

ERIN R FLYNN

Layering
Resentment

Artemis University

20

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ERIN R. FLYNN

Layering Resentment

Artemis University



My name is Tamsin Vale and I'm pissed.

I'm confused.

And I'm scared. I'd be an idiot if I wasn't scared when demons suddenly made a move and someone I love almost died. I'm pissed they did it, confused why now... But I'm also pissed that no one seems to hear me that Cluym messed up and they're upset with me instead.

Classic.

I knew life as the future ruler of a world would never be easy, but constantly living where I'm criticized for everything and people don't always listen to me is difficult. And sometimes I only have myself to blame for not fully committing to the role.

But what idiot would commit to that when it isn't going well? It was going better but... Yeah, nothing is easy.

Plus, given the state of things in my personal life and the fact I'm constantly juggling the feelings of five men, I think it's a bloody miracle that I'm not normally found at a bar completely sauced. Or in jail getting into trouble. Eating my feelings when I'm a fairy is about the healthiest way for

me to handle my life.

Especially now that my powers are expanding again and I'm worried I'll finally lose my mind this time.

Artemis University is an ongoing, hot burning reverse harem, university-age paranormal academy series with darker elements, strong language, violence, and a heroine who follows her own moral compass of what is right... And who she ends up giving her heart to.

*This book is part of a series and cannot be read as a standalone. Like all my books, this is not light and fluffy and includes dark themes and events some may find triggering. Reader discretion is advised.

Quick Character Refresher

Mates

Dr. Julian Craftsman	◆ Warlock- 6'2"; deep emerald green eyes; dark blond hair
Darby Moore	◆ Vampire- shaggy red hair was a natural bedhead, 6ft with a leaner build. Gray eyes
Hudson Vogel	◆ Dragon- eyes so vibrant blue they were almost violet. He was a whole lot of tall, dark, and trouble for sure.
Lucca Von Thann	◆ Bear shifter; Buffer than Dr. Craftsman and 6'4", sexy hazel eyes. Mixed race, half Black and half White. His hair was a

Faculty

	chocolate color and hung in his face.
Prince Neldor Donovan	◆ Fairy- long jet black hair wears in a ponytail, light green eyes; 6'; lean but ripped, built like you would expect a fairy fighter; sexy dimples when smiles widely
Kyle Edelman	◆ Headmaster; Warlock; Nice
Professor Anya White	◆ Female; Professionally & forthcoming; witch; Dean of Witches/Warlocks
Coach Khan	◆ Snarky Alpha male feline shifter
Glen	◆ Head of security and Alpha of the wolf guards;
Marshall	◆ Security; wolf; grabbed Tams

	originally
Sean	◆ Security; Wolf; grabbed Tams originally
Dr. Salzman	◆ doc at school;
Professor Richardson	◆ Geometry 101; vampire
Professor/Dean Pillay	◆ Witch; head of botany
Professor Nelson	◆ Warlock; a bit of a cad with the coeds but decent guy; buddies with Craftsman; English professor
Melody Rothchild	◆ best friend; dragon
Professor Kramer	◆ New potions teacher who has serious crush on Tamsin, not a plant for council
Instructor Drummond	◆ Witch that seems flighty and total

	hippie dippie
Professor Collins	◆ Dean of Vampires
Professor Puth	◆ Wolf shifter, very Beta Good teacher
Instructor John McGrath	◆ Warlock, new at Artemis, but has a few years teaching experience at college level. plant of council who they ordered to seduce her and get access to everything.
Instructor Nathan Larson	◆ Warlock, old, powerful one and good friend of Geiger's, one who's worked and trained with many fairies.
Campbell	◆ Witch works mostly with freshman, all

	about Julian; Priss
	◆

Hobgoblins

Irma	◆ Tam's friend, most trusted hobgoblin, head of Tam's castle, aunt in a way
Ryfon	◆ Head of Artemis hobgoblins, becomes Tams's advisor
Elasha	◆ Irma's daughter
Darfin	◆ Tam's little buddy
Alea	◆ Ryfon's cousin who worked for Meira and lived in Theripolis outside the castle
Reptar	◆ Was a manager for the co-op but took the job running the sorbet company for Tamsin.
Esta	◆ Irma's older cousin, manager of new hobgoblin bakery and

Students

Fairies

Dragons

	knows of Tamsin
Liluth	◆ Irma's sister, head of hobgoblin sanctuary
Keya	◆ In charge of Natalie's biz estate with mate
Mourn	◆ Keya's mate, butler of carriage house and handling "gentleman's affairs" of guests with staff
	◆
Isabella Kincaid (Thorne) (Izzy)	◆ Witch, roommate; ◆ She was cute, almost pretty but clearly would be as she grew up. She was a petit brunette with gold eyes and definitely would be a looker.
Josh Amyx	◆ Deer shifter, 1 st asshole punished.
Mary	◆ Share bathroom with
Claire	◆ Share bathroom with

Natalie Higgins	◆ Witch; helped with dresses; scholarship student
Ayesha	◆ Witch; helped with dresses; scholarship student; friends with Natalie
Holly	◆ Mean girl, vampire
Juan Gui	◆ dragon alpha/Prince
Katy	◆ Vampire bitch
Andy	◆ Hawk shifter bitch/loves Darby
Sherry	◆ Dragon; Tacky and over the top, “betrothed” to Hudson but that ends
Sarah, Hazel, Rory	◆ Women in her training classes that took naked pictures of her. Wolf, vampire, hawk
	◆
	◆
Lageos	◆ Tam’s father, demi-

	god
Commander Iolas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Light fairy; trusted advisor of Queen Meira ◆ Professor Garza alias at Artemis
Commander Taeral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Dark fairy; trusted advisor of Neldor's mother who is still fiercely loyal to her
Arlen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Dark Guardian Lt who won last sword championship before frozen ◆ Crazy fucker
Commander Onas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Dark fairy, highest rank and huge Neldor supporter
Commander Shael	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Light fairy, highest rank and was not a big Queen Meira supporter, completely buys into all the ancient and elder talk about

	Tamsin originally
Commander Stefanie	◆ Prominent Dark Guardian that agrees to be her advisor, swears allegiance
Cluym	◆ Geiger's dark fairy mate
Captain Dalyor	◆ Dark fairy, captain
Ara	◆ Young female light fairy who is on Tam's regular detail after they're out.
Wyn	◆ Dark fairy normally on Julian's or Tamsin's protection
Agis	◆ Dalyor's three closest friends. All dark fairy captains.
Kerym	◆ Dalyor's three closest friends. All dark fairy captains.
Rafe	◆ Dalyor's three closest friends. All

	<p>dark fairy captains. The hottest one that Darby doesn't want her around.</p>
<p>Commander Talila</p>	<p>◆ Dark fairy that can't adjust to her new reality and wants the ancients to make it all better</p>
<p>Commander Morgan</p>	<p>◆ Light fairy; Not a fan of Tamsin, but adored her mother.</p>
<p>Odile</p>	<p>◆ Noble of the next biggest city after Tamsin takes over 27</p>
<p>Glynnii</p>	<p>◆ Fairy little girl shows Tamsin how kids open portals</p>
<p>Professor Sontar</p>	<p>◆ Main guy who teaches Tams extra stuff, dark fairy</p>
<p>Professor Rosini</p>	<p>◆ Light fairy female who should have</p>

	been her tutor to start as she had her mother's
Jordan	◆ Zack's fairy mate
Cara	◆ Ray's fairy mate
Charlie	◆ head of the Land Rights Registration office in Theripolis.
Hhora	◆ Dark fairy; Julian's new right hand, trained to take care of heirs and queens
Queen	◆ Neldor's mother
Prince Alok	◆ Neldor's father
Lorsen	◆ Ancient fairy that is the royal crown and metal worker
Josie	◆ One of the section leads of the Royal Performers
Calarel	◆ Royal healer Tams met when healing Julian
Mallory	◆ Rennyn's older

	sister.
Queen Meira	◆ Tam's mother
Ancient Simimar	◆ Crazy fucker
Rennyn	◆ Corrupt light fairy noble
Tanesha Jameston	◆ Hudson's aunt; telepath
Mr. Adrian Geiger	◆ Partner in best supe law firm
Claudia	◆ Associate at law firm
Queen Sasha Vogel	◆ Hudson's mom
King Xavier Vogel	◆ Hudson's father
Connor Vogel	◆ Hudson's younger brother, heir after they mate
Avril Rothchild	◆ Mel's cousin running the havens

Ellen Rothchild	◆ Mel's 2 nd cousin VP running the havens
Colton Rothchild	◆ Mel's cousin, largest man Tam's ever seen, total softy
Trigger Rothchild	◆ Mel's dad
Lady Catherine	◆ Noble dragon, North America,
Lady Jean	◆ Noble dragon, North America,
Ida Reed	◆ Owns lingerie and bathing suit stores that sell to humans
Lady Ruby	◆ Noble NAmerica, elder lady
Lord Nicholas	◆ Lady Jean's mate, in love with Lady Catherine
Lord Warren	◆ Lady Catherine's mate
Lord Alfred	◆ Jean's younger brother that sold her and took over

King Dae Gui	◆ King of Asia/Juan's dad
Queen Sofia Gui	◆ Queen of Asia/Juan's mom
Fergus Courtenay	◆ King of the European dragons
Diaz	◆ King of the South American dragons
Mr. Silva	◆ Head of Diaz knight ninja dragons like the Rothchilds
Roberta (Robbie)	◆ Was first love of Xavier's youngest brother who died in takeover of African royals.
	◆

Background

Katrina Calloway	◆ Owner of the NYC store of Veritas Portas (truth gate)
Jeremy Sims	◆ In charge of cattle ranch and helps

Elders

Bad

	hobgoblin sanctuary
Zack James	◆ Wolf, Tam's guard; Former supe police, Captain;
Ray James	◆ Wolf; Tam's guard, former supe police (cousins)
Marisol Gonzalez	◆ Human contact Tamsin saved, hacker and computer genius. Works with group that sells pot
Mary Craftsman	◆ Julian's mother
Rupert Craftsman	◆ Julian's father
Luke	◆ Wolf shifters with fairy parent and grandparent; Underground
Marc Higgins	◆ Natalie's uncle
Charlie Higgins	◆ Natalie's dad; owner of Higgins Remodels

Guys

Other

Fair

Folk

	and Expansions
Dean	◆ New herd leader of deer shifters that Tams saved from Underground
Jason Von Thann	◆ Lucca's younger brother, next in line to lead, asshole
Ronald Von Thann	◆ Alpha bear, Lucca's father
Rich	◆ Foster kids Tams knew that was gay and killed himself when they were young
Witt	◆ Asshole who pulled the "prank" on Rich.
Captain Reddy	◆ Captain of the supe police, wolf shifter
Alpha Geoff	◆ Wolf shifter, big deal Alpha
Angel	◆ Shifter daughter of fairy who was taking grandkids of fairies to

	the Underground
Jackie	◆ Porn star friend Tam's rescued. One of the first Tams's Girls
Preston	◆ Douche who Tams lost her virginity with
Julie Brooks	◆ Bitch daughter
Mrs. Nicole Brooks	◆ Councilman Brook's mate, wolf shifter
Judy Collins	◆ Dean Collins's mate
Gene Ainsworth	◆ Councilman Ainsworth's widow
Ally Taylor	◆ Gene's daughter
Sonia	◆ Councilman Melvin's aide's niece at HAVEN
Shawn	◆ Jerk reporter who loves the Vogels and is considered "neutral"
Mrs.	◆ Councilman

Dominic Ozorio	Ozorio's mate.
Ellen Guess	◆
Brigid	◆ Baby mom of Darby's sister.
Freya	◆ Darby's sister
Chaddus Thane	◆ Vampire elder
Elder Ward	◆ Vampire elder
Harjo	◆ Warlock elder
Councilman Duncan	◆ Wolf elder that Ray dealt with and they looked into; she saved his cousin of Geoff's pack;
Councilman Chin	◆ Wolf elder that Zack dealt with as supe police
Councilman Konner Brooks	◆ Wolf elder that they both have had dealings with and trust the most, "head" of wolf elders and they looked into;

Councilman Fitzpatrick	◆ Bear elder, one of the decent ones, but a bit sexist
Blake Ward	◆ Super bitch freshman; vampire council family
Mason Rodriguez	◆ bear shifter that pretends to be nice and like Tamsin
Joshua Edelman	◆ The headmaster's father
Jordan Holmes	◆ Vamp who raped glamoured vamp to be Tams with friends
Mr. Holmes	◆ Asshole's father
Elder Harbour	◆ Vamp elder Tamsin got removed
"Alpha" Alec	◆ Dragon in charge of Australia
Kim	◆ His mate
Louis Ainsworth	◆ Warlock elder; main player in the black market and draining magic for profit

Alpha Berman	◆ Dragon Alpha of Africa
Councilman Leisser	◆ Fox elder who is POS
Carson Leisser	◆ Eldest son of Fox elder
Councilman Peter Shurr	◆ Vampire councilman Tamsin drives him crazy and he kills himself
Councilman Melvin	◆ Vampire councilman
Councilman Dominic Ozorio	◆ Vampire Councilman
Noah Taylor	◆ Ainsworth's son-in-law
Warren Guess	◆ Family: Youngest daughter Kendra; youngest son Brandon; Eldest son Reid; Mate Jennifer;
Liam Moore	◆ Darby's older brother

Alfie Fisher	◆	First guy Tamsin goes for to sentence back punishments
Chief	◆	Alpha (1 st & main)
Pikachu	◆	Alpha
Rainbow	◆	Alpha
Zedd	◆	Alpha
Amethyst	◆	Daughter of Neldor's mother's unicorn
Gambit	◆	Son of Meira's unicorn

1

People were upset the way I reacted to Cluym and what I'd done... Well, not all of them. Either they were fixated on the miracle I'd pulled out of my ass and wanted to practically erect a statue in honor of it or they were pissed I'd basically victim blamed.

Except that wasn't even close to what I'd done.

I hadn't blamed Geiger for walking through the portal first or even Cluym for not having a barrier up around him and his mate as they went through a portal to their own land. That would be blaming them for what the demons did.

I did think we should learn from what happened and adopt that practice. I'd tried to bring that up, but the commanders were too disappointed in me to hear me at the moment.

I'd put the rule in later.

Not that they'd listen to me about that either.

And *that* was why I was pissed. That was why I was furious with Cluym. He hadn't listened to me—disobeyed a direct order and that was the problem. Yes, if I hadn't been able to cure him, he would have died no matter what. It happened as soon as he'd come through the portal, but I'd been their best bet, and he'd told Geiger not to use the rune to summon my fae dogs.

I had ordered Geiger to do that. I was validly pissed because Cluym had gone against my wishes.

Why couldn't anyone see that?

“Where is your mind, Daughter?” Lageos whispered when he found me two days later at the scene where the attack had happened.

“I’m not wrong and I know I’m not, but it’s hard to keep that feeling when everyone else feels the opposite,” I admitted.

“I don’t. I’m fully on your side. I always am.”

I accepted his hug and sighed. “Yes, you are, but being on my side sometimes means you don’t tell me when I’m wrong. I need you to tell me if I’m wrong this time.”

He was quiet for several moments, kissing my hair and simply holding me. I snuggled against his strong chest. Being around Lageos was like standing closer to comfort and goodness. Your soul could heal from his smile.

This was what I’d needed to clear the storm clouds from my mind and heart.

“I don’t think you’re wrong. He disobeyed you and for no reason. I do think it happened in a flash of a moment and Geiger was right to overrule him. Cluym made a bad call when he was in horrible pain and dying, Tamsin. He knew that cut was his death. Everything was gone in that moment. That is not a moment of rational thought.”

I considered that for several moments and nodded, pulling away. “I agree and I could forgive that. I could. After he healed, he defended what he did, Dad. That’s why I slapped him. He defended it. He defended his choice to let his mate die to protect me when it wasn’t needed.”

“Would he still today? Now that he’s away from the situation?”

“Thank you,” I whispered. That was the piece I needed of this. I kissed his cheek and went to leave, stopping when Lageos grabbed my wrist.

“You need to cleanse after you settle with this. You are—your power grows, and I don’t understand it.”

“I will, I promise.” I shrugged when he frowned, all of them hating how flippant I could be. “I don’t understand any of this, Dad. Lots of people don’t have the answers. You just keep moving anyways and wing it.”

I gave him another hug and asked him to dinner, glad when that soothed him. I teleported to where Cluym was being kept under observation. Swallowing a sigh when I saw one of the Guardians pull out their phone, I nodded to the one who opened the door for me.

Fine, it wasn’t my house, and I would want to be notified as well, so I wouldn’t get annoyed that the guy was reporting in to Neldor. It was taxing to always be tracked and handled like that though. Seriously, it was.

Cluym was sitting at the dining room table talking to a few fairies. He did a double take when he saw me. “Your Highness, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you’d arrived.”

The others hurried to greet me as well and I accepted it, telling them to sit.

“How are you?” I checked.

“Healed. Completely healed. It’s truly a miracle what you did, Princess,” he whispered. “Thank you for saving me.”

“I was glad to do it, and I’m glad we have a way now to fight such a deadly threat to us,” I told him, meaning it from the bottom of my heart. I let out a slow breath and tried to control my anger. “Assuming people will listen to my orders in the future so I *can* save them.”

“Your Highness, I understand you’re upset but—” one of the Guardians tried to jump in.

“Silence,” I ordered, my eyes never leaving Cluym. “I’m here for one reason. We need this settled no matter what anyone else thinks or says of the situation. *You and I* need this hashed out. Or were we not friends as I thought?”

I hated that my voice cracked, and I quickly wiped the tears that fell, others reacting when they saw them and the tension shooting up in the room.

“Your Highness...” he whispered as tears filled his own.

“You stayed in my *home*, Cluym. You’ve sided with me when I’ve needed that most. I’ve always had your back too. Were we not friends? Don’t I deserve—this needs to be settled as Tamsin and Cluym before it’s settled as princess and Guardian, yes?”

“Yes,” he agreed.

I nodded, crossing my arms over my chest. “You made a mistake, one I understood when you were injured. A life-threatening injury. Our minds are not our own then and—I understood it. The fact you defended it after you were healed is what caused my harsh reaction. But my father reminded me you were still in that horrible moment as I was.”

“I was,” he confirmed.

“And has your opinion on the situation changed?” I pushed when he was quiet.

He nodded. “Knowing what I know now and seeing how you handled the situation, yes. Yes, I regret arguing with my mate’s decision to follow your orders and trying to stop him. Yes, Adrian made the right call.”

Except Cluym just gave me the wrong answer.

“Knowing what I know now,” I repeated, shaking my head. “You fool. You absolute fucking fool.”

“Your Highness,” someone gasped.

Neldor arrived through a portal. I felt his energy but ignored it, continuing with what I wanted to say.

“The only *acceptable answer* is ‘I’m sorry, Princess. I’m sorry I disobeyed your orders *no matter the situation*.’” I looked at the people there who objected. “Shut up! This does not—you have no vote here! What part of

he disobeyed my orders do none of you *hear*?”

“I understand that, Your Highness, but—” Agis, one of Dalyor’s close friends who I had trained with many times, said as he walked out of the kitchen.

“There is no ‘but,’ Captain,” Neldor said from behind me. “That is what no one is hearing *us* say. You all keep seeing this as a fairy sacrificing himself for his future queen. You see demons and the deaths we have suffered. That is not the situation, and I agree with Tamsin now that my head has cleared.”

That was news to me, and I moved so I could see him as well. “Since when?”

“Since I got over the panic,” he sighed. “Since my mind has recovered from seeing the miracle you pulled off. *Again*, Tams. I’m spinning again. It took me a bit.”

I slowly nodded. “Okay, then how do you see it now? Do you understand what I came here for today?”

“Yes,” he said firmly. “You wanted Cluym to not only say he was wrong for not having *faith* in his princess, his leader, and his commanding officer since you are the head of the Fairie Guardians—”

I was impressed that he understood that because apparently no one else was remembering that. The commanders punished people all of the time for disobeying or fucking up their orders.

Why the fuck didn’t that apply when the orders came from *me*?

“—but also an apology for almost leading to the death of Adrian Geiger,” he continued, everyone in the room freezing again in shock. “Who is not only your attorney, but one of your most trusted friends.”

“He’s so much more than that,” I rasped as the tears flowed freely. “He is the reason I’m still *alive*. He is the reason any of us are here. If Geiger had

not shielded me over and over and *over again*, you would all have been lost in darkness forever.” I looked at Cluym then. “And you almost cost him his life. I don’t care that you are his mate. Your *mistake* almost cost him his life.”

“Ignoring who was involved specifically, look at the situation, Captain,” Neldor said to Agis. “One of Tamsin’s trusted friends disobeyed her orders and as a result, the life was lost of a beloved dragon. One with noble blood and a confidant to several of our biggest allies. He is a beacon of morals and respected by all.”

“It would have been a rather large mess, yes, Prince Neldor,” he agreed.

“Yes, and the ripples would have been felt for years,” Neldor continued. “Faith could have been lost in Tamsin. Guardians not listening to her commands and it led to death? And apparently, no one is going to reprimand the Guardian but *her*? People are lining up to condemn *her*. I heard a few tell her she shouldn’t involve herself in *Guardian business*.”

I hadn’t heard that but felt better when several people there heard that. I met Cluym’s gaze. “We will discuss your punishment once you finally see the situation for what it is. Friend or not, I cannot allow these sorts of mistakes. I can’t and I’m sorry, but you will be made an example of.”

“That isn’t fair and is unlike you, Your Highness,” Agis whispered, his tone confused instead of his normal harshness.

I met his gaze. “And shame on me for not doing it sooner. Apparently, it’s led to none of you having any *faith* in me. He didn’t want to call me because he didn’t want to risk me. What does that imply, Captain? None of you are seeing that because clearly you feel the same.” I nodded when he flinched. “And I have done nothing to deserve that.

“I have handled situations that you all cannot over and over again. I can do things none of you can. Why can none of you have faith in me? What have I ever done to make you think I’m weak? Or stupid? Or... I don’t even know

this time. What did I do wrong tactically this time? Was there anything you would have done differently? Tell me if I can improve then so any of you trust me!”

Neldor flinched at the screech in my voice as I finished. He tried to grab me as I spun to leave, but I dodged him.

“I don’t know that answer, Your Highness,” Agis said as I reached the door, making me freeze in my tracks. “I haven’t heard what you did actually, simply what happened after you healed him and how you were upset with him.”

“So no one is investigating the reason they came for Geiger like I ordered either?” I bit out.

“No, Commander Morgan is,” he promised. “He has two teams tearing into Geiger’s life as you asked. Geiger is assisting as well and…”

“And hasn’t come to visit,” Cluym whispered.

I swallowed something shitty and went with a more toned-down reply as I looked over at Cluym. “I wouldn’t either if I was him. “I nodded when his eyes went bug wide. “If Hudson made the decision to let me die to protect his king over me when it wasn’t needed and without accepting it was the wrong decision, I wouldn’t—I’d be gone.”

“That’s a bit more complicated since his king is also his dad, baby doll,” Neldor muttered.

I met Neldor’s eyes and said something I knew with complete confidence down to my soul. “It doesn’t matter. He’d never do it. Hudson would have faith that his father, his king and shield, would know what to do and handle the situation. That is the king’s *job*. It is my job to shield Fairie and her people, not be the puppet and joke you apparently all think me.”

There wasn’t anything else to say—at least not productive—so I left.

Neldor didn’t come with though, and I heard him yelling inside as I

moved away from the house to teleport. I felt worlds better that he agreed with me. The perspective my dad had given me that I needed to give Cluym a chance to settle with what had happened was smart, but I was also glad to have Neldor's as well.

Because I hadn't even thought about the interspecies problems that Gieger's death would have caused. I was still focused on how losing him would have killed me.

I was thinking of where I was actually going to teleport to when my phone vibrated. I pulled it out and smiled when I saw it was a text from Julian.

Julian: I wanted to check in. How are you? I'm trying not to hover but I'm worried.

Julian: I'm on your side of this. I think Cluym was wrong. I understand the choice he made in the moment, pain and fear clouding judgment, but he needs to apologize now. You were MORE than capable of handling that situation and you did with ease.

Julian: And calling the dogs was the right call. There was no reason not to. You would have come but you always bring others. It was a mistake. I understand it, but you are NOT in the wrong here wanting him to apologize. Please trust that.

Tamsin: Thank you. You, my dad, and Neldor agreeing with me helps a lot.

Tamsin: Are you busy? I need to cleanse. I promised my dad I would.

Julian: I wish I could. Walking around Faerie with you sounds amazing right now, but I have back-to-back conference calls.

Tamsin: Do you need to be in your office for them? I could cleanse at the havens or the co-op?

Julian: Yes, I can absolutely manage that for my *cariño*. I'll meet you at the main one and we can go from there. I have to be on the call in fifteen, so if you could figure out a plan I can easily implement while on the call, that would be perfect.

Tamsin: It's a date. Thanks, Julian.

Julian: Always.

Maybe soon I would be able to believe that. For right then, I didn't immediately want to laugh at it or tell him he was full of shit.

And that was a big change from months ago, so I was going to accept that gratefully. Fine, it wasn't great, but... It was progress. I would take progress any day.

Shouldn't we all?

I texted one of Mel's cousins, Ellen Rothchild, who ran the havens with her cousin Avril. Ellen mostly handled the outside affairs like the groves and generating revenue while Avril handled taking care of the people who lived there, rescuing those who needed it, hiring guards, and other logistics.

I told her what was going on and asked if she was fine with it.

To which she enthusiastically told me they could absolutely help me cleanse. Everything had been harvested, and there was always a desire for more fae fruit and things they could do with it, especially with how many people wanted to buy more from Goblin Goodies.

Perfect.

I arrived first and was talking to a few of the hobgoblins when he showed up. He was dressed in business attire but not his new normal of a fancy three-piece stylish suit that made my mouth water. He hesitated when he got closer to me, studying my aura.

I sighed, meeting his gaze and making it clear we were going to talk

about that later.

He nodded and leaned in to kiss me, not keeping it to a quick peck even if we weren't alone. "I missed you, Tams. A lot."

"Me too," I admitted, clearing my throat and trying not to flush. Things were... The pace was picking up between us.

At least in the heat department. The first few weeks of school we were sending a lot of flirty texts, but right before the attack several were a bit spicier and I'd really liked it.

Clearly, he had too from the look he was giving me.

"Here is the map of where Ellen would like the princess to start, Dr. Craftsman," one of the hobgoblins told him. "We're working out some more of the logistics, but that grove is huge and will—"

"She will handle this in under twenty minutes after her last power jump. So please hurry." He thanked them and then looked at me. "I have my PA getting some food for you and—"

"Is that who's been helping you shop as well?" I snarked, not able to stop myself in time.

His eyes flashed shock, but he simply ran his tongue over his teeth as he studied me. "Clearly, someone else updating my wardrobe was a mistake."

"No," I sighed. "We weren't—you needed to do what you needed to do. I'm just..." I let out a slow breath. "I'm all over the place. Sorry. I saw—you're wearing pants close to the suit I'd picked for..."

He nodded, knowing where my mind had gone, glancing down as well. He leaned in and pressed his lips to my ear. "That suit will always be the best thing I ever own. I stopped wearing it because it felt wrong to wear it when it was your mark on me and I'd lost your heart. I thought—I wanted to show you that I took your advice to heart and updated my wardrobe."

"On your own?" I checked, swallowing loudly.

“A very nice, *male* tailor helped me once I gave him your guidelines,” he said firmly. “I’m sorry if it brought up bad memories.”

About Campbell. That was where my mind had gone, my jealousy with her and issues and we both knew it.

Plus, he’d helped me to get the co-op started and all I’d been through originally modeling. He’d... We had a lot of history. It was complicated and too many things were a minefield.

“Thanks, Julian,” I whispered, staring in his emerald eyes feeling like I’d made the right decision to get back with him.

I really did.

2

Confusion filled his pretty eyes. “I don’t know what I did right, but I want to do it again with what I’m seeing in your aura. Tell me what I did.” He glanced and winced. “But I have three minutes to jump on the call. I’m sorry, but please tell me.”

“You’re not brushing it off—this issue,” I admitted. “I know it’s too much, but... It’s nice that we can just handle it. I feel like I can talk about it with you and you want to heal it instead of worrying I should be embarrassed and hurry to hide it.”

“I never meant to brush off your feelings or make you feel that.” He let out a slow breath this time. “I thought if I could push past things that could upset our relationship we would move past them together. It was behind us then.”

“You’re an idiot. I’ve got emotional issues all over the place and even I know that’s not how it works.”

“I very much know I’m an idiot,” he chuckled as he unlocked his phone and started tapping it to get on his call. “But I was raised in an environment of suppressing everything and ignoring things that could crack the façade we project as Craftsmans. I’m trying to change that.”

“You are,” I praised.

He gave me another kiss and we left it at that since his call started.

We walked over to the grove and I got lost in the cleansing as he led me around like a toddler he wanted to keep out of trouble... Or whatever analogy

worked that didn't make me feel gross being a kid to him an adult when we were heading for having sex again.

Yeah, none of that.

Food was put in my hand and my taste buds and tummy were very happy as I let out more and more of my stress. It was honestly great and exactly what I needed even if there were piles of work and school for me to handle as well.

He pulled me out of it with a kiss and my hands slid up his body and went into his hair without any coaxing. I took things up a notch and pushed my tongue in his mouth as well, not giving a single shit who was around.

Until my father cleared his throat.

Whoops.

"Your da wants to take us out to dinner," Julian chuckled against my lips. I blinked at him a moment and then flinched. "It's dinner already?"

"You had a lot of stress to get out," he said gently.

"Don't I always?" I sighed.

"Yes," several people agreed at once.

Neldor showed up just when we were about to leave since we decided on the place to eat... And was frowning.

"I just spent all day cleansing and I want to enjoy dinner with my dad," I warned him.

He searched my eyes and nodded. "Of course."

Except the problem would still be there when dinner was over, so I listened to his thoughts and about lost my temper. People were still on Cluym's side and thought I wasn't being fair about the situation.

And my security detail mostly agreed.

"You can all return to the commanders," I told them firmly, snorting when they argued. "Wow, we're just all going to disobey orders, huh? I guess

that's why everyone thinks I'm wrong this time too." I bobbed my head and crossed my arms over my chest, staring at the ground before meeting their gazes. "A deal was made that only I'm upholding."

"She warned you all," Lageos chuckled darkly. "Let's have fun, Daughter."

"Let's," I purred, my magic ramping up.

"Wait, no—Tam's, just hold on a minute and—" Neldor argued, Julian trying to say about the same.

But I was too pissed to listen. Plus, I was going with my dad who was a demigod. No sane person would think a team of Faerie Guardians was better protection.

Lageos seemed to know where my head was because I teleported to my friend Marisol and he was right there with me.

She glanced between us and sighed. "You two are up to trouble and someone will yell at me later." She winked at us to say she didn't care at all. "What are you in the mood for, *chica*?"

"Something dangerous," I purred.

She snorted. "Always with you." She stood and went over to her impressive computer setup. Marisol was much more than a beauty who melted any men who laid eyes on her, but she was also one of the smartest people I'd ever met. She'd taken over being the head of her family in Mexico, and while that family was technically a cartel... They weren't like other cartels.

They sold pot and never allowed human trafficking or hard drugs. Sure they had guns and did bad things, but they kept worse people at bay. I mean, all of her hacking was super illegal, but it did a lot of good for the world.

Life was complicated like that. I never liked shows or movies that rooted for the criminals, but they were bad guys who murdered families and were

painted as misunderstood.

Marisol handed over information on a massive gang in a major city who bragged they killed someone from the fire department or EMT for their initiation. So yeah, there were levels of bad, and if her hacking got their locations and the information to take people that evil down, I was fine with it.

Hell, I was excited to do it.

“And they work for one of your competitors?” Lageos checked.

“No, they want to take me over,” Marisol clarified. “They do disgusting things with women and dirty hard drugs I would never allow. But we—our wealth grows, and we’re branching out into new fields of marijuana. They burned one recently as a warning.”

“How bad will that set you back?” I worried, snorting when she gave me a look to not insult her.

Yeah, Marisol was too smart to ever let one thing like that hurt her bottom line. She had too many locations and places instead of big operations that would devastate her family if it was taken out. It was a risk too because people were vulnerable if they weren’t grouped together.

Except Marisol was the boss and truly cared. If there was any sign of trouble, her people were ordered to run. She never wanted them to fight and die over pot and instead wanted them to live to rebuild. That was always the rule and it was a smart one. She’d had very few people die under her since she’d taken over, even being a cartel.

Lageos and I went after the gang and collected everything we could. We sent the people to that same frozen wasteland in Russia where they’d never be found and honestly had no chance of making it out.

But they would still try and that was half of the fun of the punishment.

Yes, I was that evil like that.

Once we had everything we wanted from several locations, I decided

how to handle the loot. I grabbed a bunch of the cash and brought Lageos with me to Hong Kong where I knew the best place to exchange US currency. We did a few thousand dollars each and ignored the worried look of the guy who made the transaction.

He thought we were going to be stupid and flash it about so we were robbed and hurt in less than an hour. I actually thought it was good of him to worry.

However, he was an asshole for not saying anything to warn us if he felt that way. He was more worried about scaring tourists off by admitting the city had a crime problem.

Right, but everywhere had that damn problem.

Next, I brought Lageos to a market that I'd been to when I'd taken tours and explored with the different dragon royals back when I'd helped with their glamour situation by making crystals. Wow, that had been so long ago that sometimes it felt like another lifetime instead of a few years.

"The situation with Cluym, the things that attacked him," I muttered as we walked along. "I learned what I needed to from Taeral, but I realized I never asked you."

"The information he has is accurate," he told me.

"Yes, but I want to know if you can find those things. Can you locate them?"

"I don't know. I've never tried."

"Can they hurt you?"

"No." He said it with such certainty that I knew that he had first-hand knowledge.

"Then you should try and locate them."

"They can undoubtedly hurt *you*, Daughter."

I glanced at him and sighed. "So could all of those guns we were just

around, Dad. I'm not going to be reckless. I—if people won't help me as they should—something is going on and a message needs to be sent.”

He searched my eyes a moment. “Why are we at this market, Tamsin?”

“Bribes,” I chuckled darkly. “Or more rewards for good puppies.”

His gaze flashed shock, but then he burst out laughing.

Yeah, I thought he'd find it amusing.

The first thing I did was buy us a few large tote bags that we could use as shopping bags. I gave one to Lageos and then we went over to the first stall with fish and I bought several things. I put them in the bag but really teleported them to the warehouse. Lageos barely hid his amusement but caught on and did the same.

After not even twenty minutes and a handful of stalls, we probably had a nice pile of fish for my dogs at the warehouse.

“I'm a bit peckish after that fun,” he said as we came across a place with cooked food.

I shrugged, always up for eating.

And then we went hunting.

Lageos *could* locate demons. Well, really, he could sense them if he focused and they were within so many miles.

Still, that was impressive... And very fucking useful.

So I gathered a few of my packs at the warehouse and let them know the plan and we were going hunting. That they were to stay invisible and simply burn the demons. That I would eventually leave one alive and make it clear this was in retaliation so to never, not *ever* do something so stupid as to even think of coming after my people again.

Oh, and I considered “my people” to be any supe. All of them, and the humans I knew. If they weren't sure, then it was safer not to go near any in my orbit.

Ever.

The dogs were always on the ball and were curious about the piles of fish, so I told them that they got one for every demon they burned along with more presents later because I loved them. It was properly motivating, and they were thrilled at the idea of more fresh fish later.

Hong Kong had amazing seafood after all. It was right off the ocean and a huge fishing capital. Yeah, my dogs were in.

Just because we were bottomless pits, we went back to the market and loaded up with food before Lageos brought us to a random location in a city and focused. He found a few demons and we teleported closer before I opened a portal and my cloaked dog came through and took care of the demon.

“You can’t just leave them burned here,” Lageos reminded me as I sent my dog back through a cloaked portal.

“Right, right.” After a bit of back and forth, I almost sent Stefanie my location, but I didn’t want my phone company having that information, and the fact I’d been all over everywhere would be *slightly* suspicious.

Instead I opened a portal to her, waiting until she came through.

I smirked when she immediately flinched. “So clearly you understand there is something to handle at this location. It won’t be the only one.” I used my magic to silence her when she opened her mouth. “This is the result of pushing me too far, Commander. If people won’t be on my side and back me, then I’m not on their team either. That’s how *trust works*.”

I didn’t wait for an answer, taking my magic off of her and letting my dad teleport us to another location. We did that over and over again, taking a few breaks to get more food and send more fish to the warehouse.

When about a hundred demons had been taken care of by my estimate, I changed the plan when Lageos found more demons. There were five this time

and I asked he froze them. He was shocked I did, but I simply shrugged. I actually wasn't reckless if I didn't have to be.

I simply didn't always have the right people at my back. My dad was a damn demigod.

I did study what he used to keep them in place. It wasn't the normal rune I would have and was glad I'd made the call. "You layered in a barrier."

"Yes, and compounded a paralyzing spell. The same as your rune. Plus, a backup should they have some trick up their sleeve that will activate my power to automatically break the bodies they're in. That would give enough time for us to leave, and it would take them a while to recover from that if they could."

"Smart, very smart, Dad," I praised as I studied the magic, checking the layering. "Thank you. I will always do the same."

"I'm glad."

I waited until I was sure I had it and then focused on the demons. "You have about a hundred less of your buddies on this world. I invited my father and my puppies to have some fun tonight." I smirked at them as I moved around the room. "Until now you've been smart and kept your distance. I don't know what's changed, but I will find out."

"You made two very large mistakes going after Geiger," Lageos purred.

"Three," I corrected, nodding when my dad looked at me with confusion. "They drew attention to the fact they are up to something that they want hidden."

"Of course."

"They pissed me off, and I never leave people alone who threaten those I love."

"Yes, that's the second."

I smiled at the demons in a way that I knew wouldn't reach my eyes and

should terrify them if they were smart. “And their trying to kill my friend allowed my magic to figure out that I can heal their attacks. Because they were rash and came after my people, I now know that I’m the antidote for the only ace they fucking had.”

“Yes, you are very right, Daughter. They did make three big mistakes with this ill-planned attack,” he agreed. “And they all died in a flash. Actually, I would think the mistake was underestimating you. Of course, you would have protected Geiger from the threat of demons. Your dogs can be summoned by anyone you love in a flash and kill the demons there like they did.”

Which wasn’t true at all... But the demons believed him from the fear I felt pulsing through the room.

Nice.

“So take this as a warning to not piss me off again. I have a lot on my plate and you’re not currently on my to-do list,” I told them honestly. “*However*, there are always things I can push back and spend some quality time with my dad and puppies hunting demons for kicks. So push me, I dare you.”

“And check who’s missing,” Lageos added before moving his arm around my shoulders. “That was fun for the dogs, but it was only amusing for us. Want dessert?”

“Sure.”

He nodded that he had the situation in hand and I teleported away first.

And yes, we went for ice cream, ignoring that my phone blew up as we ate.

“I am surprised none of the idiots have shown up and demanded answers or lectured you,” Lageos admitted once we were done with our first order and went back for more.

I snorted. “I locked down the area. They’d have to open a portal at least forty miles away and run here. I think they know they’d end up in the ocean if they did right now.”

“Of course, you did. I was wondering why you weren’t blocking or cloaking.” He ordered for us but then chuckled. “They made a bad call on this one. They pushed you way too far this time.”

“Don’t they always.” I heard the sadness in my tone and leaned into him when he hugged me. I was tired of being sad. Every time I took a few steps forward with fairies, there had to be at least one big one back. It was so frustrating that it was amazing I hadn’t lost all of my hair from stress.

Especially since it wasn’t *remotely* the only thing I had on my plate.

Lageos and I went home when we were full of ice cream and ready to crash. I ignored the fairies that were there and wanting to speak with me. I put a barrier on my house making it clear that they weren’t allowed inside either.

Fuck them. Fuck a lot of things.

Which was why I took off more than my clothes when I went to bed that night.

A memory started immediately after I fell asleep. Neldor was the focus, but it wasn’t from his view. No, it was Kerym who had been waiting outside with Taeral when I arrived home.

The Prince of Darkness smashed his fist in Dalyor’s face before Agis tried to help his friend and restrain Neldor. Neldor flipped the man over and got in several hits on Agis that would have him hurting for at least a bit before moving on to one of the commanders... Who he had clearly already been at.

“Does anyone *else* have something to say about my mate’s recent behavior?” Neldor asked after about five minutes of beating the asses of

several more dark fairies. “Or are we done with this conversation?”

I honestly wasn’t sure if I should laugh, be turned on, or lock him up for being mental. Seriously.

All of the above?

“I understand you’re upset, Prince Neldor, but Princess Tamsin is—” Dalyor started, but Neldor didn’t let him finish, kicking the captain’s ass all over again.

“Idiot,” Kerym muttered.

I moved out of his view, forgetting to do that since he was pretty quiet right then, but it was disorienting to feel as if I was saying something when I wasn’t. I was shocked by what was going on, but I’d long since learned to not make that mistake when I was reliving memories in my dreams.

“This conversation is *over*,” Neldor bit out. “I warned you all. I *told* you that you needed to listen to me and you were being unfair to her. I said over and over again that even if you disagreed with what she did, being on the same team meant *listening to her* and to stop making her feel like you’re ganging up on her again!

“But no, you all can’t get out of your own fucking heads, so sure that you were right on this one. Except you’re *not* and you’ve pushed my mate too far. *Again!* I’m tired of this shtick! She has more than met us all halfway. She has kept her security. She has put up with a lot. She sticks to what is agreed upon over and over again when none of you do!

“Now you’ve pushed her too far. You treated her like a child when she handled a pack of demons on her own before she found any of us. So of course she’s going to go hunt demons and you’re all pissed it’s for *sport*. Are you fucking stupid? She’s not doing it for kicks! She’s—”

“Protecting us,” Commander Talila of all people acknowledged. “She was protecting us. We were so busy focusing on what *she did*, no one was

focusing on what *they did* except her. Fine, Morgan was investigating into Geiger like she ordered, but no one is acknowledging that demons came after one of us even if he's a dragon. He's on our side.

“And I am tired of it. Demons have never done this before. Even I cannot bury my head in the sand on this, and I am furious that people are trying to use Princess Tamsin as an escape from reality. Being upset with her about how she treated Cluym will not change the fact that demons came for one of us! Why is she the only one with her focus in the right place?”

“Exactly,” Neldor agreed. “She didn't go stir up trouble or prove a point or anything else any of you have thought or stupidly uttered even as hypotheses, wonderings to yourself. She did this to draw a line in the sand and make it clear that she will kill all of them if they even look in our direction again.”

People were quiet for several moments before one of the other dark commanders spoke. “I don't disagree with you, but that is a dangerous gamble she took, and she did it alone on behalf of all of us.”

“She is our leader, and her job is to make those calls,” Neldor bit out. “You forget yourself and your head if you keep not understanding that. But also, we keep showing we aren't a team with her. Why would she *ever tell us* her plan? So you could judge her more? Lecture her? Look down on her? Tell her she can't or can't handle that?”

“It was too dangerous for her to do,” Dalyor argued.

