I barely have time to think before I fall asleep.

Word of my new policies and my sudden generosity is spreading quickly. The nobility of the city want to know what I mean by it, and how it will affect them. The less-fortunate citizens want to know if there will be more gifts. A few of the public meetings and audiences are almost enough to push me right back into my harsh, begrudging state of mind, because people can be so damn conniving, critical, and downright greedy. I have to remind myself that some people will never be pleased—they will always demand that they be provided with something *more* or *different* than what's available.

But they're not the ones I heed. I listen to the generous nobles who give more wealth than they keep, to the merchants who are known for paying fair wages, and to the struggling citizens who request reasonable accommodation for their needs. I listen to the sick and the weary, the young and the old, the workers with families, and the ones striving to make it alone.

I listen to the three voices in my mind—one of honey-gold, encouraging justice; another deep and jovial, promoting compassion; and a third, quiet as a whisper, reminding me to be wise, even while I'm being generous.

Most of all, I listen to my heart, because it is wider now, and deeper. I understand more fully and broadly than I ever did, and I'm ready to be a new kind of queen.

Yet still, in the recesses of my consciousness, there's a keening, weeping, aching voice, like a constant dirge, or maybe a prayer.

Do you see? Do you see how I've changed? Where are they? I need them. Please, please give them back.

I know Brax would tell me to eat more, sleep more, relax more. But how can I do any of those things, when work is the only thing keeping me sane? Bringing joy to this city, and eventually to the whole kingdom, is the lifeline that keeps me

from being washed out to sea by the dark tide of my grief and longing.

I can't stop working, or I'll feel it—the hollow vastness that is their absence. The roaring, shrieking, wailing hunger of my heart.

My ghosts believed I could do this. I will show them I can, even if they never come back, even if they never witness what I've achieved.

The fact that they may no longer exist fractures my heart in ways I could never express.



It's the last day of the week, and tonight is the first night of the Midwinter Glee Festival.

Early in the morning, a group of Seelie Fae enter the city, escorted by members of the Royal Guard. I greet them myself, then leave them in the capable hands of the new Fae liaisons, who will show them the sights and usher them into the festival this evening.

After greeting the Seelie, I meet with a few of the sorcerers who have emerged from hiding over the past week. Two of them will be performing at Midwinter Glee, and one is a healer, who plans to visit the Kratchets' home tomorrow and see to the needs of young Talin.

Around noon, my aunt arrives by carriage. She and I spend a harrowing two hours in my sitting room, during which I unfold the mystery of her daughter's disappearance and the truth of her death. I refrain from telling her how long Melria was kept alive in torment. Some truths are too cruel.

When it's over, my aunt's gaze is not exactly happier, but it is clearer and stronger. She *knows* now, and I have to believe there is relief in the certainty, and satisfaction in the knowledge that her daughter's killers are dead. She accepts my invitation to

the Midwinter feast in the palace tonight, but tells me she'll skip going to the festival afterward.

I walk her to her chambers myself, and then wander along the hallway, my mind tallying the myriad of small tasks I must still accomplish this afternoon. My feet carry me into my father's trophy room, where I stand looking up at the heads of the beasts he killed until a servant's voice startles me out of my contemplation.

"A package came for you, my lady." The servant bows and presents a small bundle wrapped in brown paper, tied with a plain string. A letter is tucked into the string. "It's from Eben, the mayor of Lirac."

With trembling hands I pluck the letter free, leaving the package in the servant's hands for the moment.

My Illustrious Queen,

Our village is most grateful for the monetary support you sent, and for the additional troops. The last attack was a week ago, and there have been no raids since then. In fact, some of our stolen livestock and goods were returned to us. There is a rumor circulating that Lirac is protected by a mighty presence, a ghost of sorts. You and I are likely the only ones who know the truth of the matter.

Gifts do not equal goodness, but they can be proof of a changed heart. I accept them as such, and with all gratitude and faith in your future kindness, I gift to you this rare and precious item. I no longer need it, for justice has returned to the land.

Yours in loyal service,

Eben

I drop the letter and snatch the package from my servant, tearing the paper with shaking hands.

Out falls a simple brown cap.

I snatch it from the floor, and as the fabric touches my hands, it transforms into soft, pliant golden cloth.

"Shit," I whisper, tears springing to my eyes. "Oh gods."

I crush the gold cap to my chest and turn my back to the servant, walking hastily away to the end of the long room.

“I summon you, riders of the Wild Hunt,” I whisper, closing my eyes. “Paemon, Helix, Abraxas—I call upon you. I summon for a reckoning, to bring justice and balance to this land. And if there is nothing left to balance, I summon you to *stay*. With me.”

There’s no response. No breath of wind, no vibration of energy, no surge of power.

Opening my eyes, I look down at the cap.

It’s a dull brown.

Was it ever golden, or did I imagine that?

The raw hurt in my soul cuts deeper than disappointment. I feel like a starving person on the verge of death, who smelled the fragrance of a warm meal, only to discover it was just an illusion.

“Do you need anything else, Your Majesty?” asks the servant.

I turn and clear my throat, still clutching the cap. “No, I’m—I’m fine. I have everything I need.” I swallow hard and walk back to him. “Please deliver this cap to Edora and tell her to put it in the vault.”

“In the vault, Majesty?”

I lift an eyebrow, and he bows quickly. “Of course, my queen. As you wish.”

“One more thing,” I add as he’s hurrying out. “Tell the palace manager that after Midwinter Glee, I’ll be doing some redecorating. We’ll start with the riot room, and then we’ll do this one.”

“Very good, my lady.” With a final bow, he disappears.



The final two hours before the feast are reserved for preparation. This is the first banquet I've hosted as queen, after which my guests and I will be attending the festival in the city—and I want to look royal, beautiful, and festive—which takes time.

After a hot bath, I let my maids groom me thoroughly, and then I try to be pleasant while they paint my face with far more makeup than usual and coax my hair into elaborate curls.

At last they pronounce me ready, so I stand before the full-length mirror in my dressing room. I have to admit, they did their job well. The dark circles around my eyes have been concealed, my pale cheeks look rosy, and my dry lips are moistened and plump.

The dress is Orseau's latest triumph, and I take a moment to admire the way it cups my chest, narrows my waist, then flares out into luxurious tiers of crimson brocade and gold lace. A ruby-encrusted corset peeps naughtily above the gilded neckline, and the bodice is crisscrossed with tiny strings of pearls. Thicker strands of pearls circle my throat and dive between my breasts, making my cleavage look twice as enticing. Several heirloom rings garnish my fingers, and from my ears hang glittering pendants of rubies, pearls, and tiny star-like diamonds.