“She did it without any danger and got fucking ice cream after!” Neldor roared. “She and her father took out a hundred demons in a few hours. Why do you only acknowledge her power and strength when it's useful in the way *you want*? She wakes fairies—a thousand at a time, every day now, and that is a power level none of us can reach.

“Why do you not see how that means other things? I underestimated her

too, but I stopped making that mistake. Why can't the rest of you? You have been around her for months and months and still you cannot see the—you will cost my mate, and I will leave you all too if you do. If you do not stop pushing her from us, I will leave with her!"

I felt the shock of that room as Neldor stormed out, people believing him.

"She's rubbing off on him," one of the dark commanders who didn't like me complained.

"Good," Taeral muttered. "She's rubbing off on all of us and we needed it." He shot the commander a nasty look. "I didn't like how she handled things with Cluym either. He made a bad call when in vast pain. I judged her because she didn't understand and acted emotionally because she loves Geiger. I *do* agree with her now.

"Cluym made a mistake. He has the distance now to see what he did wrong, and he only said he was wrong because he could see how it played out. That was not the right answer. He disobeyed her. That's the answer. Her orders were clear. We all heard that she'd done that. My soul *ached* that she'd had to do that and was in such danger and without us.

"And now she's without us because we have made her feel alone and when we're *here!* I agree with Prince Neldor. If she leaves, I will go with her. I'm not sure Faerie and her people deserve Princess Tamsin. Instead of facing the fear that demons have changed and came at us when we're weak still, they are focused on her justifiable upset with a subordinate disobeying her. I'm disgusted."

I could have been pushed over with a feather when Talila agreed.

Kerym felt the same and actually spoke up. "May I ask why you feel that way, Commander?"

"How does the definition of 'insubordination' confuse you, Captain?" she threw right back, ice in her eyes.

“No, I mean—I agree. He was insubordinate. Now that the threat has passed and he can see the—he was wrong. I think...”

Something close to amusement filled her eyes. “Why am I the one to finally agree with anything Princess Tamsin is saying? That’s what you want to know without saying the words, yes?” She snorted when a few people nodded. “Because she is a great leader. She took the time to see someone who should have constantly been on her side struggling as I did.

“I was drowning and could not pull myself out. The help she gave me put me back together enough to function after what we have all suffered. It made me see that we keep lashing out at her because she did not go through what we did. Too many resent her for not losing twenty years as we did. She *saved us* from that. We are horrible to resent our damn savior.”

I didn’t disagree with her, no one with a brain should.

I simply didn’t know if I believed that was the truth of the situation.

3

Apparently, Neldor, Taeral, and Talila weren't the only ones to push back. Voices got louder and a few rumors went around that clearly came from my security detail that I was seen crying that Cluym had almost died for me. That it was a reoccurring issue with me even that I couldn't allow people to get hurt or die for me.

That it was one of the biggest reasons that held me back from accepting my birthright.

Iolas went on the offensive and made it clear that I would start actually being as reckless as everyone accused me of being if people kept not listening to my orders. People not listening to my orders and using me as a shield to protect Faerie was the only time I was reckless. That was what I saw as the role of being the leader of Faerie and it was mine to decide.

I heard him say several times that it was time for people to get on the boat with me or he was going to drown them in the ocean. I wasn't sure that was how the phrase actually went... But I didn't dislike it. I appreciated the support if I was honest.

And it was effective.

Cluym publicly acknowledged that he did go against my orders and he was remorseful for his actions, accepted whatever punishment I decided on. That was the biggest help.

It saddened me that the one in the wrong had the bigger voice and sway than the one in the right.

As usual, there was too much going on, but there was one thing that was helping me out. The moment I was done with class, I was excited to check my phone and see what Julian had texted. He had been checking in, but today we were back to flirting and about to cross into naughty.

And I was all about it.

Seriously, I was *all about it*.

“Hey, sexy, you wanna go on a date with me?” someone said to a student in the crowded hallway, but I ignored it.

I always ignored what was going on around me, never caring who was trying to get with someone at Artemis and the gossip. I thought the person repeated it, but I was trying to read through the messages I should as princess before I focused on the ones I wanted to.

“Your Highness,” Ara muttered, moving in front of me. “He’s talking to you.”

“Huh? Who?” I glanced up and met her gaze, seeing her gesturing off to my right. I turned a bit to see who it was and shock rocked me at who stood there.

Then I was *pissed*.

And not simply because everyone around us in the busy hallway had stopped to see the show.

I wanted to punch him. I truly wanted to just slug him for showing up here after all of this time and trying that line on me, the one I’d used on him when I’d sprung a date on him.

“I’m sorry, do I know you?” I asked innocently. “You remind me of someone I think I used to know, but I haven’t seen him in... I forget it’s been so long.” I ignored the chuckles and reactions around us, only caring that Darby looked like he’d been punched in the gut.

Good, because I wanted to do it for real.

And he would have deserved it.

He cleared his throat and his gaze darted around before he moved a bit closer. “*Agra*, I wanted to see if—”

“Oh, so you do know me? I mean, where I am and how to find me?” I raised my phone and looked at it. “Funny, I don’t have any messages from you or calls.” I looked over at Ara. “Weren’t we at the point of filing a missing person’s report?”

“No, Your Highness, we confirmed with his roommates that he was alive,” she said, her tone as icy as I felt.

But I was more in the mood to be a bitch than cold.

I tucked my phone away and snapped my fingers. “Right, that was the answer.” I held out my hand to him, biting back my real feelings and emotions as he took it on instinct. “Hi, I’m Tamsin Vale. I think I’m supposed to be your fiancée?”

He swallowed loudly. “I can explain and—”

I moved in closer and grabbed his hand with my right hand and moved his palm over my left hand. “Oh, I think we’re past explanations and bullshit, don’t you?” I moved his hand a few times until understanding filled his eyes and my magic sensed his grief. “Good talk. Go back to Yale.”

I dropped his hand like it burned me and spun away.

“Wait, Tams, please,” he begged. “Please, I’m sorry and I can—”

I used my magic to freeze him for a bit and walked off. I wasn’t going to teleport away or storm off. Fuck him, he didn’t even go to school here anymore. It took every ounce of strength I had to not cry as I kept moving with my head held high.

“I don’t understand what just happened,” one of my detail muttered under their breath at a level others besides fairies wouldn’t hear because of our runes.

“She showed him that she’s taken off the engagement ring,” Ara explained at the same volume. “She glamours it as on for others and so there’s not gossip. He saw it as on like everyone else and she let him know that she’s actually taken it off.”

That was exactly what I’d done.

And I had. I’d taken it off after he’d not even bothered to show up after the situation with Cluym. He’d texted and asked me if there was anything he could do.

Yeah, show up.

Duh.

How he didn’t know that after watching what being abandoned by two different men had done to me was... I really didn’t understand what the fuck was going on with him or where his mind had been.

I felt sick to my stomach. I’d been right that day at the airport before we’d left for Yale. I had been sending him off away from me and it was the end of us. I’d always known it would come. I’d felt it the first time not long after we’d become official.

And it hadn’t been my insecurities, my abuse, or past. I’d always known without a doubt that Darby would leave me. It was the same instinct that kept me safe, tied to my magic or whatever, but I’d known.

Unfortunately, I’d been correct like I normally was when it came to my instincts.

Why couldn’t I be wrong this one fucking time?

Lunch was waiting for me when I arrived at my normal table. There had been too many times that people had attempted to mess with my food or tried to put magic on something people knew I’d liked. Now there were fairies in the kitchen to oversee meals, and Neldor and I picked out in advance what we wanted served to us family-style.

It was really nice given how much we fucking ate.

Plus, extra was always brought for us from Faerie or by hobgoblins we knew.

I sat and stared at my food knowing I had to eat it even if I had to choke it down because I needed the fuel for Fairy Crystals III & IV.

“Are you okay, Tams?” Hudson worried as he sat next to me.

“Why?” I whispered.

“It’s already spreading that you broke up with Darby in the hallway just now,” he explained. He took in a slow breath and rubbed my back, understanding that I couldn’t deny it wasn’t what happened.

Even if wasn’t exactly what *had* happened.

Apparently, now Darby suddenly cared and had balls because a few minutes later, he sat down across from me.

I didn’t even make the decision to mute him with a rune, my magic simply doing it to protect me. I met his gaze though and couldn’t hide my grief, my total and utter heartbreak. Tears filled my eyes and made him blurry before they overflowed and fell down my cheeks.

I replayed in my mind every time that I’d waited for him, worrying that he was pulling away from me but having faith in him that he loved me. Even before graduation. All the times he’d come over and I’d thought we would get to spend time together, but he’d fall asleep and I’d feel alone and unloved, unwanted and he was just there out of habit.

Next, it was my total and complete disappointment how nothing changed after we got engaged. How he basically enjoyed that day and went back to the normal of being focused on everything besides me the next. I had been so, so disappointed because he’d already graduated. He’d had a bit of time before the next stage of his internship with others.

I’d thought we’d get a few days at least. I’d cleared my calendar and

practically killed myself so we could have that time completely together and alone.

And that had been before I'd known he'd propose.

I went over all of the nights I'd waited for him to no avail. How I'd tried to plan ways to entice him or snap him out of his workaholic ways while still being supportive. How I'd *trusted him* while hurting. I'd pushed my own feelings and doubts aside, ignoring what was right in front of me and believed in what he'd said to me.

Then it was how he'd hurt me about cutting back on work but not because he'd missed me. He'd tried to fix that, but we couldn't get back to being us.

It made me regret getting engaged. I wished he'd never asked, and I wanted him to go back to loving me the way he had before I'd agreed to be his mate. I constantly worried it had all been fake to only get me to agree, fall in love with him because *clearly* I was so much more in love with him than he'd ever been in love with me.

How could he not be dying inside like I was if that wasn't true?

I replayed that moment at the airport and how sure I'd been that it was the end of us, but he'd promised me that it wasn't... And I hated him for lying to me.

Even if he'd been lying to himself as well.

After that, it was like a montage of all the times I'd checked my phone hoping for a message or saying I could come over. Or how I'd been hurt by his putting everything before me still and not seeming to care about what was going on with me or missing me.

How much I hated myself for doing this all over again with another man... And knowing I would never leave. Even if I took off the ring, I knew I would never leave Darby.

I loved him so much that I would stay knowing it would eat at my soul. Why would I leave just because of that?

I was still the heir of Faerie, and I let that place do the same to me. I let fairies take everything from me, demand it.

What was one more person? This one at least let me feel loved for a while.

But I had to take off the ring. It mocked me. It was a symbol of love, and he didn't love me enough to really have given it to me. I was shocked that he'd fooled Lageos like that.

Maybe it was because Darby had fooled himself? He'd loved me because I'd had the faith in him that no one else had and I'd seen the person he could be, but now that others did too... What did he need someone like me for? I was a mess emotionally and might not ever be able to give him a true, healthy relationship.

He had wanted normal, and being with me was anything but that. Hell, I didn't want to be in my life most of the time, so I didn't blame him. He had everything in front of him that he had wanted, and I didn't fit in that life, that picture of what he wanted.

I'd always known that. I'd always known he'd leave me, but I'd promised not to run and have faith in him.

Stupid me for making that promise, right?

"Stop!" Neldor roared.

I felt like my head split open and I wanted to vomit all over the table. My vision went dark for a moment and I started to fall backwards, but strong arms grabbed me and plucked me out of the chair.

"I got you, baby doll," Neldor rasped in my ear. "I got you."

I tried to ask him what he'd done to me, scared he'd finally shown his true colors and attacked me when I'd been vulnerable and hurt. I felt Lageos

appear and Neldor's relief.

Huh—what?

“What happened?” Lageos demanded. “If you hurt my daughter I will—”

“She locked everyone in the cafeteria in her projection,” Neldor interrupted. “Help her. She's gushing magic still. And show me how to do it.”

“I don't know you can as a fairy,” he admitted. “Julian can as a warlock because in some ways the taste of his magic is the same as a demigod's. Try to follow me.”

I gasped as I felt like my magic was wrapped around me, almost like being tucked into bed but in the metaphysical sense. Then I felt Neldor's healing before Lageos gave me a small amount as well.

“Help the others,” Lageos instructed.

“Like I give a shit if she gave the idiots at this school some migraines,” Neldor grumbled. “If they hadn't been hitting her with their energy and giddy she was in pain it wouldn't have ramped up like that. They can all be tossed into a volcano for all I care.”

“I can make that happen,” Lageos hedged.

“No, no, we're not doing that,” Iolas sighed. “That hurt. At least you were able to break free, Prince Neldor.”

“She had another power jump,” Lageos muttered. “Whatever she did for Cluym unlocked another one. This is—”

“She's a miracle,” Iolas whispered. “Now I'm wondering if we should delay her flying so she can keep growing.”

“No, she's having too much fun and clearly she needs that fucking fun,” Hudson said firmly.

That and he knew I was hating my wings a little less every time we flew and I enjoyed it. I was a thrill seeker, and there was no bigger thrill or adrenaline rush than flying.

Not even close.

Crystals were placed in my hand, and I recognized my own magic, absorbing it and feeling put back together. I licked my lips and stared up at my dad. “I don’t understand.”

“You weren’t just thinking of what happened with Darby, how things have been going wrong, baby doll,” Neldor said quietly, his voice full of pain.

I closed my eyes and willed the tears not to come, figuring out what he was trying to tell me. “No.”

He moved his hand to my arm. “I’m sorry.”

I’d shown everything I’d been thinking of to everyone in the cafeteria of Artemis. Not just Darby or the people at my table but all of the *vipers* in our school.

“Handle it,” Neldor ordered someone.

“That’s not fair when it was my mistake,” I whispered, a huge part of me hoping he would overrule me.

Lageos snorted. “Fair is for people who deserve it. These people are monsters, and several are already trying to text people that you had a nervous breakdown and it’s the time to pull something with you. I vote for Neldor’s idea and the volcano.”

“We’re blocking communications,” Stefanie informed us. “They will be sending out nothing.” She cleared her throat. “Please, Your Highness? It’s a good training exercise at least if you’re uncomfortable with it being personal.”

“Do it,” Neldor ordered. “We’re not risking her safety or the safety of those who would jump to protect her because—”

He absolutely said that because he knew it was the reason I would listen to. “Do it.”

So they did. They wiped the minds of everyone there and checked everyone on campus that day just in case it had leaked past the cafeteria. Instead, they gave them the memory that I had ignored Darby and had silently cried that he had been there, finally trying to be in my life again.

Yes, embarrassing, but nothing compared to what I'd really done and shown everyone.

"Tamsin, please, can we—" Darby whispered.

"If you speak to her right now and risk anything else happening or setting her off, I will break you into pieces and toss you into different volcanos," Neldor threatened, his voice ice-cold and deadly.

Okay then.

"Thank you," I said to Neldor, nodding when he glanced at me. "Really. I'm sorry and—" I swallowed a sob that I wasn't sure where it came from.

"Let out your wings, baby doll," he whispered as he hugged me to him. "You're a fairy. Let out your wings and please go home. We can't have class. I will handle things here. Go take a bit to settle yourself and we can talk?"

I glanced at Lageos who gave a nod and kissed my hair. Okay, that seemed completely reasonable.

And I hated all of the eyes.

I thanked them both again and did as they asked, immediately feeling better when I was home. I let out my wings and went to go see Chief and my pack. They comforted me and I felt like the pieces of me were healed.

Magic was such a double-edged sword. All the good I did, all of the miracles and lives I saved... The cost to me was so fucking high that I wondered if people ever realized it.

Or cared?

"What's happened?" a deep voice said from outside, one of the normal guards who were stationed at the house.

“It seems the power it took to save Cluym’s life from something no one else could heal has done something to the princess’s magical stability,” Dalyor said. “We don’t know yet, but Commander Shael ordered an extra squad guard her with a higher-ranking officer until we know more. Her healer is coming to give her a full workup.”

“The princess really never gets a break,” someone else grumbled.

“No, apparently not,” Dalyor sighed. “But I agree with Prince Neldor that if we’d been more worried about *her* instead of jumping on her jumping on Cluym and our fear of what she’d done, we could have watched for this.”

Glad it wasn’t my fault for once.

Calarel showed up and ran me through the normal paces, giving me the all clear and not seeming worried. She chuckled when I asked her why, being almost motherly with me as she tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

“If I told you the number of times my magic went crazy because my mate hurt me, you would roll your eyes at my drama, Your Highness. It’s fairly common as fairies. We feel too much and get hurt deeper than others. You simply have more magic than a normal fairy. And you have *five* idiot mates. I have one and we take a lover now and again. I can’t imagine two mates.”

Well, I felt a *lot* better after hearing that.

Seriously, it was better than any prescription she might have written me.

I felt settled after she left, embarrassed... But accepting that shit just happened. That was life.

Or at least my life.

4

Neldor showed up with a ton of food a bit later and confirmed everything was done at Artemis and no one was the wiser. I thanked him and wanted to eat it all and simply keep working on the piles of work I had... Except he wasn't alone.

Darby was with him.

I mentally sighed. So clearly, we were having this conversation. I looked at Neldor. "Could you give us—"

"No, I'm not leaving you alone when you're raw from what happened. I made that clear and he's accepted it. If he doesn't like it, he should have talked to you *weeks ago*."

I couldn't even argue it.

"There is one thing you need to know first," Neldor sighed. "Report to the princess what you told me."

Rafe and Wyn came into the room, dipping their heads to me and greeting me the way they should.

"Wait, I made it clear—you weren't sent to spy on him," I growled... With about as much forcefulness as Izzy because I was wiped. "I'm kicking both of your asses for snitching on anything Darby did to Neldor of all people."

"They told me first," Darby admitted. "They didn't ask but they..."

"We gave him a chance to tell you first, Your Highness," Rafe said gently. "And we weren't spying. We were witnesses. The situation was that

level of brazen and disrespectful. Now that rumors will circulate you have fallen out with Darby, we worry that...”

I just wanted to eat the food in front of me and go to bed.

Maybe not in that order.

“Is he in danger?” I sighed. I flinched when they both didn’t answer. “You were in *danger* and didn’t tell me?”

“No, it wasn’t like that, *agra*,” he whispered. “Please, I didn’t want to bother you. This whole—I wanted to—I thought I was—you took off the ring?”

So clearly, I wasn’t going to get an actual answer from him at the moment. I swallowed another sigh and looked at Rafe for answers.

“A noble from Faerie approached Darby at Yale and made it clear that his life would be difficult if he continued this insanity of being engaged to the heir of Faerie. That he wouldn’t be accepted as a vampire and shunned because of his decisions.”

I flinched, having dreamt of a man saying that exact sentence. I wasn’t sure when or by who, but it echoed in my mind as other things did.

And Darby caught it.

“Tams—”

“Is that why you’ve abandoned me?” I whispered.

“I didn’t abandon you,” he argued. “It’s been a few weeks. You started the master’s program. When I started that I was—it was such an adjustment. You run a whole other world. You didn’t need your boyfriend—fiancé from another college always hanging out or having to go there and—and law school is a big adjustment too.”

“When did you become this stupid?” I breathed, shocking everyone there. I ignored it, hurrying on. “What else did the noble say?”

“Exactly what you’d expect,” Rafe answered. “He added some crap

about now that Darby was away from your obsessive love of him and constant hovering, he could have the distance to find the clarity he needed to make the right decision.”

“And were you *listening* to any of that?” I asked Darby.

“Of course not,” he rasped, wiping under his glasses. “Tams, I didn’t tell you to bug you. I don’t care if people say bullshit to me. I get fairies don’t want us together or hate a vampire might live in Faerie, but... We’ve been through this.”

“Yes, yes, we have, but apparently no one ever learns from the same mistakes like not communicating or being honest about situations we should handle *together*,” I replied, not able to keep the anger out of my voice. “Or not giving your partner who has abandonment issues distance or space when she’s more than capable of asking for it, *has in the past!*”

Everyone flinched again, but Rafe cleared his throat. “The noble expected Darby’s decision by the end of the semester. It was clear there was a timeline.”

I snorted. “Of course, he did.” I glanced at Neldor. “They’re so fucking predictable.”

“You called it,” he agreed. “They’d get desperate and pull something.”

“Assholes always do.” I met Darby’s confused gaze. “This was more than them giving you grief. Lageos is actually prince *regent* as I’m not old enough to take the throne. He’s the boss, and there are laws and rules about royal marriages and engagements.

“It protects them from being messed with and the heirs or queens being trapped with vipers. Or people who have been threatened in some way to use their power. I told you that. Things changed when you went from boyfriend to fiancé. That was why we had that promise ceremony in Faerie before the gods to be blessed and all of that.”

“You said it was tradition,” he muttered.

I was so tired my mouth worked faster than my brain could stop me. “Glad you ignore what I say as much as you ignore me too.” I didn’t wait for any of them to reply, focusing on Rafe. “Please inform Commander Stefanie which idiot and what exactly was said. You’ll have to sign as a witness as a Faerie Guardian.”

“Brazen idiot to do it in front of one of their own, a captain no less,” Neldor scoffed.

I snorted. “They’re so full of themselves and thinking they were smartest of all of us, he probably didn’t even notice.” I snorted again when Wyn tapped his nose. Yeah, that was normally how pompous assholes worked. “How many are left after we seize everything of those three?”

“Four... No, six,” Neldor sighed. “No, I think four. I have to check. There’s been so much back and forth and people saying they’ll agree and backpedaling like you’ll look bad for not agreeing to some last-minute additional term of theirs.”

“It might be smart to wait and see what any of the other idiots might do,” I muttered.

“Or the first one might get desperate and try something worse with Darby,” Neldor warned.

“Yes, because that’s worked for anyone else,” I drawled. “Once I break, I have to break for all of them. You don’t allow political goals to fuck with people’s *lives* by using leverage like that as a threat. There is nothing worse, no rat bastard darker than someone who would pull that. These are people’s homes and the economy of areas.

“They tried to hold that hostage for power and to make me look bad. No, I’m not caving to that, and anyone who does is an idiot because all you do is show that it’s an effective tactic to do *again*. You can’t play fair with people

who won't either. That doesn't mean I'll hurt others either. Those people are safe in the hotels and other places."

"I know, Tams," Neldor said gently. "They're on your side."

"Unfortunately, they don't stay there," I grumbled. "We are our own worst enemies sometimes with our fickleness. They're on my side for this, but they'll forgive this evil for something else later and I'm the bad guy again. I'm so tired of the games." I let out another sigh. "See what Stefanie thinks on waiting or moving now."

"Can we please go back to you seizing assets of that noble who told me to leave you?" Darby whispered. "My head is spinning and I—how?"

"Can you explain it to him? Apparently, if I do, it's in one ear and out the other, and I have piles of everything else to approve." I gestured to my desk as if Neldor didn't already know that.

"Yeah, and then I'll come help you, okay?"

"Okay, thanks," I accepted before looking up at Rafe and Wyn. "School going well? You guys enjoying it?"

"Yes, thank you for asking, Your Highness," Wyn said, Rafe nodding as well.

Good.

Darby was either still in shock or realized it wasn't the time to push me or... I had no idea. I had no idea what the fuck had happened with us. We used to—the way we were in step was like having the same heartbeat.

When did we get so out of sync?

And how much of it was my fault that I didn't see?

"His assets are being seized for going against the crown," Neldor explained to Darby in the hallway. I knew he was doing it there to build trust so I heard first-hand that he wasn't rude or didn't say anything shitty to Darby. Or so I could jump in if I had anything to add.

I appreciated it, but I was too tired and wished they simply went to the kitchen.

“Lageos is technically the boss. He was Queen Meira’s mate. He declared the engagement was valid and the will of the crown.”

“Right, I get that, I did even listen to Tamsin about that. But just because someone disagrees or tells me I’m not welcome in Faerie—people go on the news all of the time and say that I’m not worthy of her and I should realize that and leave her. You don’t go and take all of their *assets*, Neldor.”

Okay, fine, he had a point, and I understood better where his head was.

Which was probably why Neldor had done it this way too.

“You’re right, but they aren’t Faerie nobles. They are—it’s like an employee. Tamsin is their boss. Think of it that way in a monarchy. They went behind the CEO’s back and tried to undermine the project or tank a deal. That’s what marriages are with royalty. They’re a big fucking deal.”

“I just have nothing to bring to the table.”

“Correct, but that is actually an asset for Tamsin if you stop being such a dumbass.”

“Thank you, I hadn’t realized I’d fucked up until you’d put it like that,” Darby snapped. “Okay, so... I guess I expected she wouldn’t have to punish them like Onas because he went and spoke on behalf of her and said he’d block her mating Hudson.”

“Totally different but yeah, still bad. You’re still giving him credit for truly believing you’d be bad for Faerie, Darby. Tamsin gave them a deadline that a deal has to be reached between her and the noble of the area to be reopened by the new year or the area would be closed permanently and they would lose their titles—everything.”

“They did it to weaken her,” he sighed. “They wanted to take out her support system and hit her where it hurts after she did the same.”

“Yes, though clearly they don’t know what you’ve—”

“Neldor, stop. It’s been a few weeks and—”

“Do you not know how calendars work? It’s not a *few* weeks. It’s several now, dipshit,” Neldor bit out. “Where are you—”

The door to my study was pulled open and Darby came inside, closing it again in Neldor’s face. He walked over to my desk and then came around it, grabbing my chair and spinning it to face him.

And then he got on his knees.

“I fucked up, *agra*,” he rasped. “I know I’ve fucked up. I know it’s *again*. I blinked and it was too long. I just thought—I fucked up. I realized that and wanted to be cute, remind you of that fun date and how much we were together. That wasn’t the right way to do this and I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry, Tams. Please, just give me one more chance.

“I won’t blow this again. You won’t be the idiot.” He hugged my legs when I flinched, both of us knowing what he meant. He’d heard me say many times that women who gave men three chances to strike out were idiots. “I *have* missed you. Fuck, I’ve missed you. I didn’t want... It all made sense in my head and like I was being mature. I’m sorry.”

“Okay,” I whispered, my voice sounding hollow to my ears.

“No, it’s not okay,” he choked out. “The pain you showed me was—you seemed fine. I didn’t understand any of this because you were swallowing down so much pain to pretend to be fine so you were supportive. You should never be in *pain* to support your partner! That’s—it never hurts me to support you. I shoulder the burden. That wasn’t what you did.”

“This isn’t my fault.”

“No, no, it’s not. I wasn’t putting it on you.” He let out a slow breath and raised his head to meet my gaze. “I wasn’t. This is my failing. I don’t know how to have a healthy relationship either. I did good when it was what I

knew, or I just kept doing what I thought I should even when things got more complicated. I let you lead and—I fucked up because...”

“What? Why? Why did you move so far from me?”

He let me go and sat back on his feet. “Because I tried to stand next to you instead of just behind you and follow your lead. I tried to show everyone that what we had was mature and not puppy love. That I wouldn’t come running back the second law school started and you’d be fine without me a few weeks.”

I pushed the chair back and shook my head. “One of the things we loved about each other from the beginning is we never cared about what others thought of us. We listened to ourselves and each other on what was right for *us* and what we wanted for *our* relationship. When did that not become enough and when did you become that guy who just decides things for his partner?”

I got up and left, not feeling bad for the disgust in my tone.

Seriously, why couldn’t any of us learn from our mistakes or the past?

Hudson and I had had huge problems because he’d not paid attention to how he’d made me look publicly and had spoken for me when he shouldn’t.

Lucca and I had had huge problems because the bear had been all about his image and how things could look to others at times.

I wasn’t sure Neldor and I could ever be together because of the perception people had of what our relationship would be.

Julian and I... Yeah, there was a lot there as well.

So now it was just Darby’s turn to be the idiot on this *same topic* but in a different way?

It was a miracle that I didn’t destroy all of the temples in Faerie when I got pissed with any of the *five* mates they’d given me.

“Are you okay?” Neldor asked me when he found me back out by the

greenhouses on the property about thirty minutes later.

“No, and I’m going to tell you something, but you have to swear to me you won’t tell anyone, not even Lageos,” I whispered as I kept harvesting marbles.

He was quiet a few moments. “Does it have the possibility of hurting you?”

“Yes, but not in the way you’re thinking. I’m not hurting myself.” I set down the bushel and met his gaze. “Neldor, please. I need to trust someone with this who can handle it. After today... I need to...” I shook my head, knowing I’d already told Julian. Had I forgotten that in my stress and confusion?

Maybe I only had in my head?

“Okay, baby doll. Tell me,” he whispered, coming closer and cupping my cheek. “I won’t tell.”

“I think I’m getting my mother’s power of seeing the future,” I heard myself tell the man I’d once thought was my biggest threat. I swallowed loudly when Neldor’s eyes filled with fear. “I know I have abandonment issues, but—my feeling that Darby would leave me wasn’t that. I didn’t feel it with the others. I felt it like my magic tells me other things.

“But it’s never been complete. I felt like I was missing pieces. I would wake up feeling like I’d had a nightmare that I couldn’t remember and a pit in my stomach that Darby was gone. It’s echoed for a while now, getting worse at times.” I waited until he nodded. “Something Rafe said today—something he reported that noble said made me...”

“It threw you in that feeling? You felt in the nightmare you couldn’t remember?”

My eyes went wide and I nodded. “Yes, exactly that. How did you know that?”

He blew out a slow breath. “Because it’s very, *very* rare to have that gift, but Meira hasn’t been the only one to ever have it. I read the journal of one of my ancestors and that is how she described the start of the gift. That she would have episodes of *déjà vu* and feel trapped in nightmares she didn’t remember.”

“I didn’t want this,” I choked out. “And why does it have to be about something I fear as me? Something so important to me? Why does everything have to always torture me?”

“I don’t know, but I wish I could take this pain on instead,” he rasped, hugging me to him. “We’ll figure this out, Tams. I know now and we can—I’ll find everything I can. We can’t tell the commanders. They’ll—we’ll figure this out. I promise.”

And for some reason, I truly did believe him.

Weird how so much could change in just a few years, right?

We brought everything back inside and there was new food for me. I felt wasteful, but I knew someone on my security had eaten it. There were too many garbage disposals around me constantly that would take care of it.

Neldor and I worked for hours on everything for Faerie. I was exhausted when we were done and ready for bed.

Except Darby was there waiting for me.

My shock was like a kick in the nuts to him from the look on his face.

Good. He deserved that and so much worse.

“You have class tomorrow,” I muttered, rubbing my arm as I looked anywhere but at him.

“So do you, but you’re staying here,” he reminded me.

“Too many people get pissy at Artemis if I have extra security. It’s just easier.”

“I figured, but I meant we could just both portal.”

I shot him a hurt look. “Yeah, it’s just that easy in our world.”

He swallowed loudly. “I want to apologize again, but you get upset when I do that and say it loses its meaning. I don’t want to not apologize and act like what I did was fine. I’m at a loss here, Tams.” He sighed. “And I hurt you when I don’t call you ‘*agra*,’ but it’s mean to do when you’re mad at me like I’m using your feelings to try and forgive me. I don’t know what to do.”

I snorted. “My answer would to be stop fucking up and actually talk to me about things.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do right now. With this.”

Fair enough.

“What can I do?” he whispered when I didn’t say anything. “You need to sleep and I don’t want—I miss you but tell me what to do?”

I was too tired to start trouble, but I also didn’t want to keep acting like things were fine. He was right that my doing that had been my mistake in this. “You can sleep on the couch.”

“Okay, sure. Yeah, okay.”

I heard the pain in his voice, but I ignored it. He’d done this to us.

Again.

He was awake when I woke the next morning, sitting there with a single magical rose. He sat it on the table when I simply stared at it, making it clear that I wouldn’t accept it. “I’ll see you after classes?” He let out a slow breath when I simply stared at him. “Are you coming home after class? I’ll be here.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know my schedule.” I got annoyed when he seemed to think just picking up where we were would fix everything. “Maybe you should just sit here for *months* and wait for me like I did for you.”

He was gone after my run and I swallowed down my fear that he wasn’t coming back.

He will or not and I can’t make him. This is our life now.

I showered and ate before heading to school.

The shit looks I received from people made it *abundantly* clear that people knew more happened with my magic than they remembered. Yeah, it wasn't all that hard to catch onto missing time or a really big gap in memory. What they thought happened would have taken a few minutes, but classes had been interrupted and more to get everyone's memory handled.

The idiots around me weren't *that* stupid.

However, the hostility seemed less after my first class and I wasn't sure why that would happen... Until I saw something that made me chuckle on the way to lunch. Namely, Irma and a few dozen hobgoblins handing out "apologies" in the form of treats to students. There was everything from caramel-dipped marbles to fresh fae fruit to baked goods.

"Thanks, guys," I said with a genuine smile.

"Of course, Your Highness," Irma accepted as she came over and gave me a hug. "As you say all of the time, everyone makes mistakes, people simply have to apologize and make amends."

That I do," I chuckled, accepting a massive caramel-dipped marble that had chocolate and candy all on it as well.

Yummy.

5

A woman I'd never seen before was waiting at the table I used for meals. She was one of the most gorgeous women I'd ever seen in real life. She looked like airbrushed perfection from her long, silky, lush black mane that didn't have a hair out of place, to her figure, to... Just fucking all of her.

And the once-over she gave me made it clear she didn't feel the same about me.

Always a good start.

She dipped into a perfect curtsy though. "Your Highness, Dr. Craftsman sent me to speak with you to ask about changing your schedule for tonight."

It took me a full minute to be able to make my mouth work, setting down my bag and pretending that was the reason I didn't respond right away. "And you have the right to speak on his behalf? What is your name?"

"I apologize for my rudeness. I was told you did not appreciate formalities at your schooling. I'm a Hhora, Princess. It is my greatest honor to meet you." She waited for me to nod in acknowledgment. "And yes, I started as Dr. Craftsman's advisor earlier this week."

The look she gave me that I didn't know had some pity in it, but mostly was judgment. Harsh judgment like I didn't have my house in order and I couldn't handle my life.

So *fair* judgment really.

Wow, they're all just making the same mistakes over and over again.

My heart broke as I stared at this breathtaking and perfect fairy. She was

everything I could never be—poised and elegant. Hair perfectly in place and calm.

I was none of those things. From my wild mane to my hot temper and loud laugh that I sometimes snorted during... I would never be like this woman.

Not even with all of the magic in both worlds.

And yet this was who he decided to put next to him day in and day out and *advise him*.

“Always the fool,” I whispered, shaking my head. I opened my mouth to tell Julian to fuck off but was interrupted.

“Tamsin, wait,” Neldor called out from the front of the cafeteria. He swiped in and then was in front of me. “Hhora, hello.”

She curtsied for him as well and gave a formal greeting. Great, he knew this perfect woman as well.

“This is—I messed up. Hhora, give us a few moments. Everyone, we need a barrier.” Neldor’s eyes were almost panicked, so I nodded and we backed away from the table towards the window and he put a barrier over us.

“Why are you so freaked out that Julian is a fucking moron again?” I demanded.

“Because he’s not and I genuinely fucked up,” he whispered. “I will explain but please—it was truly an accident. I didn’t do this on purpose or—” He pulled his phone out of his pants and quickly tapped it several times before handing it over. “It was in my notes to tell you. I genuinely forgot.”

I glanced down and saw the note “Explain Hhora.” I nodded. “Okay, yeah, fine, you forgot something. Why are you so upset?”

He sighed, scrubbing the back of his neck. “I don’t want you to think I was trying to sabotage your relationship with your mate.”

“That’s not your style.” I reached for patience when he simply studied

me. “It’s fine, okay? Can you please just tell me what the fuck is going on? I’m a bit fixated that my mate hired the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever seen who is the exact opposite of me to stand next to him all day long and advise him on—I don’t even fucking know. An excuse for him to have an actual sweet fairy next to him instead of me?”

Neldor snorted but then hurried to apologize when I flinched. “There are a lot of things you could say about Hhora, but ‘sweet’ will never be one of them.” He waved me off. “Julian came to me about a month ago and said he basically wanted prince lessons. That he sucked at the etiquette lessons his uncle had tried to force down his throat, but everything he had learned was meant for warlocks.

“He wanted to learn about fairy and Faerie everything now that you accepted him back so he never embarrassed you. Also to help you since you had a damn planet to run and would never remember it all. I reminded him that I was there for that, and he made the point that I wouldn’t always be with you and we weren’t actually together. I agreed and Hhora came to mind.”

I nodded along with everything he said, but my gaze was on the stunning woman the whole time. I hated her being by Julian. Seriously, it took everything I had not to open a portal under the woman to the moon so she could never be around him again.

“Tams, can you please focus on what I’m saying instead of her beauty?”

“Great, you fucking like her too,” I grumbled.

“No, not in the slightest,” Neldor drawled. “I respect her, but I’d rather try for a damn cactus than Hhora.” He sighed when I didn’t say anything. “And I’m not *her* type.”

“Right, so she likes buff guys like Julian? Or is Hudson more her type?”

“No, Izzy is.”

I blinked at the woman but then my neck popped I looked at Neldor so

fast. My eyes went wide at his amusement, and I even turned on my telepathy to check he was telling me the truth. “Oh thank fuck one of them isn’t a complete moron and is finally learning.” Then I had another thought and opened my mouth.

“Julian does know she’s a lesbian,” he said before I could ask. “He wouldn’t hear of hiring a woman as his advisor because of the optics, especially a female fairy, and risk upsetting you or any issues of jealousy.” He studied me as I let out a heavy breath and leaned against the wall. “Though I’m *shocked* you’re acting like this and being so damn jealous.”

“We have a history,” I defended. “You don’t know... You—I step around things better. Julian hasn’t in the past. Campbell. Watching him have dates when he had the black magic cursing him. Students throwing themselves at him and having to watch that constantly. Listening to their thoughts when I couldn’t control my telepathy. You don’t know what I’ve had to...”

Fine, I was jealous and it was over the top, but we weren’t in a secure place.

Was that really so hard to understand?

“Part of me wants to make you jealous now,” he muttered, his eyes went wide at whatever was on my face. “Sorry.”

“I don’t play those kinds of games. I won’t be with someone who does. They *hurt* people. Other games—teasing and... That’s different.”

“I know. I’m—I get frustrated.”

I didn’t know what to say or if there was anything to say so I simply nodded. Did I want Neldor with anyone? No, of course not.

But I didn’t know that I could ever be with him, so I didn’t get to have a vote in that.

If he was with someone to try and make me jealous? Yeah, he could go

dive into a volcano like he wanted to toss other people into. I hated that kind of shit.

Really, I did.

I listened to him explain who Hhora was. She was basically raised as a lady-in-waiting in the old ways of court. Their family had served Neldor's for generations and generations, Hhora's mother as the right hand of the previous queen.

And since there wasn't going to be a queen of the dark realm, but only one of all of Faerie... Hhora lost out on her position.

Whoops. No wonder the woman gave me a look like she didn't like me.

The barrier came down and I walked over to Hhora. "I apologize for wasting your time. The situation has been explained to me now. What is Julian asking?" She held out a note for me and I accepted it, taking it out of the envelope and immediately recognizing Julian's elegant handwriting.

My dearest Tamsin,

I know you are going through something difficult right now and you probably want nothing more but to cuddle up with journals of fairies or books about your world and get lost in anything else but what is going on, but I miss you. I have an event tonight and I hope you might attend with me. I know you hate functions, but there is something it has to offer that you will love.

Unsuspecting prey.

The event is for powerful magical users and very specifically didn't invite a single fairy. I would think that interesting if I didn't already know the type of people going. None would think to piss off those attending by bringing a fairy as their date, but we love to ruffle those kinds of feathers, don't we, my sweet fairy?

Come with me tonight? Let some of your security cloak and hunt while we draw attention and eat too much. I want to dance with the most beautiful woman I've ever seen like I haven't been able to at other balls in the past. Now we can and I want to every chance possible.

I never have to hide you or my love for you again and it makes my heart so happy.

Please join me tonight.

All my love,

Julian

Reading that and feeling that he meant it made my heart happy as well. I read it twice before putting it back in the envelope. Yeah, to have a night out with Julian, I would suffer through dealing with assholes and whispers.

“Ara, I need to see what’s on my schedule to change. Also, can you connect Hhora here with Jordan and Cara? They’re going to have to coordinate in the future. I need to know if they can pull this off tonight, especially with what to wear and—”

“I apologize, Your Highness, but Dr. Craftsman asked me to handle your attire, and it will be ready to match his tux,” Hhora interjected.

“Princess Tamsin has very specific tastes,” Ara hedged.

“Dr. Craftsman was clear on that, and I spoke with Natalie Higgins this morning while you were in class, Your Highness. My understanding is you’ve worked with her in the past several times, and Dr. Craftsman made it clear she would know your tastes as well.”

“Yes, anything Natalie approves is fine,” I accepted. I took a tablet from Ara and nodded. “Neldor, can we do power training tomorrow afternoon?”

“Of course. Reschedule the other meeting as well in the morning?” he muttered as he looked over my shoulder.

“I’d double-book then. Can you handle it on your own and let me know?”

“Yes, if you tell Irma I get a meal of spoiling. No matter how much I butter that woman up, she still won’t spoil me, and I’m not going to reopen my castle just for that.”

“I’ll do better than that. I’ll give you control over Sunday night dinner menu going forward.” I cleared my throat when people froze. “I didn’t realize you didn’t have more input. I don’t really care and it’s all good. Tell me if you’re in the mood for something.”

“Thanks, Tams,” he whispered.

“No, thank you. I...” I wanted to say I needed the night off, but I would have wanted something else. I wanted to have a night that Julian prepared for me wasn’t something I should say in front of others like that.

I was pretty sure Neldor knew where my mind was.

But the reason everyone had reacted like that was because Sunday night dinners had been a family affair in Neldor’s family. I had learned that from Taeral a few months ago which was why Neldor had always pushed for them, subconsciously even. His mother had left all the realm’s business outside, and it had only been family and friends in the private dining room.

So yeah, Neldor could control the menu at the castle and do whatever he wanted. It was the least I could do for him to help him when he’d done so much for me.

Everyone had their marching orders then and we had our normal lunch meeting. I finished classes, and we actually had our power training right after instead of later at night. We did it in Faerie so people didn’t try to watch on campus. The sports teams used the arena right after class which was why normally did it a night, but I was going to talk to Edelman about doing it in Faerie on Fridays.

It was fucking annoying that Neldor and I were so damn busy and had to do a class on Friday nights because the elites were fucking babies. I was over that.

Really, I was.

I showered and changed at the dorm, Izzy ready to help me get ready along with Cara since she was amazing with hair and makeup and enjoyed it as much as Izzy. Honestly, they both did, and they weren't blowing smoke up my ass. I listened to their thoughts. It was fun because I appreciated it and they didn't have to do it all of the time.

Plus, they also got the expensive cosmetics and products I did too. They wanted to do something to deserve that stuff instead of just being close to the princess. I appreciated them not wanting to take advantage of me like that.

And I was glad I wasn't taking advantage of them either.

Hhora showed up right at the perfect time with the dress.

And it was perfect for me.

Seriously, her perfection was going to annoy me.

"Dayumn girl," Izzy complimented after I was zipped up in it.

I met Hhora's gaze in the mirror and saw the look of judgment she gave Izzy. "I understand you're busy as Julian's advisor, but if you ever have time or know of someone who could work with Izzy, Jordan, and Cara on what you're going to be teaching Julian, I would appreciate it. Or who should be the right person so they're never embarrassed to step out on the stage I've pushed them onto."

She read between the lines well. "I understand, Your Highness. I'll coordinate it."