These past several days, I've felt more like a servant than a ruler. Tonight, I truly feel like a queen.

I turn, looking at each of my maids. "Thank you."

I've thanked them more often this past week than I did in the two months prior. Sometimes the gratitude is an afterthought, but I am trying. And right now, I mean it with all my heart.

"Enjoy yourself tonight, my lady," says Krissa, her eyes sparkling. "Maybe you'll find some fine young lord to dance

with! Or maybe your secret lover will be there!”

And just like that, all the light goes out of my soul.

Krissa sees it, and looks stricken. “I’m—I’m sorry, my lady,” she murmurs. “It’s just that—some of us heard a man’s voice in your rooms last week—”

“Indeed.” I arrange a light smile on my face. “But that’s over. I’ll greet my guests now.”

As I leave the room, I hear Arin hissing a rebuke to Krissa.

I’m not angry with her. Anything could have reminded me of the three lovers I’ve lost—anything at all. Like the gold rings on the plump fingers of my school friend, Zea, who bounces over to greet me as I enter the dining hall. Her rings are so similar to the ones Helix wears. And Professor Morica’s gown is a perfect match for Paemon’s hair.

I feel another pang when I see the sharp ears of Fengold and Laith, both of whom have been invited to the feast. They will sit to my right at the head of the table, which is really a dozen tables joined into one long line, extending the length of the banquet hall and into the ballroom beyond.

Swathed in white cloth, decked out with evergreen and winterberries, laden with elaborate place settings of porcelain and gold, and lined with red candles in glass vases, the table glitters with the promise of better days. I try to feel that promise in my heart and plaster joy onto my face as I finish greeting everyone and glide to my spot at the head of the table.

Everyone is standing before their chairs: the High Priest and the old chapel priestess, several of my schoolmates and professors, Kratchet and his wife, my aunt, and so many more. The butlers have filled the glasses with pale golden wine and they stand in neat rows behind the chairs, ready to deliver the first course.

The musicians in the corner have paused their melody.

They’re all waiting for me to speak. To open the feast.

I lift my eyes from the sparkling table and the expectant faces, and I gaze up at the chandeliers—faceted glass surrounding dozens of candles—candles like stars, like the

flecks of light in the Void, except these have been gathered together, and so they seem stronger—one unanimous glow.

“This is what Midwinter Glee is about.”

I don't use my queenly voice. In this moment, despite my fine dress and my tiered curls, I'm not the ruler of Revallen.

I'm just Lauriel.

“I've been in the darkness—deep in shadow. Lost my way, hurt others in my wanderings. We've all been there, in the shadow, alone in the dark. Some of us are there every day. But tonight—just tonight—we each brought a little light with us. And when all those lights are joined—when we stand together and we look into each other's eyes, and we smile—the light grows stronger. It becomes strong enough to carry us through, no matter what we've done, or who we've lost.”

My aunt's eyes are sparkling with tears, but my own are dry.

I raise my wine glass. “To the little lights,” I say. “To us.”

A thump at the double doors to my right. A turning of handles and a groaning of hinges as the massive doors, usually opened by two servants, are flung wide by one man.

One burly, broad-shouldered Fae, with deep brown skin, red horns, and locks of white hair falling over his brow.

He shoves the doors open, the tattooed muscles of his brawny arms swelling with the motion. He wears a red satin vest, a pair of dark pants, and gleaming leather boots.

Abraxas.

And behind him—

Paemon and Helix.

My wine glass falls, rolling and spilling on the table, and I scream. I scream aloud with shrill, pure delight, and I run for Brax, bounding right off the floor into his embrace, locking my arms around his neck. I kiss his mouth, over and over, so hard I'm probably bruising my own lips, but I don't care.

It isn't midnight, yet he's corporeal, physical. And that means...

“You’re here,” I pant between kisses. “You’re here, you’re real.”

“You did it, love,” he whispers. “We’ve been granted a second life, all of us. It’ll be shorter than the last one—only a few centuries—and our magic’s been limited, but—”

“But you’re *here*.” I kiss him again, as deeply as if I’m striving to suck his soul into mine.

I wouldn’t ever be able to let him go, except Paemon is there, quiet and so exquisitely beautiful because he’s *smiling*. Actually smiling. And he has fingers—slim, pale fingers without terrible claws.

I devour him next, a whirlwind of kisses while his hands sweep up my back, caressing me, clasping me.

And then I let Paemon go, and I pause right before I reach Helix.

A whole realm of joy and love shines in his amber eyes. They’re twin suns, warming my soul right to the core.

I move toward him slowly and collect both his hands.

“That’s all I get, brat?” he says, with a wry grin. “I was hoping for a smack on the cheek or a knee to the balls, at least.”

“Kiss me, idiot,” I whisper, and he bends, his warm lips pressing softly to mine.

Someone clears their throat behind me, and I suddenly realize that the guards, the servants, and every guest at the table are watching me welcome three Fae guests with my tongue.

I’m too giddy to be embarrassed, but I do owe them an explanation.

“Please bring another table, a round one, and put it right near my chair,” I say quietly to one of the servants, “and set it with three places for our guests.” Raising my voice, I continue, “I have a story to tell you all, one that might strain your powers of belief. I’ll tell it during our feast, but for now, please know that these three Fae are responsible for every good or kind thing I have done in the past couple of weeks. They are the light to my darkness.”

“If I may,” says Paemon, his eyes fixed on me. “The Queen herself is as good and kind a person as I’ve ever met. If we did anything, it was showing her the best of her own heart—the mercy, love, and wisdom that was already there.”

The guests exchange glances, clearly unsure whether to cheer this pronouncement or not.

In the midst of their confusion, Brax lets out a jovial laugh, strides to one of the butlers, and plucks the bottle of wine off his tray. “To mercy, wisdom, and good food!” he shouts, and the guests gratefully lift their glasses and roar the toast with him.

Within minutes, we’re settled at the table again, partaking of a feast so elaborate I’m sure it’s the pinnacle of the royal chef’s entire career. But I can barely taste the food, because I’m desperate to know everything—where they’ve been, whether they’ve been watching me, what happened after my last vision with Paemon—but that will come in time. First, we’ll feast, and I’ll tell my people the parts of my story they need to hear. Then we’ll go out to the festival in the city. We’ll visit the booths, sample the treats, sing the songs, and rejoice in the turning of the year.

And then—when the feasting and the reveling is done, I will shut myself in my room with the three men I love, and we will begin our own kind of celebration.