"I appreciate that. I want people to always be honest and open with me in private so the public façade never turns us into dolls, but I want everyone around me to have the right tools at their disposal."

“It’s unconventional, but I appreciate your viewpoint.”

It was a nice way of saying she disagreed with it, but she knew she didn’t have the authority to correct me. I was fine with that. I didn’t care if she disagreed or would judge me.

I just cared that she kept professional and didn’t run her mouth. Clearly, she wasn’t the type.

The dress was a deep emerald mini that matched Julian’s eyes and had a black lace bodice over the top and long black skirts over it that split in the front to show how short the skirt was. It was sleeveless and strapless... And daring. A woman had to be toned and in great shape to truly pull something like it off, and Julian clearly knew that to pick it.

Well, if he did. I assumed he had because of the color, but he might have just said he liked the color.

“You look even more breathtaking in that dress than I’d envisioned,” he greeted when I stepped out of the portal. “When Natalie sent me options, I knew that was the dress my mate should wear.”

Options? I felt my cheeks flush at the idea that he looked through pictures of dresses just to find something for me given how busy he was.

And I matched with him. The vest of his three-piece suit was the same shade of green as my dress and his eyes. He was making it *exceptionally* clear that I was his.

Fuck, this man was so damn intense and it was hot.

He was hot.

His dark blond hair was shoulder length now and naturally curly, tucked behind his ears. He was putting a bit of product in it, so the curls were defined and not frizzy and it was sexy, giving him that bedhead look without the crunchy mousse feel. The black suit made him look like he was stepping off of the cover of GQ instead of just an ordinary businessman or G-man

joke. No, Julian was anything but average.

At six-two and filled in for his larger frame, he was drool-worthy to anyone attracted to males. And that was before the sexy British accent.

His shirt was black and so was his wider tie. He had a pin, and a chain from the pin to his pocket. On anyone else, it would look cheesy or like he was trying to act like a movie character, but for Julian it just always worked.

“Thank you for setting this up,” I said as I walked over to him. I took his hand but then leaned in more, noting the surprise in his eyes but accepting my offer and kissing me. I didn’t care who was around or where we were. I wanted to kiss Julian.

So I did.

His other hand slid up my neck and held me to him, keeping the kiss polite but heated. He cleared his throat and leaned away, searching my eyes before he started to glance at my aura.

But then he stopped himself.

He let out a slow breath and met my eyes, doing a double take at whatever he saw in my gaze. “I don’t always realize that I do it.”

“No, yeah, I get it. You’ve—it’s a long habit to break.” I wasn’t sure what to say or do though.

“But I want to start asking you things first and trusting what you tell me instead of—my therapist helped me see that it’s invasive. You’re very careful with your telepathy and respect people’s privacy. I don’t. I should try to talk first.”

“I cheat too,” I offered.

“Right, but you see it as cheating or for when you’re confused. I default to it. I was raised to get the information first to have the upper hand. Yes, to protect myself—I can’t even blame my mum for that because of the position we were in, but I don’t want to live my life that way anymore.”

“I get that.” I stared in his eyes. “What did you want to know?”

He licked his lips. “Hhora said there was some confusion about her working for me?”

“Yes, and Neldor made it *exceedingly* clear that it was his mistake.” I snorted. “He even showed me the item on his list to tell me so I didn’t think he was messing with our mating. There’s just been too much going on with the Cluym situation. He apologized.”

“Good, good. I didn’t want—I’ve messed up enough. I didn’t need more on my ledger.”

It was my turn to hesitate. “Why didn’t you tell me yourself?”

“Neldor offered.” He nodded when I couldn’t hide my shock. “He said he wanted to explain why he suggested a woman to work with me so you didn’t think the worst of him either. He knows the royal protocols and all of that, and he was helping me with the reference so it made sense.” He sighed after a moment. “Okay, this is where I have to cheat.”

I swallowed a chuckle when he didn’t wait for me to say anything and looked around me, checking my aura.

He did a double take and cupped my face. “Tamsin, I do *not* like that woman. Please, just—hear me. That woman...”

“I know, she’s a lesbian.”

“Yes, but that’s her preference and the only reason I would hire a woman to work so closely with me. I didn’t want any misunderstandings. I don’t want anyone else and I trust myself. I hope you know I would *never* cheat. Never.”

“You never have.” I could give him that. He’d had ample opportunity. Only the dates when he’d been under black magic.

“Right. It wasn’t about that. I couldn’t be a hypocrite again. I’ve removed people off your detail who like you. I’m not putting a woman next

to me who would be in my ear as an advisor that could cause a misunderstanding. I think it breaks one law or another that I refused to hire a woman unless she was a lesbian, but I don't care because I can't worry or hurt you. I can't."

"I think there are certain exceptions for people who will be in your home and personal stuff," I muttered. "I can't think a woman would have to be forced to consider male applicants for jobs that would include helping her dress or seeing her naked like my attendants. There has to be some sort of exception like that."

"It would make sense," he agreed, but then shook his head. "Still, that was to make you comfortable on her side. Please hear me for my side, there is no chance ever. Never, ever, *ever*."

I read between the lines and couldn't stop myself from letting out a bit of a laugh before getting myself under control. "Why hire her if you don't like her?"

He gave a half shrug. "Why did you keep Onas around? It wasn't just that he already had the position."

I nodded. Yeah, it wasn't just that. Onas was a fount of information. Even if I'd never really liked him, he was fucking useful and worth the looks and attitude. "I had the same impression. She would be worth the judgmental looks and disappointed disposition."

"She's really good at that look," he drawled. "I think it's her default setting."

I snorted. "Glad it's not just me."

"No, I've been working with her this week and it's pretty damn constant. But she's good. She's always respectful—is she not to you?"

"No, she keeps her opinion to herself and makes it clear that my opinion is the one that matters. I don't care if she doesn't like me. I never care about

that.”

“Yeah, I don’t either. I just care she won’t sabotage us and will do the job. Won’t gossip or leak information.”

“She won’t.” I nodded when he glanced at me. “I was listening and checked again with Neldor after class. He said she’s a vault. I’ll check in since she’s next to you, but it was very clear from her that she took pride in her reputation above all else. Plus, she takes her service seriously. She can’t serve the next queen of the dark realm because there won’t be one, and she sees serving the future prince of Faerie as a challenge fitting of her.”

“I’m not sure if I’m insulted or impressed,” he sighed.

“I think you should be a bit of both,” I admitted with a shrug. “It’s more that you’re a warlock and a Craftsman and the rep of your family more than you, Dr. Julian Craftsman the person. There hasn’t been a non-fairy mate to the queens in a few generations and it’s causing a lot of uproar. Plus, I have five. I’ve also can’t find any records of a vampire one.” I swallowed loudly and looked away.

“He’s such a duffer,” Julian whispered and hugged me to him. “I’m sorry he hurt you.”

I knew that tone and pushed away. “But?”

“No, no but, Tams.”

“Right... *But?*”

He sighed, kissing my forehead and moving his hand to my face again. “But we’ve both been where he was and lost in our heads in something. I can’t tell you the amount of times I tried to sort something out and I felt like I blinked and it’s weeks or months later. Hell, I’m just dealing with everything normal now and I’m like where the fuck did the summer go? How is it October? Weren’t we just at the resort at the pool?”

I nodded that I heard him. I understood what he was saying, but I didn’t

think that it was enough to forgive everything that had happened.

I just didn't know what would be enough to forgive what happened...
Assuming that was what Darby really even wanted. I wasn't sure he did.

6

He dropped the topic and we went inside, the whispers and drama starting from the moment the guard checking people in caught sight of me. He wasn't in a position to deny me entry, but he did make it clear that there were rules about how many guards people were allowed to bring in.

"It's fine, Captain," I told Agis firmly when he tried to argue. I smiled at the guard who was in charge. "I'm assuming the rest of my detail can wait outside in case there is a problem, yes?"

He dipped his head to me. "Of course, Your Highness. I apologize for even bringing it up. If we had known you were coming, other arrangements could have been made, but we denied others and—"

"And they would give your boss a ton of flack for giving someone else the exception," I finished for him. "I fully understand. I apologize. If I tell people where I'll be, that creates other issues as well." I nodded to Agis that it was really fine. "Take positions at windows. I'm sure your guys can watch me just fine from there. I'll make sure to be visible. Julian and I want to dance and have fun. Call in extra people if you're going to panic."

"Yes, Your Highness." He gave a look to a few people, and I knew they were communicating with telepathy runes, but I didn't listen in. They would handle it, and I was already going against what had been ordered with me having more security for a while because of my latest power jump.

Hey, they would still be there even if they weren't attached to my damn hip. Outside was fine. Seriously. I was the most powerful magic user there

and Julian could tap into my magic. We were fine at one damn party.

The host had been warned though because he immediately found us.

“Julian, I’m glad you came, but I thought you understood the point of the night and the invitation,” he greeted... Completely ignoring me.

“Do you have a death wish?” Julian asked him. “You just ignored the heir of Faerie.”

I patted Julian’s arm when I felt his magic ramping up. “It’s fine, darling. I don’t care about being acknowledged by someone so insecure that they’ll go brag they’re better than me because of this. It’s all so ridiculous and the same games over and over again.”

“We care, Your Highness,” Agis bit out.

“Then you punish him, Captain. I want to have a date with my mate.” I nodded that I wasn’t kidding and gave a slight tug on Julian’s arm that I wanted to move.

“I’m sorry,” Julian whispered as he led me on.

“No, I am. I’m sorry that I’m ruining your night like always and—”

“Hey, it’s not you,” he whispered, leaning in and kissing my temple. “I’m sorry my people won’t pull their heads from their asses. I can’t believe some of them *still* do this crap with you. That you *still* have to deal with this.”

I gave a half shrug. “Either I’m a bitch for throwing a fit and a baby for making a deal about it or a pushover without pride for letting it go and it can affect my people like with the bears. There’s just no winning and—it’s exhausting. I’m so exhausted of it all. I really am, Julian.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I thought...”

“What?”

“I didn’t think anyone would still be that blatant and right away like that,” he admitted.

“It happens all of the time,” I said sadly.

“It’s gotten better.” His voice was quiet, almost like he knew it wasn’t enough but it was all he had to offer.

“It’s gotten better.”

“I liked that you called me ‘darling.’” He snagged two drinks from a passing server and I felt him pull on my magic.

I watched as the drinks changed different colors before going back to their original pale color and he handed me one. “What did you just do?”

“Taeral taught me the fairy rune they use to check for anything toxic to you guys or any magic that can harm you,” he told me. “Once I proved to him that I could use your magic in that way, he spoke with the commanders and they agreed I could at least learn the runes and magic that could protect you.”

“Thank you.” I felt my cheeks heat as I put the rune on me that I needed to drink alcohol and had a sip.

He smiled, taking a sip as well before we continued towards the food. “How are your classes going?”

“They’re really interesting. Honestly, they’re so damn fascinating that I wish I had so much more time to dive into them, but I barely get to do the reading and homework.”

“You are running all of Faerie,” he chuckled. “Which do you like best?”

“All of them,” I answered honestly. I smiled when he gave me a hesitant look. “I’m not kidding. Faerie is fascinating when you take out my link and the terror of being the conduit to the planet. The difference of the world and the—it’s all so cool. And the history of the dark realm and the royals is so cool. I mean, there are so many things—the realms are like a mirror of each other in so many ways.

“They don’t see it because they grew up there, but I do, and pointing it

out to them is fun in itself. I keep showing the parallels and it's like hitting them upside the head at times. That's always fun, but also like *duh*. I mean, even the parallels now are unreal. Just look at Iolas and Taeral. Seriously? Yeah, no, they're totally different realms and nothing alike." I rolled my eyes so hard Julian snorted.

I kept talking about school and my classes as we picked up different appetizers and ate. I realized I'd been talking for at least a half an hour and froze mid-sentence, my face flushing lava hot.

"Sorry." I cleared my throat and tossed back the rest of my drink. "Sorry."

He took my empty glass and set it on the table along with his. "Why are you sorry? I enjoy listening to you talk, Tams." He nodded when I hesitated, leaning in and kissing my cheek. He pressed his lips to my ear. "You were so excited and animated. I'm glad you're finally excited about your classes and enjoying school. You used to hate it. You hated school and it killed me because you love learning."

"I hated the others," I admitted. "Or some of the teachers and... I hated being cut off at the knees at every turn. It was like everything was a lie. One of the first promises Edelman made me was that supes push each other to soar. You said the same. I never blamed you; you were in a tough spot, but I resented Edelman. He shouldn't have made that promise. He was part of the problem and I felt..."

"Yeah, I hated it. I hated seeing what they did to you. I always felt like I was abusing you," he confessed, nodding when I couldn't hide my shock. "That was part of my spinout with the Power Playoffs. They rigged the game against you, and I was the teacher who helped them. It wasn't just that I taught you the runes that hurt people. I taught them the runes that they took into the competition that they used to cheat against you too, Tams."

He had never told me that. Seriously, that therapist was really getting Julian to open up.

It was amazing and in a way made me sad.

“Hey, what did I say wrong?” he whispered.

“No, I just...” I shook my head, but then felt bad when he pushed me. “I feel like I failed you. I couldn’t help you the way your therapist does and I tear into myself. I’m glad they’re helping, but I feel like such a failure of a partner that you couldn’t tell me these things.”

“Oh, Tams, *none* of that is on you, *cariño*,” he murmured as he hugged me to him. “We’re not the solution to all of each other’s problems as partners. I can’t fix everything for you either no matter how much I’d want to. Do you blame me for that? No, of course, you don’t. You support me. That’s what a partner does.”

He moved his hands to my face and leaned away so he could see my eyes, searching them but also so I could see the sincerity in them.

“Do you know how much it helps me that you support me going to therapy?” He brushed his lips over mine. “Tams, it’s everything to me. I was raised that Craftsmans never asked for help. We didn’t have problems. We were never broken. *You* showed me how asking for help is being strong. You’re the strongest person I’ve ever known, and you asked for help the day I met you.”

I frowned. “No, I didn’t. I couldn’t ask for help for anything. I lied and hid everything and ran all of the time and—”

He kissed me quiet. “That’s because your trust kept being broken, my sweet fairy. You gave that trust and asked for help first. You accepted coming to Artemis to get help with your power. You accidentally hurt people—even if they were bad people—and when help was offered, you took it. You asked Darby for extra help with your studies. You asked me for help to

acclimate your life. You asked for help. You did. I saw that you did.

“You only shut down when we failed you or you saw certain knowledge could get us hurt. You ran when you were scared. But you were strong and admitted you couldn’t bear it all alone. I thought that was amazing. I just didn’t know how to do the same. It took me a while to... Deprogram. Figure it out. Yes, the therapist is the way it’s happened for me to communicate, but *you* are the reason I had the strength to see the therapist.”

“Thanks, Julian.”

“Thanks for coming into my life and giving me the chances I didn’t deserve.”

“You deserved them as long as you take them seriously,” I mumbled, feeling stupid saying it and maybe that it wasn’t the right thing to say.

“I do. I take you seriously.”

That I believed.

“How about a dance?” Julian asked after a few minutes of us simply staring at each other.

“That would be nice.”

We smiled and he led me out to the dance floor, neither of us caring that no one else was dancing. Julian took the lead and off we went.

Only for the music to stop.

Oh, someone wanted to play that sort of game with me?

Fuckers.

I glanced around to see where the music had been set up at but met Agis’s amused gaze. He winked at me and a new song started up.

So clearly the captain knew the right way to handle that problem.

Nice.

Julian chuckled and gave me a kiss before we went back to dancing like nothing had happened. My heart soared as I moved around the floor with my

mate, his hands feeling right on me. We were in sync to the point that I knew our hearts would beat at the same moment as well as the air entering and leaving our lungs in tandem. I saw in his eyes that he felt the same.

Our souls were dancing together in that moment as much as our bodies were.

He chuckled as he lifted me in the air and flipped me around. Then he gracefully spun me back and forth, knowing how much I loved it before dipping me low enough that my head almost touched the floor.

“Daring,” I purred.

“You wouldn’t want it any other way.”

No, I wouldn’t. Not with Julian. Not between us.

We kept dancing for another two songs and then took a break. Right as we did, I thought I saw someone that couldn’t have been there but then did a double take as I realized he was really there.

Neldor.

And he was in his pajamas?

“Okay, so apparently I now see your level of glamour because people would be freaking out right now if they were seeing what I am,” Julian muttered under his breath.

Right, glamour!

He reached us and immediately put a barrier up.

“Are you here uninvited in your pajamas?” I blurted.

“Yes, but only you can see it,” he mumbled. “I didn’t have time to change into a tux when Agis alerted me of the problem.”

“Shouldn’t he have alerted me?” I bitched.

“Agis is worried and confused,” Julian muttered.

Neldor nodded. “I think he wanted me to more confirm what was going on, but I felt it from outside before you even stopped dancing. Tams, we’ve

talked about you being careful with this kind of stuff.”

Huh? I sighed. “That is a very long fucking list, so you have to be a bit more specific.”

“Why do people look like they’re a bit stoned?” Julian asked as he focused out at the room.

“Her,” Neldor drawled, nodding when I pointed to myself. “Yes, *you*.” He reached out and ran his fingers over my cheek. “You were having a great time, baby doll. What happens when you’re so happy and your soul is loved like that?” He gave me a sad smile when I didn’t answer. “What happens when Lageos is full of love?”

I swore. “My demigod side came out, didn’t it?” I sighed when he nodded. “It’s only—it’s not like it happens often, Neldor.”

“No, yeah, I get that, but…” He glanced at Julian. “Your soul is healing. Your mate is loving you as he should. That piece of your soul you gave him is strengthening.”

“I feel like I should apologize for the pain in your aura,” Julian muttered.

“Cheating,” I told him under my breath.

“Right, sorry,” he sighed.

“I get what you’re saying, Neldor, but I can’t not be happy in public because other people feel it. That’s just not fair to ask. Nor is it reasonable. It’s like just saying I can only be around people when I’m in pain or miserable. Yeah, that will help my image.”

“No, I don’t think—I don’t want that. I’m saying an event where they limit how many guards you can have with you isn’t the place.”

The sigh I let out could probably be heard from the other side of the globe. “Reach for my breast. Just this once you have permission to grope me.” I nodded. “Go ahead.” The second he lifted his hand, I teleported Julian and I outside of his barrier, breaking it in a way I knew would hurt, and we

were about twenty feet away from him. “I appreciate the concern and worry, but please don’t be stupid like the others. I can teleport.”

“Shit, that hurt,” he groaned.

I teleported us back and healed him. “I’m sorry. I know it did, but it was to make the point. I don’t do that because it hurts, but then you guys don’t understand. My teleporting automatically breaks the barriers or magic, okay? I hear you. I’ll watch it or not do it long. I even appreciate you rushing out here in your damn jammies to check on me.” I leaned in and kissed his cheek so he felt my sincerity. “Have a nice night, Neldor.”

“You too, Tams.” He glanced between us and then settled on Julian. “Could you feel it?”

“No, I didn’t. I just felt her love for me and... I think I’m wrapped in the magic of whatever is happening with her. Like a hug.”

“That’s what I really came to find out. That means we need the guards to be on alert for it.” He glanced around, people back to themselves now—albeit happier.

But like... So what? Seriously, so what?

I understood the concern it was another reason people might want to nab me, but that was a long fucking list. I could make people happy with my magic. Right, there were runes for that and more. I had to be happy for it to work, and how many people who were abducted were smiling and feeling great all of the time?

Exactly. None.

Julian waited until Neldor was long gone before shooting me an amused glance. “Just so we’re clear, you know that Agis was mostly confused that Neldor showed up, right?” He chuckled when I did a double take. “His aura flashed shock and confusion when Neldor walked in, and he would have seen the tux. He probably reported to Neldor about the happy vibe or...” He

studied around Agis who was looking at his phone.

“What?”

“He’s amused. Very amused. I would bet anything Neldor checked in with him knowing he was on your security and he mentioned your demigod side was showing or you were sending out happy vibes. Something that was meant to put Neldor at ease that you were fine and the night was good, but Neldor overreacted and was protective, flying off the handle and rushing here.”

“Juan said Neldor’s serious about me and gets into shit at school with people.”

Julian blinked at me for a full minute. “You really don’t listen in on people. Wow.” He cupped my face and brushed his lips over mine again. “Tams, Neldor is in love with you.” I slowly blinked at him and couldn’t make my mouth work. “His aura flares with love all of the time. He can’t hide it from me now that I have your power. He’s very much in love with you. His feelings are true. He would do anything to be with you.”

“Wow,” I whispered. “I thought... Wow.”

“It’s so adorable that you’re so shocked.”

I blew out a harsh breath. “You missed a lot and—you weren’t there for a lot of us hating each other Julian.”

“There is a very thin line between love and hate, Tams, and I don’t think Neldor was on the side of hate really at all. I think he resented you for a lot of things that weren’t your fault and he was just in too much pain to understand. I’m not forgiving him for what he did, but I think he’s done a lot to make up for what he’s done.”

“I do too, but trusting him is a totally different thing.”

“It is. Hey, I’m not trying to sell you on taking another mate. I’m just—he was honest about me, and we all agreed we wouldn’t stand in the way and

we would be honest so you weren't hurt. I'm saying that man is in love with you. Deeply."

Okay then. Wow. And yeah, Julian wouldn't lie about that.

We danced for a bit more and enjoyed the food before deciding to call it a night. Just because I was a bottomless pit, we went and picked up some more food. We were walking out of the Chinese restaurant when Julian chuckled for some reason. I glanced over and saw he was looking at something, following his gaze and saw he was staring at a large ceramic frog that was on a shelf in the window.

Instantly, I knew where his mind was and dropped his arm with an, "Ugh."

"I'm sorry," he snickered and hurried after me. "I'm sorry, Tams. I just..."

I waited until we were outside to respond. "If you make one frog legs joke, I'm locking down a fifty-mile radius from portals and teleporting home."

"Please don't, Your Highness," Agis muttered. "I'm really tired."

"Fine, but I'll dump you in the ocean if you do, Julian." I spun around and shoved at his chest. "You really hurt me with that whole thing. And you wouldn't even let me in after. You shut down your thoughts and—"

"I know. I know I did and I was a jerk," he whispered, handing off the bags and sliding his arm around me. He pulled me closer when I tried to turn away. "Tams, I wasn't laughing at that. I wasn't—I'm sorry."

"I'm not trying to bring up old stuff," I mumbled. "It was years ago. It's just..."

"Not something I should laugh at," he accepted. "I was laughing at the revenge. You were so damn dedicated. I fell so damn hard for you. You were so *dedicated* to making me suffer like I should. It was—you were so—I mean

everything from the ab imprint thing to the sauna shorts. I was—you were so fucking adorable. And I was clueless. I really didn't understand that I hurt you.

“I thought we were playing and then you were so hurt. I was confused and stupid, and it was even more confusing because I realized how much I really liked you already and I had no idea what to do. I just—you're so the boss of me and that's how it should be.” He leaned down and kissed me. “I love feeding you. I love watching you eat and doing your happy dances and the noises you make. All of it. That's why I chuckled. That's the memory I keep.”

“Those cannoli were good,” I mumbled, giving him at least that. “And I remember how you looked like you were drooling over that outfit I wore to my date with Darby.”

“You looked delicious and I was jealous,” he praised.

Well, that helped at least.

“Um, let's go to your place tonight,” I said when it was time to set the portal. I shrugged when he seemed shocked. “I haven't seen the—you bought a condo, right?”

Now that he didn't have to live at the Craftsman estate he said he was going to buy a place to be on US time since that was where most of his business was. It made sense, but I knew it was more so we were in the same time range.

“Yeah, in Chicago, so I'm Central time,” he said, smiling at me.

So the same as me. He was too much.

He cleared his throat. “Isn't Darby waiting at home?”

I snorted. “So?” I sighed when he gave me a look. “I'm not doing this for revenge. I don't even know if he is. I just...”

“Mr. Moore is at your house,” Agis confirmed.

“Fine, can you please let him know that I’m staying at Julian’s tonight after our night out?” I shrugged. Wasn’t that fair and normal? I gave Julian a hesitant look. “Do you not want to show me your place?”

“Of course, I do. As long as…”

“Don’t do that. You brought up Darby. I didn’t—”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” He leaned in and kissed my cheek. “You’re right. You don’t pit us against each other.”

No, I didn’t, but I fully understood why his mind would have gone there and I forgave him. I hadn’t tried to see his place in the weeks Darby had been MIA when I could have. There hadn’t really been the opportunity like this.

“You also didn’t invite me,” I defended weakly.

“You’re right, I didn’t,” he accepted. “I’m sorry. I was going to do it when I got the place furnished, but I blinked and it’s weeks later and I have only a few things. I’ve never done a house on my own.” He set the runes on the portal for what we needed. “I had dorms or the teachers’ residence before the estate. I have no idea what I’m doing.”

I snorted. “I didn’t know either. Call Izzy.”

“I kept thinking I would start it and ask you to help me finish it like you made the estate so much better,” he hedged.

“I’ll help,” I agreed, smiling when he did.

The condo was nice. Pretty damn bare like he’d said, but nice with a great view of Lake Michigan which was really pretty at night. My security switched out and cloaked in the hallway for the night, happy with the carton of Chinese food they each received as they came on shift.

Julian and I ate happily in his sparse kitchen and then it was more than time for bed. He chuckled when I snagged his toothbrush and teased him about my mouth being super gross so he should toss it after. Instead, he kissed me saying he got my clean mouth all dirty again.

It was cute. We were cute like it was a new relationship almost and...
Fun.

Until it came time for more.

7

I moved closer and slid my hands up his chest before taking off his vest. He'd already lost his jacket and tie. My fingers shook as I started to unbutton his shirt.

"Hey, there's no rush."

"It's been months," I whispered. "It's time."

He leaned down and kissed me. "I kept messing up after we had sex, Tams. I know that. You gave me the fantasy I wanted and then faded. You gave me the piece of your soul and thought were ending. We did end for a while. Sex for us isn't always positive in your mind. You get scared with it too. I'm not an idiot."

"Okay, but we just can't never have sex again," I mumbled.

"No, not never. I couldn't even try to promise that when I want you as desperately as I do. Not when you're the sexiest and most beautiful woman in the world."

I searched his eyes. "Then what do you want, Julian?"

His nostrils flared before he took in a long, deep breath. Then he closed his eyes and let out that breath slowly as if trying to stay in control. I almost cheated and listened in to his thoughts. I really wanted to just because I was confused and scared to mess this up when I knew this was our last shot to get things right.

But he'd been working so hard to learn to communicate and I wanted us to do better. I wanted to give him that chance to grow like he'd been giving

me.

For us to be healthy together.

“Undress for me?” he whispered, his voice shaky and unsure. “I want you naked in my new bed, Tams. The bed I sleep in.” He swallowed loudly and opened his eyes, the passion and fire I saw in them setting me ablaze. “Please yourself in my bed. Let me watch. Let me watching you do that be enough to turn you on so I know...”

That we still had that same chemistry. That was what he was worried about. I didn’t need my telepathy to know that was where his mind was. He was worried that even if my soul could heal and love him again, he’d hurt me to the point I wouldn’t feel the same sparks again with him.

I’d worried about the same.

I knew that was why he’d kept up his workout routine. I’d seen how cut he was when we’d been at the resort. His abs and chest were the most defined they’d ever been. His shoulders and arms had more muscle. Not a lot, but it was clear he was training hard even with his busy schedule.

“I’d rather you did it,” I admitted, staring at his chest as my face flushed lava hot. “Can’t we start slower instead of something kinky?” I felt stupid and turned away and was thinking of heading for the door.

He hugged me to him and kissed my neck. “Yes, of course, yes, Tams.” He kissed the other side of my neck next. “Sorry. I didn’t... I was going to just ask to hold you naked in my bed, but then I thought of that and I got...” He leaned in closer and I felt how hard he was against my back. “The wrong head took over. Did—I didn’t mean to demean you or—”

“I get it,” I whispered. “Can you help me with the dress?”

“Of course.” He kissed all along my neck and shoulders as he untied the corset before pulling down the zipper of the mini dress itself. It fell off of me and pooled around my feet, leaving me completely naked besides the heels.

“You were fucking naked under that this whole time? Oh, fuck me.”

I snorted. “That dress doesn’t leave room for anything under it. The corset is the bra.”

“Can I touch you?” he breathed in my ear.

“Yes.”

His hands moved to my hips and he lifted me up before setting me on the bed. He easily moved me back, coming onto the bed with me. Julian licked his lips as he stared into my eyes and then down my body. “Can I stay dressed?”

I shivered. “Yes.”

He chuckled. “That turns you on.”

“Sometimes.” I shrugged.

“Does it turn you on that I’m asking?” He hummed happily when I shivered again. “This is fun. I only hoped to be spoiled by getting to see my gorgeous mate wear a dress I picked out for her, to get to spend time with her, dance with her, and maybe if I was lucky, a kiss goodnight.”

“That was all you really wanted?”

He smirked down at me. “Oh, I want everything with you, Tams. I’m greedy when it comes to you. You know that. It was all I realistically hoped for.” I opened my mouth to ask what he wanted now, but he spoke first. “Can I kiss your nipple? Your pert, pretty pink nipple that looks so fucking delicious and ready for my attention?”

“Yes,” I breathed.

He leaned down and gave my right nipple the softest kiss while he kept my gaze. “Can I lick it, Tams? I want to run my tongue all around—”

“Yes, yes, do whatever you want to it,” I panted.

“The other one too? I can’t just play with only one of your lovely nipples, right? Can I play with the other one? Do what I want to it?”

I moaned and uttered something I thought was a yes.

Julian kissed my other nipple while teasing my right one and then went back and forth, Then he'd bite one suddenly and then be gentle with the other and switch. It was like sensation overload before he pushed my breasts together and sucked on my nipples at the same time.

I thought he was going to ask to do more, but instead he kissed every inch of both my breasts. He took his time and moved them around and it was kind of odd but also arousing and intimate. I felt like he was trying to remember every curve and pore, not just have fun with tits. It was... I felt like he was trying to burn the image of me in his mind almost.

I mean not really because it was my breasts only, but it felt like that level of intensity.

But then he moved one, studying my ribs and kissing them. Then he raised my arms and kissed my underarms. I tried to stop him, but he asked me to let him. I melted even if I worried that I smelled, but he didn't care, kissing back down my body and along my stomach. Then back up another path and along my collarbone.

Was he seriously going to kiss every inch of my body? I knew people *said* that, but it was normally in the proverbial sense or basically they did, not literally because that would take a long fucking time.

He pushed up a bit and rubbed his fingers over a spot on my left shoulder. "Right here. Remember right here, Tams. This is where I'm picking up next time."

"Next time?" I whispered.

"Yeah, next time. I want to map out my mate's body with my lips. I want to do it again and again until I know your body better than I know mine." He met my gaze then, still rubbing that spot. I was shocked when tears filled his pretty eyes. "I started to forget what your body looked like—how soft your

skin was. I couldn't remember what it felt like to kiss your skin and it killed me.

"I tried so hard to remember, and I felt like I was dying inside each time you slipped away from me a little more. I know I was such a bastard to not let you go when you wanted me to or to force you to stay because of the pressure others put on you, but that pain of forgetting more of you—it was killing me. I felt that piece of your soul slipping away, and I knew my soul would die if it did. I'm sorry for being so selfish. I'm so sorry."

"You're not sorry if you don't regret it," I sighed, hating that he brought it up when we were having fun. I didn't want to bring up the past for once.

"I regret how I treated you and a lot of how I messed up. I'm sorry I hurt you. I'm sorry being selfish hurt you, but I can't ever regret holding onto you. I knew I shouldn't let go. I still think it was the right decision and not just because I loved you. I think you needed it too."

"I don't want to talk about this now," I muttered, reaching for the covers to hide since obviously naked time was done.

And it was always awkward when you were the only one naked during a talk.

"Wait, please," he whispered, leaning his forehead down to my shoulder. "Please? I know this wasn't the right time, but my therapist finally helped me figure out how to say what I've tried to tell you a bunch of times."

Fine, that was fair, but I needed to start saying what I needed as well too. "I don't like being the only one naked when we talk like this."

"Oh, right. Sorry." He moved and got me under the covers, giving me a quick kiss as he rolled out of bed and started taking off his shirt. "I was selfish with not letting go, but it was more than that. You were someone who was always abandoned. You've always freely admitted that you have abandonment issues. You were so upset with me for abandoning you."

“The one thing I could do to make you see that you were worth more than the world had treated you was to not let go no matter what. Even if you never took me back, never giving up and loving you unconditionally was what you deserved. I believed that and not just because I was your mate. Because I loved you and saw you deserved that. I would have done it, Tams. I would have kept trying forever so you saw you were worth fighting for.”

I opened my mouth and then closed it before trying a few more times. He was undressed by then, only in his boxer briefs, sliding under the covers with me, but not coming close. The hesitant look in his eyes said it all and he wasn't sure if he was welcome.

“Tams?” he finally whispered when I just stared at him.

“I want to say thank you,” I admitted. “I believe you that it wasn't only selfish. I do. Once more of my hurt and anger cleared I saw you were fighting for me in the background, and like the situation with Professor Kramer abusing me you were there and on my side. I get you were in a bad place too and hurt more than I understood. I'm starting to understand a lot of that more now.”

“But?”

“I don't know there is a but,” I sighed, sitting up and pulling my knees to my chest. “I think it's more, I hear you and I need time to process that? I appreciate what you were trying to do, but you weren't the right person to do it because you were my mate?”

“That's what my therapist said too,” he admitted. “That I undoubtedly came off more as a fucked up stalker or obsessive mate who wouldn't let you go because you were mine bullshit.”

“I don't think you were—it wasn't possessive,” I mumbled. “I don't know, Julian.”

“Hey, sorry,” he whispered, moving closer and hugging me to him. “I

didn't mean to ruin tonight. I just wanted to..."

"No, you didn't. I hear you, and I'm glad we can talk about this stuff." I sighed and then looked at him. "Can you just not be a dummy and do it during naked time? I was all hot and bothered and feeling all the sparks with you. I wanted orgasms and passion. Not to talk about the past. I don't want to go back, Julian."

"I don't either, but I want you to heal." He kissed my eyes, making me realize I'd been tearing up. "You're right, no more talking like that during naked time. I'm a fucking moron."

"You really are," I said, sighing dramatically... Knowing full well I'd done the same.

"Yeah, I am," he murmured as he kissed along my neck. "How can I make amends?"

I gasped as his hand slid under my ass and then teased my pussy. "Okay, we've not played like this."

"New is fun," he chuckled. "Keep your knees closed, *cariño*."

He'd certainly gotten some advice from Marisol. I'd asked her and it meant "dear" or "honey" in Spanish, but she'd let me know that in some regions like where she was from it was more like "dearest possible." Almost like I was so dear that it wasn't possible to find one who was dearer.

Or she was totally full of shit. I didn't think so even if I couldn't find that online but then again, there was slang from different parts of the US I couldn't always find written down either. The world was weird like that, with as much information we could have at our fingertips, we didn't tell each other all that much at times.

"What are you thinking about while my fingers are dripping with your wetness, my mate?" he asked as he nipped my skin. "I want you to sit on my face, Tams. Just a night of you sitting on my face and licking your tight little

—”

I orgasmed, trying to rock my hips and get more, but his arm kept me in place and his fingers went deeper as his thumb pressed on my clit. It wasn't a big one, but it was needed. I'd *needed* to be touched and loved on like this.

And for a while.

“I feel like you've been neglected, Tams,” he whispered, his voice worried like he didn't know if he should bring it up. “I figured they... Have you not with Hudson and Lucca?”

I cleared my throat and buried my face in my knees. “No.”

“Why?”

I sighed. “It's been a *thing* that when I fight or have issues with one of you that I can turn to a different mate and not feel lonely or as bad about the situation. It didn't feel...” I blew out a slow breath. “You've even said it, Julian.”

“I know. It's hard to not think like that. I don't even mean it to be hurtful or rude. It's more like I know it's not just the two of us in this relationship.” He kissed my hair. “But you shouldn't have to suffer alone when one of us is being a jerk. Darby was an asshole in this, and it's not Hudson and Lucca's fault that he has been. They tried to help him.” He cleared his throat. “Have they not been—”

“Oh my fucking god they have been *everywhere*,” I groaned, pulling away and turning to face him, his fingers moving from my body.

“I wasn't done playing with you,” he growled.

I blinked and I was lying on my back staring up at him kneeling between my spread legs. “So it's like that?”

He smirked down at me. “Yeah, it's like that tonight.”

Okay then. I licked my lips as he ran his fingers over my clit and teased me. “What was I saying?”

“That you wanted more attention from me,” he fibbed.

“I do,” I said, but then I remembered what we were actually talking about. “Oh, right, Hudson and Lucca.”

“What are those gits doing now? Do I need to beat them up?”

I snorted. “No. Can you make them keep their shirts on somehow? Is there a rune for that?”

He froze and blinked at me. “I’m sorry?”

“They keep taking their shirts off around me. Like all of the fucking time. They come to breakfast saying they forgot them. Dinner they go for an extra run just so they come in shirtless and sweaty. It’s a fucking joke and I’m one big ball of need. Now Neldor was getting in on it last week and I’m like... Seriously.”

“So they weren’t kidding about that full-court press,” he chuckled. He moved in closer and brushed his lips over mine. “Well, if they wind you up, come to me and I’ll lick you, Tams. No questions or explanation needed. Just let me lick you. You know how much I love licking you. I’d lick you every fucking day. Every night. I’d lick you every time you teleport to me no matter if I’m—”

Yup, I climaxed again.

And he didn’t stop talking or playing with me. He fingered me for three more orgasms, and even if it wasn’t remotely close to life-altering sex like we used to have it was worlds better than the pain we used to have months ago.

Plus, I snuggled down in his arms after not because he helped me with dreams or my magic, but because I wanted to. I wanted to be with Julian, and I felt our love wouldn’t ruin us both anymore. I didn’t know for sure if we would make it or if we were good for each other, but I thought we had a chance again.

That was enough for the moment... Right?

8

Darby was sitting in the kitchen when I arrived home. I couldn't hide my shock, but I also didn't know what to do with him being there, so I was pretty sure I didn't handle it well and hurt him but like... What did he expect?

Seriously?

Plus, I was also thinking about what Julian had said to me that morning over breakfast.

"Irma, can you see if we can have a meeting with Esta, Alea, Jordan, and Cara?" I asked instead. "I want to try and fit the pieces of something that's been on my mind. Nothing formal, just if people can fit some time—"

"I will have them come over for lunch, Your Highness," she said easily.

I sighed. "Irma, people have lives. Just because I want a meeting doesn't mean they have to drop everything on their Saturday and come over in a few hours."

She gave me an amused look. "That's exactly what it means, *Princess Tamsin*."

"It shouldn't. I don't want to be like that with anyone. I won't accept people treating me like that and I won't disrespect people like that. If it's an emergency, that's different. If they're jerks, fine, beat them up. But this—just be normal, please. See when people have time without changing their lives."

I swallowed a sigh when it was dinner instead.

Brat.

"Thank you for meeting with me on such short notice. I hope no one was

pressured into dropping their plans for this.” I shot Irma a look that I knew she had told them to get their asses over to my house.

“I can watch a movie with Ray after dinner, Your Highness,” Cara promised, her friend, Jordan nodding as well. They had grown up together and were both mates of the Alpha wolf cousins who Geiger had found to help guard me when I’d been alone and in trouble. “What is on your mind?”

I let out a heavy sigh. “I have concerns about the bakery.”

“You are unhappy about our work or what—our profits are—” Esta worried, her skin changing color to reflect her concern.

“No, Esta, I’m so sorry. No, I’m thrilled with the job you’re all doing. We need to expand and expand. You’re all wonderful. I’m sorry, I should have clarified. Please, my only worry for the hobgoblins is breaking you all with the demands.”

“We can hire more help, Your Highness,” she muttered, her skin slowly changing back to normal.

My bad.

“Yes, but you need a bigger space and then it’s a target. That’s—we should probably have it in Faerie and another problem for another day,” I clarified. “No, I’m concerned about the blacklist.”

Irma caught on first. “People keep buying their way off of it. You came up with the idea of people being able to pay penance and now it’s just become a penalty for bad behavior to get back off. People stopped taking it seriously and have stopped caring that they get on it.”

“Yeah, that has seriously backfired big time,” I drawled. It was a joke. It was disgusting and fine, the donations to help the hobgoblin housing in Faerie were great, but it disgusted a lot of us and hurt morale. “And I don’t know what to do about it. How to fix this to make it real.”

“Where is your mind?” Esta asked honestly.

“I would like one blanket forgiveness to say it’s a new era of us being back, people have had time to fully come to terms I’m not just some unknown and I’m the heir of Faerie and pull their heads out of their asses. Not money this time, but—I want the hobgoblins to have more fun. They had such a rough time while fairies were frozen. I’ve seen—the kids wanted to experience Halloween so much, and I kept promising myself I would take them—”

“There’s no way that you could take every hobgoblin child trick-or-treating,” Cara muttered.

“No, but there are a lot of us now,” I defended weakly. “Or enough to try. At least with the older kids who will remember it. I was thinking a party for the younger ones who—maybe these jerks could come and not be jerks for one damn day and give candy to the younger hobgoblins in a controlled setting. Could they just show they’re not assholes? Please? Like seriously. Try for once? Then they can get off the list and we all try again?”

“Are you okay, *agra*?” Darby whispered from behind me.

I flinched at the term and him being there. “I’m fine.” I cleared my throat, no one there believing that. “I’m tired of the same problems happening over and over again. I feel like I’m just spinning my wheels too often and nothing changes. I can’t change anything. I can’t fix anything. I just want...”

“You’re at the eye of the storm, Tamsin,” Irma said gently. “You always are. Everything is different. *Everything*. I know you hate that for every three steps forward you have to take one back—”

“Or sometimes you only get two steps for one back,” Jordan cut in. “But that is life. You’ve made huge progress. We all see it. I also think this idea has a lot of promise. Will it work for everyone? No. Unfortunately, it won’t and feels just like you know that you cannot save everyone. But I think it’s

the best shot we have to put the past behind us to have a better future with some of them.”

“And going forward, anyone we place on the blacklist, we will also notify their leadership,” Esta added. She shook her head when I sighed. “You are the owner of that bakery, Your Highness. People know that and intentionally insult us because they can’t do it to your face.”

“Is that true?” I whispered, horror filling me when the hobgoblin’s skin changed to the color of worry and guilt. “I didn’t know. I’m sorry.”

“We didn’t want to burden you, but we should have been honest,” Esta replied. “You’ve asked for... We should all be more honest. I understand you don’t want to engage in these situations and rise above the petty. We agreed with you and wanted to do the same, but the bullies aren’t stopping. It’s turned more into that accepting unacceptable behavior is giving them approval to do more.”

“Amazing how that has been turned back on me,” I grumbled, rubbing my temples as I sat back in my seat. “That wasn’t supposed to be for snide comments and bullshit like this. That was in abusing women and... I’m sorry. Truly.”

“You didn’t know, and we didn’t know people would continue this,” Irma said.

“Or get worse,” Esta admitted, nodding when I winced. “The more they had to be polite to your faces, the worse they started being to those they could behind your back. They never hurt us, but it’s been...”

“It’s triggered some of you that have been hurt the worst,” Darby figured out.

“Yes, several times,” Esta muttered.