After my final vision, we were whisked back to the Hovel. The timepiece and the orb were gone, so we had no way of knowing if our mission had succeeded—no way of knowing how much time was passing in Lauriel’s world. And though we looked for the path from the Hovel to her realm, it was gone.

I have never delivered or experienced such torment as I endured then. The ache inside me, the hollow, gnawing pain, was the price of carving my heart open and exposing its vulnerable center.

While we languished there together, Helix talked aloud, endlessly, trying to reason himself into a state of hope. Brax growled and stormed around, brandished his sword, and occasionally brawled with Helix, after which both of them seemed to feel slightly better.

I merely watched them. Waiting.

No use talking about something we could not control.

And then... at last... after a span of time that felt like an eternity—I felt a violent tug in my chest, like a golden fist wrapped around my heart, squeezing, pulling.

My head snapped up, and as soon as I met the eyes of the other two, I knew. We were all feeling the same sweet pull, the summons of the girl we love.

“Congratulations.” Nocturis spoke from the doorway where he leaned, a smile playing over his dark-green lips. “You have earned your second life.”

None of us could answer him, not even Brax.

Nocturis explained what it meant—the span of time we would have, the limits on our magic. I barely listened—my ghostly form was buzzing with an excitement beyond anything I’ve felt during my entire existence.

“Your horses belong to you,” Nocturis continued. “After centuries of riding together, their bond with each of you is strong, and it would be cruel to part you from them. You may ride them to meet your queen, and they will be yours as long as they choose to remain so. Go now! I’ll not keep you from your joyful reunion any longer.”

Brax leaped for Nocturis—caught him around the neck in a boisterous embrace—then whooped and darted out of the Hovel.

Helix took a moment to bow and thank our squadron leader before following Brax outside.

I stepped forward, too full of cautious joy to speak.

Nocturis waved his hand, and the long black claws vanished from my fingers. “Be free, my friend.”

“And you,” I replied. “I hope one day you will be free as well.”

His eyes widened, a startled pain shining in them briefly before he shuttered his expression again. With a nod to him, I left the Hovel for the last time.

We summoned the horses, and sure enough, the cloud-path to Lauriel’s realm had reappeared. Brax bellowed his glee as we rode down it and gave a victorious shout as we landed in the palace courtyard.

The instant our feet touched the ground, we transformed—skeletons condensing, flesh rolling over the bones, skin and hair and clothing all forming, solid and real.

But I didn't quite believe any of it until Lauriel threw herself into my arms and I held her, swept my hands along her back, gathered her slim body close to mine. My belief grew stronger as I tasted the delectable flavors of the feast, and as we wandered through the sparkling lights, festive booths, and holiday spectacles of the Midwinter Glee Festival.

Yet even now it feels like a beautiful dream, and I wonder if this is merely a construct of my mind to soften the hideous truth—that I'm in the belly of a slough, being slowly digested and dissolved. I'll wake up to that reality any moment. I can't trust that I'm really walking past Lauriel's astonished bodyguards, entering her chambers in the company of Brax and Helix, striding toward her bedroom in a body of my own, not a fleshly simulation that will disappear at dawn.

I can't grasp it. I must be dreaming, floating in a glimmering illusion.

Once the bedroom door closes behind us, Helix shoves Lauriel against the wall with a wicked grin and bends to kiss her. She slaps him viciously before dragging his face down to hers and crushing her mouth to his. I curl my fingers against my palms, feeling the ridges of my fingernails, using pain to convince myself that I'm awake.

"What's wrong with you?" Brax cuffs me playfully on the back of the head. "You've been in a daze all night."

I swallow, reluctant to meet his eyes. "I can't trust this," I say under my breath.

"Can't trust it?" He shrugs off the vest he's been wearing all night, then moves in front of me and takes my jaw in his hand. "Does this feel real?"

I nod.

"Touch me, Paemon," he says, low.

I lay my palms against his massive chest, sliding them over his pectorals. The rush of warm, smooth skin against my fingertips is a reassuring bliss. He's solid, corporeal, firm and heavy under my hands.

“Feel me,” he says. “I’m real. This is happening. And if you need further proof...” He hooks one hand around the back of my neck and pulls my mouth to his.

I collapse into the kiss, into him—his heat, his strength, his scent. My body sways forward, yielding, and he crushes me harder to himself, as if he knows I need to be *forced* to believe. His tongue thrashes with mine, and the ridge of his cock grinds against my own hardness.

“This is as fucking real as it gets,” he growls through clenched teeth, then kisses me again.

“Thank you,” I gasp into his mouth. “I needed—I *need*—ahh—” I lose my words, because he’s gripping my bulge, rubbing me through my pants.

“Gentlemen,” says Helix, stalking past us with Lauriel over his shoulder, “I have a queen here who requires our worship. We owe her everything, after all.”

“Fuck yes.” Brax gives me one last rough kiss and draws me with him toward the bed. I follow eagerly, my fingers laced with his.

My fingers.

I can *touch* them, all of them, without fear of causing harm or pain.

Tonight, my role is not to torture, but to tantalize. By the sensation of my fingertips, the play of my tongue, and the fervency of my kisses, I will convince these men and this woman of my love. And in convincing them, I too will believe in our future happiness.



Lauriel escapes Helix’s grip with several well-placed punches and kicks, then races off to the bathroom to freshen herself before our play begins. Meanwhile, I rid myself of every scrap of clothing and relish the sight of Helix and Paemon as they do the same. Their bodies are fucking glorious. I look forward to exploring every part of them.

But tonight is about the ruler of all our hearts—my savage little love, my sweet wild queen. I want her melting on my cock, dripping down it, her hair tossing and her face rosy with sex.

She returns from the bathroom naked, carrying a small tin of lubricant she must have ordered after the four of us had our last tryst. When she comes up to me, lifting her dark lashes with a look of shy wickedness, I nearly lose my mind. She’s so fucking cute.

“I want you in my ass,” she says. “I think I can handle it.”

“Yes, love,” I growl. “I’ll take that sweet little ass. Come here.”

I settle myself against her headboard, my knees arched and my thighs spread. She leans back against my chest, her silky hair gliding across my skin. I shiver at the delicious contact, and

then I hook my hands under her knees and lift her, spreading her wide, exposing both her pussy and asshole to the other two. “Paemon, prepare her to take me.”

Paemon dips two slender fingers in the lubricant and moves between my legs. He tucks his slick fingertips against her puckered hole and begins to bathe the opening. But I can see his nostrils flickering as he inhales her scent, and I grin when he swears under his breath and ducks down to taste the damp, sensitive flesh of her pussy.

“That’s it,” I murmur, holding her wide for him. “Taste every bit of our darling queen.”

Lauriel is whimpering and squirming against my chest, her small fingers gripping the bulges of my biceps. Over her shoulder and the swell of her breast I can see Paemon’s forked tongue sliding along the creases of her sex, slipping across the tiny bud of her clit. Judging from the motion of his hand, he’s got both fingers up her ass, too.

My nipples are tight as fuck, utterly sensitive to the friction of Lauriel’s writhing body and her soft hair. I’m holding her right above my cock, and the back of Paemon’s hand keeps brushing against my tip as his fingers work her asshole. I’m tempted to come all over her rump and all over those elegant knuckles of his.

But I will maintain control. I will hold back until the right moment.

Lauriel makes a tiny, shrill, sharp sound, and Paemon backs off, his thin lips wet with her arousal. “She’s ready for you.”

Lauriel bucks against my grip. “Not fair,” she hisses. “I was almost there, and you *stopped*.”

“Patience, brat,” Helix says, crawling onto the bed and giving her a light kiss. “You’ll have plenty of pleasure tonight. Humans paired with Fae enjoy enhanced libido and can have more orgasms than other mortals.”

“Oh,” Lauriel breathes. “Oh *fuck* yes.”

Paemon smiles, dipping into the lubricant again. A startled groan breaks from me as he slathers my cock with the lube, his long fingers gliding firmly along my shaft. He gives my balls an affectionate tug and squeeze, which makes me choke and nearly come. I manage to hold back by reciting the names of all my targets during my years with the Wild Hunt.

“Put me inside her,” I say thickly to Paemon.

Lauriel whimpers as Paemon eases my fat cock head through her cinched hole, into the warm, snug channel beyond. Once the tip is in, I take over, pushing Lauriel down onto my length. The progress is slow. Each time she tenses, I pause until her body relaxes again.

At last I’m completely inside her, packing her ass full of cock.

“I need her pussy,” says Helix in a strangled voice, and Paemon yields him space, murmuring, “I’ll take her mouth.”

I don’t dare move yet, or I’ll come. I focus on taking great, deep breaths, while Lauriel lies panting against my chest.

Paemon approaches on my left side and kisses her, while his fingers grope her soft breasts. I don’t begrudge him the access to her beautiful tits—he hasn’t touched anything in so long.

Helix kneels between my legs and strokes my inner thighs, his orange eyes fixed on my face. There’s a lecherous promise in his gaze—the promise that he’ll be mine later. I hold Lauriel wide for him as he plunges his cock between the lips of her pussy. She’s so slippery that he slides in with ease.

I can feel him moving with me, inside her, like I felt Paemon last time, and my dick throbs in greeting.

“Fuck, I’m going to come,” I choke out.

“No.” Paemon pauses on the verge of feeding Lauriel his cock, and he grips my throat, constricting my breath. “Not until you’re allowed.”



I vent a breathless, delighted laugh at Paemon's sudden dominance. Quiet as he is, he has a darkness inside—the shadow of a monster. I'm going to enjoy teasing it out of him.

His threat seems to work on Brax, for now, so I focus on Lauriel. She's flushed, her eyes glossy with lust, her breasts pink from Paemon's fondling. He's half-standing on the bed, one leg braced against Brax's shoulder so he can get the right angle to access Lauriel's mouth. I watch his pale cock disappear between her red lips—watch her throat shift and stretch to accommodate him. She looks up at him through inky lashes—and then her dark eyes angle toward me.

I shove my cock into her, hard, and I hiss words through my teeth. "I hate you, brat." But my eyes are telling her something else. She already knows it—we all understand what this is. But I needed to say it, because part of me still fears this will end, that it isn't true, that Nocturis will show up, sneering, and tell us it was all a mistake and we're going to be banished to the Void after all.

Lauriel pulls her mouth off Paemon's cock and looks straight at me, her dark eyes fiery and sweet. "I hate you, too."

“You’re both twisted,” Brax chokes. Paemon chuckles, relinquishing his grip on Brax’s throat and slipping the fingers of his right hand into the bigger male’s mouth instead.

Lauriel takes Paemon’s cock and tucks him between her lips again.

And then we move, all of us—Brax gripping Lauriel’s body and rolling his hips beneath her ass—me clutching his thigh and her waist, fucking her soaked pussy with all my might—and Paemon, with his hand buried in her dark waves, his own hair a purple waterfall down his spine as his head tips back with ecstasy.

We melt together, breathing, gasping, incandescent—taut muscle and silken skin and dizzying heat—and we *fuck*, caught in the desperate throes of a mindless need. I don’t know where my hands are now, who I’m touching—it’s all of them—their scents twining in my nostrils, sweetness and strength, rich musk and delicate florals. I’m losing my mind, my soul, my heart to these three, and I cry out, clutching someone’s hand—Paemon’s. My cock pulses inside Lauriel’s tight pussy, and she’s coming too, with a muffled scream around Paemon’s cock, her small fingers clutching one of my antlers.

“Now,” Paemon hisses. “Now you may come.”

Brax groans through Paemon’s fingers and his great body shudders. I can feel the flex of his length inside Lauriel, pressing through the walls of her flesh. Paemon cries out too, his hips jerking forward compulsively as he spills his cum down the queen’s throat.

I’m still coming, or maybe I’m coming again. My mind whites out, a blaze of ecstasy. I can’t fucking breathe.

Lauriel is gripping my horns, holding my head up. She kisses my parted mouth, the dark sweetness of Paemon’s cum on her tongue.

Brax grips my shoulder: “Breathe, Helix,” and I manage a stark, rasping inhale. My body surges with pleasure again—I shove my cock deeper, and Lauriel screams, her thighs shaking as she comes on me a second time.

I manage to open my eyes. Paemon's fingers are massaging Lauriel's clit, soothing her through the bliss. She's looking at me, clinging to me, her eyes wide with wonder.

She doesn't understand why the pleasure is so powerful when she and I are together. She doesn't know we're mates yet.

I'll tell her tomorrow. Tonight is about all four of us, nurturing our connection.

For now, I'm content to be one of her worshippers.



I'm on my hands and knees, on the plush rug before the hearth, the dancing light glowing warmly along my bare skin. In my mouth blooms the salty heat of Brax's cock head. It's big, roundish, and velvety-smooth—the perfect size for sucking.

I wiggle my tongue against the tender spot right beneath it, where the head meets the shaft, and Brax groans, his big hands sinking into my hair. He's fighting with himself not to shove all the way down my throat. As a reward for his restraint, I suck him more earnestly, swirling my tongue over his tip. Precum slides over my tastebuds, salty with a kick of sweetness.