“Fucking assholes. I can’t—why does it always have to be like this?” I shook my head. “Okay, then this isn’t just a matter for the bakery. Let’s

outline a plan and then I would like to bring up the official recommendation with Neldor, the commanders, and clean nobles we're dealing with. I want us all on the same page and toeing the line on how to handle this. We cannot keep allowing this shit."

We were able to arrange the meeting Monday after my first midterm. While others would have extra projects and papers for their master's, I was already living the work people were educated for. So Neldor and I would graduate with the specialty of politics and governing for our master's.

Meaning every situation that arose that we had to handle like this was basically part of our grade. Oddly enough it had been the *nobles* who had demanded this, saying making me write some arbitrary papers would take my focus away from Faerie and break me when it wasn't necessary. I was shocked at the turnaround, but the commanders had told me it was because of the turnaround of Faerie.

I'd literally put my money where my mouth was, and the improvements were widely praised. So they were supporting me back.

It was nice.

And they all agreed with me in the meeting. There was debate on how to handle the situation, but everyone agreed there was a situation and it was past time to come together and do something about it.

So yeah, there really was progress. I saw that, it just hurt when there was stumbling back or we didn't keep the ground we'd made.

The decision was that we would have fairies who were newer to being unfrozen take hobgoblins with older children trick-or-treating while glamoured. It didn't matter where. Different neighborhoods, areas, and time zones to spread it all out were better.

Before or after Halloween, each species would host a party for the younger hobgoblins, and the people of their species would attend and show

genuine goodwill to get off the blacklist and wipe the slate clean. The party would be hosted by their leaders with someone we trusted, like Alpha Geoff for the wolves or Von Thann for the bears. Hell, Von Thann would do it to get off the blacklist and for a chance to talk with his mate.

But then going forward, any issue would be handled directly with the leadership of that species. I owned that business. Any of the businesses Neldor and I owned. I had thought to keep my money separate, but it wasn't that simple if people would abuse those businesses and my people to insult me.

So yeah, it was time to draw a line in the sand.

I was pleased with the outcome, Neldor even offering to divide and conquer since there wasn't much time left and we had midterms. I would handle getting the parties set up with some of the nobles and he would handle the supe species' leaderships with some of the other nobles. The remaining majority of the nobles were going to work with the commanders and make sure not one hobgoblin child missed out on the festivities.

And the fairies who had newly been awoken for the chance to see the updated world and get a chance to rest.

Done and done... And I aced my Rune Combining II midterm.

After I'd already aced my Faerie Biology midterm. I'd call that a damn good Monday.

The moment my head hit the pillow, I woke in a memory that wasn't mine. I was Neldor. I stepped out of his view and moved off to the side, frowning at the strange surroundings. A courtroom?

No, a council room.

Someone started off with a bang. Someone I vaguely recognized as barking at me and on supe media, but I couldn't remember his name.

"I'm glad you finally agreed to meet with us without that trash and her

—”

Neldor was across the room and slammed the guy’s face into a table before anyone could blink, blood all over the place. He let out a long sigh before smirking at them. “Yes, this conversation is long overdue, but if any of you speak disrespectfully of my intended again, I will permanently injure you and your animal.”

“How can you allow this to happen?” a different councilman demanded of the nobles with Neldor.

They glanced at each other, and I was shocked at the amusement and outright disdain before one stepped forward. “You are clearly ignorant, but I would think even an imbecile like you understands how a monarchy works, yes? The royals are the boss.” He snorted when the councilmen all muttered amongst themselves. “You have been fed lies and stories that we somehow led from behind the throne.

“Yes, there were *some* corrupt ancients. You’ve had your own corruption. It happens. And you’re *very* misinformed about the male royals being the ones with power. That is not the way their relationships work. That is some new fabrication and insanity of this new development of sexism that has come about worse than twenty years ago. Princess Tamsin simply wasn’t alive to know the truth.”

“But I was,” Neldor chuckled darkly. “These nobles were. So it’s time to set the record straight and fix a few things because too many of these misconceptions are keeping me from my mate. And I will *not* allow that to be the reason. If she cannot love me or we are not well matched, fine, I will figure out a way to accept that. But you lot? No, you will not keep me from what I want, and I want *her*.”

“Then tell us what we’ve missed, Prince Neldor,” someone said after a few moments.

Yeah, I wanted to know that too, because I was a bit worried about what was being done behind my back. I trusted Neldor, I really did, but... It was hard not to feel I was going to regret giving him that trust.

That same noble looked to Neldor and waited for the prince to nod. “Prince Alok wasn’t the power behind the previous queen. He wasn’t more powerful than her.”

“As I am not more powerful than Tamsin,” Neldor added. “And that means *everything* to fairies as it does to your animals, so as shifters this should not be a hard concept to you.” He waited for a few to nod. “My father was my mother’s hammer. He was her...” He glanced at one of the other nobles. “What is the mob term that they would understand?”

“I believe it’s ‘enforcer?’”

Neldor seemed to consider it and then shrugged. “That will work.”

“I was thinking of her executioner,” a different noble chuckled, smirking when several of the council members glanced at him in shock. “Oh please, we all know of several people who disappeared or had *accidents* when they upset our previous queen. Remember that cad who went on TV and said she was an idiot? He had an accident within the week and his family lost a bunch of money. About ten years before the war.”

Someone else remembered the name, and *clearly* the council members knew it from the way several of them went pale.

Sooooo apparently, this was a real thing, and Neldor’s dad wasn’t the sweet and kind man that I’d been told about. Or that wasn’t all he was.

Fair enough.

“And here is the fun part of it all,” Neldor chuckled as he pulled out a large, old book and flipped through the pages. “Now where was that section? Hmmm, here?” he flipped several pages. “No, this speaks to the morality of the council. Clearly, no one follows those rules either. Here? No, this is about

making sure corruption doesn't fester in the council so as to avoid nepotism."

One of the nobles snorted. "They never follow that one, Prince Neldor."

"No, but neither do we, so that one I won't judge," Neldor chuckled.

"Yes, but we don't have *rules* about it. Our gods granted the power to our families."

Good point.

"Ahhhh, here it is," Neldor purred after flipping through several more pages. He slowly tapped the book several times. "The section about Faerie and her leadership having *complete* sovereignty over this council. So not only do I have diplomatic immunity as a royal of the dark realm, as Princess Tamsin's second, that means any punishment I dole out is *legal*."

He closed the book loudly and beamed around the room, showing off his dimples. Then he tossed it at someone else I recognized as having said a lot of shit about me.

Neldor slowly made his way over to the man who then tilted his neck like a predator examining prey. "And I'm starting with you. You who won't shut his mouth about how once I control my amazing, loving, and gracious mate maybe our people will be respectful again. Tamsin wanted to be diplomatic about it. She wanted to give people a chance to change their minds and see how much better the world could be now that she cut out corruption."

"Unfortunately, the princess's kind heart is a double-edged sword," the first noble said sadly. "It's the reason there is peace—true peace—between the realms in so many centuries, but she still gives faith to those who don't deserve it."

"Also she was raised that people were encouraged to speak their minds," Neldor added. "But the freedom of speech was always a lie. There is a *cost* for that speech. It is never free. People have fought and died for it. People bear the price for others being able to speak lies unchecked. People are hurt

because of assholes like this man who say what they want unchecked for power and his own narcissism.”

“And jealousy,” someone else drawled.

Neldor grunted to accept that. A dagger was in the councilman’s shoulder before anyone could blink. “This is now the price of your words. This is the *cost* of your speech. I will take it in your flesh and blood and maybe not always from you.” He smiled evilly when the man winced. “You aim to hurt my mate and next time I will hurt *yours*. Or your eldest son. How about your brother? You have lots of family to choose from.”

“Or lose,” a different noble added. “I don’t think any of them will believe you without showing your sincerity, Prince Neldor.”

“I agree with you, but Tamsin would be disappointed in me if I didn’t give them a warning in fairness,” Neldor grumbled. “We pride ourselves on being fair.”

“She has given these maggots *ample* warnings,” that noble argued. “We are tired of them ignoring her—*us*.”

“I know, but she won’t kill people for their words unless it’s a death threat.” Neldor shrugged as he pulled out the dagger. “She doesn’t need to. That’s what she has us for. I’d prefer her focus on caring about our people and opening rest stops and creating more miracles like the bubbles. Wouldn’t you?” He smiled when the nobles agreed, focusing back on the councilman in front of him. “Now, what else have you said about her?”

I watched as one of the nobles pulled out a notebook and read off the long list of things the guy had apparently said about me publicly. Each insult Neldor stabbed the councilman in a new spot.

And healed him.

Over and over again.

Dozens of times.

“I don’t like to be someone who says, ‘I told you so,’ but damn, Tams, I told you so,” Julian said from my right.

I let out a good and proper yelp, jumping away from him. “Have you been here this whole time?”

“No, Darby said something was going on with you. You kept flinching in your sleep and he was worried. I came in a few minutes ago and basically got the gist,” he explained.

“I don’t know that you did,” I admitted. “Or if you’re supposed to know this. I’m not sure what I’m seeing or if it’s a dark realm thing. I’m not...”

“Are you upset he’s doing this?” he asked as we watched Neldor move onto someone else, the nobles having frozen all of the council members in place to wait their turn.

“I think I should be.” I was shocked when Julian snorted. “What does that mean?”

“I’d do it in a heartbeat if I could get away with it. You’d do it if it was them saying it about us.” He pushed on when I opened my mouth to argue. “If these guys were tearing Hudson up as the next ruler and it could lead to him being *assassinated* or overthrown because these assholes painted him as weak with their lies, you would cut them up on TV for our world to see in warning.”

Yeah, I would have. I just never saw it like that when it came to me. I still didn’t... I wasn’t sure. I wasn’t sure I knew what the hell it all meant or what I was supposed to do.

“Thanks, Julian. Sorry Darby worried you.”

He reached over and took my hand and we watched the rest.

And it was a lot.

I woke to find Darby watching me from the sofa in my room, clearly having stayed up all night. “Why did you bother Julian?”

“Are you kidding me?” he whispered. “Tams, you were flinching in your sleep. You were moving like you were walking around. It was...”

I sat up and pulled my knees to my chest, looking straight ahead and away from his gray eyes that hurt to look at right then. “I always do that. That’s been my new norm for a while now. Since I’ve been handling the dreams without Julian. Since I can separate myself from the person whose memory it is. That’s the side effect.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize that was still...”

Yeah, because he hadn’t been there, and even when he had physically, clearly he hadn’t been paying attention.

When we shared a bed.

How sad was that?

9

“I think we need to talk,” Neldor said as I walked into my dorm room after my last midterm. “Izzy let me in. She’s excited to decorate Julian’s condo or something.”

I rubbed my tired eyes. “Right, what’s up?”

“Funny you’re asking me that since I would have thought you’d have some questions for me,” he muttered, his tone a bit off.

I was about to ask him what he was on about and say I was too tired for anything cryptic, but then it hit me. I slowly went to sit down on my desk and simply stared at him, unsure of what to say or even how to say it.

Honestly, I still didn’t know what I felt about what I’d seen.

He let out a slow breath. “Clearly, you’re going to make me start this.”

“Sorry,” I whispered.

“I’m not sure why you should be sorry for that.” He moved closer but then seemed to think better of that, sitting on my bed.

“How did you find out?” I asked when the silence felt suffocating after several minutes.

“Julian asked me about the laws for the mates of our royals and what was the line. Was it the title or the bond that gave him the stronger ability to protect you without being a liability to you? It was pretty damn clear what he knew.”

“I didn’t tell him.”

He was quiet several moments. “I wouldn’t have judged you if you did.

You've known him longer and given how you grew up—it might have hurt you didn't come talk to me first, but that would—”

“Be a bit hypocritical?” I snarked.

“Yes, but I was going to say difficult for you. I understand it would have been difficult for you because it's a way of Faerie and I've been overly harsh on you in the past about not being respectful of our ways. Frankly, I've been an asshole to you about going against them. It was never your fault and I hated how bad your past was, how much you've been hurt. I didn't know how to deal with it and I just yelled.”

“Yelling at the victim isn't the way to handle it, Prince of Darkness,” I grumbled.

“Yes, thank you, I know I'm a moron. I remind myself daily when I look at you and have to restrain myself.”

I swallowed loudly and met his pretty green eyes for a moment, shocked at the intensity and range of emotion I found there. It was too much for me and I focused back on the floor. “I was dreaming your memories and Darby didn't know—he called Julian. That's how Julian saw. I told him that I didn't think he was supposed to know and to please not tell anyone.”

“Clearly, he didn't know not me because he was rather shocked we hadn't spoken.”

“Idiot,” I sighed. “If anyone should know how I can't talk about the things I should and run from complicated situations, it should be that man.”

“Yes, but you love Julian and that makes things scarier. We don't have that problem and you like to yell at me.” The amusement in his voice was dry.

I didn't know what to say, my heart beating in my ears and my mouth going dry.

“You're giving me hope, baby doll,” he whispered. He stood when I

didn't say anything—*couldn't* say anything. His feet came into my view first and then his lower body before I was staring at his chest. He leaned down so his cheek pressed against mine. "If you don't say something, I'm going to do something that might upset you. I didn't do what I did so maybe you'd let me kiss you, but if that's the outcome, fuck—it was worth it."

And then his hands were on my face.

My hands moved on their own and went in his hair.

His lips found mine.

My tongue was in his mouth.

His was in mine and I loved it.

I pulled him closer—no, he pulled me closer. His hand was on my back.

But mine was on his too.

Then it was under his shirt and I was touching his chest.

He took out the clip holding my hair and his fingers got tangled.

"I knew it. I knew they would immediately get tangled," he panted against my lips. "I fucking knew your gorgeous mane would keep me to you. I want it all over my body while I make love to you."

I wanted that too. I couldn't deny that anymore.

I wanted that too.

He kissed me again and I ran my nails down his chest and along his side... And he made a noise I didn't think he could.

I froze and slowly pulled away. "Did you just giggle?"

Horror was in his gaze. "No."

"You just giggled."

"No. I'm the prince of the dark realm of Faerie. I would never giggle."

"Your hips are ticklish."

"No. That doesn't sound possible at all."

I simply blinked at him. "You big fat liar."

“I beg your pardon. I’m not fat. Even if I was, I can’t believe you would fat shame someone.”

“Yeah, *that’s* the point of this, Neldor,” I drawled, before snapping out of my shock and reaching for his hip.

He caught my wrist in time and snagged the other one. “What are you doing?”

“Proving you’re a liar.”

“I’m not.”

“Liar.”

He sighed, lowering his forehead to mine. “Tams, is my being ticklish really the point of right now? I would also like to remind you that I’ve let go of *several* of your embarrassing moments, so please, *please* just let this one go.”

“No, because I think it’s one of the most endearing things ever if the Prince of Darkness has ticklish hips and giggles just like your fucking sexy dimples I hate and love,” I whispered, my entire body going lava hot with the confession.

Neldor let go of me and slowly backed away, blinking at me like he’d never seen me before.

And that was when I attacked. I grabbed him around the waist, spun us, and tripped him so he landed under me.

The fucker smirked up at me. “Yeah, sure, Tams. Take me to your bed. Should I get naked to help you check?”

I licked my lips, smirking right back when his eyes glazed over. I ran my nails over his hip... But he didn’t giggle this time. “You were ready for it.”

“Apparently, it’s a new thing,” he mumbled. “If it’s with you.” He pulled me down closer. “I wasn’t lying. It’s never happened before.”

I opened my mouth to blast him for tricking me, but he flipped us and

then we were kissing again.

And I didn't care anymore if he or anyone in Faerie was ticklish anywhere ever. I moved so I could fit his body between my legs and he ground his hips against mine. I reached up to pull off his shirt, but he beat me to it, his fingers already holding the hem of mine.

The door flew open and Izzy stood there with the most shocked look ever. We both froze.

Well, at least for a half of a second. I shoved Neldor off of me when I realized Izzy wasn't alone and my security was behind her. He went flying and I didn't even see where he landed before I was already to the door.

"Tams, wait," Izzy begged.

I saw the hallway filled and knew I couldn't escape gracefully, so I cheated and teleported. I didn't even think, simply appearing in my bedroom at home.

"What the fuck just happened?" I whispered as I sank to the floor. I swallowed loudly when I felt Neldor arrive sometime later. Honestly, I had no clue if it was a few minutes or hours. My mind was static. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry about," he said gently. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know what the fuck I'm doing," I admitted.

"That's why I'm not mad and you don't have to apologize," he whispered as he knelt down in front of me. "Please don't cry, baby doll. It's really okay."

"It's not. I'm... I'm that woman I hate. I'm playing with you and—"

"No, you're not." He leaned in and kissed my hair. I shivered when I felt his lips on my cheek. "This is the one time I won't be the idiot or impatient with you. I'm a fairy, Tams. I sense your soul as your mate. You didn't grow up around this, so you don't get it, and it only hurts you."

“I don’t understand,” I rasped.

He leaned back, holding my face in his hands and searching my eyes. “It’s why you give them so many chances. When others would walk away or be done, it’s why you stay. You feel their souls. You know their souls don’t mean malice. They’re not trying to hurt you. The one time you were done with Julian, he was trying to hurt you because of the magic. Your soul felt that and you cut the connection with him.”

I shook my head. “I broke up with all of them before.”

“I wasn’t there, but you were drowning, and I think you knew it wasn’t forever. You were traumatized and in so much pain. I’m talking now. Even with Darby. You know in your soul that he didn’t mean to hurt you. You don’t consciously understand what you’re seeing or doing, but that’s what it is. I’m saying the same. You aren’t trying to hurt me. You aren’t fucking with me. I’m not mad and I understand why you pull away.”

“That doesn’t make this right.”

“It’s my choice just like it’s yours to stay with Darby. Or give Julian another chance. Hudson—any of it. That’s how it works.”

I thought about it and sighed. “Lucca wanted to hurt me at times. Emotionally. He would... He would feel like a jerk about what he did and lash out, feel something off that he could hurt me with. That’s why I wanted out.”

“And Hudson started to do the same.” He sighed when I nodded. “That’s being a fairy. That’s the line. Unfortunately, they can be idiots for the rest of time and you’ll forgive them, but the moment it turns darker or they have even an ounce of enjoyment seeing you in pain, you’re gone. We leave.”

That made sense. It was a good line.

I just wished we could keep people from being idiots too.

I was lost in my thoughts and didn’t see what he was doing until I was

already in his arms. He moved me off the ground and over to my reading nook. He sat next to me and cupped my cheek, his hand soft and warm on my skin.

“Let me take care of you today, baby doll,” he whispered. He sighed when I flinched. “I didn’t mean like that. Just—you take care of all of us. Just let me handle today, okay? Please. *Please*, Tams. I’ll handle things. What they say, getting us moved back—all of it. Let me just be with you today like this. Let me hold you tonight and comfort you when you’re all torn up. It’s killing me to watch.”

I nodded because I wanted that too. I wanted someone to just love me like that again, make me feel... Everything.

I nodded because I was selfish when I had no intention of being with Neldor.

I nodded because I didn’t have the willpower to say no and push him away.

He gave me a soft kiss and smirked when I couldn’t hide my shock. “This changes nothing. I get it. I’m just taking a page out of Lucca’s book and sneaking kissing when no one’s around now that I know you want to kiss me too.”

“Right, but that hasn’t worked out well for Lucca considering we’re not back together,” I mumbled, not sure I believed my own argument.

“I’m not as dumb as your stupid bear, and I’d still take his spot as my starting line instead of mine any day.” He didn’t wait for an answer, opening a portal and walking right through it.

Dick. Seriously, it was such a dick move to end a conversation that way... But I did all of the time, so I really couldn’t bitch about it.

I actually dozed for a bit and woke when Neldor returned with enough food to feed a squad of fairies instead of just us. He set it all up as a carpet

picnic which surprised me.

He simply shrugged when I asked about it. “You like to hide after you’re embarrassed. So we’re hiding today. Everything is done with school and everyone is back safely. No one saw anything and even if they did, they understand that it was college stress and exploring that they should mention never or I will hurt them. And now we’re going to eat and hang out. Do you want to watch TV or just sleep?”

Okay then. I blinked at him a moment but then nodded before diving into the fried chicken comfort food feast he’d brought.

“Let’s go soak in your tub with the jets,” Neldor said when we finished. He chuckled at whatever was on my face. “I’ll wear my shorts. Go throw on a swimsuit. I didn’t mean it—you’re stressed. Let’s soak.”

“Do you want to at the hot springs in my—”

“No,” he blurted too loudly, clearing his throat and looking away. “No, I don’t want you in Faerie unless you’re at full strength and able to handle that planet. You can’t go there when you have any cracks in your armor.” He hurried to toss the rest of our garbage. “Besides, this will be just as good if I put a few runes on the jets and we use the right bath salts.”

“There are runes for hot tub jets?” I wondered, wanting to do it now just for my own curiosity.

“Yes. What else do you want?”

“Donuts.”

“Those mochi donuts you ate like two dozen of?” he checked.

“Hey, who was right there eating the same?” I threw right back.

“They were damn good. Yeah, I’ll order them.”

“You can pick what we watch then,” I offered. I ignored the look he gave me and went for my closet to change. This was feeling more and more like a date than I wanted to admit.

And it was nice. Much nicer than I'd been feeling lately besides with Julian.

To be fair, it wasn't Hudson or Lucca's fault. They were second-year master's students now, and they both admitted they were a bit underwater. They couldn't even lock down a topic for their thesis papers with their advisors and were having a tough time. So I understood that.

I even accepted that because they talked to me first, it wasn't something stupid but school, and I knew they were trying still. Basically, they handled it in the opposite way Darby had.

Stupid vampire.

The soak was exactly what I needed except one thing.

"I'm taking advantage of you," I whispered as Neldor rubbed my shoulders while I lay against his chest.

"I was thinking I was actually taking advantage of you and the state you're in," he admitted quietly. "How about we just both agree to enjoy it and stop overthinking every fucking thing?"

"Deal." I fell asleep after a while but started to wake when lips pressed against my temple.

"Please fall in love with me, Tams," Neldor whispered. "Please don't leave me alone, my mate. I know it won't be easy, but please see that I could be worth the trouble it would cause."

It was heartbreaking, but I pretended not to hear it. I didn't know that I could trust his feelings yet. So much had happened, so much could still go wrong that... I had to protect myself.

Was that really so wrong? I let the men I loved walk all over me once we were together. Was it really so incomprehensible that I would do my best to keep it from happening again?

I woke dried off and snuggled in a robe. I smiled when there were boxes

of donuts, the two of us pigging out and talking about where we wanted to do this from next time. I brought it up even which shocked him, but this was perfect to me and exactly what I needed. Just easy and relaxing.

“My first flying lesson is going to be in a few weeks,” Neldor muttered when we snuggled in bed and turned on the TV. “I’m ridiculously nervous.”

“That’s understandable.” My eyes were getting heavy especially now that my stomach was full of sugar and nummy. “You’ll be great, Neldor. Taeral won’t let you fail.”

“Will you come?” He hugged me when I flinched. “I know Hudson’s teaching you. This isn’t my sneaky way for you to get training from fairies. I don’t think that’s a bad idea so you don’t get hurt even if Hudson does it, but this is for me. Can you come for me, Tams?”

I nodded. I could do that for him.

“Thanks, baby doll,” he rasped. “Really.”

I wasn’t sure what else he said because I fell asleep. My neck hurt later, and I realized it was because my bathing suit was pulling and twisted. I sat up and took it off and tossed it aside before laying back down.

I didn’t think about it or anything because I was still mostly asleep. It didn’t occur to me that I basically got naked while in bed with Neldor or what that could mean, how horrible it was of me to tease him like that.

“Just shut up,” someone hissed later, waking me a bit. “Nothing happened like that.”

“Right because the guard said they had to check if I was still allowed in my own room because of what happened earlier,” Darby bit out. “And now she’s naked in your arms in *our bed*. So tell me that I’m overreacting again.”

“Those idiots,” Neldor sighed. “Tams and I kissed in her dorm room. She freaked out and apologized. That’s it.”

“Right, and she’s naked in your arms.”

“We soaked in the tub and she wore her swimsuit. It’s right there on the floor. She woke up and it was pulling at her neck. She didn’t even register I was here when she took it off and tossed it before falling right back to sleep. All she’s been doing is sleeping.”

“Fine, yeah, she does that,” Darby sighed.

“Why is your tail all in knots?” Neldor asked. “You know I want to be with her. You said you were fine with it.”

“That was before.”

They were quiet a moment, but then Neldor snorted. “Before you were such a fuckhead and realized just how close you were to truly losing her. Now you don’t want me near her.”

“Fine, yes, okay?”

“You—what the fuck happened to you, Darby?”

“I fucked up. I know it and—”

“It’s more than that. When did you become so damn selfish?”

“What? How did this conversation turn into that? You’re the one being selfish because you want her?”

“Yeah, I do, but I had every chance to take advantage tonight and I didn’t. Because she’s twisted up in knots—mostly thanks to you—and if people don’t start putting her first, she’s going to stay this knotted-up mess. The Darby I used to know would have done anything to make sure she was okay before worrying about his place at her side.”

“I’ve always been this worried about my place and threatened by all of you, especially you. This isn’t new, Neldor. You clearly just ignored it.”

“No, I saw your worry, but you still always put her first. Now you’re throwing a fit that we’re in bed and telling me to leave her alone. Why? So you can neglect her some more? Abandon her?”

“I’m still putting her first. She doesn’t want to be with you like that.

She's said it over and over again. I know I've knotted her up, but I don't want her to do things she'll regret because she's hurt. And you would fucking flip your shit if you came home and found her in bed with one of us when things weren't like that. Don't turn this around."

"Please stop fighting," I mumbled. "I'm too tired. I wanted my donut food coma."

"Sorry, baby doll," Neldor whispered and kissed my hair. "Go back to sleep, everything's fine."

No, it wasn't, but I nodded because I wanted to believe the lie.

10

My fall “break” was anything but relaxing and time off. It simply didn’t have any school involved in it... Well, my school. There was a lot of work on the schools in Faerie so the kids that were awake could get back to learning and on track. Also, so when the rest of the kids were woken up they would have school to go to.

I had to delve into all of the businesses I owned. I had a world to govern. Idiots to handle.

Yeah, so my break wasn’t relaxing in the slightest.

But at least I had some fun times in between the crazy. Planning the Halloween festivities for the hobgoblins was great and everything was going well. People were on board. I didn’t think it would be perfect or without issue, but people were understanding that fairies were out of patience for their bullshit.

Truly, this time, and not because of me. My patience and giving them multiple chances had failed. Neldor was right and the people with evil in their hearts were never going to stop shouting that I was horrible and trying to tear me down. I’d proven to the ones I could that I was good for Faerie and fairies. I’d proven to the ones who truly cared that I was helping people and my heart was in the right place.

The rest were never going to change. They weren’t playing fair and it was time we stopped.

Well, Neldor did. He beat some serious ass behind my back and went to

each council to make what I wanted for Halloween and the way things ran in the future happen. I got enough of the highlights from my dreams to know that him bringing down the hammer had done more than all of my patience had.

Wasn't that sad? That no matter how much kindness and understanding you gave people, knocking heads together was the real way to change things.

And yet, when I'd done that, it hadn't helped much.

Julian said the answer was simple. It was a dark one, but it was simple.

Neldor was willing to kill to protect me and change what was happening and I wasn't willing to. I would kill to protect those I loved from imminent danger, but I couldn't kill them for talking shit.

And I certainly wouldn't for talking shit about me.

He was right and it seemed wrong to me to do that. However, I did understand where they both came from. Those people weren't just saying I was fat or my hair was ugly. They were making lies up to try and get people to overthrow me, and that meant my death. It wasn't any different than saying they were going to kill me or threatening to blow me up which was illegal.

So I understood it, but it wasn't a line I could cross.

"Can I say one thing?" Julian asked as I packed up to head back to school. He waited until I nodded. "Your conflicted feelings, the ones I've felt in your dreams when you've watched what Neldor has done—that's how I felt about teaching you runes. I was so damn conflicted that I was part of people getting hurt, but I wasn't, and it was their choice, but I understood it, but it also seemed so..."

"I always understood why you were conflicted or even how it spun you around. It was how you didn't support me when they were doing it all to me. They were hoping to hurt me, kill me in an accident, and my lover wasn't there to support me. You seemed on their side and just left me, Julian."

“I know. I know I was wrong and it all got so—I’m not trying to say what I did was okay. I just want you to understand that I was spinning round and round as you are. I couldn’t make it stop and...”

“And what?”

“I didn’t have anyone to pull me out,” he said sadly.

I bristled at that. “I tried *many* times to pull you out and—”

“You did. Edelman did. White did. They had the experience and had gone through it and couldn’t. I’m not blaming any of you.”

I swallowed loudly and realized what he was saying. “I handled it all better because you were holding my hand and watching it with me. Yeah, it helped me handle this better. I’m sorry that I couldn’t do that for you.”

“Stop, you have no reason to apologize. None.” He slid his arm around me and pulled me closer, brushing his lips over mine. “None, Tams. This isn’t about blame or—I want to communicate—we’ve never been able to talk about this in a way that seemed to settle it for you. I couldn’t let you in. I was too closed off. I know you would have held my hand and watched it with me, kept me from spinning out.

“I couldn’t see that. I couldn’t let you because it involved you. I was pissed they cornered you. I was furious I couldn’t protect you and fix this for us. I was a mess. I just wanted to say how you feel was how I felt because I witnessed you going through it. It seemed so... It seems so silly now even when I look back years later, but it wasn’t then to me. It was big and hurt and I couldn’t get out.”

I nodded and kissed him. I heard him. He was trying to tell me that not only did he understand what I was going through *now*, he wanted to settle something that hurt me in the past. Plus, he wanted me to see that in a few years I wouldn’t be torn up like this anymore.

So he was trying to do a lot with bringing up this one painful topic and I

appreciated it.

I leaned away and he grabbed me at the last second. “What?”

“Something is off,” he hedged. “I want to cheat and check. It’s not about what we talked about. I’ve been feeling it since I came over. When I saw you the other day. Please tell me if I did something, Tams. I beg you. I don’t understand like others and—I’m asking for help.”

It was almost cute the way he said it so bluntly, desperately almost. I knew that was his therapist getting him to understand that if he didn’t talk to me, I wasn’t a mind reader either.

But it made things a bit awkward for me because I wasn’t good at talking about things either.

However, if he had the guts to say it and ask—bring up difficult topics when we both had trouble with that. I wasn’t going to be the one to run us off track by not being honest.

“You stopped texting me,” I muttered. “Are you mad at me?”

“I text you,” he hedged. He slowly smiled after I huffed. “Oh, you mean *those* texts?”

“Well, not just the dirty ones,” I grumbled, poking his chest. “I just meant... You went from a good amount overall to less. Information and not even really checking in.” I shrugged, glancing away.

“I wanted you to rest on your break, Tams. I sent a lot of those so you would have something from me after class.”

“Right, but all I had was meetings and no rest. You had meetings. I thought it was because you missed me and liked doing it too.”

“I did. I do,” he said firmly. “I thought maybe I was pushing too hard or being annoying because of your responses or lack of responses.”

Now it was my turn to be embarrassed. He’d put in more effort and I never knew what to respond, so I could see him having thought that.

I felt my face flush as I pulled away and tucked my hair behind my ear. “I don’t lie to you. I said I liked them and made me feel special. Did you think I didn’t mean it unless I teleported to your office and demanded sex?”

“Fuck, that is my ultimate fantasy,” he groaned. “Seriously, it really, *really* is. Or you under my desk while—” He cleared his throat when I gave him a shocked look. “That’s so not the point.”

No, but it was good to know.

He gave me a heated but quick kiss. “I will text. I will send you all of the texts, not just the dirty ones. I’ve learned how to dictate texts through my watch so I’ll—whatever makes you happy, my sweet fairy.”

I nodded, my face feeling lava hot. I didn’t hate when he called me that anymore and I took it as a good sign.

Plus, now I was thinking of us having hot sex in his office.

All over his office even.

Why did I like that so much better than I did his classroom? Was it the grown-up version? I wasn’t sure, but I said goodbye to him and headed back to school still thinking about it. Maybe it was because of how much trouble his being a teacher brought to our relationship. It didn’t really ever bring much fun, maybe a bit of kink, but it had brought a lot of problems.

Caused a lot of problems between us.

There wouldn’t be those problems now the way we were. Now it could just be a hot nooner in his office that no one knew about because I could teleport.

“Why are you one big hormone?” Lucca asked me, his deep voice surprising me and making me yelp.

“She’s been in her own world for over an hour now,” Izzy chuckled. “Her aura is changing colors at a crazy pace.”

“How are you seeing it?” Lucca worried.

“She takes off the charm when we’re in our room alone to help me. My thesis is going to be about auras anyways, and it’s my specialty of magic, so it helps.”

“What thesis specifically?”

“How having someone who knows how to read auras would help in therapy for people overcoming tragedies,” Izzy answered.

I gave her a grateful look as she rambled on about the idea, knowing full well that she’d turned the conversation away from me and my hormones that Lucca had smelled. She distracted the bear, and he didn’t bring it up again which was a damn miracle since Lucca could have a one-track mind.

That night I was in bed reading texts from Julian and responding instead of sleeping at home with Darby still on the couch. It was nice and didn’t have as much pressure. I felt bad that I might wake up Izzy but... It was nice to feel like a college student and things calm even if it was for one night.

Even better? Two shirtless sexy men were waiting to go running with me in the morning.

Huh?

I simply pointed between Hudson and Lucca as if asking the question I couldn’t articulate because it was early.

“We didn’t work out enough last quarter and it affected everything we did,” Lucca explained. “Training was harder. I didn’t feel great. I was so with my head in books that I neglected my health and then I wanted to sleep more and—you know how it is. So can we get back into training with you?”

“Save us from our own stupidity, Tams,” Hudson mumbled before coming over and hugging me. “Plus, I missed you, shorty. We barely get to see you besides flying lessons.”

This time he meant “we” as in him and River. I understood though because I felt the same and we didn’t get many flying lessons. More like I

was getting better at him dropping me off his back.

“Yeah, you guys can join me for my runs. Whatever,” I agreed, patting his back. I pulled away and smirked up at him. “You just have to catch me.” I took off, faster than both of them now because my magic built into my speed when it ramped up.

Lucca knew that and how fast I was now, but Hudson... Not so much. He knew I could use runes and yes, I’d gotten faster, but he didn’t know yet that my jog was faster than his now.

The dragon who had once acted like I was walking for my jogs was left in the dust. It was pretty fucking glorious if I was honest.

Lucca might still be laughing a year from now he enjoyed it so much.

“You can put your shirts on now,” I said when we were done and walking into the cafeteria.

“It’s fine. I’m hot,” Hudson muttered.

“It’s October... In *Kansas*,” I reminded him.

“It’s been pretty warm,” Lucca defended.

True, and they did run warmer. Fine, fair enough. Still, all the females seemed to enjoy the eye candy of them walking in shirtless.

Them walking in like that with *me*, not so much. Especially when I was all sweaty and tired as well. It was obvious what we were doing, but people would still talk shit.

We ate and it was normal, Juan and Neldor joining us along with Izzy.

It was only Neldor and I for lunch and we had our meeting like normal. But dinner was another shirtless Lucca and Hudson.

“What? You forgot to pack them to come back?” I asked as I set down my tray and gestured to their naked chests.

“No, we were messing around with some others,” Lucca answered easily.

Fine, but when they got up and moved to sit on either side of me, that

clearly had nothing to do with whatever had them losing their shirts. They kept grabbing things off the other's tray or snagging something from mine. Basically touching me the whole meal or putting their many, *many* muscles on display for me.

Right in front of my damn face even.

I shot a look to Izzy, but she seemed as confused as I was.

Then it was the same the next morning as we ran, shirtless and sweaty in the cafeteria. One sat shirtless in front of me and the other next to me.

"Tams?" Lucca murmured in my ear, his naked, sweaty chest pressing against my bare arm.

"What?" I yelped, and leaned away almost until I fell off the bench.

Lucca's arm went around me and he kept me in place, pulling me closer. "I asked if you were okay. You keep trying to scoop up food from an empty plate. Is there something you need, cream puff?"

Was his voice lower and huskier than normal or was that my hormones talking? I shook it off and sat up normally. "No, I'm fine. I do that all of the time because I'm a garbage disposal." I pushed his arm off and changed plates.

"Are you sure you don't have a fever?" Hudson asked as he leaned over the table and moved his hand to my forehead, his face and muscles all too close.

"I'm fine," I promised, pushing his hand away. "What is with you guys?"

"Nothing, just worried about you, shorty."

But they were both touchier than normal, hugging me at every chance and talking closer like they wanted to whisper everything.

Well, I'd missed them too, so it was fine.

Then they came to dinner without shirts again.

"Laundry day?" I drawled.

“Yes, but we’re going to play some football after dinner, so I just tucked mine in my bag,” Hudson said... While not looking at me.

Uh-huh. Sure.

The look on Izzy’s face made it clear she thought the same but it left me as one huge hormone. *Especially* with the texts that I was getting from Julian.

Actually, this was something that he would do on top of sexting to tease me. Or something they worked out together. Right? They knew I wasn’t going home to sleep and they... What? Wanted me to sleep in their beds?

That actually sounded great and a much better reason than just not wanting to sleep in my bed with Darby on the couch. That wasn’t awkward or anything.

It went on for a few more days, every damn time I saw Hudson or Lucca, they were shirtless. Even in between classes! And they needed to talk to me privately or touch me, have their hands on me.

I walked into the cafeteria for lunch on Friday and broke when I saw Neldor sitting with them shirtless. “Why the fuck are you shirtless now? Seriously, what is going on here?”

“It’s casual Friday?” he teased, batting his eyelashes at me.

I couldn’t deal with this. I spun around and left, figuring it was better to order Portal Chow for my sanity.

Except I had texts waiting.

Julian: I was thinking of you this morning as I ate my breakfast late, wishing it was you that I was eating. I tasted you on my tongue as I thought of how you sound when I eat you, have you. I miss those sounds you make, the ones you make just for me.

Julian: You haven’t sent me enough selfies, Tams. You promised to send me more. Send them to me when you’re being cute or working out. I want to

see you.

Julian: I'm in a meeting and hard thinking of you. You're probably in class being cute and asking smart questions, captivated by the lecture and material being taught. I love that side of you. I love watching you read and the emotions that play over your face when you find something interesting.

Julian: I love watching you stretch when you're done studying or reading. The way your breasts move and tease me. The way your body curves and how flexible. Every time you stretch, my mind thinks of your body moving like that naked under me. I know I'm a huge pervert to think these things, but it's you. I always think them about you.

And then there was the latest that just came in.

Julian: I don't want my lunch in front of me. I want you. I want you in front of me. I want you here. I want to be inside of you. Eat you. All of you. You have no idea how much I need you, Tams.

Yes, yes, I did. I absolutely did.

I teleported to him and found him sitting at his desk staring at his phone as if waiting for my response. "This is my response. Yes, I get it."

"Wait—what?" He set down his phone and stood, looking delicious in a tailored three-piece suit, his curly longer hair wild from him pushing it back all morning.

I dropped my phone and bag to the ground and grabbed his tie, pulling him to me and kissing him with all I had. "Seriously, you're all driving me crazy. I'm your lunch. Eat me. Have me. Fuck me."

"Christ above, yes," he moaned against my lips and lifted me under my ass. He went to put me down on his desk but then remembered there was

food sitting there, so he set me back on my feet.

That was fine. I was dressed and didn't want to be.

"You plotted something with them, didn't you?" I demanded as I yanked off my clothes. "You got them in on this."

"On what? Who?" he asked as he moved it off to the side and then went for his office door. He locked it and groaned when he turned back to find me almost naked. "Fuck, Tams, don't ask me to think when you actually showed up and look this delicious."

I didn't have time to respond before he was on me. He ripped off my bra and panties and sat me on his desk. His hands were everywhere and then his lips were. He laid me back on the desk and kissed along my skin, each spot feeling hotter than the last.

"You're fucking dripping, Tams," he moaned before fingering me. He smirked down at me and pushed two fingers in me. "Is this what you needed?"

"Yes, please," I whimpered. "I'm so fucking horny. You're all driving me nuts."

He looked confused but left it alone, kissing my breasts and teasing my nipples as he gave me what I needed. He did it again and then sat down in his chair and in his fancy suit, looking like the boss, he ate me out like his favorite meal.

I bit my hand to keep quiet as he did everything I loved and craved.

Hell, he did nothing but suck my clit and finger fuck me for at least five minutes until I orgasmed again.

And he just kept going, a total addict to my pussy and making me climax.

"Julian, I can't," I panted after yet *another* orgasm. "I can't keep going. It's been..." I bit my hand to keep quiet as he touched that spot inside of me. "Please, it's too much. I have to get to class soon and we haven't even—"

He chuckled and flicked my clit with his tongue. “Oh, we’re not having sex. I said I wanted to eat you for lunch and that’s all I’m going to do. I want my fill of your sexy, tight pussy I dream of.”

They really were all trying to kill me.

He gave me two more orgasms before my body was just done. So incredibly sated and done I couldn’t move besides twitching.

Julian stood with a smirk and ran his fingers all over my body. “You are so bloody delicious that there aren’t words. This was the sexiest thing ever, Tams.”

It was. It was so much better than the sex we’d had on his desk in the classroom and everything else we’d done at Artemis. Something was different—we were different.

“I love you,” I said before I realized I was going to. I wasn’t sure which of us was more shocked, but then I was up in his arms and he was kissing me.

And after a moment I felt wetness on my cheeks. Julian was crying.

Which made me start to cry. He held me wrapped around him and thanked me. I wasn’t sure how that worked when I should be thanking him, but I understood.

Oh, and he told me he loved me too.

I cleared my throat when I knew it was really time to go. “Um, I still want to—can I see you tonight?”

“I have a dinner meeting I would love to cancel, but I can’t,” he admitted. “I’ll make it quick. I’ll pick you up at the cafeteria as soon as I can and we can have dessert.”

“Will I be on the menu again?” I teased.

He nipped my ear and squeezed my ass hard. “You are always on the menu, Tams. You just have to give me permission and I’ll eat you like I did today.”

Fuck. That was just... Fuckkkkkk.

“Don’t promise that to someone who’s been so sex deprived,” I warned. “I’ll be here every day for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

“You have lunch meetings,” he reminded me.

“The commanders can fucking watch for all I care if I get that kind of loving.”

He laughed so hard he had to set me down.

I went for my clothes, groaning when I saw my undergarments were toast. Whatever, I grabbed my clothes and teleported back to my room. I hurried to throw on new clothes and was out the door, my stomach grumbling the whole time.

Neldor had only one word when I walked into class. “Julian.”

My face flushed about all of the shades of red, and I pretended not to have any clue what he was talking about. Except the shit didn’t let it go.

“Ara, come take my card and get the princess food since she didn’t eat during lunch, just got some exercise,” he called to our security sitting in the back of class.

It ruffled my feathers, and I was still riding all of my happy hormones, so my mouth worked faster than my brain. “I didn’t get exercise so much as laid there and enjoyed being his lunch. Repeatedly.”

“Dayumn,” one of our guards hissed.

“All right, please remember that this old man’s heart cannot take such talk from the prince and princess,” Professor Sontar cut in before Neldor might have said anything else.

I stuck my tongue out at Neldor and took my seat, thanking Ara when she came in a bit later loaded up with burgers and fries from Culver’s.

Except then everyone else wanted some too because fairies really were garbage disposals, so she had to go out and get more. At least the professor

got a few, so he was happy.

I showed up for dinner and got about the same reaction from the shirtless twits.

They shared a glance and both growled. “Julian?”

“Do I just wear a sign that I’m not wound up anymore?”

“Tams, you walked in humming,” Izzy muttered. “No one needed a sign. Plus, you changed your outfit. None of us need to be Sherlock Holmes for that.”

Both were very good points. Still, it was funny even if it annoyed me that men who were so big should not be able to pout that well. We ate and talked about the last details for the Halloween parties for the hobgoblins and outings. Everything was in good shape for next week and I was glad.

Julian was waiting outside of the cafeteria with a bouquet of flowers looking dashing and totally the boss. It was really, *really* a good look for him. He moved closer when he saw me but then stopped, glancing between Hudson and Lucca. “Why are you duffers not wearing shirts to dinner?”

“So you didn’t instigate this?” I asked, gesturing to their chests, abs—all the muscles. “They’ve been without shirts all week and suddenly have to talk to me quietly or alone about everything.”

Julian burst out laughing, covering his face and trying to control it, but then losing it all over again, and Hudson and Lucca both crossed their arms over their chests and frowned. “Ahh, lads, I can’t even thank you enough. Glad to know that I’m not the only git who can miss the mark like that.”

“We were doing a damn good job,” Hudson argued.

“So this was a coordinated effort to make me horny,” I grumbled, crossing my arms over my chest as well now.

“No, not just horny. Horny for them,” Izzy drawled. “They were giving you live action-thirst traps, Tams. It’s been a rom-com all week with them

picking fake leaves out of your hair so they could be all over you and reaching for salt that wasn't on the damn table.”

“You've been too busy drooling to notice it was a crock of bad acting,” Neldor added.

“You wanna flip this and see how you handle it?” I threatened. “And I remember you coming in shirtless too.”

“I didn't say I wasn't open to such tactics. I'm just up-front about it.”

That was actually very fair and very much like Neldor.

Julian slid his arm around me and gave me a scorching kiss, ignoring that we had a crowd around us now. He pulled me against him where we stood, and I could only imagine what was on his face from the death looks Hudson and Lucca gave him. “Well, you keep taking your shirts off and doing your thing. If there's any way I can help your cause or steal your shirts, please, let me know.”

“Don't help this be—”

Julian pressed his lips to my ear. “Do you want to be my dinner tomorrow if they wind you up, Tams?”

Shit, did I ever. I shut my mouth so fast it wasn't even funny.

I glanced over at my security as I opened a portal. “We'll be at Julian's. I'm his dessert—I'm having him for—there's dessert and we're eating.”

“Fuck, Tams, just give up. You're going to have sex and the whole campus now knows it,” Izzy said with a sigh. “Just make sure she gets some sort of sleep in between—”

I thanked Neldor when he silenced her with a rune. Some things never changed, and Izzy would always be a brat about my sex life.

That was pretty fair given how much of it she'd had to witness or walk in on.

11

“The flowers are amazing,” I told Julian before attacking his mouth. “I also need a shower.”

“So do I,” he groaned as he lifted me under my ass again. He brought me over to the counter and I set down the flowers as I kept kissing him. He carried me into his room and then his bathroom. I barely saw it all, more focused on his lips.

His neck.

His ears.

All of him that I could reach.

He turned on the shower and then set me on my feet. I yanked off his tie while he took off his jacket. Then it was his vest and shirt. I moaned as I ran my fingernails over his chest and abs.

And he did too.

“Wait, slow down,” he whispered against my lips. “We have all night.”

“Julian, we’ve been making out and touching each other for months. We’ve been messing around in dreams but not for real. I need you. I can’t wait anymore. I can’t—be slow with me later.”

He nodded and hurried to help me get undressed as I took off the rest of his clothes too.

Then we were under the water which he didn’t turn warm enough and I got the brunt of it. The chuckle against my lips from him made me wonder if he’d done it on purpose or my reaction simply amused him. Either way, we

both furiously tried to change the water setting, but then he moved us so he blocked the water and then adjusted it.

“Sorry, Tams, my head was on something else,” he said as he turned around and grabbed me again. “Shockingly, I seem to be distracted and not focused on my shower but the beauty in it.”

“Uh-huh, and who is this bitch I’m gonna cut?” I teased.

“Mmm, as much as I love when you get jealous, I can’t even joke about you getting hurt.” He kissed along my neck and fisted my ass. “Shit, I’ve so missed being able to touch you, have you how I want.” He wrapped both arms around me fully and simply held me. “I won’t ever risk this again. I swear it. I won’t—”

“I know,” I whispered, more because I didn’t want to ruin this moment with our past than I was that confident we would work out forever. I thought we would. I thought we had a real chance, but... I had to start, so clearly I wasn’t all-knowing. I reached down and touched his dick, smirking when he moaned. “I want this in me, Julian. I need hot Englishman cock.”

“I don’t know if I’m turned on or want to ask you to never say that again,” he admitted, his voice barely containing his laugh.

“I’ll teleport away,” I threatened.

“No, you would never be that cruel no matter how big of a git I was.” He kissed me quiet when I went to reply and his fingers pushed inside of me. He stretched me and then lifted me up, fucking me against the tiles of his shower like a desperate man.

And finished much faster than I remembered.

Clearly, he was embarrassed, but I had another reaction, kissing him deeply.

“I’m glad you weren’t fucking anyone else while we were apart.”

“Never,” he swore to me. “I don’t think I could even get hard for anyone

else at this point, Tams. You've bewitched me completely. I only lust for my sweet fairy."

Good.

"I know you're embarrassed, but I love when you're this vulnerable with me," I told him honestly. "I love that you're so desperate for me that you couldn't hold back, just like you love making me crazy." I kissed his nose. "So don't hide it from me. Don't be embarrassed or apologize. This is part of you too, and I want all of you Julian Craftsman."

"Good, because you have all of me."

He gently pulled out of me and set me on my feet before turning me around. He hugged me to him, and I squirmed against him, his hard-on pressing into my back. "I need you again. I'm sorry, but I do. Please say yes."

"Yes, but then you're going to have to shower me completely," I warned him. "I'm not used to this anymore."

"That sounded like a challenge, Tams."

Sure, he could go with that.

He moved me where he wanted me and pushed inside of my body. I whimpered at how good he felt, inside of me, holding me, pressed against me—all of it.

Julian nipped at my shoulder, along my neck, and my ear as he whispered everything perfect. Most would think it was cheesy or he was going overboard to make up for the past, but that wasn't him. Not when we were like this. Julian showed me his soul when we were intimate, and I craved that as much as I did his body.

"Touch yourself, Tams. I know you're close. I want to feel you touch your clit when I'm inside of you."

This man was really trying to see if we could have all kinds of hot sex in one night. Still, I did what he wanted and finished not long after, moaning

when he did too. It was amazing... But still faster than normal.

Yeah, I smirked at that.

He sat me on the bench in the shower when we were done, and I basically slumped against the wall. Besides giving him a sated smile, I was pretty useless for our shower. He took his time and carefully washed my scalp, making sure to lather it really well. Then he detached his shower head and made sure that my hair got clean as he rinsed it all out.

The man could truly be trained. He used to lather up the length of my hair like the others no matter how often I told them they were over-shampooing my hair and that was why it took forever to rinse.

Then he carefully conditioned my hair and made sure to not get any on my scalp. Extra brownie points for him.

Lastly, he clipped up my hair once it was all rinsed so my clean hair didn't get soap from my body. Seriously, this man was going for the gold medal.

He chuckled at whatever was on my face. "Yeah, I know, you've told us so many times how to do it right. I can't speak for the others, but I actually needed to see it done right to understand. I got it in my head that maybe if I could spoil you with showers... Anyways, I looked up what you were talking about on YouTube and now I get it." He smirked up at me as he knelt at my feet. "I can be trained."

"I'll be the judge of that," I teased.

Yeah, he could be.

Starting at my feet, he used some expensive body scrub all over me. It smelled like roses and heaven and felt better than going to a damn spa.

"Okay, this shit is legit," I moaned as he massaged my thigh. "I want to just lay down on this bench and let you do whatever to me as long as it involves this scrub. What is it?" I grabbed the glass jar and read the label.

“Use once a week. Yes, please. Shit, I’ll do it to you too. This is heaven.”

It was made with rose water and roses, so that explained the smell. A few other things that would definitely make it pricey. Unlike a lot of those things that were pricey and no different than a Dove product, this was something good.

Really good.

“I wonder if we could do this with healing or whatever Neldor did to the jets in my tub.”

Julian chuckled and took the jar from me. “I will ask Neldor for *you* but turn the brain off. Seriously, you never stop.”

I sighed and did as he said. “There’s just too much to do, Julian. It never stops.”

“I know, my mate, I know,” he said gently. “I’ll tell you what, if you promise to let me have a night a week to not only make love with you, just us, but also to turn off your brain and relax like this, I’ll get a damn table we can put in here and then you rinse off in the shower.”

“Done.” I chuckled after a moment. “Jordan and Cara have been trying to get me to name a royal masseuse or something for months and you convince me in two seconds.”

He paused before moving to my other thigh. “That’s weird to me and I was raised near money with the Craftsmans. You didn’t grow up with—a royal massager is a bit much. Plus, I wouldn’t want some stranger to have it be their job. Only for me. Going to a spa is different.”

“Thank you,” I sighed. “Can you please explain that to them? They all act like I’m the damn weirdo. And they didn’t train to be a lady in waiting. This wasn’t their normal either, but it’s more like an assumption that people would do everything for me because I’m Faerie royalty. Like I’m only half sarcastic when I think to ask if there’s a royal ass wiper.”

“That’s where my mind went too,” he admitted.

“Of course, it did,” I chuckled. “Thanks, Julian.”

“Anytime, *cariño*.”

It felt really good and he did a great job... Until he spent too long on my breasts. I let it go on a bit longer than I should because I knew he was enjoying it.

“Julian, the skin there is very sensitive. You do it much longer and you’re going to take off actual skin I need,” I warned.

“Right, sorry. My mind was—”

“Perv.”

He didn’t even try to deny it, simply sighing when I laughed.

I did actually like when he massaged my ass for a good five minutes too. So we were both pervs? Fair enough.

He had me stand to rinse fully and by then my legs were working, so I finished the rest of everything quickly on my own. I gave him a soft kiss and promised I’d be waiting for him in bed and not sleeping.

Because I wanted more of my sexy Brit.

Yeah, he liked the sound of that. His dick did at least.

I grabbed a towel and dried off enough so I wouldn’t soak his bedding, scrunching up my hair to get as much water out as I could without the full routine. He came hurrying out not five minutes later looking like a man with a mission.

Too bad I had to hit the breaks for him a bit.

“Lay down and grab the headboard,” I told him.

He licked his lips and moved closer. “Am I getting a massage now too?”

“Something like that, but if you won’t be good, I might not be in the mood very long and—” I didn’t even get to finish before he was on the bed and reaching for the headboard.

“If you just stand there and stare at me, this might get weird on my end,” he muttered after a few moments.

“No, there’s more planned. I just... I find it shocking how the sassy me almost threatening you gets you to behave.”

He blinked at me a moment and laughed, trying to swallow it down and even burying his face in his arm. “Tams, I met you beating up a bunch of men. Kicking ass and taking names like you and Mel used to say. Yeah, I’ve always been ridiculously attracted to the assertive side of you. Watching you train or boss people around are two of my favorite hobbies in the naughty kind of way.”

Right, fair enough. Sometimes it was hard to keep it all straight or remember who liked what. That sounded weird probably, but I did have five mates and a whole world of people who regularly shared their opinions about what they liked about me.

Or more what they disliked. So it got to be hard to remember.

I took off my towel and climbed on the bed, taking off his towel as well. Then I sat on one of his thighs, clenching it between one of mine. “I bet I could give you a full body massage just rubbing parts of you between my thighs.”

“And I’d fucking love every bloody minute of it,” he promised.

“Yeah?” I licked my lips when he nodded. “I was promised dessert, but I seem to have a buffet of yummy before me.” I gave him a warning look. “If you make a blowjob joke, you’re not getting one anytime soon.”

“I was actually going to suggest you check if all the muscles you see are real. You never know what tricks I might try on you,” he admitted.

“Cheeky brat,” I chuckled and scooted up a bit. “But you’re all clean. Can I get you dirty, Julian?”

“You can do anything and everything to me. Always.”

Yum. I leaned over and licked the lines of his abs. “Delicious.”

“Fuck, you are trying to kill me.”

Hadn’t I been saying that over and over again about him and the shirtless twits?

I moved up his body and licked his chest, teased his nipples, and then *bit* his bicep. “Hmm, seems real.”

“Are you leaving your mark on me, love?” he whispered when I went to bite the other one. We both froze and he hurried to apologize.

“No, it’s okay,” I muttered. “I kinda miss it when we’re like this. Maybe soon.” I shrugged, not wanting it to be a thing, especially when we were having fun and both trying too hard. “But yes, I’m leaving all of the marks on what’s mine.”

“Good. Tattoo it on my forehead then.”

“That’s a bit much.” I chuckled when he simply shrugged. “Though I could glamour it so every supe saw it. I bet that’s like a thing. I’ll have to talk to the commanders about it. Probably something expected even since I’m a royal.”

He smirked at me, fully knowing I was fucking with him. “By all means. I’d love it. Maybe in your pretty cursive like how you sign your name?”

Damn, he was good.

I leaned over and licked his lips. “Maybe just on your dick. Or a spell that it won’t work unless I touch it.”

“Hmmm, I like jacking off to thoughts of you too much. You’d never been that mean. Only you or I could touch.”

“You should text me the next time you do that,” I purred. “Every time you do that thinking about me.”

“You’d dump me within a month,” he drawled.

“I showed you my paintings.” I flinched, still hating how that topic made

me feel like a psycho.

“I loved your paintings even if your pain in them killed me, Tams. I never thought myself a handsome man before I saw myself from your eyes.”

I studied his face and wanted him to say that again around someone who could tell if he was lying. That was... Intense. I didn't know what to say and didn't want to ruin the moment, so I kissed him. I kissed down his chest and took a bite out of his side just to leave another mark.

The fun had gotten me wound up again and I lowered myself onto his dick.

“Better than a massage,” he hissed as I squeezed him tightly. “Fuck me, Tams. You squeeze me like that and I'll go insane.”

“Go insane for me,” I chuckled. “That sounds like a promise, not a threat.”

“I'm already insane for you. If all the stupid shit I've done doesn't prove that, we don't need me to try anymore.”

I chuckled as I moved my hands to his chest. I rocked my hips and moaned, like *moaned* as my nerve endings went crazy because of the angle.

“That what you want, Tams?”

“Yes,” I hissed and did it again.

“Fuck, yes, take what you need, my sweet fairy. This view, your pleasure—I want all of it. Your pussy clutching onto me, dripping down me.”

I was going to climax just from his mouth. Seriously. I almost asked him when he'd gotten so dirty and knew what to say to drive me nuts... But Julian always had. He knew how to read the mood I was in and make the naked time fit it.

Just as I did for him as a telepath.

I moved faster, taking him inside of me as deep as I could each time until I couldn't handle it anymore. I came with a cry of his name and kept going

until my body stopped spasming.

Then I flopped down to his chest.

“That good, huh?” he chuckled so deeply that I felt the vibrations of it. He sighed when I groaned. “So I’m not even needed for you to have amazing sex? They make—”

“Shut up, stupid,” I grumbled. “We both know you watching and giving me looks you were about to lose control and take over were more than half of what got me there. More than your damn dick.”

“Actually, that’s really good to know,” he muttered. “Does that mean I have your permission?”

“Huh?”

“To let go and take over,” he purred.

“Yeah, I’m dead,” I chuckled.

In a flash he let go and sat up before rolling us so I was on my back. “Oh, not just yet, my sweet fairy. You have a bit more in you before I tuck you in bed.”

“I’m getting old if you’re tucking me in this early.”

“You get up too early and have too much stress,” he mumbled before kissing me. Then he grabbed my hand, interlocked our fingers, and moved our hands over my head. He spread me wide and thrust deep while staring into my eyes. Over and over again until we both finished.

And yeah, then I was really done.

“I love you so much, Tamsin Vale,” he whispered. “I wish there were words that made you understand how much I love you. I wish I could make you see how you really do own every piece of me.”

“The body scrub was a good start,” I teased as my eyes got heavy. “Sorry, Julian. That really wiped me. Thanks for the sexfest today. I needed it. I needed you.”

“I needed you too. It’s fine. I sated my mate, so rest. I’ll clean you up and order dessert for when you’re starving in a few hours.”

Yeah, that sounded about right.

Sure enough, I woke just after midnight because my stomach growled. It was loud enough to wake Julian as well and he simply smiled and shook his head at my antics.

Well, my stomach’s antics to be fair.

I went to get up, but he cleared his throat and lifted me out of bed, bringing me over to his closet. He set me on my feet and opened one of the drawers.

I blinked down at what I saw. “This is either the sweetest thing or you’re not leaving this condo alive.”

He hugged me to him and chuckled, kissing my shoulder. “I bought them all with you in mind, Tams. I know I’ve done a lot wrong, but would you ever look at *me* and think a guy who bought lingerie for his plethora of overnight guests?”

He really had a self-confidence problem just as bad as mine. Yes. A hundred million thousand percent could I look at Julian and think that. Not because he was an asshole, because he was that fucking *hawt*.

I turned in his arms and gave him a kiss. “Yes, because women would want to join you. You would never be that crass and be that guy.” I gave him another kiss. “Pick what you want.”

“I want all of them,” he mumbled. “That’s why I bought them all.”

“Well, I’m going to have to be invited over more then because I’m not giving you a fashion show in the middle of the night.”

He picked out a black chemise that he seemed happy with from the bulge in his boxer briefs that he threw on. Then he led me to the kitchen, and I chuckled when there were more cupcakes than even I could eat.

He kissed my shoulder as I pulled them all out of the fridge. “I figured you could have some leftovers to snack on during class tomorrow and think of me.”

“Oh, I will,” I purred.

We ate a few, but then I had an idea. My phone was in the kitchen charging because Julian was sweet and always remembered things like that. I grabbed it and pulled up the song I wanted on Spotify and set my phone back on the counter before taking his hand.

Ed Sheeran’s “Beautiful People” started as I pulled him to dance with me. Understanding filled his eyes and he slid his arm around me. We danced to that song and a few others that we’d used in the videos we’d used to send messages to each other.

It wouldn’t fix all the pain we’d been through or how we’d hurt each other—and ourselves—with those videos... But it was a start. It felt like one to me.

The next morning while I was sitting in the cafeteria with the shirtless twits, a couple of my security came over looking incredibly amused. I simply raised an eyebrow when they handed Lucca and Hudson each a bag.

“A courier dropped those off at the guard station and they asked us to bring them since they know you sit together,” one of them explained.

Lucca took it and reached inside, frowning when he pulled out a bottle of baby oil. Hudson had a jar of sparkling body glitter in his hand and they shared a confused look.

However, I burst out laughing. It was too fucking funny, and I honestly laughed so hard my stomach cramped a bit.

There were also a few things professional bodybuilders used to make themselves look good for competitions including a spray tan cream for Hudson.

They both growled when they realized they were being mocked and had the same answer. “Julian.”

Yeah, I bet anything it was my sexy warlock poking fun at them. It worked though because they put their shirts back on and stopped the muscle assault.

And Izzy recorded the whole thing to show Julian later. Nice.

12

“Seriously?” I sighed as I stared at Lucca’s chest. “I thought we were over this.”

“It’s my costume,” he defended, pointing to the large white letters spelling “BEAR” written in body paint.

“That is not a costume,” I growled, gesturing to what I was wearing. “This is a costume.”

“A very, *very* nice costume, cream puff,” he praised.

Yeah, I just bet he liked the Tinker Bell costume I was wearing. It was cute but super short and barely covered my ass. It was fine for a costume party with adults, but we were going trick-or-treating with kids.

Izzy strikes again.

It was a week after the bodybuilder gift gag and the guys had changed tactics, sneaking kisses and touches that they were allowed but like all of the time. *All of the damn time!*

I was like one ball of hormones, so Julian had gotten a few more hot times in his office and once in the bathroom right before a board meeting, so we were at least having fun. It made Lucca and Hudson pout, but they’d both been happy that I’d included them to come where I was doing my Halloween fun instead of asking them to help somewhere else.

The rule was they had to dress like their supe because I was.

Hence, the Tinker Bell costume.

Lucca was wearing sexy jeans and no shirt with “BEAR” written on his

chest.

“You get a big fat F,” I grumbled. I turned to walk away and my eyes went wide. Standing there was one of those inflatable dinosaur costumes that were popular and all over YouTube a few years ago for pranks.

An eight-foot blue one.

“Don’t be mad,” Hudson said from inside of it. “I bought a dragon, but I didn’t pay attention and I’m too tall for it. Like it hurt to hunch over in. So I found this.”

“Are you kidding? This is awesome!” I kept the squeal out of my voice as much as possible, going closer and kissing the plastic panel he could see out of. “You’re awesome, beastie.” I laughed when he kissed the other side of the plastic.

I couldn’t believe the prince of the North American dragons, the stoic and hard to crack Hudson, was wearing an inflatable dinosaur costume. Best day ever.

There was a deep sigh from my left, and I turned just in time to see Lucca pull out a headband that had bear ears and put it on.

Oh geez.

“The bear head of the costume I got didn’t fit right and my bear hated the whole thing because it was too confining,” Lucca mumbled. “This was all I could find last minute when I realized that.”

“Fine, you’re a twit, but you’re forgiven if you wear the ears.”

“You look seriously adorable with them on,” Hudson admitted under his breath, knowing Lucca would hear him.

Next, Darby and Julian showed up... Both as vampires.

“I am the actual vampire,” Darby snapped. “What the fuck are you thinking? What shite is this now?”

“I’m a duffer,” Julian sighed, moving his hand over his face. “I

apologize. I wasn't thinking." He glanced over at me and winced. "I'm sorry, I—I couldn't be the Englishman buying a warlock costume. I couldn't be Harry Fucking Potter. It's all the costumes are basically and I just—my head was fuzzy from it, and I saw this and thought you would like it."

Oh shit. I was a brat then too.

I cleared my throat and nodded. "You guys can just switch then. It's fine." I met Darby's gaze. "Right?"

He swallowed down what he probably really wanted to say and nodded.

I went over to the bag I'd brought and picked it up, bringing it to him and hoping he noted what I was feeling, but I was pretty sure he was wrapped up in his own emotions.

He took it from me and looked inside, doing a double take when he saw it. He leaned in and pressed his lips to my ear. "I got you, *agra*."

"Thanks," I mumbled.

"You bought me a Harry Potter costume, didn't you," Julian said from behind me.

"Cheater," I grumbled. "You checked our auras."

"It was pretty obvious, shorty," Hudson admitted. "You're so red even your shoulders are blushing. I didn't even know that was a thing."

Damn. I sighed and turned around, seeing the emotions play over Julian's face. I wasn't sure if it was because I'd accused him of checking auras or he was upset about the costume. "I understand you guys get upset about how you're portrayed, but... People don't know, Julian. They're not mocking you. They don't think warlocks are real." I gestured to my costume. "It's just for entertainment and having fun."

"I get that," Julian sighed. "I just get shite even from other warlocks and supes that I'm British and it's the whole supe school thing. I was in college much younger than others. That's more what it is than anything."

“I didn’t know that part,” I defended.

“I think it’s cute you tried,” he offered after a moment.

“And it’s fine that we’ll switch,” Darby said from behind me, giving me a half hug. “I’ll be an Irish warlock and he can be a British vamp. It’s just for fun.” He snorted. “And much better than a headband with bear ears.”

“There was a problem with my costume,” Lucca defended.

“I still have friends at Artemis. I know what’s been going on, you twat,” Darby muttered. He kissed my hair and let me go. “The baby oil thing was grand.”

“I learned from the master of sarcasm how to give good gifts,” Julian... Praised? It felt like praise.

Darby came back in the other costume and I went over to him, grateful he took one for the team. “Thanks.” I cleared my throat when he simply nodded. “You make—you’re much more handsome than Harry Potter. Even now.”

Oh dear gods, I sucked at interacting with people. I really and truly did.

He grabbed my arm when I turned to leave, moving closer as well. “Um, are you—can you come home tonight?”

I opened my mouth to agree, but then had a flash of the hell I’d witnessed in my dreams last week. I knew it wasn’t a memory.

No, it had been a vision of the future. I could tell the difference between them mostly now. The edges were fuzzy like it was coming from underwater or something. Or I was watching something play out in a pool of water. It wasn’t set or settled. It was fluid still. That was the vibe I got from it at least.

I pulled away. “I’m going to stay at school.”

“Tam, please don’t run from me again,” he begged, grabbing me back.

I yanked my arm, ignoring when his nails accidentally scrapped me. I met his gaze and tried to blink back tears. “You ran. Not me. I waited for you

night after night and died inside waiting for you to come back to me. I can't do it again for you to just leave and go to..." I swallowed down the rest and turned so I could go meet up with the hobgoblins.

Instead, I met Julain's pitying gaze. He understood I had a vision of something or was able to see more than he'd even witnessed.

And what he'd seen was bad enough.

"Princess!" a young voice squealed.

I had just enough time to open my arms and catch my buddy Darfin when he jumped at me. I laughed and spun us around, glad he was already wearing a glamour so everything was set.

"You know what is going on," Darby hissed from behind me while I greeted Darfin and the others that I'd met at Artemis originally.

"You did this damage, mate. You've gotta make it right on your own," Julian replied.

"I know that. I accept that, but she was terrified just now. Something else is going on and you're keeping it from me."

"Us," Lucca grumbled.

"Leave it alone," Hudson cut in. "This is not the time or place."

"You know what's going on," Lucca accused.

"No." Hudson sighed. "No, I don't know. I just listen to Tams when she's talked about her magic."

"What does that mean?" Darby demanded. "It makes no sense. She wasn't upset about now, she was scared about what I was going to do."

"Oh fuck," Lucca whispered in horror.

"Hudson's right and this isn't the place," I said over my shoulder. "This is Halloween fun or leave."

"Hey Darfin," Hudson greeted as he immediately came over next to me.

"Prince Hudson?" Darfin gasped, bursting into giggles when the dino

head bobbed.

I saw we had others and glanced around. “Okay, so remember the rules about being around outsiders, right? What do you call me?”

“Tamsin!” a chorus went up.

“Good. And the dinosaur is?” I pushed.

“Blue dino!” Elasha squealed louder than everyone else.

Close enough. They clearly got it though. If they messed up we were ready which was why I told the guys to all dress in costume.

I checked we had enough fairy guards and there was also Hudson’s detail plus the hobgoblin parents. The numbers added up, so we went across the street to the first house, the people amused at the huge group of us.

It was a lot of fun though, the kids getting tired fast and letting us load them in the cart to pull at least. They got to experience it, and the fairies could see how things were now without pressure or worry they would expose us.

“Umm, I know this might sound silly, but isn’t this a lot of work to get enough candy you could buy for a few dollars, Your Highness?” one of the newly awakened fairies asked after about five blocks. “I know the price of things has gone up, but the humans are also cheap. There can’t be more than ten chocolate candies in that little pouch. Why not buy one big bag and save your precious time?”

“Yes, but I wouldn’t get to see Hudson in a dinosaur costume, and that’s worth more than money,” I joked, Hudson snorting behind me. I turned to the fairy and smiled. “It’s not about the candy but the experience. It’s fun for the people to see cute kids all dressed up. It’s fun for the kids to have an excuse to dress up and play with their friends.” I gestured to our group. “We had something nice to do and enjoy our time.”

“Thank you for explaining it,” he said, dipping his head and swallowing

down the “Your Highness.” A lot of the fairies couldn’t call me by my name even if needing to do it in public. That was fine.

I was fairly flexible. The fairies were the sticklers most times.

The reason we picked this neighborhood wasn’t just because it was nicer and that meant we shouldn’t have a problem, but they also had a potluck and block party after the kids did their thing. We didn’t just grub. I made sure we had a table set up at the right spot with a lot of catering trays.

No one would really check which house we were from in the large subdivision. Though someone was still nosy, but it was a perfect teaching moment for those watching.

I smiled at the human and waved them over to have some of what we brought, letting them see how *much* we brought. “I live on the far side of the subdivision in one of the newer houses. Since I don’t know anyone yet, I invited a bunch of my friends from school to bring their cousins so they could all play.” I gave my best innocent look. “I was told that was okay. Did I mess up?”

“No, no, not at all,” the woman hurried to say, especially when she realized people were staring. “Welcome to the neighborhood, hon! I’m glad your friends and family can come help you settle in. That’s so dang nice of them.”

I talked with her a bit more before Darby smoothly helped me out and said he found something that would make me happy. I wasn’t sure what that could be, but I was glad for the out because that woman was more than a little nosy.

Like damn, she was going to ask me my shoe size and the date of my last period if I let her keep talking.

I chuckled when he showed me that they had a dunk tank... And then he got in line to go next.

He simply winked at me. “Show me how good your arm is, *agra*. I’ll do it as many times as you want.”

“Ohhh, don’t offer me an outlet for my anger,” I warned.

He simply shrugged and climbed up when the guy got out after someone knocked them off. He sat there and waited for me.

Yeah, I took the offer. I couldn’t even be happy when I got him for the first time.

And he got right back up. I did it again and he climbed right back in the seat. People started to realize something was going on after five times of me dunking him.

“Are you guys going until you miss a shot?” Neldor asked from my right. He sighed when I did a double take, surprised he was there. I’d thought he’d blown it off. “Something came up. I handled it and it’s fine but yeah, I got delayed.”

I nodded. It happened. “I think I’m going as long as he lets me.”

“Oh, that will be for years if it makes you happy and less pissed at him,” Neldor drawled. “How about limit it to a couple dozen times so you don’t hog it?”

“No one’s waiting to go next,” I grumbled before hitting the target again.

“I want to see how many times she can hit it,” Hudson cut in. “She’s not close or cheating.” He was quiet a moment. “Are you cheating?”

I snorted, getting he was asking if I was using magic. “No, I’ve always had a good arm.”

The answer ended up being twenty-three. I knocked him in twenty-three times in a row before I missed. People cheered and said it was a record, everyone trying to keep things light when I wasn’t hiding that I wanted to dunk Darby.

“This should be like a couples therapy tool,” I muttered as I headed back

to the food. Darby came over a few minutes later, dripping all over the place and took a chair next to me without saying a word for several minutes.

“I don’t know what’s going on or what else I did, but I’m not leaving, Tams,” he said quietly. “I know I messed up. I know you don’t trust me after I was such a dipshit. It’s been weeks and weeks now though. I’m balancing again. I’m home at night. You’re not, and I’m having a hard time not getting mad because it feels like you’re punishing me instead of—”

“I’m not punishing you,” I whispered. “I’m not. It’s just so fucking awkward that I don’t sleep well, and I do too much to not sleep. Plus, now I feel like you’re waiting for me to have dreams to see what I do because you didn’t know what was going on.” I turned and looked at him. “You went from months of ignoring me and not paying attention to just watching me now. The disconnect is...”

“I thought sleeping on the couch would make it easier but show you I was there.” There was tension coming off of him when I didn’t say anything. “What do you need from me, Tams?”

I didn’t have an answer for him and that wasn’t fair. Then again, what he’d done wasn’t either. People just switched gears on me too fast. Darby went from distant and not there really to just back and ready to pick up. Hudson had done the same with his shit listening to Juan. Lucca. Julian.

I didn’t shift gears that fast. I couldn’t adjust that well when it was emotional and relationship stuff. I needed...

I needed things not to go wrong, but that wasn’t remotely realistic.

“I don’t know, but I feel more distant from you than when you finally came back around instead of closer, and I know it shouldn’t be that way,” I admitted honestly. I couldn’t talk about it right then and too many people were around.

So I played with the hobgoblins and ate my fill, glad they were getting

their fill of a human Halloween experience.

Darby came over while we were cleaning up and told me he was going to sleep at his apartment. That he would come home when I was ready so to please let him know and it was on my terms since he'd been the problem.

I nodded, conflicted as sadness and relief filled me.

I ended up sleeping at Julian's because going to my dorm or home both sounded too depressing to handle. He seemed to understand and didn't touch it. He simply accepted my compliments that he was a sexy vampire and then held me in my sleep.

The "dream" happened again, the one that I was completely sure was a vision.

"Don't push me out," Julian said quietly. "Let me see this, Tams. You shouldn't have to deal with this alone. It's fucking terrifying and it's not even happening to me. I won't judge you. Just let me see it all. I'll help."

"I don't think there's any help for me," I whispered but didn't push him out.

Julian saw my nightmare that was my future if I truly had my mother's power.

Darby knelt in front of me and told me he needed to end things. That he would never be accepted in Faerie and he couldn't live his life that way, never having a place. He'd grown up the outsider in his own family and it was too much for him mentally. And he couldn't move past that everyone saw him as a strike against me.

Plus, Freya would never be accepted in vampire society if he mated me. They saw it as a betrayal, and it would be a stigma too strong for her to bear and he couldn't do that to her.

He did that for the little sister he hadn't even wanted to know, the one I'd taken care of and protected, helped him develop a relationship with. He

picked her in the end and destroyed me to protect her.

I had a front-row seat to watching myself die inside. People begged me to eat or go to school or do anything but all I did was lie in our bed and mourn my soul shredding. No one could get through to me and even Lageos looked scared as he tried to get me to want to live.

Then I overheard someone saying Darby was getting mated and people were shocked. It wasn't two weeks since the breakup and he was getting mated that day to a vampire.

I watched myself arrive too late and witness them kissing as the ceremony ended. My Darby was mated to another woman. His soul was now hers.

How long had he been with her while with me? Weeks? Months?

Did it really matter?

I left there and went into Faerie. My guards let me because they thought I'd gone there to heal or maybe see my unicorns.

No, I watched Faerie consume me. I let the planet have me and completely gave myself over, letting that insane, sentient planet win and take me over. And that was what it had always wanted because now it was self-sustaining. It didn't need to connect to an heir or a queen anymore now that it completely consumed one like it had always wanted.

Julian grabbed me and woke us up. No, he was already awake and shaking me.

"What?" I gasped, blinking at him and then grabbing my head. "Ouch."

"Sorry," he whispered before hugging me. He pulled me onto his lap when that didn't seem to be enough. "You were moving towards Faerie in the dream with a weird look on your face. I'm sorry. I got scared and you weren't hearing me."

I nodded that I understood and snuggled up to him. "I can't let him back

in knowing he's going to leave and that's my fate."

"I won't let that be your fate, Tams," he choked out. Julian broke down sobbing and I felt bad sharing my pain.

Until I realized I was a *moron* and he was crying because he just saw me dying. Shit. I'd been so locked into my own issues with the vision, I hadn't even realized I'd just told Julian that I died soon basically.

He calmed down some and moved me to sit across from him so he could see my face. "Does it ever change? I read in something Iolas gave me that the visions have versions. They can have hundreds of versions."

I sighed, scrubbing my hand over my hair. "I didn't see it all at first or really see anything. I could hear it echo, and it was just the first part of him leaving me. I've always felt that... I worry about all of you leaving me. I know that's normal in a relationship. But it's always been different with Darby. I look at him sometimes and have that echo of it's inevitable. I knew one day he would say that to me even before Freya."

"You've said this wasn't the life he wanted."

"Neither of us did. He didn't date the heir of Faerie, just Tamsin." I blew out a slow breath. "I started to see the first part in a way months ago. Darby kneeling and telling me he was leaving me. It would change a lot though, and I thought it was because of how distant he was being. It's been more solid the past few months and the second part with marrying his lover is new. I've only seen it like six times."

"Okay, got it. Has any of it changed?"

I nodded. "Sometimes the flowers in the hall are blue or once silver. Once he just kissed her cheek instead of her lips. One time Chief stopped me from going into Faerie at first, but I went in later and the same thing happens."

"I won't let that fucking planet consume you," he rasped. "Please, Tams."

I can't control Darby, but please don't leave the rest of us. Don't leave me."

"I don't make the conscious choice, Julian," I whispered. "I break. I don't even feel that I give myself over to Faerie willingly. I just..." I hugged myself.

"I won't let it happen, I swear it," he choked out as he hugged me as well. "We'll figure this out, okay? Thank you for telling me. I can help now." He kissed my shoulder when I flinched. "What? What didn't you tell me?"

"It happens soon," I heard myself admit, my voice sounding distant with sleep. It took *so much* out of me when I had one of these dreams that weren't dreams.

"How soon? How do you know that?" he demanded, giving me a shake when I didn't answer. "Please, my sweet fairy, talk to me. Don't leave me when I just got you back."

"There was snow originally. At the church, I stepped on snow walking into the wedding hall."

"The snow was melting. That means end of winter or spring."

"Or an early snow that melts," I muttered. He couldn't assume that. There had been lots of random snowstorms with climate change.

And it was now the first day of November. Snow could come at any time.

Faerie would consume me any day now. Hadn't I always known that? If it wasn't this time, it would be later.

I wasn't sure there was a point in even trying to fight it.

13

Julian promised not to tell everyone what he saw, but I had to promise to tell him if anything changed or I had more visions. I agreed even as I apologized for burdening him with this. It was too heavy for me to carry alone.

I also didn't know what to do about it. He actually understood. Even he knew how people beat my mother up about having visions. Either they were dismissive or treated her like a glass ball that she would break for them and the realm. Granted, the ancients and dirty elders were all trapped on the prison island, but that didn't mean it had only been them.

Or others wouldn't do the same. It would be a disaster if any of the councils found out. Hell, there was a list of people who would want to be involved just to use me like a lab rat to learn more than there were who actually cared about me. Edelman came to mind first. Sontar as well. They were both good people, but they were academics and missed the mark a lot. The two of them would go nuts and come up with plans to study me.

So more people watching me all of the time. My worst nightmare basically.

Yeah, I really wanted to tell everyone.

Plus, it sounded crazy. I was mad at Darby for not just what he'd done but what he would do, acting like he'd cheated on me.

But hadn't he? If he was mating that woman, it wasn't just something that came up. He had to know her already and be in contact.

I didn't know, and I didn't know how to handle it in a way that wouldn't blow up my life more. Luckily, Julian talked to Hudson and Lucca and whatever he said had them back off. Neldor watched me like he was worried but didn't say anything.

A few weeks later I was sitting in a meeting that was fucking useless. I lost patience about twenty minutes into it and stood, startling everyone, especially Shael.

"Don't waste my fucking time again by having a meeting without the answers I wanted," I told them coldly.

"I understand your frustration, Your Highness, but we've looked at this from every angle and there isn't a reason," Shael replied.

"Bullshit, Shael. You guys did what you always do and didn't find anything, so you just say there's no reason. *Find another fucking way!* You're missing something. Just because you can't find it doesn't mean it's not there. It's there. We just can't find it. So do something different and get the godsdamn answer. Why is that so hard to understand?" I glanced around the room and shook my head.

"Sometimes you expect too much, Your Highness," Iolas said quietly.

"No, I really don't," I argued. "When you guys couldn't figure out who attacked me, I accepted that. I felt like he was stronger. I admitted I could be wrong and there wasn't enough information. We couldn't track him—the odds were against us. I didn't like it, but I understood it. I accepted that it was the answer for now. Same with the magic at Artemis that did the plagues magic. I understood that was limited.

"That's not the case this time. We aren't seeing the puzzle. You're not lining up the pieces. There has to be a reason they went for Geiger. Demons suddenly attacked and in a big way, but not directly at us. You can't find anything and just assume they picked him to hurt me, to crack my armor or

whatever. They had *years* to come at me. They never did but only one warning about not opening Faerie.”

“I agree that it doesn’t make sense that Geiger was a lead-in to you, but we don’t have enough pieces then to make the puzzle,” Neldor interjected. “We don’t have the information.”

“Because you’re not looking at it right!” I let out a slow breath and focused on the papers on the table. “You guys do things the best of any supe group. I’ve said that many times. It’s your greatest strength, but it’s also your biggest weakness. You’ve created the greatest formula to handle issues, but now it’s the *only* formula you use. There is more than one formula for calculus to work.”

“We use dozens of formulas, Your Highness,” Shael defended. “And we’ve used them all.”

“Then fucking do trigonometry!” I blasted. “You understand what I’m saying. The problem is your *egos*. You’re defending what you’ve done as if I’m saying you’ve done it wrong. You’re defending your results instead of hearing me. That’s the fucking problem, Shael. Repeatedly.”

“Okay, push pause,” Stefanie cut in. “We all care about this and our emotions are heightened.”

“I understand that, but this time I get to be the pissed off boss,” I warned her, giving her a look to shut it. “The end result you guys came up with sucks. I’m not criticizing the work you’ve done, but the fact you think you’ve reached the end. You’re giving up and I never thought fairies to be this lazy.”

I realized nothing was going to come of this when I felt the anger at what I’d said. It pissed me off even more. How many times had they all told *me* that I’d been lazy with training or learning things? My trainers had. Sontar did now and again when I didn’t like learning something. It was normal to give that pushback.

But their egos and age and superiority as fairies didn't let them hear it. That was stupid and bullshit.

So I left, ignoring that they called my name or asked me to cool off and come back. I wasn't the problem this time. I knew I wasn't. Maybe I wasn't handling it right by blowing up or yelling, but it had been *months* of this and I was over it. I knew things would never be perfect with the commanders and even any work relationship, but this was the one area we kept butting heads.

And they wondered why I went around them so often? Seriously?

I went and picked up my weight in Taco Bell and then found myself heading to Faerie. I was about to be a complete asshole, but this was important enough. This was... It wasn't even about Geiger and Cluym, but demons had reemerged in a big way and attacked like that. Yeah, it was all hands on deck time.

Even if one was supposed to be healing while grounded.

Once in Faerie, I teleported to the person I wanted only to find him picking fruit well after his work time should be over.

"What happened to your hair?" I asked as I studied the man. "It's been months."

"I shaved it again, Your Highness," Onas answered as he turned to me.

I sighed and found the best spot to sit to eat. "Join me."

"It would be my honor," he accepted.

I waited until he was sitting and handed him a few burritos. "Onas, I know you're older than me, but you actually listen to outside opinions once you pull your head out of your ass. So please hear me and know that what I'm about to say comes from a genuine place of concern."

He took a bite and nodded. "I've learned you're not the type of mess with people. You'd rather beat someone's ass instead of mess with them emotionally."

That was very, *very* true. “You’re too extreme. You go past intense and dedicated, and you’ve crossed into extreme. That’s why you got all messed up.” I sighed again when he flinched. “Plus, you got locked in with the darkness too long. We shouldn’t have left you to handle all of the interrogations and darkness like we did. You needed a break.”

“Yes, I really and truly did,” he admitted. “I don’t understand the rest of what you—”

“You were punished with shaving your head, cutting your braids. No one said you keep doing it. You’re like those crazy monks that self-whip themselves or whatever. It’s just too much.”

“I wanted to show my sincerity and that I accepted my punishment,” he muttered, sounding hurt. He let out a slow breath and finished the burrito. “How should I have done that in a healthier way?”