But I'm distracted the next second as a fingertip slides through my exposed slit, teasing me. It's Helix. He let the other two take turns with my pussy, and now he wants it again. He rubs his bare cock along my sex, mutely requesting admission.

I take Brax out of my mouth long enough to say, "Just fuck me. That's an order."

"You don't give me orders, brat." He thrusts in, and the piercing on his underside rolls through my channel, tantalizing my nerves with unexpected friction.

Helix bends over me, his chest hot against my back, and he cups my breasts with both hands. “I will never get enough of these gorgeous tits.”

His thumbs stroke my nipples, and when I whimper, Brax pushes his cock back into my mouth. “Hush, little queen,” he soothes me in that deep voice of his. “Suckle my cock, let it comfort you. Sshh... take it a bit deeper now... that’s a good girl.”

“Oh fuck,” says Helix suddenly. “God-stars, Paemon— aahh—”

“Relax,” says Paemon from somewhere behind us both. “I used plenty of lubricant. It will only hurt for a moment.”

Gods—I think he’s going to fuck Helix.

I release Brax’s cock again and crane my neck to see.

Paemon is gripping Helix’s bottom, easing himself in between the round cheeks. “Almost there.”

Helix jolts deeper into me as Paemon shoves all the way inside him.

Shuddering, panting, Helix presses his face into my hair. His silken voice is ragged—he’s on the verge of coming undone. “Fuck, that feels good. Your cock is so deep inside my hole, stretching me... gods...”

“You’re so fucking tight,” Paemon hisses, a strained note in the whisper, like he’s struggling to control himself.

When I look up at Brax, he’s grinning, a bawdy glee shining in his eyes. “You’re doing so well, taking us so many times, in so many ways. Open for me, love.”

The praise thrills me right down to my bones. I let him slide his cock into my mouth again, just as Paemon thrusts, shoving Helix into me. The force of it propels me forward, and I take Brax’s cock deeper than I meant to. I manage not to gag, though. There’s something gloriously primal in having my mouth and throat stuffed full of cock, having my pussy pounded from behind—and it’s being *pounded* now, mercilessly, because Paemon and Helix have found a passionate, frenzied rhythm. Helix is letting out soft whines of absolutely helpless need as his

ass is fucked, as he fucks me, as my lips are stretched wide, shoved back and forth along Brax's huge cock.

My hands splay out rigidly on the rug as Helix cups my breasts, curls his big body over mine, cries his beautiful broken lust into my hair while Paemon ruts into him. With a growl, Brax reaches forward and grips Helix's antlers, using them as leverage to fuck my mouth faster.

Even lost in his own delirium, Helix manages to reach under me and cup my pussy with his hand. It's the precise pressure I need, and bright swirls of pleasure uncoil from that spot, flaring through my body.

"Fuck him harder, Paemon," Brax says, his voice rich with lust. "Fuck the cum out of him. Ride him 'til he fills up our queen's pretty little cunt."

Paemon gasps as he comes, ramming hard into Helix, and with a startled sob, Helix spurts inside me. His cum is hotter than the others'—deliciously so. That heat, and the frantic pulsing of his cock, and the convulsive pressure of his fingers against my clit finish me, destroy me, send me spinning into a maelstrom of spasming, swirling pleasure.

Brax tugs his dick from my mouth and lets me breathe while he finishes himself off, coming in thick white streams all over my face.

I'm dizzy now—the room is spinning. My climaxes are intense with all of them, but when Helix is inside me, they last longer, and sometimes I forget to breathe. My pussy is still trembling, and Helix stays inside me, holding me while I quiver and gasp.

Suddenly Paemon is there—he pulled out of Helix and he's sliding under my body, lifting his face to my pussy, soothing my clit with his tongue. I can feel cum leaking around Helix's cock, glazing the lips of my sex... and then I feel Paemon's tongue gliding there too, licking up the excess.

While Paemon savors our cum, Helix finally releases me and straightens upright. He's still buried in me, even as Brax moves in to kiss him.

He slides out after a moment, and Paemon sits up, pulling me against him and using his long purple hair to wipe Brax's cum from my face. We're bathed in each other's scent, soaked in seduction, luxuriously messy and sick with delight. Brax and Helix have risen on their knees and moved closer until they're pressed against each other, hard already, insatiable.

Paemon and I lie together, watching their buttocks and thighs tense as they surge against each other, cocks pinned and grinding—watching the vigorous flexion of their powerful bodies. Both of them are so strong, and yet they're so defenseless to the intoxicating heat devouring us all.

“Will it be like this always?” I whisper to Paemon, lying back against his pale chest, playing with a strand of his lovely hair.

“The Fae need sex often, and our pheromones will enable you to keep up with us,” he says. “But no, precious, it will not be like this every night.” He smooths the hair back from my face and kisses my forehead. “You've gotten too little sleep lately. Rest now with me, and let those two entertain each other.”

With a contented nod, I roll over and face him, nestling my face against his chest and urging my body as close to his as I can get.

“I love you.”

At first I'm not sure if I thought it or said it aloud, but then he murmurs, “I love you, too. In fact... you are the first person I have ever loved.”

My eyes blink open, meeting his lavender ones. I don't know what to say, so I kiss the nearest part of him—his breastbone, right beside the tiny bird-skull necklace he wears. And then I kiss the bird skull, too, for good measure.

He laughs, sibilant and soft, then cuddles me closer. “This is real, isn't it?”

“It's real,” I whisper back. “You're here—all three of you—and I'm here. And we will have each other tonight, to begin with... and then many more nights and days, for a very long time. Of that, I am absolutely certain.”



ONE WEEK LATER

Wind spirals from the northeast, dragging icy fingers across my face and through my hair as it rushes over the parapet where I stand. I wrap my scarf more securely and keep my eyes trained on the gray sky.

I've been up here for nearly an hour, and my nose is bitterly cold. I have things to do, things I shouldn't postpone. But I'm anxious, because Helix rode away on Enbarr this morning and he's been gone for hours. He didn't even tell me he was planning an inter-realm journey—I had to find out from a servant.

What if someday he rides off and never comes back?

Enbarr and the other two ghost-horses reside in a special stable just beyond the palace walls. They can stay there whenever they want to exist in corporeal form, and when they prefer to roam, they shift into ghost form and gallop into the sky. As former steeds of the Wild Hunt, they can transport living beings safely on their backs from realm to realm—though thus far, my riders have only taken a few brief trips, transporting one or two Seelie Fae from Revallen back to Faerie. Some of the

remaining Fae in our kingdom have chosen to stay, but others prefer to return to their home realm, now that they have the option.