I thought on that a few minutes as I polished off some chalupas. “I’m not the most emotionally or mentally sound person to ask, but when people enter programs, even for anger, they normally write letters of apology.” I nodded to the trees he was harvesting. “This is good. You’re done with your work for the day and you’re still helping. That’s healthy effort. Shaving your hair when it’s such a stigma in Faerie is just hurting yourself.”

“I will think on this, truly I will.” He cleared his throat and shot me a quick look. “Thank you, Tamsin.” He shrugged when I couldn’t hide my shock. “You’re not here as the princess. You didn’t give me an order. You’re here helping a friend.” He nodded when I winced. “You need something. I know, but you took the time to help me first.”

“You are so fucking different,” I blurted.

He let out a sad chuckle. “Hitting rock bottom will do that. I look back at what I did before it came to a head and I can’t believe that was me. It seems too surreal. I ignored all of the warning signs that I was breaking. I regret

that.” He glanced over at me. “You ignore them too.”

I was about to brush him off, but then I had a flash of the vision and letting Faerie consume me. “Yeah, but there’s only one of me and it seemed worth it.”

“You don’t sound so sure of that,” he pushed. He accepted more food instead of an answer, letting it go. “So what did you need?”

I opened my mouth to tell him, but then I realized he was the right person to ask something else. “What did Neldor’s mom and your realm think of my mother’s visions?”

“That’s an oddly specific question to ask me when I’m being punished and you haven’t visited,” he muttered.

“It’s not the only reason I’m here, but the topic came up recently, so I was curious since you were so close to her.”

“You’re a horrible liar,” he chuckled darkly. “You had a vision about breaking. That’s what brought this up.” He shook his head when I tried to backpedal. “My magic is stronger now that I’ve cleared the toxic of all investigations. I’m the equivalent of your Julian with auras. I’m the best at interrogations because I see more than most. I catch the littlest things, so please don’t lie to me.”

I wracked my brain on what to say or how to get myself out of this, stuffing my face as I did. That was basically an admission though.

“I won’t tell anyone as long as *you’ve* told someone,” he said after a few tense minutes.

“Julian,” I sighed. “I told Neldor too but not what it was. I showed it all to Julian.”

“Good. Why did you think to ask me when I talked about breaking?”

I shot him an infuriated look. “Glad to know you’re still a pushy bastard when you’re doing better.”

“It’s one of my best qualities and why I do my job so well,” he admitted. “It’s also because I care.”

I sighed. “It’s only been one vision. It ends with Faerie consuming me.”

He froze with his food almost to his mouth. “What do you mean consuming you?”

I didn’t really know how to explain it, so I took his hand and showed him. I let him see how I laid down and Faerie basically sucked the life out of me before pulling me into the ground so I became the planet.

“I have so many questions,” he whispered, his eyes full of terror.

I snorted. “Join the fucking club.”

“Okay, first, I know you’ve been hesitant to—I know Shael and others have pushed you to go through your mother’s belongings. You still haven’t?” He waited until I nodded. “Queen Meira was a kind soul who desperately loved you. There is no way that there isn’t something there for you, Tamsin. I know it’s a wound you don’t want to open, but I truly believe that you are pouring salt in your other wounds by not going and finding it.”

I thought about that as I ate a bit. “No one’s said it like that. I get it now. Yeah, I think I’m at the point of needing answers more than...”

“What is the start of this vision? Has it changed?”

“Answer me first,” I pushed.

He let out a slow breath. “She pitied your mother.” He nodded when I couldn’t hide my shock. “Someone in her family had visions and she read their journal. The power wasn’t worth the pain is what she said. There wasn’t a way to control it or handle it. The power controlled the person, not the person controlled the power. That’s what she said. And she pitied your mother for that.”

Yeah, that sounded about right and made me understand again that Neldor’s mother wasn’t always a bad person. She’d taken the time to talk

about it with her subordinates. With a woman I didn't think she'd ever officially met?

It was really a shame that everything went so far off the rails.

I kept up my end and told him the full vision.

He sighed. Heavily. "I cannot imagine how painful that was for you to see, especially repeatedly. I won't say that I cannot see it happen. Too much has happened for me to say that ever again. However, you see it from only what you saw. You assume he will leave you for a woman. You own that man's soul."

I finished the bag of chalupas as I considered what he said. "That's why Neldor's mother pitied mine. What's not seen or known is so much harder than the vision itself."

"Yes, that's exactly how she would think," he agreed. "From an outsider's perspective, not the woman who loves the vampire, my mind goes right to someone threatening him." He nodded when I did a double take. "Too many people are around him to not detect if he was cheating or interested in another woman. And that fast—he'd have to know how it would reflect upon you."

"But if someone pushed him into it, that would be part of the plan," I muttered. "To make me implode."

"It did make you implode." He let out a slow breath. "I know you won't want to do this because you're basically punishing for something he hasn't done, but you need to tell him, show him. You love more than him, and you have too many people that need you alive. We all do. I don't care if Faerie becomes self-sufficient even if you're consumed or whatever, we need you for more than the conduit to this planet."

"I'll think about it."

He snickered. "Because you're worried someone will threaten the

vampire, not because you'll protect yourself and your heart. You're as big of a pain in the ass as I am."

He wasn't wrong and I couldn't even deny it. I really couldn't, but we were worth it which was why I could never fully write off Onas or give up on him.

"I heard the Halloween plans were a success. That the councils forced the people on the blacklists to step up and made it clear they would punish them going forward."

I snorted, reaching for more food. "More like Neldor got stabby with people and made it clear there would be more in the future unless they stopped coming after me with ill intent instead of actually disagreeing with me."

Onas threw back his head and burst out laughing, actually holding his stomach and rolling on his side on the ground it got so bad. It took him several minutes of laughing to calm down while I ate about a dozen tacos.

"Oh, that boy takes after his dad so much." Tears filled Onas's eyes and he wiped them away. "Fuck, I miss that man."

"I'm sorry," I muttered.

He nodded, accepting what I said. "Did you yell at him?" He chuckled when I sighed. "It's hard to yell at him when you'd do the same thing. I do like how rarely you're a hypocrite. The rest of us ignore it, but when you are, you're so hard on yourself and work to do better."

"It's all we can do."

"That's true," he agreed. "So now that you feel lighter because you told an 'adult' about your visions, tell me why you came to see me. I know it's about work. You're too hesitant like you're pulling me out of my vacation early."

He really did see everything when he wasn't so burdened and clouded

up.

I caved and told him what was going on. I figured he had heard about Geiger and Cluym being attacked if he knew about the Halloween fun. I mostly told him my frustrations with the commanders and investigators. Just because they went through their normal steps, they couldn't just declare there was nothing to be found and it was just an in to hurt me.

"Lack of evidence doesn't make evidence to support assumptions," I said to wrap up, finished with all of the food by then.

"You're completely correct, and I wonder if you remember where you first heard that," he said, sounding amused. I frowned for a minute and then looked at him. "Yes, me. I told you that on the first investigation we worked on together. Glad it stuck."

"It's good advice," I praised. Easily praised. It was. I tossed the bag with all of the garbage away from me. "I've already understood that the easiest solution is generally the right one. I did, but the minute magic was an option, that should no longer really be the default."

"I completely agree, but also the easiest solution is someone using magic when in Faerie or dealing with supes. You didn't grow up with that though." He waved off what I was going to say and actually gave me a very un-Onas-like smile. It was older brotherly actually and I would have expected it to come from Taeral. "They're also burnt out as well, Your Highness."

"I agree." I narrowed my eyes at him. "I've repeatedly told all of you fools that you need to take breaks or stop going around in circles. You're all so worried about everything about *me* from my fucking periods to magic to—you never take care of yourselves and we're breaking because of it."

"You're right and we should have listened. I should have. I think it time you need to order us idiots to do it though." He nodded when I sighed. "Then make Neldor do it. He has no problems bossing people around."

“Good point.” I thought about that a moment and nodded. “Yeah, fine. He has more experience with it all than I do.”

“He does. Now, back to the puzzle you all have been staring at for too long. You’ve cleared that it wasn’t something Geiger had done recently out of the ordinary. You’ve ruled out that it wasn’t something he was *currently* doing that was out of his ordinary. What’s left?”

I flinched. “Something he was going to do.” Then I growled. “But that was also looked into with his meetings and what he was currently doing. You can’t predict the future or—”

“No, but who was going to talk to Geiger about getting help and hadn’t yet?” he cut in. “Think about it. Say Shael was going to talk to Geiger about something that could hurt the demons. Going after her would be suicide for them and they would know it. But if they knew what she was going to do—”

“Taking out Geiger would be the smart play,” I muttered. “I agree, and I thought of that too, but how do we ask who was going to want to do something with Geiger when we can’t tell them about demons? How could we find the person that...” Horror filled me, and it was so bad that my wings popped out. I was about to teleport away when Onas grabbed my wrist.

“Who?” he asked, worry in his eyes as well.

“Julian,” I whimpered and teleported us to the portal. “I revoke your punishment. At least for—there’s no time.”

“It’s been weeks and weeks. The demons haven’t—” he comforted.

“He could die, Onas,” I choked out as I opened the portal. “And Stefanie.” I walked through and teleported right to Julian. I sank to my knees and gave a silent cry of relief when I saw him working from home and on a video call.

He was safe. I didn’t realize the answer too late.

He did a double take when he saw me and went to come to me, but I

waved him off, tears blurring him.

“Apologies, but I just received word my partner has been in an accident,” he said the others on the call. “I’ll catch up with you later. Cheers.” He closed the laptop before anyone could say much of anything and hurried to me. “Tams, what happened? What’s going on?”

“You,” I choked out, hugging him to me. “The answer is you. They wanted you. They knew it would be a death sentence.”

“I’m fine. I’m very confused, but I’m fine,” he murmured as he hugged me tightly. He flinched when portals started opening around us and Fairie Guardians came pouring through, followed by Stefanie.

“Onas came right for me, Your Highness,” she explained. “Dr. Craftsman, this is just a precaution, but please come with us. We think there’s a viable threat to your security.”

“Of course.” He stood with me in his arms, chuckling when I wrapped around him like a monkey. “I can’t even get angry with you for coming to me when you thought I might be in danger when you’re acting like this.”

By the time he walked us through the portal, I felt like I was under control again, kissing his cheek. “I’ve been too late too many times in my life. I didn’t want to be this time.”

“I’m not going anywhere, my sweet fairy,” he murmured in my ear.

We arrived at the dark fairy hotel’s conference room, commanders coming in through their own portals.

Then Geiger did after several moments, doing a double take when he saw the room full. “You found something out about the attack?”

“We have a new lead that makes sense,” Shael informed him. “We hit nothing but dead ends and the princess went to speak to Onas. His fresh eyes helped see the next steps we were missing.”

Onas quickly explained what we’d discussed, and I saw the moment the

light bulb went off over Julian's head.

"Tamsin acquired the majority shares of several companies warlocks mostly own behind the scenes and have used magic to help along," Julian explained. "The technology catches up or the technology now sparks magical discoveries. But they made a lot of money from those shares. I inherited the Craftsman shares."

"Right, you came to speak to me about the princess's shares," Geiger muttered.

"No," Julian said firmly. "I understand now better why you shut me down, but that wasn't what I wanted to discuss. I had some ideas on ways to improve the infrastructure of two of the companies where I found some redundancies. I wanted to show you what I was thinking because you basically oversaw her majority shares. I would have come to you even if it wasn't Tamsin."

"Ahh, that makes more sense, and I apologize for being so blunt with you then," Geiger accepted. "Everyone was approaching me about—I thought you were trying to take some of the heat off Tamsin since you had to control the Craftsman shares also. I didn't take it as you doing something wrong, simply premature since you weren't even engaged yet."

"Understood. I'm glad we cleared that up."

"Yes, but this was months and months ago we spoke quickly," Geiger said for the others. "Before the summer even."

"Right, but Tamsin told me to speak with you again," Julian explained. "To speak with Commander Stefanie about what I saw and maybe she could help me—I figured you blew me off because I'm a kid to you guys still and a former teacher not experienced in business."

"And he did," Stefanie told everyone. "We had several meetings and I even inspected some of the..." Her eyes went wide and she looked at Julian.

“Someone there has to be working with demons. There has to be something with demons at one of those companies. The last tour we took and went over ideas was two weeks before Geiger was attacked.”

“You never considered it because you hadn’t spoken with him yet, so it wasn’t on the list of things we were looking into,” Shael surmised, sighing when she nodded. “You were right, Princess. We failed again.”

“No, I don’t—you didn’t fail, Shael,” I muttered, scrubbing my hand over my hair. “I get too annoyed when—you guys need to just admit you don’t know the answer or know what to do next. You come up with these...”

I looked at Onas and he explained what we’d talked about with them giving the lack of evidence as proof of what they thought.

“The theory is sound, and I understand why they wouldn’t go after Stefanie,” Taeral accepted. “She has centuries under her belt hunting demons. Her name strikes fear in them if they’re smart. Forgive me, but going after Julian who was on his own all of the time would have been much easier than Geiger who has a fairy mate. That’s the part that I’m lost at.”

Someone burst out laughing, a dark laugh that I knew only the Prince of Darkness could make, and I didn’t even know Neldor was there. It was quick and he calmed down fast, giving Taeral a look that he was an idiot which I’d never seen Neldor give his godsfather.

“She would walk into Hell, Hades, or wherever demons come from itself to wipe them all out if they touched Julian. If they *look* at him funny, she would spend her free time killing them and making it painful just as a warning. Demons aren’t stupid. They knew they would provoke the scariest hunter that lay mostly dormant if they touched the man she’d given part of her soul to.”

“Neldor, please stop giving her ideas,” Julian groaned. “Her aura is full of wrath and ideas and—”

“Oh please, like she’s not already debating how to talk Lageos into taking her into the belly of the beast. They’d do it just for some father-daughter fun now that she can heal the wounds of demons.”

“That’s so fucking true,” Iolas grumbled.

“He’d want me to prove I could self-heal first,” I muttered, wondering how I could manage that. “Or maybe if one of the dogs could burn it out of me.”

“Nope, nope, *nope*,” Julian cut in before lifting me up and setting me on the table. He even snapped in front of my face. “I’ve always supported you. You go after Underground? Sure, you can handle that. Magical bombs? I shite myself, but I believe in you. Taking on all kinds of crazy yourself? I’ve believed in you. But I draw the fucking line on demons who can kill fairies with one *cut*, Tams.”

“Right, but—”

“You did it *once*,” he pushed. “You healed someone once in something never done before. Nope, we’re not—please.” He grabbed my arms and shook me. “Please?” Tears filled his eyes and I swallowed what I wanted to say. “I’ll do whatever you want. Take squads with me. Dogs. I don’t care but please, this one time, hear me this is too much for my heart. Not after what I just saw. Please?”

I closed my eyes and nodded. He couldn’t handle it after seeing my vision of Faerie swallowing me. I let out a slow breath and wiped his tears away. “Okay, you win, Julian. I won’t go looking for trouble, I promise. Not on this.”

“Thank you, my sweet fairy,” he rasped, hugging me tightly.

I rubbed his back and held him too. When we parted, I looked at everyone else. “We’re still not sure this is the reason. It’s the best lead we have, but we aren’t sure, so we need to quietly talk to others on who was

going to approach Geiger or if there are more situations like this. That's the best plan. And we quietly investigate whatever Stefanie and Julian were up to."

"You're hesitant this is the right path?" Iolas asked, not hiding his confusion.

"No, I think it's this but like Taeral said, Stefanie is the ultimate demon killer. How were they close enough to hear her and Julian and she didn't sense them?"

"Cameras?" Neldor offered.

"That works," I agreed. "But she would sense that demons had been there, right? I've felt the evil in the building when I tripped over them that one time. And I'm new to all of this."

"You're not wrong, but it doesn't stick around," Stefanie explained. "Otherwise, we wouldn't be able to be in this world if we were constantly sensing where any demon had been. It's hours maybe."

"Normally, a human walks over the area after the demon and we can't sense it anymore is how my father explained it to me," Neldor added.

That did make a lot more sense. "Understood. We've got to dive into AT&P and INTELS then. Those are the two—"

"It could be both," Onas cut in. "I wouldn't assume one. I would assume all." He smirked when I glanced at him. "You were the one who beat it into us that we need to stop assuming everything is the same from twenty years ago. You could have a family of warlocks who knows about demons and working with them. That could mean they're involved in all of the companies those warlocks get income from."

That was a terrifying idea.

Which meant it was probably true.

14

A few days later, I was standing on the cliff of a very large mountain in Faerie.

And apparently, Neldor didn't tell anyone that he'd invited me to his first flying lesson.

"No, I'm not participating," I told several people very firmly and shot Neldor a look to help me.

"I forgot because of the demon thing," he admitted. "Look, you guys had your chance to teach her. This is my lesson. I asked Tams to come because I was nervous and..."

"Yeah, I get it," Taeral muttered, clapping Neldor on the back. "He's watching."

"They both are," I corrected quietly. I ignored it when everyone went stiff at even the implication of his mother. I went over to Neldor and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Do good. Be glad a dragon isn't dumping you off his back and then eating a shark. I would have preferred something a bit calmer than that."

He chuckled and hugged me. "This is why I needed you to come. Thanks, Tams."

"Sure, sure, we can go eat out a bakery when you're done," I teased, patting him on the shoulder.

"Still, if the princess is here, it doesn't hurt to have you come down with us," Captain Dalyor tried. He was there as Neldor's trainer along with a few

of his friends to give moral support to their prince.

“No, because some of you will worry more about the heir of Faerie instead of the other royal. Don’t even try it when half of you think the world will die if I do. So just focus, and maybe if I see you’re not idiots I’ll try and let you talk with my teacher and give suggestions.”

“So you’re going to climb down instead?” Agis snickered.

I was glad when I wasn’t the only one who looked at him as if he was the idiot.

“We opened a portal to up here,” Taeral reminded him.

“And she can teleport, idiot,” Neldor added much more bluntly.

Yeah, that was where my mind went too.

“Okay, focus, kids,” I said as I clapped my hands. “Let’s get this show on the road. Or air. Whatever.”

Neldor let his wings out, but no one else did. Right, they wouldn’t bring their wings out around a royal who didn’t have theirs out. I let mine out as well just so they could get going.

It made me sad again though. Neldor was getting to experience something I didn’t because he was a real fairy. He shot me a worried look and I simply smiled, giving him a goofy thumbs-up so he knew I was fine.

I needed to call my dragon and ask for another flying lesson. I did want to get better... And spend time with Hudson.

Dalyor and Agis jumped off first and then Taeral counted it down for him and Neldor to go. I smiled when Neldor let out a sound he would never, not ever admit to.

He did pretty well, but I could see exactly what I’d done basically watching him. He overextended his wings when the force of the air hitting them first time threw him. Then, while he was getting that handled, a gust of wind came and knocked him off balance. Everything I’d had to deal with my

first time.

So it was good to know Hudson's idea really was good.

Still, it was much gentler falling off a cliff than going fast on a dragon's back and getting sucked up into the air from the resistance of my wings. I wasn't sure by how much really, but honestly it worked out in the end.

And I wouldn't trade that memory of Hudson and River helping me for anything. I was glad I got to experience that with my mate.

After several more minutes, he was out of range for me to see without using runes, and honestly I didn't want to mess with my eyes magically when standing near the edge of a cliff.

Who said I was always reckless?

I teleported to the ground below the mountain where I had been before we took a portal up to the top. Then I decided to get some of my own exercise in and took off at a fast run in the direction they had headed. I caught sight of them about ten minutes later and picked up the pace so I could intercept them.

Dalyor landed first and at a jog as he folded in his wings, kind of how I'd seen pros at sky diving or military guys in movies land from their parachutes.

On the other hand, Agis landed more like Thor from a fucking Marvel movie. His wings were folded in and he landed *hard* to where the ground kind of shook. I expected that when River landed, but he was a dragon the size of a semitruck.

Agis was not.

They didn't pay any attention to me and threw up magic, catching Neldor in a sort of invisible netting as if he'd been bungee jumping or something. He looked like he landed on a damn cloud.

I didn't even realize I was doing it at first, but I rubbed my ass thinking of how it had hurt from landing back on River when I'd been too tired to

keep flying.

Taeral landed easily and praised Neldor, checking on how he was doing and asking him questions about his wings and magic.

Everything River and Hudson hadn't known to ask me.

Dalyor realized I was there then and did a double taken when he looked at me. Pity filled his eyes, making me realize I was crying.

I hurried to wipe away the evidence and slap on a smile before Neldor saw me. I beamed at him. "You did great! How are you feeling? Are you ready to go again?"

The three other fairies shot me looks of horror.

Taeral recovered first. "We never allow someone to go more than once their first time. You could injure a wing that way."

"Oh, of course," I hurried to say, still smiling at Neldor. "Yeah, that makes perfect sense. Are you ready for food? Or is that—"

"Yes, he needs to eat, Your Highness," Agis answered. "Fae food is best."

"Oh, of course," I said again, feeling stupid and small.

Yeah, that was what real fairies ate.

Unlike me.

"I'm glad it went—"

"Tams, are you okay?" Neldor muttered as he pulled away from Taeral.

"Yeah, of course," I said as brightly as I could. "Go eat."

"You're not going to join us?" Neldor worried.

"I already ate," I told him. "Sorry, I thought it was just—I have to handle stuff today." I hurried over to him and rubbed his shoulder. "I'm happy for you." I moved back when he tried to hug me. "I'll see you later for the meeting." I gave a wave to all of them and teleported to the portal... Where I broke down crying.

Unfortunately, a bunch of Faerie Guardians came through the portal right then.

“You saw nothing,” I ordered them between sobs. “I’m fine. Don’t ruin this for Neldor.” I pushed past them and went through the portal. I teleported to who I needed most, barely able to see him because of my tears. “I’ll never be one of them.”

“What happened, shorty?” Hudson whispered as he hugged me.

“I won’t ever be a real fairy like them,” I choked out as I held onto him with all I had. “They have different ways to land. I’ve never seen any of them fly before. They don’t even fly around a fake fairy like me.” I clung onto him and sobbed out everything without giving specifics because that was against the rules of being a fairy.

Funny that I kept the rules when I wasn’t really one of them.

And yet, I was the leader of them.

Yeah, no, it made perfect sense why I was the most messed up person mentally and emotionally three hundred and sixty days of the year.

“You flew like a dragon, my mate,” he whispered against my temple when I finally calmed down. “And I was damn proud of you. I always am.”

“Sorry.” My voice cracked and my throat hurt. “I’m sorry. I felt like I was breaking again.”

“It’s fine. Nothing is more important than you, Tams. I’m sorry they keep hurting you.”

I nodded and tried to mop up my face. I sighed when I locked gazes with King Xavier. “How big of a mess did I make this time?”

Sadness was in his eyes and he shook his head. I thought that meant it was really bad this time, but Queen Sasha cleared her throat and I glanced over at her.

And saw tears trailing down her cheeks. “This was more important than a

breakfast meeting. It was only going over castle security.”

“I’m sorry,” I said again. I glanced over and saw Mel’s parents, a few of her cousins, and a few of the Vogels that had high positions in Xavier’s cabinet. “Sorry.”

“Stop apologizing and have something to eat,” Hudson said as he helped me stand.

“Don’t tell Neldor, okay?” I sighed when people flinched or gasped. “I don’t want to make his first time flying all about my meltdown because you know people will if they find out. He lost his parents and—I didn’t want to ruin this for him.”

“I’m kind of pissed he asked you to be there,” Hudson grumbled as he guided me to his chair. He sat first and pulled me onto his lap as if it was the most natural thing in the world. “I get it and he was nervous.”

“It was selfish of him given how—they haven’t ever flown around you before?” Sasha demanded.

I shook my head. “It’s considered rude to have your wings out around a royal who doesn’t have them yet, so I barely saw them before mine came in. Then, with the fiasco of not teaching me to fly and my whole reoccurring breakdown that I grew up human and having extra appendages—and ones that didn’t behave and gave away my emotions that tons of everyone picked on me for so I resented them—and I’m sure no one wanted to.”

“You never get a day off,” Hudson sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry I’m complaining when you’ve been a great teacher,” I said as I wrapped his arms around me. “I wouldn’t trade the memories we have for any fairy anything. I thought that earlier too. I swear it.”

“You just also wish things weren’t so painful and problematic,” Xavier said gently, nodding when I did. “Yes, there are many instances in my life I’ve felt the same. Sasha’s pregnancy with Hudson is one of them. She had

such a difficult time and I never wanted that for her, but some of my most precious memories were helping her then. The cuddles when she wasn't feeling well or asking me to rub her feet."

"You never told me that," Sasha muttered, not hiding her surprise at all.

Xavier shrugged. "It sounds fairly horrible of me as if I enjoyed your discomfort and pain."

"You stupid dragon," I sighed... At the same time Sasha did. We shared a look that we were on the same page that the Vogel men were a handful. I glanced up at Hudson. "I was just thinking how sore my ass was from landing back on you when you caught me."

Hudson winced. "You almost bounced right back off you landed so rough. Even River cringed and thought we'd get grounded for that." He kissed my nose. "Instead, you gave me a damn shark."

"I think that will become legend among this castle for many generations to come," Mel's dad, Trigger, joked. "The best end to a flying lesson ever is getting to scoop up a rare Faerie shark."

"It was super cool the way he just dove into the ocean and all the fish flying everywhere when he came back up," I admitted. "I was so shocked how smooth it was that I didn't even see the shark at first."

The others chuckled at that and I relaxed some, hugging Hudson's arms to me. Yeah, this was better. This was my place and people, not... Fine, they were my people too. I was too old to be childish and rip into fairies and lash out.

Well, as much as possible.

"Let's go fly here, shorty," Hudson said after we finished eating.

"Wait, your days are always packed."

"It's fine. My brother can take the meeting."

I swallowed what I wanted to say. He was trying to get his brother to take

over more of his responsibilities since Hudson didn't plan on being Xavier's heir. But that only worked if he mated me, and I felt bad for Hudson's brother getting jerked around like that.

Not enough to mate Hudson before I was ready, but it put the guy in a bad spot.

Then again, he could turn it down or say no.

Life was complicated.

Still, I wanted to fly too. I wanted to feel closer to Hudson and clear my own head.

Plus, I'd never flown around the Vogel's mountains before. We'd always done it in Faerie. It was much different that he could just go out to one of the large balconies, undress, shift, and we took off. It made sense that everything was set up like that in case of emergencies, but it was also fun.

Once we were at a safe distance from the castle, I flipped off River and let my wings out—something that drove him nuts. I was able to fly alongside him now, flapping my own wings. Going fast was hard for me because just like running fast, it took a lot more work, but it was good progress.

Well, in my opinion.

I laughed when River went upside down under me so I could smile down at him. The goofy dragon loved to do it since I'd started using my wings instead of gliding.

I tried to do it next, but I wasn't ready for that, losing balance with my wings and diving down for a bit before I could recover. Just as I leveled out, River swooped under me to where I would have been to catch me.

He gave me a lecture in our minds about behaving and not scaring him.

Coming from the guy who had originally just dumped me off of his back? That was rich.

Still, I promised to be good because I knew how scared and worried he

was about me. Plus, he had a few good points that I should maybe learn to land and take off on my own before trying for anything fancy.

Yeah, that seemed smart.

We went for a while before I dropped onto his back. I'd figured out how to close my wings and teleport onto him so my ass wasn't hurting the rest of the day without healing runes. I let out a squeal as he kept flying and we passed other dragons. They flew around each other almost like how friends would high-five or hug. Then I realized it was more of a dance to communicate.

Sort of like how dogs circled their friends to say high or ask to play. I didn't mean it in a condescending way—a dragon wasn't remotely like a dog—but that was how the behavior seemed to me as an outsider.

We landed near the trees which made me yelp at how close we were, but I realized he wanted to be away from others who were hanging out by the lake. It was already fairly cold given it was the mountains and how far north we were.

River shifted into Hudson, and he caught me as I dropped to the ground from the change of height. He gave me a heated kiss and then pulled me along by the hand.

So clearly he wanted to show me something. It ended up being a hidden cave. It was clear others knew about it from the firewood and obvious spot people lit a fire. I used a rune to do that when Hudson threw on a few logs.

“Feeling better?” he checked.

“Yeah, that was exactly what I needed.”

“Me too.” He leaned down and kissed me, hugging me to him. “There's something else I need. Or maybe need to ask?”

“Anything.”

“Did I do something wrong when we were together? We haven't been

since and—were you really calling us shirtless twits?”

Crap. He was hurt.

I rubbed my hands over his chest and stared into his eyes. “You guys were being goofs about it and like a thing. It seemed more like a bit to...” I shrugged. “It wasn’t like I was telling everyone. I think Julian and Izzy.”

He nodded but then sighed. “We got competitive. We are twits, I get it. I just—I missed you and yeah, I wanted us time. This year started rough and I wasn’t ready for that, but now that my fucking dean finally accepted a thesis topic, I can just work.”

“He was really being rough on you about that,” I muttered, studying his eyes. “It’s a thing, right?”

“He’s an Asian dragon and not my fan because of what happened or now that Juan’s hanging with us after renouncing his family.” He hurried on when I sighed. “I would just be ready to call him on it and say something and he’d tell me the new thesis was promising. Then—”

“He’d pull the football away, Charlie Brown.”

“Yeah, but that’s nothing compared to the shit Lucca got from his dean. Damn, that man is for real not even hiding it. And Lucca can’t get help since he’s still on the outs with his dad.”

“That’s so beneath Artemis.”

“You’re going to kick some ass, aren’t you, shorty?” he chuckled.

“You should have told me when it started,” I lectured.

He flinched and chuffed. “Like you did your visions?” He chilled out when I apologized. “Are you going to tell me? Were you eventually?”

I let out a heavy breath and pulled away. I hugged myself and sat on one of the large logs by the fire. “I don’t know if that’s what I’m even seeing, Hudson. I think I am. I just...” I shook my head. “I get so tired of it always being my weird and crazy stuff. I can’t imagine how it is for you guys. I just

—I knew you were busy with school. That’s where your head should be.”

“There’s more?” he pushed, sitting next to me, completely fine with being naked.

“It’s one vision a handful of times with some changes, and it’s all about Darby and not a good end for me. I thought…”

“Did you think one of us would get hurt that your first vision wasn’t about us?” he asked after several minutes of quiet, his voice not hiding how crazy that sounded.

“Well, I feel stupid now when you say it like that,” I grumbled. I shrugged. “You guys get jealous of Darby and vice versa. But I know I’ve been so focused on him too. It’s like consumed me, and it’s slowed down us moving past what happened. Then I get weird about making up with one of you when I’m fighting with another. It’s not easy to constantly worry that you all think I’m replacing you with another.”

“Do you love me?”

“Of course, I do.” I grabbed his arm when he didn’t say anything. “Hudson, I love you. Do you think I’d have stayed through all of our problems if I didn’t love you?”

He reached over and lifted me off the log, moving me to straddle his lap and face him. He cupped my cheek and smiled. “I believe you, Tams. I wasn’t doubting you. I was trying to figure out how to say what I was thinking.”

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean to rush you.”

“Sometimes we need the push,” he chuckled. “I love you too, Tams. That’s the part that matters. We love each other. The rest can just be noise. Important noise, but noise. My being an idiot. You overthinking something. Yes, we do better, but that’s not the important part when we love each other. That’s what I wanted to say, but I know I’m not saying it right.”

“No, I get it,” I promised. “You’re not dismissing that we can get hurt on the way or the journey has been tough, but focusing on we still love each other.”

“Yes.” He moved his hand and took off my jacket. Then my shirt.

“What are you doing, my dragon?” I teased.

“Getting you naked. I know you feel how hard I am. I can’t—I’m fucking dying, shorty. Please?”

I was already going to agree, but when he gave me those big puppy dragon eyes, I caved. Damn this man for knowing exactly how to get what he wanted from me.

Minutes later, I was naked, straddling his lap again, and his fingers were inside of me.

“You’re going to get splinters in bad parts if we do it like this,” I warned him.

“Worth it,” he chuckled. “I’d take a splinter in the nuts every time we had sex just to be with you, Tams.”

I didn’t know if that was super romantic, weird, or Hudson seriously needed to get laid.

All three?

“I love you, beastie,” I whispered when I was ready. “With all my fucking heart, I really do.”

“Me too, shorty.” He pulled his fingers out and replaced them with his dick, giving us what we both really wanted.

And he ended up standing after the first sliver. I laughed so hard that I couldn’t control it, but apparently he liked what that made my body do around him because the look in his eyes was almost feral.

“Will the fire go out on its own?” I checked, nodding when he did. “Grab clothes.”

“You’re teleporting us while we’re having sex?” he checked.

“I was going to do a portal just to be safe,” I admitted. Then I realized I was an idiot and used my magic to put out the fire while he grabbed my clothes. I opened a portal to his room and he walked right through.

The cave was fun, but he had a really nice bed too and I didn’t want it to go to waste.

He took me twice and then wrapped around me like a damn barnacle. We laid like that for a while, just enjoying the time together... Even if I had to take shallower breaths than normal.

“Was I at least a hot shirtless twit?” he asked me, his tone completely serious, breaking the silence after so long it made me jump.

Then I realized what he’d said, and honestly I burnt more calories laughing than from the two rounds of hot sex. How could I not love this man?

Eventually, we had to get up, mostly because we were both hungry, and I sighed when I saw the amount of missed calls and messages I had.

“I need a fucking vacation,” I bitched as I grabbed a loaner towel from Hudson. I was just going to teleport home and shower. I gave him a kiss and accepted his offer to have dinner before leaving.

Only to find a very upset Neldor pacing my bedroom.

Anger filled his eyes as he took in my state. “I was losing my mind with fucking worry and you were having sex? Are you fucking kidding me right now?”

“I’m lost,” I admitted. “I went to my own flying lesson and—”

“You didn’t just use meetings as an excuse to blow me off. You had actual meetings,” he snapped. “And you didn’t show. We only got the Faerie Guardians to confess they saw you crying because you were missing.”

I glanced at the clock and sighed. “It’s now just lunch, Neldor. I was gone for the morning. I’m sorry I worried you. I am.”

“No, I’m sorry I was worried about you,” he growled before opening a portal and leaving.

Fuck. He was being over the top, but I also understood it.

I was annoyed because I hadn’t wanted to ruin his first flying lesson and that was why I’d left, and I’d done exactly that.

Fuck.

15

The next day, I asked the bakery for a very nice apology for Neldor and they promised they'd make it happen... As long as I did my best to not disappear and scare people again.

Fine, I promised them that I'd do better, while also reminding them that I had been as well. That got me out of most of my hot water. Except for Neldor.

I went to get an update on the investigation on the demons and the new lead when I heard some fairies talking about Neldor pushing to have Mason executed and he was frustrated that I kept blocking it. And the commanders were against it for the moment as well.

Something was missing. In my mind, no matter how many people told me everything lined up and it was done, I still saw something missing.

And given "it" was Mason and the numerous traumas I wasn't sure I could ever get over, I actually understood why those close to me thought it was simply my nerves.

Or emotions.

Or fears.

I got that. I understood the logic.

Something was still missing.

After I threw down with the bear council, the Rodriguezes lost their position and were actually kicked out of their sloth. They kept what they had and were excommunicated basically. Not rogue but... Shunned? I wasn't

sure, but it was a bear thing.

From what Lucca told me that part of the punishment wasn't a big deal to them since their sloth was pretty remote and they thought everyone else were jerks anyways. They still answered to the council and their children could be welcomed back into bear society when they reached adult age but yeah, they weren't welcome anymore.

No, that made no fucking sense to me when everyone had called me a terrorist for starting a women's shelter and comparing me to Underground, but the bears did that. So yeah, hypocrisy was everywhere. I knew that.

We all knew that, and I couldn't change that at the moment.

Maybe tomorrow.

Right then the situation with Mason still didn't add up in my head, and as much as everyone wanted to put it behind them for my sake, I couldn't.

So I went to Ara. She owed me a few favors after our ups and downs, and I was going to be a shit and call them in.

"Look, I admit I'm traumatized and absolutely fixated," I'd said after I'd told her what I wanted.

She'd sighed, nodding as she rubbed her hands over her cheeks. "But that doesn't mean you're wrong, Your Highness. It does mean this is distracting you and that's the last thing you need. The unknown can be scarier than any clear picture at times."

"That is where my head is at, yes."

"Then I will help you get the picture."

And she'd kept her word. She'd gone over every fucking piece of information we had. She redid interviews under the guise of documenting the situation for Vale history given my position. She collected everything from the supe police, Artemis, the bear council—just everything.

But it was also part of why I had decided not to have Mason put to death.

That had surprised everyone, but I thought they were a bit dense. Mason was a truly rare individual and in our custody.

Why the fuck wouldn't we use that?

I ordered all of our interrogators and all Guardians to have extra training with telepathy runes to work with him. He was a damn psychopath, and he was rare but not the only one, so I wanted people to learn the signs. Study him and make sure we were ready for the next one.

Mr. Rodriguez objected—though privately to keep his promise that his family wouldn't be a problem again—saying we were going to torture his son forever in revenge and call it training. Mrs. Rodriguez apparently beat the shit out of her husband and simply asked she could still visit Mason.

I allowed them both to see the training and to have monthly visits if they wanted, but the moment Mason tried to manipulate them, the visit was over. He was a damn psychopath after all.

Once I had everything from Ara's reinvestigation, I was overwhelmed. I couldn't be objective. I needed outside eyes.

But how?

I would want to ask a psychologist or psychiatrist. Of course, I would. But how the *fuck* did I explain the most important parts like truth-telling runes and telepathy? They would put me in a damn padded room. It was like I needed someone who wouldn't blink at the supe part and simply look at the pieces like a puzzle.

Or like a mystery.

A mystery novel even.

That was when the answer hit me.

I made a few calls and arranged what I needed to, picking out the parts of what Ara had put together. I snorted when I saw how meticulous she was and outlined all of the events even. She also had her notes and that outline on a

USB drive.

So after I switched up the names, I was ready to meet my “outside eyes.”
Or Jackie, the porn star I knew.

No, I wasn’t kidding.

I was a firm believer that the best answers could come from the most unlikely places. I was the perfect example of that when it came to Faerie. I didn’t grow up there, and growing up human gave me an interesting perspective. So did not knowing I was a supe until so late. And being half demigod.

Yeah, so I wasn’t going to look down on a porn star.

Especially when the woman was sharp and had read more books than probably any other person I’d ever met. So what if they were murder mysteries and paranormal romance?

Hell, that was what I needed right now.

“Sorry for all the secrecy,” I said as I hugged her in greeting.

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” she chuckled. “I would be embarrassed to know me too.”

I gasped and leaned away, not hiding my shock. “That is *not* what this is.”

She gave me a sad smile. “Tams, it’s fine, really. I get it.”

I sat down across from her and shook my head. “I would still do this even if you were a Hollywood movie star, Jackie. Or an Instagram model—any of it. I just—I don’t *like* the spotlight. I do it to give jobs and because people rely on me.”

She studied me for several moments. “You were always private. Yeah, I could see that about you. Sorry, I didn’t mean to assume the worst.”

I reached over and took her hand. “If you were arrested or there was a problem, I would never hide I knew you and I’d stand up in court and testify

you were a good person. I would be there in a heartbeat and have your back. It's not about what you do. Really, it's not. I just don't want any of me being focused on or the next article digging into my life."

She squeezed my hand. "You're right, that's not you. I'm sorry. A few of the other girls turned their lives around and—it hurts when they pretend we don't exist or are an ugly past they want to forget."

"That's not you so much as what was done to them, Jackie," I said gently. "I've had a few snub me or forget me too. It's how they survive."

She nodded and then patted my hand before letting go. "Well, enough of the bad. I was glad to get your call and our schedules could line up. Though I would have looked over anything you wanted me to if you emailed it."

"I know, but I feel silly bugging you for a college project when you're so busy," I said as I pulled out the doctored outline.

"I love that you're going to college. Mel said even a master's?"

"In business. This is just for my roommate who is—this is her senior project. Creative writing English major. She's going all in and writing a novel and—the girl is stressing, and when I told her I knew someone who ate up books like candy she begged I have you look this over. Something is missing in her mind. Like a piece of the puzzle."

"That's my crack," she giggled and took it from me. "You hungry? I thought we could order room service and just hang? You said you had a couple of hours?"

"I do, but we can do better than room service," I purred, winking at her when she glanced at me. "I have one of my security grabbing something special."

"I like special, especially if he's hot," she teased.

Oh boy. Yeah, my guards were hot and awkward at times, so it would be funny to see Jackie try to gobble them up.

She had been in Chicago for a shoot, so I had lied and said I'd had a meeting there too, but it gave us the excuse to have some of their deep-dish pizza which always made my tummy happy. A few minutes later, they arrived and we dug right in. She was a quicker reader than I remembered because I was only on my third slice when she was finished.

And the outline had been over ten normal printer pages. Not just bullet points either.

“Okay, so I have questions, lots of them,” she said as she focused on her pizza. “Have you read the book? I really wish I could just read it.”

I was ready for her to have said that, nodding and swallowing my bite. “It’s not a book yet, more like scenes she’s still trying to stitch together but is missing something. And her advisor won’t let her have more than one person read the material. School rules or something.”

“That’s actually smart, but I should ask her directly,” she hedged.

Oh shit. I hadn’t thought of that. I shrugged. “Hit me first. It’s been bugging me too because I feel like I can almost see what’s wrong but can’t grasp it.”

She snorted. “Because you’re too busy yourself. You would have seen the holes I do if your plate wasn’t crazy full, Tams.”

I froze in my next bite. “So you do see holes?”

She nodded. “Well, more I have questions maybe.”

I tried to stay calm as my heart beat in my ears and I saw Ara go tense as well across the hotel suite we were meeting in. “Hit me.”

“So originally, everyone thought this Mason guy learned about our main character, Princess Meira—and I love that name by the way—from this douche Ronald Von Thann. Side note—that name sounds like a Bond villain. I would tell her to change the name.”

I choked on my sip of pop, thumping myself in the chest. “Yeah, I’ll tell

her.” Oh shit, it was hard not to laugh at that.

“So they *thought* he learned about Meira being a fairy from Ronald running his mouth about breeding fairies when drunk. A few times. Then overhearing some comments she made—which was super stupid of her given the guy was a douche.”

Yeah, it was, and I beat myself up about it. I still did.

“But no one’s perfect, so I don’t judge our girl,” Jackie continued. “But it turns out later he knew from a project he did when he was younger, right?” She waited until I nodded. “But he’s the only one who paid attention in school? Some extra credit assignment? That seems sus. Really sus.”

It was, and I’d thought the same when I’d moved past my shock and binge drinking. “It was actually a footnote. The main character finds the book and assignment, and it’s one footnote in a huge reference book that most wouldn’t have used for the assignment. Most looked up what they needed and moved on.”

She bobbed her head and chewed her bite. “You would think the bad guy would brag about that and he was smarter to read more. But I could see him thinking learning was the norm and wanting to look down on others that they were lazy and stupid. Either way he’s better, so it’s more a framing if he’s an overachiever for reading it all then and remembering a footnote—”

“Or he paid attention to her when others dismissed her,” I said quietly. “I think he would choose that path to freak her out more. It wasn’t about him sounding better in the end but haunting her more.”

“Yeah, that’s how I would take it. Even if he was going down, he wanted to make sure he scared her forever.”

Mason certainly did that.

“So okay, that was one question. My other question is on the investigation. I get he wore a telepathy charm to block Princess Meira. She

didn't know about them then—yeah, not our girl's fault. Never blame the victim. We believe that always.” She winked at me, talking about our real lives.

And having no idea this was actually my real life.

“I also get him fooling people who could detect lies. I've seen that before where psychopaths can get around shifter senses. They don't register it's a lie in their heartbeat or whatever. Yeah, I think that's a cool thing even if authors lean on that a bit too much. I mean, real psychopaths are pretty rare.”

“One percent of the population,” I muttered, nodding when she did a double take. “I looked it up for her. One percent have ‘clinically significant’ traits is what I found.”

“That's more than I would have thought.” She shook her head. “Okay, one in a hundred is fucking terrifying. I apologize, authors.”

Of course, she did.

“But how did he get around the truth-telling rune or confession potion? No, confession rune, right? The magic part.”

“I don't understand,” I hedged.

“Right, in any normal interrogation, you would set up a baseline. A cop sits someone down and asks them, ‘Did you steal that car?’ They know the guy stole the car already, but they ask. Even if they knew the guy supposedly learned about Princess Meira from villain Ronald... Wouldn't they have asked him? How did he not answer he learned about Meira earlier then?”

I glanced at Ara and saw she didn't have an answer either. “What if they didn't ask it that way? It could have been offhanded like, ‘Did Ronald talk of breeding fairies in front of you?’”

“Ooooh, good point,” Jackie purred. “Yeah, it could totally be the way the question was phrased. You can't just say, ‘Tell me everything I need to know’ because magic wouldn't work like that.”

Unfortunately not. That was too subjective and too easy to get around.

“Okay, but my other question is why he had his room set up like a stalker when he was a smart psychopath? That could get him caught.”

“Or give him an insanity case if he was caught,” Ara cut in, clearing her throat and dipping her head to me. “I apologize, Ms. Vale.”

I waved it off. “It’s fine, you guys all sign NDAs. I didn’t know you were a fiction fan too.”

She got on the ploy and nodded. “Plus, my dad was a military cop.”

“Oh, that’s cool,” Jackie said, before glancing at me. “They can sit and have pizza. They don’t have to be formal for me, Tams.”

“Some people—it’s like I invited extra friends and kinda rude.” I shrugged. “I wing it. I never know what I’m doing.”

“And you hate having security. You’re such a solo act,” she teased.

She wasn’t wrong though.

I apologized to all of them when I realized I hadn’t even introduced them though, feeling ashamed of that.

“It’s fine, Ms. Vale,” Ara picked up easily. “You were so excited to see your old friend and that meeting was—wow, that was stressful and I just had to stand there.”

Damn, she was good. For real, that was great cover.

“Okay, I want to hear about that, but first let’s help your friend,” Jackie said, excitement in her eyes. “Some things don’t line up for me that I think are getting swept up in ‘he’s crazy.’ Like, why tell his dad that they were engaged?”

“I thought of that,” I admitted. “To set up the lie that the vampire was stealing her away or did something to her. If he was going to knock her up and force her to mate, he had to have some sort of basis to be the victim. Or the hero *saving* her from the evil vampire lie.”

“So basically, he lied so much he got tangled in all the stories?” Jackie hedged. “That sounds like a big fucking mistake a villain wouldn’t make if he was smart enough to latch onto a dragon prince best friend when he was just a little kid.”

“Yeah, but I saw little kids latching onto anyone they could in foster care,” I muttered. “Even if he didn’t understand all the implications of a prince until later, a kid could just think having a prince kid as a friend was cool or useful, not his ultimate villain plan.”

“True. It just seems some of it doesn’t add up neatly. I know that’s real life, but for her first book I would think a publisher would want her to have it all laid out unless there was a sequel or series.” She snorted when she reached for another slice. “I feel like this is where the telenovela would reveal it’s actually his evil twin.”

“What would lead you to that?” Ara asked when I couldn’t seem to get my mouth to work.

Jackie shrugged. “It almost seems like two different people. You have Mason the stalker and crazy of one flavor making up that he loves her and they’re mates in his head. Telling people he’s asked her out and to back off because she’s said she needs time. That they’ve had study dates or are into each other.

“It’s all fantasy and even telling his family they’re *engaged* and in love. That’s like one path of delusion. Then he abducts her to save his mate—in his mind—from the evil guy who hurt her. He knew the vampire accidentally hurt her, right? Drank too much blood and wanted to save her? Or the outline said something about mating her before the leech killed her.”

“Yes,” I whispered, swallowing back bile as I heard Mason’s words ring in my ear.

“Well, I have questions as to how he even knew that,” Jackie muttered.

I did now too.

“I thought that was in the outline,” Ara hedged, giving me a gentle look. “No, wait, I overheard you talking about it with your friend. Sorry.”

“Give us deets, girl,” Jackie chuckled.

“He was stalking Princess Meira, so he knew she was hooking up with the dragon and it was intense, serious. But knowing about the vampire was an accident. He came back to campus early after fighting with his family and saw the vampire talking with the dean and eavesdropped.”

“Okay, that tracks,” Jackie accepted.

Ara wouldn’t lie, so I did too. Actually, I might have known that already. Maybe. I wasn’t sure. It was hard to hear it all or keep it straight. Just hearing Mason’s name made my blood thunder in my ears.

“But all of that delusion is different than the psycho behaviors,” Jackie said. “Manipulating her into trying to get dates. Getting her pregnant so she would need the bear pack’s protection. Setting up a video camera not to watch her in her room or see her more, but to confirm she could open the portal. So yeah, it’s like two people.

“One was delusional to think they were in love and put her in a wedding dress, but the other wanted her pregnant so she was trapped and needed protection. One had pictures all over of her while the other wouldn’t be so stupid to plan so much out. One telling his dad they were in love and engaged and the one enraged she showed up with another guy and embarrassed him.

“If he was in love like a good guy, he would be hurt, not enraged. That sounds like a psychopath, not just delusional. I like the twist of mental illness in the family with the great-grandfather. I wonder where she’s going to take that? I would want to know what kind of mental illness?”

“Delusional,” I hedged. “If I remember correctly, he thought he did the same to a fairy and made up crazy about selling off the kids, but no trace of

them could ever be found. The investigation was ruled all his fantasy. That he killed the fairy with that potion and it drove him insane.”

“He lost his fated mate and was losing his grip on reality,” Ara added. “He thought the power of a fairy could save him but yeah, it killed her and the rest was just insanity.”

“So insanity from losing his mate, not in the family then,” Jackie muttered.

Oh shit. Yeah, that was different. Or was it? Not everyone who lost their mate went insane.

No, there would be tons of insane shifters around and would have outed the supe world to humans for sure.

“I think you might be onto something, Jackie, but I would say—from what I overheard of the plot—that having one shifter elder interrogate Mason with a rune after it happened was the problem. People were trying to keep it quiet and handle it fast so no one found out Meira was a fairy and quickly got enough answers. You understand it, but that is the breakdown I saw.”

“True. Yeah, that gives your friend a lot of wiggle room to change things around and put pieces together differently behind the scenes. Smart, really smart,” Jackie agreed. “Seriously, I want to read this book when she’s done. If she publishes it, you gotta get me a copy, Tams.”

“You will be the first one, I promise,” I chuckled. “So what other theories would you have besides evil twin?” I waggled my eyebrows at her when she glanced at me and tried to keep it light. “I know you. You always saw the endings easily and had like forty theories about any show or movie that came from a book.”

She blew a long raspberry as she stared at the far wall. “That could be a whole list depending on her mythology. I mean, if it was a good guy you might think demon possession or dark magic. You could go the sci-fi route

and someone put a chip in his brain or brainwashed him like those old spy books to react to trigger phrases.

“His bear has his own voice, right? Maybe it was going feral. Become like a bearman instead of a wolfman trapped in an in-between form. I still would think the evil twin idea. How hard would it be for both of them to fake being one? If his dad was an asshole I bet he wouldn’t want the conflict of twins, so he tried to get rid of one and the mom saved him or something.”

Jackie was really stuck on that one, but she did list a few other things. I knew Ara was going to check into it.

It was honestly good to see her. I hated that I’d lied to her and she was incredibly helpful, but I had missed talking with her and I was glad I’d gotten the chance to.

“Um, I don’t want to impose on our friendship, but I was...” she trailed off when one of my security held up their phone to me. “Oh right, you didn’t have much time.”

“No, but it’s fine. What were you going to say?”

“It’s nothing. You have to get going,” she said quickly.

I grabbed her hand when she went to get up and stopped her. “Jackie, don’t bullshit me. You okay?”

She sighed. “Yeah, I’m good, but I want—you’re good with the money stuff. I mean, like investing? Every time I turn around you’re starting some new venture. I don’t want to—could I like invest in something? I mean, you’re never going to fail and—I can’t do porn forever and I don’t want to, ya know? I just want to have...” She looked like a kid asking for help with her homework and it broke my heart.

“Yeah, I know, Jackie,” I said gently. “But I’m actually not great with that stuff.” I rolled my eyes when my security snorted.

All of them.

“My attorneys make it all work out. Let me talk to my main one, Claudia, and she can hook you up with an associate who can put it together. I’m fine with you investing in something I’m doing. Or working with you on your own stuff. You’re super popular. If I was you I’d be doing merch and your own branding stuff.”

“I hate that stuff,” she sighed. “The sex is fun but all the rest just—I don’t like that stuff.”

“Neither do I. It’s why I have people to do it. I’ll get someone to hook you up. Really.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s what we do for each other.” I winked at her, feeling like I was at least paying her back for taking up her time for a lie.

That was my life, so that was weird.

I wasn’t in Chicago publicly, so we were able to portal back and I was glad because it meant I could dive right into everything Ara had gathered. She wanted to as well and we spent hours poring over it. I did agree with her that the “flaw” in a lot of the picture was how the original interrogation of Mason was handled.

It was done quick to keep me safe and move on. If they interrogated him too much something else could have slipped out that would have led to more questions I couldn’t have afforded to be asked. That was an answer for a lot of the gaps that we could have found if we picked it all to death.

“Jackie’s not wrong that sometimes the answer is there aren’t answers in real life,” Ara said with a sigh after several hours of us going over it all. “Crazy unravels, Your Highness. Look at Arlen. People trained with him for *years* and in close quarters and never a hint. That fucked teacher you dealt with too.”

I snorted. “Which one?”

“It’s so scary that you have a fucking list,” she grumbled. “Kramer.” She sighed when I flinched at his name. “I’m sorry to bring him up. But you said his mind unraveled. His obsession became more and more and that made him more twisted. I think that could be what this was. He saw his golden ticket in you, and it made Mason’s crazy deteriorate.”

“Yeah, like *American Psycho*,” I muttered. “I think that was the one that by the end we weren’t supposed to know what was real because he didn’t. I get you.”

She was quiet for several minutes. “I think there are pieces missing. I get why you are bothered by this or your gut is saying you’re missing something. I do. No bullshit. I would feel the same—I *do* feel the same and I wasn’t traumatized.” She waited until I looked at her. “I think the answer can also be that we won’t ever understand the puzzle coming from someone sick.”

I took in a slow breath and let it out. “I think I just needed to relook at it all and have someone else agree they could see the collage instead of the photo being presented.”

“I think everyone would admit that to you, but a collage is unresolved or has gaps in the picture and no one wanted that for you.”

Fair enough. If the situation was reversed, I wouldn’t have wanted that for Ara either. I thanked her and went to bed.

Except my subconscious couldn’t let it go. I dreamt of Mason having an evil twin. His bear versus Lucca’s bear and how I’d gotten them wrong. Mason had used a telepathy blocking charm to keep me out, but Lucca had never talked to me as his bear because I would have busted him. The voices would have been different.

Yeah, the voices would have given it away... Him away.

Both of them.

16

I woke with a start, my heart thudding in my ears and dripping with sweat. I blinked into the darkness, and before I even bothered to look at the time or anything, I jumped out of bed and raced to the bathroom. I took the world's fastest shower and got my head together before throwing on whatever I could.

I teleported to Neldor and was shocked to find him sitting up in bed like he was waiting for me.

"I don't mind you showing up at four in the morning if it's for fun, but you look ready to go into battle," he grumbled.

"Why are you up?" I asked. I sighed when he raised an eyebrow at me. "I didn't realize the time nor did—I had—"

"My magic woke me about ten minutes ago," he answered. "I figured something was going on and waited for a call or someone to tell me what was going on." He gestured to me as if to say, "And here you are."

"That's when I woke up," I muttered.

"What happened?" he worried, pushing when I didn't say anything. "What's going on, baby doll?" He growled when I still kept quiet. "Presents from the bakery aren't enough if you're going to keep shutting me out. Even if we're not together, we're supposed to be a team."

I wasn't sure that was fair for this moment, but I let it go. "Where's Mason? I need to see him."

"No."

I sighed. “Neldor, I don’t care if you come with, but—I *need* to see him.” He studied me closely. “You figured something out.”

“Yes.” I met his gaze after a moment. “Please. Please just help me with this.”

“Okay.”

I was shocked when he got up and dressed without saying anything else. I knew I could get Mason’s location from Shael or order Mason to be brought to me, but this was honestly the easiest way. I just knew he was locked down at one of Neldor’s family houses and other arrangements were being made for his permanent imprisonment since I wouldn’t allow Mason in Faerie.

Plus, I’d promised that his mom could keep seeing him and I *never* wanted that woman—or their family—in Faerie either.

Not even five minutes later we were at a remote property standing outside a horse stable. Neldor nodded to the Faerie Guardians on duty before opening the door and letting me inside. I felt like I walked into a movie to find a large metal cage in the middle of the refurbished stable.

The door opening woke Mason who was on the cot in the middle of the ten-by-ten cage bolted into the concrete. He barely looked up but then did a double take and sat up with a smile. He slid to his feet and stretched. “Hey, Tams.”

I teleported into the cage with him and decked him so he fell to the ground. “We’re not friends, fucker. We were never friends. I pitied you, so I didn’t make a big deal of you hanging out with me.”

He spit on the floor and stared up at me with anger in his eyes. “If that’s what you need to tell yourself, you go right ahead.”

Neldor snorted. “I’ve seen it. She’s shown me. We’re mates and can share magic. I had questions, so she showed me everything in dreamscapes. She only put up with you because she thought you were *Lucca* and her

jogging buddy.”

Only part of that was true, but it still worked and Mason lost his smirk. He jumped to his feet and watched me like he was ready for me to flinch away or act like I was scared of him.

But I didn't. I'd been ready for games and crazy now, plus, I was there for a reason.

“You have DID, don't you?” I asked him. “There are two of you.”

He clucked his tongue at me. “How very racist of you, Tams. I would think fairies were better than accusing shifters of something so horrid.”

The evil grin I knew well slowly formed on my lips. “And yet you know exactly what it is. Neldor, do you know what DID is?”

“No,” he hedged.

“Actually, that's not fair to ask you since the term has changed over recent years,” I admitted. “Still, it's a rare condition. It's not something common that people would just know the acronym of.”

“What is it?” Neldor asked.

“Dissociative identity disorder,” I answered. “It used to be called multiple personality disorder or split personality disorder.”

“I know it by that,” Neldor muttered. “Baby doll, my magic is ramping up at you being that close to him.”

I teleported out of the cage but stood right near the bars, knowing Neldor would join me... Something Mason did *not* like. He was not happy I listened to another man in his presence.

“If I remember correctly, it's something that happens when someone experiences a trauma, normally young,” Neldor said as he moved next to me. He kept pace with me as I walked around the cage, keeping Mason's gaze. “You're saying he was traumatized young?”

“I suspect the opposite actually,” I admitted. “I was talking with a friend

about the collage I was looking at and she said that it was as if Mason had an evil twin. Some of his actions didn't match up and it was almost like there were two of him. And I realized she was right."

"Him and his bear."

"Right, but a bear is good. A bear protects people and is generally kind. They're known for being loyal and *emotional*. Now what would happen if a bear was trapped inside of the body of a psychopath?"

Neldor flinched. "It would traumatize the bear. They wouldn't know how to connect with someone without emotion."

"Exactly."

"You're saying the offshoot isn't Mason the psychopath trying to protect the original Mason from whatever happened, but Mason being a psychopath was so traumatic to a shifter that a personality between him and his bear formed?"

I didn't answer him directly, still staring at Mason as we kept circling him like sharks. "When I was a kid, there was someone in a group home with me that I never wanted to be around. Can you guess why?" I didn't wait for him to answer. "She would sound different at times to my telepathy. It freaked me out."

"She had multiple personalities," Neldor muttered.

"She did. Most times she would sound like she spoke and other times her thoughts wouldn't just be scary, but the voice of them would be different. I learned later that she was locked up because she was mentally ill. I met a woman later when I was helping Mel who had the same, and that was when I learned that their personalities sounded different in their thoughts even."

I teleported back into the cage and put the truth-telling rune on Mason before returning next to Neldor.

"There are two of you, aren't there?"

“Yes,” Mason bit out.

I wanted to cry in relief. I was right. There had been pieces missing to me. Fine, he was mentally ill and I could never fully paint a complete picture of someone else and they went together, but getting that last peace was everything.

A thought hit me, and I decided to be a decent person even if Juan didn't deserve it. “And I bet that other Mason actually adores Juan, right? Is that the kid who asked to be his friend or did he come later?”

“Yes to both,” he growled.

“That's how you've gotten around the questioning, isn't it?” I pushed. “It was him originally or you're able to separate things with the rune that you aren't the other Mason.”

“Yes.” He went on when I opened my mouth. “I made three mistakes.”

I snorted. “Oh, you made way more than that in your web of lies.”

He snorted right back. “You'd be surprised how often people don't talk to each other the way they should.”

He was actually right there. Even Darby hadn't known the truth and I'd never had study dates with Mason. He'd never asked and checked. Same with the others.

“What were your mistakes?” Neldor asked.

Mason answered but kept his eyes on me. “I should have killed the leech the moment you actually went out with him.”

I snorted. “My money would have been on Darby. You're too much of a bully who used the size of his bear. Darby would have torn out your throat because you showed your true colors and were a danger to me.”

“I totally agree when you put it like that,” Neldor muttered.

Mason didn't react besides the rage in his eyes. “I never should have seen my father while enacting my plans because that man irked both sides of me in

different ways.”

“That’s one of the only things you’ve ever said that we agree on. Your father is a complete fuckhead useless piece of shit who has nothing redeeming about him.”

Neldor snickered. “Don’t hold back what you really think.”

“When do I ever?” I drawled.

Neldor and Mason both snorted, the two of them sharing a look that they weren’t happy they had the same reaction.

“And third, I should have realized you were such a whore faster because what I’d said to everyone would have worked if you weren’t already fucking Hudson, Lucca, and Craftsman.”

I moved my hand to Neldor’s chest when he stepped forward like he was going to step towards the cage. “Please, you think I care what a fucking psychopath like him thinks of me? He’s still not right.”

Neldor frowned. “Right, you weren’t with Lucca until later. Months later.”

I nodded, keeping Mason’s gaze. “I wasn’t with Lucca then. Didn’t touch him. I didn’t have a clue he liked me more than a friend.” I smirked at him as I moved towards the cage. “Call me a whore all you want, but even if I was the biggest slut at Artemis—which we both know I wasn’t—I still didn’t want *you*. That’s what you’re really pissed about. You think you’re awesome and so much smarter than all of us, but I never wanted you.”

I headed for the door, shocking both of them, but it wasn’t for the reason they thought. I grabbed a few of the Faerie Guardians and brought them back to the cell with us. Then I used a rune on Mason to freeze him and keep him quiet.

“Open the cell. We need to change how things are in there,” I told them. One opened it and I immediately stripped the bed and tossed it all out.

“Nothing that can be used to harm himself. I know you guys heard me that we’re not putting him to death, but I’m also aware that no one would lose sleep if he killed himself. If he does, I will have the heads of the guards here, and I’m not kidding. So we need to—”

“Wait, Tams, slow down, you’re not making sense,” Neldor muttered, grabbing my hand when I went to grasp something else.

I blinked at him and saw the worry there so I didn’t get mad. “I’m fine. Fuck, I feel *amazing* finally having that last piece of the puzzle confirmed so my nightmares can maybe finally stop. You’re busy worrying about me instead of seeing how this changes everything.”

“We know the full truth now, and there’s no chance he can turn it around, get a pass out now,” Ara said from behind the other guards. She gave me a sad smile when I looked at her. “I let all of the shifts know to call me if you showed up. I figured it would be something big or I worried he’d hurt you more, Your Highness.”

“Thanks. Jackie was right. There were two of them.”

“I heard. I also understand what you want. I’ll handle it.” She sighed when the others around us went tense. “She’s putting him on suicide watch basically. Mason has nothing left, no play or cards he’s still holding now. The only thing he can do to hurt Princess Tamsin now is to make himself a martyr or try and start shit that we’re incompetent. Maybe rumors we don’t listen to her or Prince Neldor goes behind her back.”

“And he will. He’s just that sick,” Neldor muttered, sighing when I nodded. “You switched gears so fast that—I wasn’t keeping up, sorry. I thought you were panicking at...” He shrugged.

Fair enough and again, I wasn’t mad. It was the middle of the fucking night when we should all have been asleep after all.

We stripped down the cell of everything he could use to hurt himself

easily. Even the metal bedframe. He lost his shower curtain. Everything basically.

“He’s a bear with claws,” one of the guards reminded us when we were done.

“Yes, but a shifter’s animal cannot kill themselves like that,” Neldor said firmly.

“Let’s not take the chance with someone mentally unwell,” I worried. “There are runes to keep him from shifting, right? That magic is on the prisons in Faerie? Let’s get that on this cell and fast. Also, as much as it sucks, I think we’re going to need an extra detail here to watch him. Like sit in here and watch him.”

“And if he misbehaves, knock him out for a while. He could basically be forced to sleep as his life unless we need him if he pulls shit,” Ara added.

“He’s never tried anything or even been rude to us,” the guard hedged.

“That was before when he thought he had a chance to still get out,” I warned them. “And I’m sure he was nice to you guys. He can’t make friends with you to get you to help him if he’s an asshole. How are you ever going to be stupid enough to fall for his tricks if he shows you his true colors instead of working towards me being the villain and him the victim?”

“Good point, but it wouldn’t have worked, Your Highness,” the guard said firmly.

“It will one day with someone, so we need more eyes on him and switching shifts often.” I shook my head when they all seemed to think that was overkill. “Mason is *good*. Juan isn’t an idiot, raised to see snakes that come near him, and Mason got through. I felt *bad* for him most of the time. Someone will not like me and feel bad for him, so let’s do it right because he’s not awesome the way he thinks he is, but he is valuable.”

“Right, you want to study him,” Neldor sighed, giving me a look that he

didn't agree but would back me.

"I'm not being weird with this," I snapped, toning it back when people flinched. "Psychopaths are one in a hundred people. One percent have some tendencies. It's not as uncommon as people think because of that one percent, most don't get to that level. However, there are millions of shifters. Do you think he is the only one out there that has formed DID? I highly doubt that."

"And we have no record or procedure for checking if someone in our custody has it," Ara muttered, nodding she was on the same page as me. "It's smart, Your Highness. I would suggest a captain from either light or dark head this. They can handle training and mapping it out."

"Neldor's in charge of this," I muttered, scrubbing my hand over my head. "I can't stay objective. Or nonviolent."

"Fair enough. I think Captain Dalyor would be..." She cleared her throat and waited for me to look at her. "You flinched at his name. Is he in—"

"No, it's nothing," I said easily even as I looked away from her knowing eyes. "I just worry we give the same people all of the work because we can trust them and that's how we broke Onas. I've done the same."

"Yes, but he is the best at this next to Onas," Neldor pushed. "My training can be taken over by someone else. Easily even especially now that I've started flying. I just continued with him because he was working with you." He opened a portal before I could say anything, his mind already focused on what to do next so he could get back to bed.

I felt the same but also knew I wouldn't sleep after what I'd heard. I released Mason now that we were out of there and everything was stripped from his cage.

Dalyor came through the portal in nothing but boxer briefs, obviously having been woken up and not thinking straight. I flinched and turned away.

"Another one you've fucked, Tams?" Mason taunted. "Really? You're

the bitch royal who fucks her subordinates—”

“It’s going to be really hard not to kill this asshole,” Neldor grumbled.

“Right, but remember that he might want that now and you would just give him what he wants instead of being in this cage the rest of his life,” I reminded him before moving closer to Mason with a smirk. “All he has left are his petty insults. The guy who thought he would rule Faerie and all of us, take over the dragons and puppet Juan. Now he can just toss out insults no worse than I get in the media. How. Sad.”

Mason broke and launched for the bars, snarling at me, but I didn’t even flinch.

“Please stop seeing if my head will pop,” Neldor growled before picking me up and moving me away from the cage. “Seriously, please stop playing chicken with the psycho.”

“It could be therapeutic for her,” Ara muttered under her breath as he set me on my feet and backed off.

No, I didn’t think it was. Maybe in the way that I’d broken part of his hold over me, but I knew I’d be shaking as soon as I went back to my room. It was more that I wanted to learn how to fake it better. I needed to get better at hiding my reactions and not being so open.

There could be an explosion in front of Xavier and Sasha and the pair would barely blink an eyelash. I didn’t think I ever needed to go that far, but I wanted to do better.

“Ara, fill in Dalyor and you guys let us know how you want to handle this,” I instructed. I reached out my hand to Neldor, but suddenly I was touching Dalyor’s hip.

Because he’d moved in the way.

“What did you need me for, Your Highness?” he asked as he tried to hold my hand.

I yanked it away and my mouth got ahead of my brain. “Are you having a laugh? You’re acting jealous after completely ditching me when you realized I wouldn’t let you fuck me?”

Anger filled his eyes. “Is that what you think happened?”

“Oh shit,” someone whispered from my left.

“I shouldn’t have brought this up here,” I muttered, moving to step away. I flinched when laughter filled the large room.

Mason’s laughter.

And it wasn’t the sane kind. Honestly, I hadn’t heard him laugh much other than when he sort of chuckled when he’d been faking being our friend.

“Still stupid and trusting, Tams,” he taunted, grabbing onto the bars and stretching with a huge smirk on his face. “Your *mate* reeks of guilt and annoyance. I’m fairly sure he’s the reason this Dalyor guy ghosted you.”

Neldor’s face was unreadable like a statue, but it was all in his eyes.

“Next time you’re busy pulling the strings of my life in a way you have no right to, could you at least assign me another trainer because you fucked with me big time by having Dalyor drop me and no one continue,” I bit out.

“Tams, wait, I didn’t—it’s not like what you’re thinking,” he muttered as he came closer.

I was pretty sure stepping away from him spoke volumes. And loudly. I glanced at Dalyor and made it clear he was in trouble with me too. “When you agreed to be my trainer, we made a deal that you would tell me everything. You wouldn’t let anyone else influence you or answer to anyone but me. That was the deal so I would trust you. Neldor interfering doesn’t absolve you from breaking your word to me.”

He was suddenly in front of me and slid his arm around me, pulling me against him. “It wasn’t about Neldor, but this. Every fucking time I see you this is all I want to do. And more. I can’t control—”

Dalyor was ripped away from me and tossed across the room, Neldor in front of me.

“Enough!” I bellowed when Dalyor jumped back to his feet. I shoved Neldor to the side so I could see both of them. “You’re both assholes. Use your fucking words. Everyone pushes me to tell you more and more—tell you everything, and yet you guys can’t talk to me about something completely normal like this? And I get hurt in the end. Again.” I shoved Neldor away when he reached for me. “Finish what we need done here.”

I teleported back to my dorm room, but there was no chance of me going back to bed. It was only an hour before my normal run now and there was someone I wanted to talk with.

Juan sat up the moment I was in his room, blinking at me as if trying to catch up.

“You’re really sensitive to that,” I muttered. “I don’t think anyone’s ever woken up from me teleporting. I’m sorry.”

He rubbed his hand over his face and sat up more. “My father’s favorite way to get under my skin was to wait for me to wake up and lay into me first thing before I could use my brain to respond. It was his way of proving to himself how stupid I am that I couldn’t talk then.”

I snorted. “You all survive on gallons of coffee. He might as well have yelled at you while still sleeping.”

“I’ve said as much, but he did teach me a useful skill.” He nodded to where I was standing. “I always wake when something changes in my room.”

“Sorry. I just...”

“What’s wrong?” he worried. He sighed at whatever was on my face. “Mason.”

“Yeah. I didn’t want to wait.”

He stared at the far wall. “Is he dead?”

“No, but I figured out the rest of the puzzle.” I shook my head when he opened his mouth. “Let’s go take a run. I think it will be best for both of us.”

He nodded after a moment. “Yeah, I’ve been super lazy and my dragon is pissed. I’ll meet you outside.”

I agreed and teleported back to my room, glancing over at Izzy and snickering. If she woke every time I teleported or portaled in and out of the room all of these years the woman would never have slept.

Five minutes later I was outside of the dragon dorm stretching as Juan came through the door.

We started at a slow pace, but when I went to kick it up, he didn’t go much faster.

“Yeah, lazy is one way to put it,” I muttered after a bit, realizing that was going to be his high gear. “Are you being stupid? I would think there are lots of people who would have an axe to grind with you now that you’re not under your parents’ protection.”

“They’ve made it clear that this is just a stupid, petty rebellion of mine and I’ll be home for winter, begging their forgiveness no less,” he replied after a moment.

“Which also undermines you as the future ruler. I swear your dad just sets it all up so you trip and he’ll have more reason to be your ‘advisor’ pulling the strings. The fucking ancients and elders were doing the same shit from the moment I unfroze them. Ungrateful bastards.”

He was quiet for a mile or so. “It took me a while to realize that was what he was really doing. I don’t even think he realizes he does it. I think he’s just so threatened and grew up fighting for everything that he doesn’t know how to not be the best. Even if he has to be underhanded to do it.”

I nodded. There were a lot of people like that in the world, so I understood how hard that would be for Juan. It had to crush him for it to be

his father though. Really, I couldn't even imagine it. Foster parent? Sure, I'd dealt with a lot of assholes just like that.

But my actual flesh and blood parent? Yeah, that would kill me.

"What are you going to do?" I asked after a bit.

"I have no fucking clue and I feel like I'm drowning," he admitted. "And the only people who even put up with me are the ones I've hurt the most. I don't—everything is fucked. So just tell me what will kill me inside next."

So I did. I told him what I'd figured out—without giving him the background and my friend who helped—and what I'd made Mason confess.

Juan was quiet the whole time and for several minutes after I was done talking. Then, all of a sudden, he stopped running and changed into his dragon. I teleported out of the way in time, but he trashed dozens of trees.

I was scared what he was going to do or if he had the mind to stay in the magic of Artemis. My wings came out as if telling me what to do... Except I didn't know how to take off. I glanced around a bit and found a super tall tree, thinking that was good enough for the moment. I teleported up there and jumped off, flapping my wings hard to catch up to Juan.

And turning on my telepathy.

"*Dragon area,*" I told him firmly. I sighed when the dragon chuffed at me. "*If dragon is good and doesn't start problems for Juan, I'll take you to Faerie and let you eat a big animal, okay?*"

"*Shark like Hudson?*" he asked, his voice different from Juan's. I'd never talked to another dragon in dragon form besides River.

"*No, my mate only gets those, but we can find something if you're good. You can have a shark in this world. I'll cloak you when we visit the beach and you can go dive for a shark.*"

"*Tamsin better friend to Juan than our family. Hate them.*"

"*Yeah, I know. I'm sorry.*"

He chuffed as if saying... I wasn't really sure, but I thought maybe saying it wasn't for me to apologize for? Either way, the bribe worked, and he headed straight for dragon territory so maybe no one would catch his slip of shifting in the wrong area.

Then again, people just looked for this shit and frothed with the chance to take others down.

A very large purple and blue dragon was suddenly in the air on the other side of me... And not looking happy.

"Sorry, River. He did it on accident because he's hurt. I wasn't cheating on you."

"River knows. Worried he wanted to hurt you. Temper. Bad temper."

"No, he's been super nice. Just hurt." I smiled at the dragon. *"Love you."*

"Love Tamsin too."

We flew for a bit, but then I dropped onto Hudson's back when I got tired, the two dragons more than able to go much longer.

"Too many people," River warned.

Fuck, we'd drawn a crowd. Yeah, people would wonder why Hudson and Juan were flying around the dragon territory for so long.

"I can teleport us to your mountain?" I offered, glad when he agreed. Then I switched to talk to Juan. *"There are too many people watching. I'm going to teleport Hudson and then I'll come back for you, okay? You have to give me permission to ride you."*

"Hudson be pissed."

"He says it's okay. He doesn't want a problem and to explain to everyone."

"Dragon be good."

Good. I teleported Hudson and then went back to get Juan, slumping over

once we were at the Vogel's mountain.

Okay, so teleporting huge dragons was much harder than a person or two. Good to know.

A roar jostled me awake and I realized Juan had done it when I'd passed out. I hurried to tell them both that I was okay, just wiped. I apologized to River for riding another dragon, but I didn't think I had the energy to move safely.

He only cared that I was okay, and apparently so did Juan because he followed River to where he should land.

"I'm okay," I muttered after we landed and they both shifted back. "Teleporting huge ass dragons is way more energy. I wasn't—I didn't sleep."

"Hudson doesn't know, got it," Juan said as he handed me to Hudson. "I'll tell him."

So he did as Hudson hugged me to him and they headed for the castle.

"I'm sorry, shorty," Hudson whispered when Juan was done. "I really am."

"I'm actually relieved," I confessed, explaining how the not knowing or feeling like there was something I was still missing and could be in danger drove me nuts.

"I thought Mason might be bipolar," Juan admitted. "I tried to talk to him about it once in high school, but he blew a gasket. He threatened to stop being my friend if I was going to..."

"You didn't want to lose your friend," I said, understanding that fear. "I didn't have friends really growing up either, Juan. One really, and I was so scared to say the wrong thing and go back to being all alone. He was a great guy and I still worried. That's normal. No one wants to hurt their friends."

Juan stopped walking and squatted down, giving out a wordless shout that hurt my heart. "Why do I feel better that the psychopath who's been my

best friend all of my life truly cared about me? What the fuck is wrong with me?”

“I don’t judge you for that,” Hudson said quietly. “I understand it. Everything wasn’t a lie. You hate yourself for missing it and what happened because of it. I feel that too. You weren’t the only one always around Mason, Juan. Lucca and I are shredded that we missed it too. It’s why we’ve been extra focused on school. We realized it hurt to see Tams and the guilt was eating us.”

“Dummies,” I sighed, snuggling against his chest. “None of us should blame anyone but Mason.”

“Sure, you go first, Tams,” Juan drawled.

Yeah, it was definitely easier said than done.

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Hudson alerted my security as to what happened and they got us back to my house. I decided to lay everything out on the table, so I even texted Darby asking him to come home for an early breakfast. It was the normal time to run, so Lucca was up, and someone went to wake Izzy while others got food. I stared out the window at the now closed pool and was lost in my thoughts while everything was set up.

And people found clothes for Hudson and Juan.

Julian showed up with food and an apology on his lips. Apparently, he had missed the calls and someone had had to go find him. I fully understood and wasn't mad.

"Stop, you fell asleep in your study," I said when he apologized again. "You didn't get caught in bed with another woman. It's fine and we all have too much—I'm dragging you here for something extra. Not an appointment you missed."

"Sorry," he sighed before kissing my cheek. "I'm nervous. I know something is up and I'm worried what."

"Not that," I said under my breath, seeing in his eyes that he thought I was going to tell everyone about the visions. No, I should soon, but I wasn't ready. Maybe I could finally focus on that now that I could resolve my feelings with Mason and had the answers I needed.

Taeral came in with Onas and bowed to me. "I apologize, but from what I heard already, I think we need the best interrogator we have to at least set

up this program and idea given it's not been done before.”

“Fine, but he needs the break and once he's back, I want every commander to take at least a week break in rotation and he can fill in for them. We're all going to kill ourselves under all of this,” I ordered.

“I think that's a great idea,” Neldor said from the kitchen where he was leaning against the fridge. “Fuck, I want a week off as well.”

Yeah, I was sure he did to go hide under a rock for a while so I didn't beat him to death.

Once everyone was there, I filled them in on what happened. I told them everything, even about Ara redoing interviews and helping me. And about asking a human friend to help me put the pieces together from an outside view and I'd told her it was for a book idea.

“Glad to know I'm talented enough to write such a captivating novel,” Izzy muttered, probably going for some sarcasm but looking pretty wrecked at the topic too.

Neldor took over for me when we got to actually talking to Mason and I was grateful that he did. That was the hardest part for me.

I was still validly pissed with him and would be for a while, but I appreciated the help.

“We once had a wolf in custody that we believed had multiple person—I forgot the new term,” Onas told me. “Many, many years ago. We did want to study them and see how things worked with our interrogation techniques, but they did commit suicide, so you made the wise choice of how to handle this. I cannot tell you if it was caused because he was also a psychopath, but it's a very interesting conclusion and something to absolutely study.”

“Thank you.” I let out a slow breath. “I don't want to be involved though. I want to finally, *finally* try and close this chapter. I might have other questions later, but I feel like I finally see the puzzle and want to... I will

always be scared of him to some extent. That's understandable, but I broke from some of it today and I think that's enough. His hold is—the pain will never leave, but I don't feel like he's still choking me emotionally.”

“I didn't realize that was how you felt,” Hudson worried.

“It's not always,” I sighed. “It comes and goes. I think I'm fine and then suddenly someone says his name and I spin out even if I'd heard his name a dozen times before and been fine. It's just always bothered me that pieces were missing, and that made him so much scarier for me.”

“I'm sorry, Tams,” Juan whispered, staring out the window and not touching his food. “I didn't know you had such open... I'm sorry. You seemed to handle it all so well that—I probably just wanted to see that and worried about him. I'm sorry. I was your friend too, and you didn't deserve my picking his side and being an asshole to you.”

“I want to forgive you, but I think it will take time to believe you won't do it again for something else,” I admitted.

“That's more than fair.” He stood like he was going to leave and leave me to it, but I wasn't done with him yet.

“Stay. There's more to discuss once the others leave,” I told him. I nodded it was okay, and he sat back down more like he thought he owed it to me than he wanted to.

Fine, I would take that.

We went over the rest, and they outlined the plan for Mason. I was glad when it was done and thanked them.

Except they knew something else was going on and didn't take the hint to leave.

“Fine, but this isn't for everyone,” I told them, giving Taeral and Onas a look to behave. I looked at Izzy first. “You're doing another internship at the council over winter, right? That's what you want?”

“Yes.” She frowned at me. “Were you worried or—”

“She’s been juggling too much,” Lucca muttered. “She’s trying to get on firmer ground.”

“Yeah, that sounds right,” I admitted. “Plus, it’s time to call uncle. I can’t keep—I need help.” I waved off their concerns and kept looking at Izzy. “You want to do this, right? You don’t have to. You don’t have to be my liaison with Katrina or—”

“It’s what I want, Tams,” she said firmly. “I like the work I’ve helped you do. I want to do more. So does Katrina, but you’ve been...” She shrugged.

There was no nice way to say I was overloaded. I knew it too especially since this was review week for finals, and for the first time since my first finals at Artemis, I was incredibly scared I was going to fail them all. I hadn’t been focused where I should be this semester and it was going to show in my grades.

Which would give everyone fuel to come at me again and I needed to not let that happen. It was probably too late for that, but I wanted to do better in the future.

Didn’t we all?

“I think I’m going to allow Julian to handle my shares of the companies I own the majority in,” I told them as I rubbed my temples. “Geiger and the whole firm are so focused on Faerie and everything else that it falls to the side. I don’t want some associate to—” I looked to Julian and sighed. “You’re already doing it, and we’re in a place that we’re talking more than ever.”

He slowly nodded. “I wouldn’t have asked for this, but if it could help you, yeah, of course.”

I read between the lines. He was excited for the responsibility and trust I

was putting in him, but he wouldn't ever have tried for it. Too much had happened between us in the past where I'd—and others—had thought he only wanted me for my magic. Or wanted more magic from me, so it was sensitive for both of us.

“How much more work would that give you?” I worried. “Would you never get to do your own magic stuff? I mean—”

“It's really not much more,” he assured me. “You would give me more power so I would have to deal with less bullshit. I have to get involved all of the time anyways because of the shares I have but they...”

“They put you through your paces not just because you're young or new, but it's their only chance to poke at you given the princess protects you,” Onas surmised. “Plus, you have influence with her, and some of those people on those boards want to be councilmen.” He shrugged when I looked at him in shock. “The hobgoblins are tuned in on everything. I listen when working with them. I've learned a lot.”

“We all need that break and to get read in on more,” Taeral muttered. “I think it's a smart move as long as we handle the PR on it. Most wouldn't have thought you'd do something like this without getting engaged first.”

Well, that was one way to start trouble at the table. The look I gave him would have made most people wince, but he simply shrugged. Fine, he wasn't wrong, but it was a cheap way to bring up the topic.

“I think most around me would understand why I'd be hesitant to get engaged again after how the last one has gone,” I bit out, still staring daggers at him... And not realizing how I'd just verbally slapped Darby across the face.

Whoops?

Darby didn't say anything and simply kept eating. I was just about to say something mean asking if he was even paying attention or just phoning it in

again when he looked up and met my gaze. The pain in his eyes was so thick, I felt it.

I hadn't said it to hurt him, but that didn't mean he didn't deserve it.

"I feel like we're talking about our jobs after graduation," Lucca muttered. "Should we have an answer for that?"

"You're graduating this year, so maybe it would be smart," Izzy drawled.

"I'm laying things out and checking in because there's something on my mind," I clarified before anyone got upset. I glanced over at Juan. "I'm going to be blunt but not because I'm trying to be mean."

"I know. Go ahead," he accepted.

"No one's going to hire you after you graduate and risk pissing off your parents. Or you're going to be a pawn they use. You know this."

"I do."

"What do you want to do though?" I swallowed a sigh when he didn't say anything. "I'll hire you, Juan. You're smart and we need the help. I do. The question I have is do you want the political side or business? I was going to offer letting you be my liaison with the dragons since we haven't locked in on one yet. It keeps being Hudson, but they've gone too far with that because we're together.

"But you were born to be king, so my liaison seems like a slap in the face. So I don't know what to do there. You handled businesses and did well from what I know, but they were your family's, so you lost that when you left. Do you want that again? Is that where your heart is? And the answer isn't even forever. Could you help me until you figure it out?"

"Tams, I'm not upset or—breathe," he blurted when I went to ramp back up. "The answer is business. I've thought of asking you for a job being your business manager. You have too—you know it's not sustainable. And you're killing your growth potential because you are the boss of a whole world. I've

been itching to take over running the gelato company since the moment you started it practically.”

“Please fucking do,” I chuckled and then let out a huge laugh. “Fuck, please do. I can’t—everyone—I know I’m fucking up too much.”

“I wasn’t saying that you were,” Juan cut in. “I have enough sins on my ledger, I don’t want that one too. You also weren’t raised in business. I was. My family knows that money means protection and happy people under them. So we’re very divested, and that’s just as important as our political and ruling duties.”

“My family should get better at that,” Hudson muttered.

“Your father was too busy jumping in and saving as many as he could even when it wasn’t his duty, my family included, so we should have given more financial assistance,” Juan said and looked... Lighter? Had that been on his mind and shoulders for a while?