The brisk wind shifts the clouds, sending a bank of them scudding southwest. Translucent rays, like golden veils, shoot through the gap, and in that light, I see Helix approaching, soaring through the clouds on Enbarr's back.

The horse leaps from the cloud bank and sails toward the palace, running as easily on air as if it were land. As she heads straight for me, Helix lifts his hand in greeting. He's wearing a sort of scarlet cap that lets his antlers stick out the top, with all his hair tucked underneath it. A huge white cape, trimmed with red, billows around him. Ever since he and the others returned in permanent corporeal form, they are more sensitive to temperatures than they were in their first lives.

Enbarr clatters onto the parapet, and Helix swings off her back. She nudges him fondly with her nose before leaping into the air again and bounding away toward the stable. I hear the excited shouts of a few servants and guards below, no doubt pointing and exclaiming over Enbarr's return. The three ghost horses are a frequent sight now, and though my people don't seem to fear them anymore, a sighting is still the cause of much wonder and exclamation.

Helix walks toward me, his orange eyes bright.

I lean against the parapet wall and regard him coldly. "You're back."

"So I am." He picks me right up off the ground and swings me around in a circle.

"Helix!" I squeal. "Put me *down*, I am the *Queen*."

"I won't put you down. Not until you've been thoroughly kissed."

"You can't kiss me, because I'm mad at you. You didn't tell me you were leaving."

"Were you worried about me, brat?"

He tries to kiss me, but I turn my head so his lips land on my cheek. "Worried? Of course not. I just like to know how

long you'll be gone, so I know how much time I have without your big annoying self stalking around, breaking chandeliers with your antlers—”

“That was *one* time.”

“It was my grandmother’s.”

“It was ugly.” Laughing, he sets me down. “I’ll bring you another from Faerie.”

The mention of Faerie sobers me. “How did it go?”

“It went very well. Daric and his partner are now settled in the Seelie kingdom.”

“And what about you?” I ask, staring resolutely at the snowy rooftops of the city. “You took longer this time. Maybe you’d rather stay there as well.”

“Is that what’s making you so thorny?” He laughs and lowers his antlered head, angling it so he can kiss my cold nose. “I took longer because I was fetching you a gift. Well—*gifts*. I have something for the others too. But the best one is for my mate.” His voice turns low and velvety with the last few words, and I feel myself melting, relenting.

The night after they all returned, he told me about the mate bond between us. He’s an older spirit than the others, from a time where such connections were more common in Faerie—and he was distantly related to a royal bloodline. Though he loves Paemon and Brax, I am special to him—and I won’t deny that I love the distinction, that extra thread in the cord that links my heart to his.

From a satchel beneath his cloak Helix takes a cloth-wrapped package, about the size and shape of... well... a head?

“Please tell me it’s not a head.” I wince.

He hooks one eyebrow. “Why the fuck would I give you a *head*?”

“I don’t know... you’re Unseelie?” I say lamely.

“Lauriel.”

“Sorry, bad guess.”

He sighs, then lays back the folds of cloth.

“It’s... an onion,” I say slowly. “An onion that’s black, and the size of a melon.”

“Not just an onion. This is an extremely rare kind of onion from Faerie. Here, hold it for a moment.”

I take the cloth and the onion, watching doubtfully as he draws a short knife and slices into the vegetable, cutting out a small wedge. I gasp as he draws out the wedge. The inside is a rainbow.

“The first few layers are bitter and dark,” Helix says softly. “But if you keep going, you’ll find that the rest of the layers are all different colors, and each one has a different flavor—flavors like you’ve never tasted anywhere else—the most delicious in all the realms. These onions produce fruit once every five hundred years in Faerie, so they’re very expensive. I didn’t have any Fae coin, nor did I want to spend *your* gold on a gift for you, so...” He pulls off the cap he’s wearing.

No abundance of glorious red hair tumbles out. His locks have all been snipped away, leaving short curls that cluster over his head. He looks younger like this, almost boyish. I stare, unable to utter a word.

“The hair of a Revenant, one who has been among the Wild Hunt and returned to a second life, is priceless for spellwork,” he says. “I know you like my hair, but—I can grow it again. And this—” he nods to the onion— “it reminded me of you.”

I pluck the segment of onion from his hand and take a tiny nibble of a pink layer.

The flavor that washes over my tongue is like tasting the frothy fizz of an actual *star*, if stars were edible, and—gods, I can’t describe it. It’s the most wonderful thing I’ve ever tasted.

“You rat bastard,” I whisper. “How dare you?”

He smiles cautiously, unsure. I can’t bear to leave him in suspense, not after he did this for me.

“This is the best gift I have ever received or will ever receive,” I continue, a tremor in my voice. “I have gifts for you three, too—I had planned to give them to you this morning, but

then you left, and now... well, now I can't possibly give you anything better than this, ever."

"You already have, though," he murmurs, cupping my chin. "Your very existence is a gift." He tips my face up and leans down, kissing me tenderly.

Fuck, I'm crying.

"This isn't us," I breathe. "You and I—we're not sweet like this."

"I won't tell the others if you won't."

"Agreed." And I kiss him again, to seal the promise. Then I lift the onion to inhale the myriad of fragrances floating up from its center. Somehow, all those fragrances blend perfectly into an addictive, mouthwatering scent. "Do they have many beautiful things like this in Faerie?"

"So many," he answers. "You know, once you've set up this new government of yours—once everything is running smoothly—we can take you there to live. Humans age very slowly in that realm, so we'll have our whole lives to spend together. And we can come back to visit this realm whenever you want."

"It'll be a few years before everything is stable here," I tell him. "Maybe longer. But... yes, I would like that."

He vents a startled laugh. "I expected more of a protest."

"Why? Who wouldn't want to live for centuries?"

"But you'd be giving up your birthright, your kingdom, your whole world."

I shake my head. "Don't make me say it." When he grins, I sigh and say grudgingly, "I'd give up everything for you three idiots. There. Are you happy now?"

"Deliriously so, because I know you mean it. I can't wait to tell the others you've agreed to this."

"Wait... you've discussed moving to faerie? You talked about it without me?"

"Yes. Are you angry?" He pulls back, eyeing me with a rueful grin.

“You don’t want me growing old and wrinkly and *then* going to live in Faerie, is that it? You want to make sure you take me there young enough, so that I’m still palatable to you.”

He bristles. “That’s fucking untrue, Lauriel, and you know it. We won’t take you there until you’re ready. And I will love you just as much when you’re a soft, wrinkled, age-spotted woman of eighty.”

Before I met him, I would never have thought a big Fae warrior could be *adorable*, but it’s really the perfect word for the way he looks when he’s all ruffled up and flushed and indignant like this. I consider torturing him some more, but decide against it. “It’s fine. I’d rather be young and gorgeous for centuries anyway. Let’s plan for five years—ten at the most, and then we leave this country in the hands of its people and go.”

We kiss again before wrapping up the onion again and heading inside. Helix promises that the onion will stay fresh for years, so I tuck it away in my room, to serve as an occasional treat.

Last I heard, Brax and Paemon were headed to my study to help out with some correspondence. But when we arrive, Brax is sitting alone behind the huge desk I had installed right next to mine.

“Where is Paemon?” I say, exasperated. “It’s practically impossible to get you all together in one place!”

“Maybe this will cheer you up. Another conciliatory letter from a neighboring kingdom.” Brax tosses the paper onto my desk. “It looks as though our presence here has made everyone very eager to be your friend.”

“I’m afraid it’s not friendship, but fear,” I mutter. “Everyone knows about the three of you now.”

“Fear first, then friendship.” Brax raises his eyebrows, surveying Helix. “You cut your hair.”

“Yes.”

“I’d miss it, but since you have those antlers, there’s still something to grab when I’m fucking you—so I won’t

complain.” He grins at Helix... but then his eyes unfocus for a second and he lets out a faint moan of pleasure.

“What’s wrong with you?” I frown. “You’re not actually fucking him right *now*.”

Helix throws himself into a chair, idly spinning a nearby globe with his finger. “Paemon is sucking him off under the desk.”

“What?” I gasp, stepping over so I can see.

Brax leans backward and sure enough, Paemon is between his legs, his lips stretched wide around Brax’s cock. He lets Brax slide out of his mouth and gives me a languid smile. “You’re next, Majesty.”

“I have *work* to do,” I say indignantly.

“You can’t work and come at the same time?” Helix widens his eyes innocently. “And here I thought you could do anything.”

“What if a servant comes in?”

“That’s the fun of it,” says Brax. “Watch me, love... see how I look perfectly normal and busy with paperwork, even while Paemon is... doing unspeakable things... fu-u-u-ck...” His eyes roll back and he groans.

“Oh yes,” I say dryly. “Perfectly normal. Paperwork makes me orgasm all the time.”

“This isn’t optional, brat,” Helix says, his silky tone a shade darker. “You’ll take his tongue in your pussy as soon as he finishes with Abraxas.”

“It’s our job to make sure you enjoy your life,” Brax adds. “Ahh, gods—I’m coming, Paemon—shit—”

He gasps, his big chest heaving under the white shirt he wears. I can’t resist kissing his mouth, savoring every deep male moan. I curl my fingers around one of his scarlet horns, tipping his head back so I can kiss him deeper, sliding my tongue into his mouth. He reaches up, cupping the back of my neck and groaning as he spills everything down Paemon’s throat.

“Now then, you two,” Helix says affectionately. “Let Paemon up. We have gift-giving to do.”

Brax scoots back his chair, and Paemon unwinds his long form from the large hollow beneath the desk. He shakes out his shoulders and wipes his mouth with his fingers. “Your turn, Lauriel.” His forked tongue slithers suggestively between his teeth. When he advances toward me, and my heart actually *flutters* at the graceful, divine beauty of him. But I put my hand against his chest, over the silver brocade vest he’s wearing.

“I promise I will let you eat me out later. *After* I give you all your gifts.”

“I have gifts for you too.” Helix jumps out of his chair and tosses two round fruits to Brax and Paemon. Each fruit’s skin looks as if it’s made of crystallized sugar.

“Are these what I think they are?” asks Paemon in a tense voice.

“Sugarplums from Faerie. From the garden of the Seelie king himself. Best in the land, I’m told. And there’s a bag of mushrooms, for later.”

“Gods, yes,” crows Abraxas as Helix drops the bag on the desk.

Paemon has already taken a large bite from his sugarplum. His eyes close in blissful satisfaction as he chews slowly. He holds it toward me. “Try it.”

I feel a little guilty, knowing the rare treat I have waiting for me back in my room. But Paemon looks determined to make me try the fruit, so I take a small bite, inwardly vowing to share my rainbow onion with all of them.

“My gods,” I exclaim, as my mouth fills with sweet juice.

“I haven’t had one of these in so long,” groans Brax, biting into his sugarplum as well. “Come here, let me share this bite with you.” He moves toward Helix, his mouth full of syrupy fruit.

“No!” Helix darts away, but Brax lunges for him, barreling him against the wall and sealing his mouth over Helix’s in a

laughing, messy kiss. Helix struggles a little, then relents to the sweet fruit being passed from Brax's tongue to his own.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" Paemon murmurs to me.

"Beautiful, and *ours*," I whisper back. I slip my hand into his free one, reveling again at the touch of his actual fingers. "Come on, you two—enough! Or perhaps I should give your presents to the servants!"

"No, I want mine!" Brax releases Helix immediately, leaving the other male breathless and flushed against the wall. Helix shakes it off, but he mutters something about Brax owing him a good fuck.

We walk the halls together, past servants who smile delightedly at seeing us all together. Our route takes us past the riot room, where workers have sealed up the tunnel and are renovating the space into a bigger training area. Well... perhaps it's not solely for training. There's a swing at the end that may have another use.

I lead my three riders onward, past my suite and the rooms nearby, which are technically theirs, though they usually all end up in my bed. At the end of the hall, behind reinforced doors and a false panel, is a quiet room with velvet-covered shelves, where my parents would occasionally store a few of the crown jewels for easy access or for display.

My heart is racing almost as fast as it was in the throne room, right before I faced Jaik Marleigh.

Suppose they don't like the gifts.

Suppose this isn't what they want.

Suppose...

Taking a deep breath, I open the false panel in the wall, unlock the doors with a key from my pocket, and beckon the three Fae inside.

"Lights please," I say, and Helix sends several glowing orbs up to the ceiling to illuminate the room. All the shelves are empty except a long one swathed in dark-blue velvet, on which rest three crowns.

“I commissioned them the night after Paemon showed me my future,” I say quietly. “They’re adapted from existing crowns in the family vault, but they’ve been altered to suit each of you.”

Paemon’s crown is silver, set with black diamonds, designed to sweep down to a point between his brows and then arch back over his ram’s horns. Slim silver chains can loop around his horns and hook back onto the crown, holding it in place.

Brax’s crown is a simple gold band that runs across his forehead, fitting just below his ox horns. There’s a hinged section, nearly undetectable, so he can fasten it securely. It’s bold, simple, and glorious. Fit for a king.

The crown for Helix has elaborate gold latticework across the forehead, dipping on either side to run through the space above his ears, below his antlers. It’s like a tiara, the two ends not quite meeting at the back of his head—and from those ends dangle a series of delicate gold chains, each one set with tiny sparkling gems.

“I had yours designed so the gold chains would flow through your hair,” I tell Helix. “But your hair is gone, so it might not look quite as I imagined.”

“Fuck, love,” says Brax, in his deepest tones. “These are beautiful.”

This is the part I’ve been dreading and longing for in equal measure. The moment I’ve imagined ever since they left me, when I realized just how deeply each one of them had woven himself into my soul.

“They mean something, these gifts,” I say stiffly. “I want to ask you all if—”

“Yes,” says Paemon immediately.

“But I haven’t asked you anyth—”

“You don’t have to, love.” Brax turns to me, clasping my face between his large hands. “We’ll be yours however you want us. Kings, consorts, husbands, guardians, whores... whatever you need. Whatever you crave.”

I give him a trembling smile and glance at Helix.

“You already know my answer,” he says softly. “You’re my mate. This thing between us—it’s eternal.”

“Mates?” Abraxas peers into my eyes, his thumb teasing the corner of my mouth. “You two are *mates*? I’m fucking jealous.”

“Don’t be!” I exclaim. “I love you, too, and I love Paemon—I love all of you idiots, beyond reason. It’s frightening, actually, how much I love you.”

“And she agreed to the Faerie thing,” Helix puts in.

“Thank the god-stars,” Paemon breathes, relief glimmering in his lavender eyes as he comes to me. Brax yields him space and Paemon draws me in, his long, slender fingers gliding up my back as he covers my lips with his.

I close my eyes, surrendering.

His kiss is like a song in my soul, like music and shadow intertwined. Whenever I’m kissing him, the air seems to stir around us, and I’m whirled away into a glittering black night full of whispered promises.

Helix is next, taking my chin and turning my face so he can steal my mouth from Paemon, and then Brax reclaims his spot and kisses me hard, with a squeeze of my ass that makes me giggle.

“I’d like us all to be married officially at the temple,” I tell them. “It’s more of a human custom than a Fae one, I know, but it’s important to me. Husbands—that’s what you’ll be, if you like the sound of it. Husbands to me, and to each other.”

“I *do* like the sound of it,” Helix says, arranging his crown on his head. “Come, husband—let me crown you.” He catches Paemon’s hand and pulls him close, then sets the silver crown in place and fastens the slender chains. His fingers glide along Paemon’s jaw. “Beautiful.”

Brax lifts me up so I can crown him. “I’ve always served kings,” he says, his handsome face more sober than usual. “You’re giving me the chance to be one, love.”

“Only for a while,” I tell him. “Marleigh was right about one thing—it’s time for the monarchy of Revallen to end. The government I’m designing will be by my appointment at first, but eventually each role will be filled by individuals the citizens choose. Imagine it—a government selected by the people it serves.”

Approval shines in Brax’s eyes, but then he gives me a merry wink. “That’s all well and good, love, but let me revel in my kingliness for a little while. If Helix and Paemon can stop kissing long enough, perhaps we three kings can take our queen out for dinner in the city to celebrate? It’s not every day one gains a trio of lovers for life!”

We part ways briefly to dress for the occasion. My husbands-to-be have a limited wardrobe selection, but the palace tailor is working to rectify that as fast as he can. Paemon tells me that some Fae can conjure clothing for themselves, with varying degrees of success and longevity. He used to excel at such things, but his new body does not possess that talent.

Dressed in the finest, warmest clothes we own, the four of us take a carriage to the city center and stroll the main street, toward the “Thistle and Key,” the finest dining establishment in town. Since I’m surrounded by three enormous Fae men, I don’t need bodyguards anymore, and I like the freedom of walking alone with the people I love most.

But we’re not truly alone, after all. Shopkeepers bob out of doorways to greet us, children cheer for us, and passersby give us merry greetings rather than bowing skittishly and slinking away as people used to do whenever I walked the streets.

Paemon pauses to help a cart driver with a restive horse, and a little later Brax lifts wine barrels from a wagon to the doorstep of an inn. When we pass through a crowd of cheering children, Helix scoops up two of the little ones and plops them onto his shoulders, where they cling to his antlers and crow delightedly, waving to their friends as he strolls along.

I have a bag of coin with me, and I drop generous handfuls into the cup or basket of every beggar we see along the way. Before long, I hope there won’t be any citizens so poor that they must plead for coins on the streets. The temple is doing its work

well—and as more coin flows from the palace, the kingdom’s economy improves, and more people find work, our joint efforts should make a quick end to such poverty.

At the next crossing, Helix swings the children down from his shoulders and falls into step with me again. Paemon moves in on my right, and Brax strides beyond him.

The blue shadows of evening spread across snowy rooftops, but light spills from each shop and tavern, gilding the cobblestones and the ridges of crusted, dirtied snow left by carriage wheels. As the leeries light more gaslamps, the city takes on a charming glow. The aroma of baked goods and cinnamon sugar pours from doorways, and shop bells ring as people pass in and out, bidding each other “Merry Midwinter.” Through an archway drifts a chorus of cheerful voices—an ensemble entertaining guests in the courtyard of a nearby inn.

Ahead, the sign of the “Thistle and Key” glints in the lantern light. From the darkness overhead, white flakes begin to fall, like bits of lace catching in Paemon’s hair, on Helix’s antlers, and in Brax’s dark lashes.

At the doorstep of the “Thistle and Key” I reach for them, my eyes full of the words I can’t speak. Helix takes my left hand silently, while Paemon and Brax lace their fingers together and then clasp their joined hands over my right one. In the strength and gentleness of each grip, I sense their love—my kings, my husbands, these men who know my past and present, and whom I trust to walk with me into our shared future.



MIND - MISSIVE
TO THE
GOD - STAR ANDREGH

I am pleased to report that the experiment was a thorough success. Queen Lauriel has been true to her word—better, even. Over the past several years of her realm’s time, she has established a fine democracy in the former kingdom of Revallen. She currently dwells in Faerie with her three guides, now her husbands, and they are as wise, compassionate, and tender as we could have hoped.

Each year during Midwinter Glee, the four of them visit the mortal world, to do more of the same good that they do every day for the less fortunate of Faerie. Wherever they roam, they bring joy, kindness, and comfort with them—and together, they are the most ardent and devoted of lovers.

It is with great pleasure that I report these results, God-Star, and request your blessing upon the next experiment I wish to conduct... the rehabilitation of a soul even more monstrous than these.

Yours Eternally,

Nocturis, Leader of the Second Squadron of the Wild Hunt

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