I didn’t think I was the only one who thought that.

“I would like to take over your duties of the bakery and gelato companies the moment I’m up to speed,” Juan told me firmly. “The others you aren’t the sole owner of, and it could be more of a problem than help if I just slid in and took over. They need to be able to see that I won’t be a hindrance. By the time I graduate, I should have done that, and I can take over your other business interests, especially with your clothing company.”

Neldor and I shared a look and sighed. Yeah, we’d been dropping the ball on that for a bit. Our winter launch was just basic and rode on the popularity we’d built so far. That wasn’t the way to grow the company.

“If you can manage it, I think you taking over Symbiotic would be the biggest help,” Neldor admitted.

“I’m shocked you’re on board,” Juan muttered, glancing between us. “You’ve made it very clear how you feel about me.”

“I came in when you were being an asshole to Tams and even Hudson who has helped me. I didn’t see the nice guy they all have, but I trust Tams. So if she has faith in you, I’m not going to sabotage you and hurt her standing.”

Juan seemed to accept that. “I can handle all three as long as it’s not this second and all dropped on my lap. I would need winter break to ramp up. I’m having some problems with my master’s thesis and—”

“I will handle that,” I cut in, steam about coming out of my ears. “You are not the only one, and I’m fucking tired of this shit from Artemis. Seriously, if I hadn’t met all of you there, I would have told that school to fuck off the first damn week and torn it apart when I got power. It’s so fucking—”

“Toxic,” Izzy said.

While Onas cut in with, “Cancerous.”

Both at the same time Taeral said, “Corroded.”

“Yes, all of the above,” I agreed and glanced at Taeral. “As long as you’re here, I want a meeting with the school board and it should be tonight. If Sasha can’t attend, that’s fine, but if she can, even better. She’ll blow a gasket when she learns the dragon dean was fucking with Hudson.”

“I didn’t know you were fucked with as well,” Juan muttered. “I thought it was just my shit.”

“No, and I didn’t know for sure at first,” Hudson sighed. “I didn’t want to get accused of being a spoiled prince.”

“Or bear,” Lucca grumbled.

“Yeah, sometimes being the poor scholarship student had perks,” Darby muttered. “Everyone was so busy pitying me that I never had that.”

“Plus, for all of the shit I give Collins, he’s actually a good dean who cares,” I added. “And he’s happy getting published, and his wife is my

liaison, so he gets perks from that as well. He's also the hero who helped take down the corrupt council to some."

"Yes, you did it and are hated by vamps, but somehow he's a hero," Darby drawled, shaking his head at the idiocy. "If you'll allow me, I'll help Juan get caught up from the legal side. I know the most about it." He cleared his throat. "Tams?"

I thought it was rude of him to push me like that when I'd need to think a moment, but then I realized everyone around me was concerned.

And Onas's plate was empty. I'd just seen him refilling it a moment ago. No, it had to be longer. That was Darby asking me. I'd gotten lost in my head simply staring at him.

Whoops?

"Yeah, that's fine if you can handle it with Yale," I muttered. I swallowed a growl when he snorted. I knew he was picking on himself for how he'd handled it all, but it *hurt* that he'd done so much damage to us but was now sailing through law school.

It really hurt.

We ended the meeting since we had to get ready for class, but Julian pulled me off to the side. "What happened?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "I didn't realize that I was taking time or acting weird. I didn't know time passed."

"Your dad said your mother acted like that when she got visions," he worried. "You've only been having them in your dreams, Tams. Your mom didn't."

I sighed, nodding that I heard him. "I didn't see anything. I just lost time."

"That might be the first step in you getting them while awake," he surmised.

“I suggest you do as I advised,” Onas said from behind me. “Because if that happens while you’re flying or driving—magic can only save us from so much.”

I felt a cold fear flow over me and nodded. “After finals. I promise. I need to fail my finals first.”

“What?” Julian gasped. “What are you talking about?”

“I haven’t been a very good student this semester,” I finally confessed. “I’m shocked Sontar and Rosini haven’t kicked me to the curb or kicked my ass.”

“You’re an idiot,” Neldor said from behind Onas.

“Seriously, did no one actually leave?” I drawled.

“The rest did as you said, but I was worried and nosy,” Neldor admitted, sighing when Onas moved aside and he could see the look on his face. “No one has thought about kicking your ass. You’re still a good student. You learned study habits from Darby since he was your tutor and helped you finish high school and he’s the overachiever’s overachiever. You’re just being normal, not slacking.”

“We’ll see what my finals say,” I drawled.

“I want to know what’s going on here,” Julian muttered as he pointed between Neldor and me. He winced and reached for my hand. “Sorry. I didn’t mean that to be—”

“It wasn’t an order,” I forgave. “I don’t honestly know, just that he fucked with Dalyor, and that’s why I was dropped like useless garbage when Neldor got his wings.”

“Is that what you think happened?” Onas asked, his eyes going bug wide.

I held up my hand to hold both fairies off. “I can’t today. I just—I wasn’t trying to get into this, simply explain to Julian. I’m—I’m at my limit today and exhausted. Please, just leave it the fuck alone today.”

“Hey, I’ve got a light afternoon,” Julian said as he hugged me. “Let’s go cleanse in Faerie. Or here. How about here at the—I’ll find where we can. I’ll handle it.”

“That sounds like the best idea ever,” I whispered, tears burning in my eyes. “Yeah, perfect.”

“I’ll text you.” He gave me a sweet kiss and seemed like he was going to leave but then thought better of it. “Let’s get you back to school.”

I gave him a grateful look. If he left me with Mr. Pushy and Mr. Extra Pushy, they would have... Pushed me. I couldn’t right then. “I want to paint over break. I haven’t since I did all of those collections for money. I miss just painting for me. I want my therapy back.”

“I think that’s great. I’d love some winter scenes for my condo,” Julian suggested. “You need to eat, Tams. You barely touched your breakfast. How about your security gets some for you. You can eat while reviewing.”

That was smart and I said as much. I felt a ball of everything when he dropped me off at Artemis. The sweet kiss he gave me before he left helped a lot, even if too many people saw it. Fuck them.

I did as Julian said and was impressed when Taeral worked his magic and we had a meeting with the school board and commanders by lunch instead of our normal update meetings.

“Tamsin and I have repeatedly heard lately that certain deans are picking favorites and starting trouble with students on their career paths, the advising they get, and their theses,” Neldor started with a bang.

Of course he did so I didn’t have to. I couldn’t even get mad at him.

Hell, I appreciated it even if he was still going to be in hot water with me.

“And this is not just about Hudson, Lucca, and Juan, but I’m pissed this shit is happening again,” I said before anyone could try and talk their way out of it.

“It’s not only those two deans,” Neldor informed me, nodding when I couldn’t hide my shock. “Except the other dean I’ve heard of has been giving people a hard time who have given you a hard time.”

I had no idea who that could be until people started looking at Dean Pillay one by one.

Oh shit.

“It’s not people who just gave the princess a hard time,” Dean Pillay said after a few moments. “They tend to overlap, but they’re people who I’ve *witnessed* get away with too much. That ends when I’m their dean. I’m not blaming White. Her hands were tied all of the time with the council and—we know how things were. I’m trying to get the troublemakers back in line.”

“Understood, but it’s being framed as revenge for what they did to Tamsin who you adore,” Neldor informed her. “I’ve heard it repeatedly, so I suggest that’s addressed. The bear dean—I suggest you leave your family relations out of your schooling. I don’t know what your problem is with certain dragons, but I suggest it stops because even I know Hudson and Juan are great students.”

“Family relations?” I hedged.

“His cousin is mated into the sloth Mason was born to,” he said gently.

“I swear to fuck it’s always back to that with the fucking bears when I was the victim,” I sneered at the bear dean.

And then he wasn’t there.

“That was an accident, but I’m not apologizing,” I grumbled, realizing I’d opened a portal under the man and sent him to the ocean or icy place I sent bad people. I glanced over at Headmaster Edelman. “For the record, Lucca and Hudson didn’t want to start trouble. I pushed and poked until they told me what was going on. The right people are still afraid to have valid criticisms and the wrong people bitch about everything.”

“That is part of life—as you well know—but thank you for bringing this to our attention. You are not the only one tired of these antics and problems. We will handle it from here, you have my word.”

“Oh yes, we will,” Sasha purred as she stared daggers at the dean of dragons.

Well, my job was done for sure. I nodded and left with the other fairies so we could have our own meeting. It was mostly catching everyone up on what happened with Mason and the game plan going forward. I only half tuned in and let Neldor handle most of it.

Apparently, someone meddled though because when I arrived at Rune Combining II, Sontar gave me an earful that I’m not flunking anything. He asked me to do something as an example, and I was still so tired that I didn’t put together what was happening. So I just did what he wanted.

“There, you just aced your final, Your Highness,” he told me after I combined the runes he wanted.

Huh?

Neldor snorted, clearly comprehending that I didn’t know what I’d done.

“Princess, please go cleanse with your mate and rest,” Sontar said gently as he patted my shoulder. “We’re worried about you. I applaud your decision to ask for help, and I hope this conclusion with the bear will free you from that pain.”

I nodded. Me too.

“You are not dismissed, Prince Neldor,” Sontar said before Neldor could say anything. “You are the one I’m worried about passing this class.”

Oh damn. Like *dayumn*.

And yes, I got out of there fast. One final done ahead of time was awesome.

Julian was ready to meet up, and we went to one of the havens to start. It

was exactly what I needed.

I wasn't sure the hot sex we had in the back part of the grove was part of cleansing, but it was definitely something I needed. His passion was for sure. I didn't even realize what was going on or what he wanted until I was half naked since cleansing like that normally had me in a bit of a daze.

Suddenly we were kissing and my body wanted his instead of food. I felt magic all over us somehow and I didn't want it to stop. I wanted more of it, more of him—just more.

And when he begged to have me, I only had one answer.

Yes. Please.

“You're going to ruin your suit,” I muttered when he pulled me to the ground.

“Like I fucking care about the bloody suit,” he growled as he yanked off my clothes.

I felt like I blinked and we were naked and Julian was inside of me, fucking me in an animalistic way he never had before. I wasn't complaining, but it was shocking. It was more like Lucca or Hudson.

Something built more than my orgasm. Magic crawled all over my skin, and I felt like we were the end of powerful electrical wires that no one should touch.

We finished together, and it was like a power clap happened between us or because of us. I wasn't sure, but my mind was telling me that was important, that it meant something.

But then I didn't care because he flipped me over and fucked me again. Julian completely plowed me, and the strength he used to do it was actually surprising. He'd really been working out because it was much more forceful than I would have thought he was capable of.

I came hard and seconds later he finished as well.

“Separate them,” someone yelled.

I panicked that people were there and I didn’t even realize, throwing up a barrier around us. My eyes went wide when Neldor walked right through it.

“Be pissed at me later,” he muttered before reaching out and touching Julian. Instantly, the warlock passed out.

Well, shit.

18

“Something happened?” I checked, sighing when he nodded. “Awesome. How many people saw me—us—”

“Shael was here and felt it, so she arrived fast and put up a barrier,” he told me, carefully not looking at me. “She called in your healer and Taeral who I was with. A few others followed, but it’s not that big—we’re more worried what he could do to you.”

“I was enjoying that,” I grumbled.

“Clearly, but let your head clear and you’ll put the pieces together.” He sighed and stood. “Or maybe not. I don’t—I’m not sure how it works between fairies and warlocks.” He walked back out through the barrier and I was at a loss of what to do.

I gently moved so Julian wasn’t still inside of me, and then I carefully laid him on his back. After a few moments of trying to figure out how to handle this, I teleported my blanket from my bed to me and covered us. That was enough for right then as long as the crowd wasn’t too big.

Taking down the barrier, I looked at Shael waiting for her to explain.

Except she didn’t even need to. “I did that rune thing to him, right? I claimed him as mine?”

“Yes. Clearly, it wasn’t intentional,” she worried.

“Shael, I never know what the fuck I’m doing,” I drawled. “It was different than what I remember from doing it to Hudson.”

“Because he’s a warlock and you’re more powerful now,” Calarel, my

healer, explained. “It’s also that you’ve combined magic and power before. We know he can tap into your magic if he wants.” She waited until I nodded. “He was doing that now. I doubt intentionally, but he also used your power level in his runes. We were worried about him accidentally hurting you.”

She was being delicate about it, but I could read between the lines.

I sighed and used a rune to wake Julian up.

“Fuck that—” He groaned in a way I didn’t like, and I immediately healed him from whatever was going on. “Thanks, Tams. What the fuck—my head hurts still.”

“That will take a bit,” Shael sighed.

“Why do we have an audience?” Julian sighed.

“I did the fairy rune thing claiming you as mine,” I explained. “Without your permission. I’m such a fucking useless—”

“Don’t say that shite about the woman I love,” he chastised. “I was willing. I heard from Onas before that you can’t put it on someone unwilling. We have to be in the same feeling as you and open to the rune.”

“That’s very true,” Shael confirmed.

I opened my mouth to blast her but then closed it. Someone might have told me about that when I did it to Hudson, but so much had happened since then and was always going on that I couldn’t be sure.

“Something happened and power flooded me like never before,” Julian muttered as he pulled me against him. He moved the blanket enough so we were covered, but he sat me between his legs, hugging me to him. “It was too much. I needed to use it but couldn’t think.”

I sighed, filling in the pieces. “But since you were tapped into my magic, you were able to think runes to use them instead of putting them on you. You’ve done that before.”

“Right but—”

“You wanted more of her,” Neldor cut in, trying to be discrete even as he faced away from us. “Think of what runes you might accidentally use then and you did. That’s what we felt when we arrived and why I knocked you out.”

“Thanks for protecting her, mate,” Julian said quietly. “It wasn’t—I would never abuse—”

“I know.” He snorted. “She definitely wasn’t screaming in pain.” He opened a portal and left before we could even think to reply.

“Damn it,” I sighed, hugging Julian’s arms to me. “I can’t be mad at him, but I shouldn’t feel like I did something wrong either. I was in control and could have stopped you.”

“We couldn’t have known that when you didn’t even register we were here, Your Highness,” Shael explained.

“You need better sex if you are normally paying attention to what else is going around you, Commander,” I threw right back. “Normal sex with Julian, I have no idea if we’re alone or the world is imploding.”

Julian tried to smother a laugh against my back and failed. “Oh, Tams, you are—you’re too good for me and to me.”

“Oh please, you keep handling these cleansings, and I know that’s not exactly fun for you.” I frowned. “Wait, why did things go crazy this time? You’ve helped me before and never jumped me.”

“If I had to guess, I think part of your soul healed with what you learned earlier today,” Calarel said gently. “That normally means we open ourselves to those we love. Your soul was ready to let him in more if that makes sense.”

I sighed. “Yes, but I really wish my magic checked with me more. Just because he was willing doesn’t mean he consciously wanted it. Me either. These are adult decisions we should talk about, not my magic just does what

it wants.”

“Unfortunately, that’s not even about you being powerful,” she explained. “I did the same to my mate. Our magic knows best when our minds would get in the way.”

I couldn’t argue with that, but it still was weird and not... I did something without Julian’s permission.

“Thank you for coming and helping, but I’m going to teleport us to his condo. If security wants to go there so—”

“You could be vulnerable for the next day,” Shael warned. “So yes, we’ll send people. And food. Lots of food that you’ll both need.”

She was kind and gathered up our clothes and stuff, tossing it all on top of the blanket so I could get us in one trip. I thanked them all again and teleported us to Julian’s room.

He moved me off of him in a flash and grabbed a different blanket but didn’t make it three steps before his legs gave out. I was so shocked by it all I didn’t even have a chance to catch him with my magic.

Then I realized why he was acting like that.

I wrapped the blanket around me and went out to the living room, rage filling me when there were three warlocks sitting around like they owned the place. “You have ten seconds to give me a reason not to crush you like cockroaches who came where they don’t belong.”

One of them had the gall to look amused, clucking his tongue at me as he eyed me over like his next lay. “How would people react if they knew how the princess spoke to her soon-to-be in-laws?”

“If they heard they were Craftsmans? I think they would fully understand,” I drawled. I didn’t wait for them to say anything else, opening a portal to Shael. She walked right through and flinched. “Yeah, so this is a problem. Apparently, Julian’s extended family are up to something.”

“I have them, Your Highness. Go see to your—”

“Thanks,” I cut in, not wanting to risk she used a term these fools would latch onto. I went back into the bedroom and gave Julian the look he deserved. “Something you should tell me, love?”

“They never had the balls to come into my condo before,” he mumbled. “They normally just use magic to get past security, and it’s a building of humans, so I couldn’t ever do what I wanted. It just started.”

I nodded and healed him again but realized it was more him being down on the tank. “Shael, can I give him power?”

“I would worry about it being your power at the moment,” she answered after a moment of thought.

“Can you freeze the cockroaches then and please come help him while I grab us clothes?”

She frowned as she appeared in the doorway. “Freezing them is fine, but you want me to touch your mate in his state?”

“Helping him is more important than my jealousy and delicate sensibilities,” I drawled. “Plus, you’re not his type.”

“I never said that,” Julian grumbled. “Could you tell her that after she does magic on me, Tams?”

“No, because it would make her feel more comfortable to know,” I answered. “And no, you never said it, but I think most of us would guess Shael isn’t your type.”

“He’s not mine either,” she muttered under her breath.

Good. I wouldn’t be upset about that. I was glad. I wanted less people to be into Julian.

Seriously, too many fucking people wanted him already.

I grabbed one of his hoodies to wear since he only had naughty clothes for me there and snagged a pair of running pants for him.

I also used the bathroom and cleaned up a bit. There was really only so much I could push to the side after sex and keep acting like I was fine. I wasn't fine. I was sexed up.

And I wanted to be again. Damn that man.

I was glad when Calarel was there and checked out Julian. I turned on my telepathy and spoke to her about his state and was glad it was exactly as I thought. Julian had used fairy runes without knowing it, and his body wasn't made to handle fairy magic like that. Being my mate could only help him so much and for something quick like punching people or what he had done before, not for what he'd done.

I could tell him all of that later... Once the cockroaches were gone.

"He needs to refuel and get a good night's rest," Calarel instructed. "I would like to examine him tomorrow and check on him."

"He'll make time in his schedule," I promised her.

"It's not fair that works only one way," Julian grumbled after thanking her.

"I fight dirty and you allow it," I chuckled, shooting him a smirk. "Or should I stop visiting your office during work?"

He sighed and looked at my healer. "Calarel, I'm at your disposal tomorrow. Is there any food you prefer for me to order if you can take your break then?"

Both fairies were clearly trying not to laugh. Calarel asked for sushi and then excused herself.

"I would prefer Shael stay so she knows what's going on and can handle it unless you're uncomfortable with that?" I hedged when Julian glanced at her.

"No, that's probably smart," he sighed, giving me a kiss on the cheek when I joined him on the couch. "There's not much to know though. The

duffers are making a fuss about my not following the rules of living at the estate and trying to push to take over since I'll become your husband. I won't be able to focus on our family then."

"Unfreeze the cockroaches, Commander," I said smirking at the three warlocks. "Let me make a few things clear. First, you're breaking and entering the residence of a future prince of Faerie. That means I can punish you in Faerie where I'm the law, so I suggest you not do it again because the way I punish you next time won't be this kind."

Before they could even ask what that meant, I placed runes on all three of them to lock their magic to them in barriers.

"Oh boy," Shael sighed when she realized what I'd done. "So you're angry."

"Do you blame me?" I snorted when she gave me a look saying she would have done worse. "Now that I've spanked you bad boys for the next week, take my warning to heart. Also, Julian is following *exactly* the rules of the charter. We confirmed it with several attorneys. If you disagree, take it to the council."

"You understand why that wouldn't do much for us," the first cockroach that had spoken originally bit out. He added a hasty "Your Highness" when Shael looked like she might squash him.

"Awww, my heart hurts for your plight especially when you know your argument is bullshit," I mocked. "Now the other point, Julian won't be giving up being the head of the Craftsmans even once we mate. We plan on having our witch or warlock child inherit it as is their right being his child. There is nothing in the charter preventing that. So I suggest this is the last time you try to argue this and scurry back from where you came. Savvy?"

Their gazes were a range of things from greed to excitement to anger and... Just a lot.

“And I have the right to kick each of you out of the family if you act unbecoming our family,” Julian warned. “You wanted to hear her confirm we were going to mate so you could use it to your advantage. You aren’t even my first cousins. You’re distant cousins. In no rational world should my mating be advantageous to you. Don’t make the mistake thinking it will be just because of her position.”

“You know they’re smarter than us, honey,” I purred. “Of course, they are. They already said their one play they think is big. They’ll say bad things about me in the media. Oh no, not that! How will I ever survive?”

“Your Highness, their thoughts are not good. I suggest we take steps.” Shael looked as if she was debating where to bury them, so I could only imagine what they were thinking.

“You good with that?” I checked with Julian, smiling when he snorted. “Change their memories for what you think is best, assign some newbies to track them, and dig into them.”

“I was also thinking some magic to make them come confess their intentions to Julian before they do anything regrettable,” she added.

“No, to the bakery or something not—it hurts him to have to deal with this. Make it the fairy hotel or people who would enjoy them falling on their faces.”

“Even better. Enjoy your evening.” She smirked at me as she forced the warlocks through the portal and I rolled my eyes.

“Were you serious about our kids?” Julian asked when we were alone.

Oh shit. I winced and slowly looked at him.

He wouldn’t meet my eyes though. “Right, you said it for them. I understand.”

“It just kind of came out,” I muttered. “I don’t dislike the idea. I think we’re too young to talk about this, and I’m terrified about the idea of ever

being a mother and I think I'll be a shit one, and everyone is constantly talking to me about heirs and who I'd have to have babies with first and—”

“I get it,” he cut in when I ramped up a panic. He hugged me to him. “Sorry, it’s just I look at you and sometimes think of our nippers. I got excited you did too.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I think that part of me was broken.” I pulled away and wiped my suddenly wet eyes. “I’m scared I won’t love my own kids because I’m so broken. I’m sorry that I won’t ever dream of our kids like that.”

“Hey, stop,” he whispered. “Wait, Tams, I think you were drained from what happened too. You’re reacting more harshly to this than you normally would.”

He was right. I took stock of my magic and I felt weak and all over the place. I sighed. Heavily. “Of course, this happens right after I cleansed that much. I just can’t ever fucking get it right.”

There was a knock at the door, and I was glad it was my security with a butt load of food. Good barbeque which apparently was exactly what Julian was in the mood for.

Or he just said that to make me feel better. I hoped he really was. I felt bad. Really bad.

“I know you’re fine with what happened... Or did you just say that for them?”

“I’m really fine with it, but I understand why you feel bad,” he said gently. “I would be a mess if I did that to you on accident. I know you feel the same. If you had done it to me on purpose without talking to me first, I’d be gone.” He nodded when I couldn’t hide my shock. “You would be too, Tams. That would be way over the line.”

I opened my mouth but then closed it. “Yeah, that makes sense. I was

thinking of my—sometimes I just think things and it happens. That’s what I thought you meant by ‘on purpose,’ but that’s not like—I get it. You meant planned and deliberate.”

“Yes. What you said is still an accident.”

Yes and no, but I was glad he was so forgiving.

“So what now? What did this do for you and Hudson?”

I shrugged. “Nothing. Fairies could sense he was taken. That was really all I understood from it.”

He gave me a look of love but then sighed. “You really are a fucking handful, my sweet fairy.”

“I say that all of the godsdamn time,” I grumbled, glad he wasn’t mad at least.

We finished our food, took a soak in his tub, and went to bed. It was really nice.

And yeah, I woke in the middle of the night starving again. Seriously, he really had to love me to put up with my crazy.

19

Closing the door on Mason once and for all made me realize how much I had open in my mind and lingering. I wanted to handle more of that over break. But right as review week was about to end, I handed in my final for History of Witches/Vampires, and I couldn't let go of where my mind was.

I started at one of the houses that I'd originally inherited from the light fairy trust when I'd been found. Nobles had been staying there while most of Faerie was closed, but now most of them could get back in their residences since I'd taken over their areas or they were on board with the changes.

So the houses were mostly empty. The nobles who didn't get on board... Well, I never let them stay at my houses. They grouped up at a house someone had in this world or slept under bridges for all I cared.

But it seemed a waste to leave these mansions open and unloved. I'd thought a lot about what I'd wanted to do with them, and I'd come to the decision a while ago.

I simply hadn't had the time or energy to implement it. We were stretched too thin. We couldn't handle everything we wanted to and so much fell through the cracks. I'd thought not taking this on and pushing it back was smarter given how stressed I was, but not doing what I needed to for my soul was worse.

Too bad I kept not learning from that.

So I went through the houses I thought would be best, five of them to start. I stopped for food and then headed to Faerie. I didn't actually know

where the facility I wanted was located, too ashamed that I hadn't done anything sooner to go there.

I let my security catch up so I could ask them where I was going. Ara shot me a worried look but then opened the portal to where we needed.

We walked in and almost instantly I saw the person I wanted to meet. She looked different—better. She'd gained some weight and looked well rested.

She did a double take when she saw me, slowly standing and bowing to me. "What brings you here, Princess?"

"I wanted to speak with you and the people you trust that came in with you, Angel," I answered, having learned her name a while ago when I'd at least asked if they were all okay.

"I will find them and we can meet you in the cafeteria? It should be empty since lunch is over."

"That would be great," I accepted. I looked around as we moved along. It was definitely a prison but a low-security one even if I was sure there were runes and wards. It was clean and... Actually, it reminded me more of a place for rehab or a mental health facility than a prison. It was obvious that people couldn't come and go of their free will, but this was a lot less oppressive than a prison.

I was glad for that. I hadn't wanted these people to be in prison.

They were criminals but in the way I was too. They'd broken the law and done some bad things, but in the name of doing what they could to help. I'd met Angel a while ago, over a year at least, when we'd rescued dozens of grandchildren of fairies. She was taking them to the Underground that she'd worked for as well. Not because she believed in the organization, but because it had been her only option for survival as a child of a fairy.

Plus, from her horrid past, she'd been twisted up in trauma and the

Underground had preyed on that. She wanted to save the kids from becoming sex slaves like she'd been. She'd also been the magical dog of someone else. Angel had been through a lot.

They all had.

I waited for all of them to join us, glancing out at the group of ten. "How are your accommodations here? Are they okay? Anyone giving you a hard time?"

They couldn't hide their shock, Angel recovering first. "Everyone here is amazing, Princess. We're treated amazingly well and—I've not had something like this since my mother was killed. Thank you. Truly." She cleared her throat when I simply stared at her. People always had something to criticize. "Thank you for saving me that night."

"What?" I whispered, shocked that was how she was phrasing it.

She nodded... And wasn't the only one. "We didn't buy into what they wanted, but I wanted some of it. The councils were corrupt. Some still have issues. I wanted the way things were to burn for what was done to me, my mother, and others like me. I just wanted..."

"I know. Believe me, I understand the way others here can't." I glanced at my security and the person from the facility. "Put runes on them for whatever you feel comfortable with, but we're leaving for a bit. There's something I want them to see."

"I already contacted Alpha Geoff," Ara told me.

Yeah, of course, she figured it out. I saw in her eyes that she felt the same and wanted to do more on this topic as well. Too many others were always focused on only fairies, seeing these people as not their problem.

Fairies could be incredibly selfish like that. I tried not to judge them because of what they'd gone through, but it was clear too many fairies thought only fairies mattered.

Then they shouldn't have fucking kids with people other than fairies and once I became queen, I planned on making that a law. Not that people couldn't have kids with non-fairies. No, that would shoot me in the foot and wound a few of my mates beyond repair.

I planned on making a law that harshly punished fairies who abandoned their children, non-fairies or fairies. It didn't matter. They were the ones who brought them into this world, it was their duty to take care of them. The way I saw it, it was no different than child abandonment or not paying child support, both of which were against the law in the human world.

Fairies could at least do that for their own choices.

More Guardians arrived and Iolas as well since someone had told him what was going on. Ten minutes later, we were walking through a portal to Geoff's pack. A few of the wolves greeted us and led the way.

"This is the house we had built here to house the children we rescued that night and some since," I explained as we stopped at the large dormitory. "There are several who have been placed with empty nesters in the pack and we check on them regularly. They're happy. They've basically been adopted and are safe in this pack."

"You trust them that much?" one of the guys worried. "We all come from different Alphas who were more than happy to sell someone with confirmed fairy blood to—"

"My mate would rather die than sell anyone," Geoff's mate said from behind us.

I turned to her and did a double take. "Congratulations."

She blinked at me a moment and then sighed. "How? I haven't even told Geoff yet. I just found out yesterday."

I opened my mouth but then closed it. "I don't actually know. You seem..."

Iolas cleared his throat. “You sense the extra life in her. More magic really because she’s growing another life in her.”

“You feel it too?” I checked.

He shook his head. “Not just like this. I could if I focused, but you’re the most powerful of us, Your Highness. It makes sense you’d be the most sensitive.”

“Sorry,” I sighed, giving Geoff’s mate a look. “I’ll send presents? Don’t beat me.”

She simply snorted. “I’d be dead if you hadn’t saved me—saved *us* a few times over. I’ll go tell Geoff he’s going to be a dad again before someone else does.”

“My bad,” I grumbled as she walked off, shaking my head when she simply chuckled.

We showed them around and let them talk to the kids themselves to see that they were fine and being well cared for. It helped, and I saw the worry they were carrying slowly leave.

“I’m sorry. I meant to show you this a while ago but...”

“Time flies when you’re buried,” one of the other women said. “We understand. We do. I blinked and everything spun so far out of control that I didn’t even understand the deep hole I was in.”

Yeah, that sounded about right. That was life way too often.

I brought them all to one of the houses and explained what the place was. They all seemed a bit confused but simply listened. “I can’t just pardon you. I’m not queen yet, and I don’t have the legal right until I am. However, I can adjust your sentences for good behavior or if the need arises. So I’m making it arise.”

“What do you wish of us?” one of the guys worried, not hiding his distrust well.

“There are more like those kids you saw. Those ones are safe with Geoff and his pack, adjusting well and looked after. We have some stashed here and there and it’s not—I’m embarrassed how little more we’ve done after we set up that house with Geoff. I’m not excusing it, but we have piles of problems all over. So now that you guys understand what I said was legit, I want you to help with this problem.

“It was what you were originally trying to do. Instead of finding them to deliver to the Underground, I want you to help work with Faerie Guardians to find other children and grandchildren of fairies who are in bad spots or need help. I want you to keep them safe here and at four other places that are safe, protected by fairy magic, and I’ll leave fae dogs there. I want you to be the adults and help us give the kids what they need.”

“Yes,” Angel blurted... A bit too fast. She sighed when people stared at her in suspicion. “I want to save as many as I can. I’ve always wanted to, and this is much better than being with the Underground. If you can protect them so this isn’t one huge target for them, then yes, whatever—please, just let me help them instead of sitting still anymore. I more than accept my punishment and will pay for my crimes, I just—”

“I get it,” I whispered, walking over to her and hugging her. “I get it. I know. I’m sorry I didn’t do this sooner, but I was drowning.”

“None of this was your mess to clean up,” she rasped, holding me tightly. “If we were stronger we could have protected them on our own. We didn’t know—we couldn’t—” She broke down sobbing, thanking me for letting her help them and giving her a new life.

Yeah, this was the right move, long overdue, but I would try to forgive myself for that. I couldn’t do it all either.

After talking with those ten and Iolas, they agreed to wear a rune that was like an ankle monitor but better. They couldn’t leave the property I

would place them at. To start, I thought all ten should be at this one house. They could check out others and take care of the kids together. From there, it could all grow.

Just like the havens had. I rarely had anything to do with them anymore because of how awesome the people running them were and I knew they still saved people. They protected the ones already saved and helped others.

Like Iolas and others had told me many times, it was about giving people the path to help. They didn't know how to do it themselves but if someone showed them, the right people would do a lot to help.

After talking with Iolas, there were a lot of things that needed to be changed about that house before kids moved in and it was basically converted to an orphanage. It was a really good point, but I didn't know what to do about that.

But Katrina would. I texted Katrina Calloway and asked her to come over when she could. She was there not five minutes later with a smile on her face and hugging me tightly.

"I've missed you too," I chuckled. "I need your help. I think we need to have an auction for a lot of the belongings of this house. Not the fairy stuff, but—" I gestured to the crazy looking couch. "That has to be some type of something. It looks old and pricy. You can even say whose house that came from."

"That's a good way to fund whatever you're plotting," she agreed. "I'll have my people come and start cataloging everything." She chuckled when I couldn't hide my shock. That was fast even for her. "I actually have an auction planned in two weeks. The people I was supposed to be auctioning for are being... Tedious."

Meaning they were trying to screw over Katrina. That was never smart and people didn't do it often because she was very savvy.

“So now I can walk away from their last-minute renegotiations and hold this auction instead.”

“Glad I had good timing,” I chuckled, shaking my head at her antics and the dollar signs I practically saw over her head.

We ended up getting help from a bunch of fairies who weren’t working and heard something was going on from the hobgoblins. I walked around with Iolas and told them everything they could take to Katrina’s warehouse and they did right through portals. It was awesome and we had the house cleared out in no time.

“I was worried there would be a lot of items we needed to hide or handle differently,” Iolas admitted.

I snorted. “I didn’t trust the nobles who were staying here. Remember how many problems we had? I stripped these houses of anything powerful, magical, or—all of it. It’s all at my house hidden.”

“Of course, it is,” he chuckled, reaching over and rubbing my head. “Okay, let’s hit up an IKEA and get a bunch of everything for them to handle.”

“You’re really all about this,” I muttered, giving him a suspicious look.

He snorted. “We all know how this has been wearing on you. I’m glad you can get movement on it and hand it over. It’s upset a lot of us too. I was born of fairy parents, but there were several under me who were born of mixed parents. Seeing how different their lives could have been if they weren’t born fairy has been...”

I nodded. I hadn’t thought of that, *but* I was glad so many others were upset too. I was glad I wasn’t the only one and everyone else was heartless.

Which was clear when he had a boatload of fairy volunteers. It was clear they were born of mixed parents and wanted to help. This was why I suffered through all of the crazy and stress. It was these times where my people

showed they were good people that helped me do the rest.

We started with twenty loft beds that had desks and storage under them. That would make any kid feel like they had their own corner and private stuff. I would have loved that when I was a foster kid.

Three rooms were cleaned from top to bottom by the time we returned. We also had rugs and bedding so they could mostly put together a full room. Someone showed up with food and then hobgoblins arrived to help with the cleaning.

It all warmed my heart. Really, it did. I looked outside and saw off duty Guardians taking care of the overgrown lawn. This place was in the South, so someone was already plotting out a grove for fae fruit.

“Juan is going to be taking over the sorbet company for me,” I told the others as I texted Juan. “He might have input on what we want planted here.”

“So this place will be—the kids will have to work?” Angel asked, sounding worried and like she was scared to push.

“No, we’re just utilizing the land,” I told her firmly. “We do it at the havens to fund them. It will also be more protection since fairies tend to harvest the groves when they have downtime.”

“A lot of us do it for our exercise after dinner,” a fairy explained. “The princess started a new tradition that people have taken kindly to. Yes, the fruit is used in her business, but those businesses fund a lot for Faerie. We can’t contribute the money but we can a bit of time. I normally do it for a half an hour a night with my mate. It’s our meditation time if you will.”

It was a really great start. I was proud of everyone and glad I’d made this a priority.

Five days later I stopped by after my first final to see how things were going and found out things were practically done. There were fifteen bedrooms, but they were huge, mansion rooms, so several kids could fit

comfortably with what we'd bought. More had been purchased since then and kids were already there.

And not just the ones we already had, twenty were rescued from being used for their magic. They were all witches and warlocks and used as batteries.

Twenty more were saved. That was everything.

I met with each one of them after I had Calarel and some of the royal healers join us. I promised they were going to be okay now and did everything I could to set them at ease. I let them see my wings when they asked and did some magic for them.

The healers told us exactly what we'd expected. They were abused and needed more food, easy consideration, and help for a while, but none of them were beyond aid and their magic should be fine with time.

I had them all come outside and opened a portal to Chief and my first pack of fae dogs. I let the children all see and told them that a few of the dogs would stay here for the next few weeks to keep them safe. They were scared of the fae dogs at first, but after seeing how loveable and sweet they were to me, one by one they all went and petted the dogs.

I smiled when I saw tears and heard giggles. I knew that feeling as well. Any house that I was assigned to that had a dog wasn't as scary. If the people could like animals, they wouldn't be horrible to kids.

No, that wasn't always true, but it had made sense to me as a child. Even if reality had burst that bubble for me, I still understood their feelings.

Juan showed up as I was getting ready to leave and told me he'd only started to dive into the sorbet sales and numbers given it was finals time. But he knew we needed blue cherries and a whole array of our citrus trees. That surprised me since they were so temperamental. They were sweet or tart depending on where they grew in Faerie, when they were harvested, and a

bunch of other factors at times.

“Right, but I confirmed with the haven close to this area that their fae citrus trees always harvest sweeter. I’ve talked with a couple of your arborists, and they think it’s the axis lines like weather basically. The bakery and sorbet company could both use a lot more if possible.”

“If you can turn it into money, I can get you more,” I told him with a shrug. I glanced over at our helpers. “Have you started spacing out the groves?”

“No, Your Highness,” the fairy answered. “We needed to know which trees would be planted first.”

“Right, they all need different spacing,” I sighed, having forgotten that. “Okay, plot it out with what Juan says and—do you have seeds?”

“No, we need those as well,” she told me, giving me a worried look.

“I’ll see what we have in Faerie.” I patted her shoulder. “You guys are doing great, really. Thank you and everyone for the help.” I thanked Juan too which seemed to surprise him, but then I went to Faerie to get answers.

Luckily, there wasn’t too much back and forth. We didn’t have what we needed ready, but it didn’t take much to get the right seeds that were prepped to be planted. It might have made more sense to put the seeds in starter trays and get sprouts going, but given how powerful my magic was, it was like an extra step.

Lucca and Hudson showed up to check on me and seemed to accept Juan was involved. We ordered food and the four of us had a picnic for dinner. Julian arrived not long after with food as well.

“I heard you were going to plant the grove tonight to entertain the kiddos,” he told me as if to explain all the food.

“I didn’t say it was to entertain...” I trailed off when they all gave me a look to not even bother.

Fair enough. Yeah, I was totally doing it to help the kids feel like this place was awesome and they could feel safe here.

Izzy and Darby showed up before Neldor and I actually felt better we were all there. No matter what was going on with us individually, we all wanted to help and be a part of doing something good.

Once I had my fill, I saw the kids were all outside with us, along with the volunteers and those who were now assigned to work there. I waved them over and gave them seeds to plant. The new ones were hesitant, simply wanting to pair up with kids who seemed to understand better what was going on. They had been safe where they'd been, but this was much better for them and a final spot, so most of them were over the moon.

It didn't take too long to get them all planted since we were only starting the grove. Once it was done, I knelt down and felt the energy of the first seed. I put magic into it and let my magic spread out to other seeds, jumping to the next until I had them all. Then I let out my magic and cleansed it on nature, let it have fun, and do what it wanted.

Namely, make things grow and be pretty.

"You got enough, Tams," Julian said, cutting me off. He smiled at me when I blinked at him. "This is a huge start. Don't push too hard."

"Me? Never." I snickered when he gave me the look I deserved. I let him help me up, not knowing Hudson had been reaching for me at the same time. Shock rocked me when I felt the mating bond dance all over my skin.

And so was Hudson from the way his eyes bugged out.

"We have something we need to do," I told the others, my eyes not leaving Hudson's. I grabbed Julian's hand when he went to let go.

Oh no, he was coming with as well.

I teleported us to Julian's condo, not even saying goodbye or explaining, probably leaving poor Izzy to wrap things up for me. That was the only adult

thought I had for the rest of the night. “Make sure I apologize to Izzy and get her a prezzie.”

“Uh-huh,” Hudson agreed.

“Sure, sure,” Julian said from behind me. “So that’s what the mating bond feels like between you.”

“You felt it?” I checked.

“Yeah, I was touching you, and it was over my magic as well since ours is connected.”

“Weird.” That was all Hudson said before his lips were on mine.

They gobbled me up in the best way and I enjoyed every second of it.

A few times even.

“Fuck studying for finals,” Hudson muttered when we all snuggled down for bed.

“I’m such a shit student this year,” I sighed. “I’m hungry.”

“I already ordered food,” Julian told me.

“I love how expensive I am for you now that you have money. Seriously, how much is your budget a month to feed me?”

“Only you would worry about that or bring it up. Just say thank you, my sweet fairy.”

I did. With my mouth. I didn’t give him a full blowjob, but I did give him something he really, *really* enjoyed. And then he fucked me again.

Yeah, this was way better than studying for finals.

20

I had just finished my final for Faerie Biology when a very pissed off dragon came storming towards me. I knew he wasn't mad at me, but he looked ready to kill someone. I went towards him and jumped so he caught me.

"Get me out of here, Tams," he whispered against my lips. "I need—"

"I know what you need, beastie," I promised and teleported us to the portal to Faerie that I wanted. I activated it and we went right through. "Let's fly."

"I love you," he said quietly.

"I love you too." I winked at him and waved for him to take off his clothes, chilling out his mood a bit. "What? I want to be a perv and appreciate what's mine."

"Fine, but you better do something to claim it as yours after we fly," he... Threatened? Warned?

Sure, sign me up for all of it.

"You go first," I said when he shifted. "I'm going to try and take off on my own." I nodded to River when he froze. "I'm ready. I got this. Have faith in your mate." I chuckled when he chuffed like of course he did.

But he clearly wanted me to go first. I told him it made me self-conscious and to just go fly. I felt better when he did it. I took off my jacket and let my wings out. I really didn't know what the fuck I was doing, since Hudson just jumped up and then flew. I didn't know how fairies did it.

Fine, I would just do it my way.

I extended my wings ready to flap and then ran for a bit and jumped, picturing how like a long jumper did it or maybe a pole vaulter... Without the pole.

Nothing *ever* went to plan though and the moment my wings flapped, I shot up in the air.

And magic exploded out of me.

It rubber banded back at me, and for a moment I couldn't use my wings, the shock of it sort of stalling me out. I didn't even have time to get scared, River catching me on his back before I could worry.

Except if my magic was going crazy, I didn't want to risk Hudson and River. I pushed off his back and flapped my wings to get clear of him. They worked again, but I felt like I'd overused them. I couldn't fly in this condition, not safely.

And I had no idea how to land.

Relief filled me when I felt Lageos appear below me. I glided down and then was at a loss.

"Drop, Tamsin," he yelled up. "I've got you."

I didn't even question the demigod. My dad would never risk me. I folded in my wings and dropped the last thirty feet. He easily caught me with magic and brought me down so he was hugging me.

"I don't know what happened," I told him before he could even ask.

"I felt a magical explosion from where I was helping with the construction in Theripolis," he told me. "That's eons away. That's how strong it was."

"Did I hurt anything? Anyone?" I worried.

River gave a roar as if to say he was fine.

"Don't turn on your telepathy," Lageos told me firmly. "I'm

communicating with him.” I let my dad be the boss and snuggled up against him. “He says nothing bad happened. Things are growing. He saw growth.” He sighed. “Communicating with a dragon isn’t clear.”

“You have to speak River,” I chuckled, sighing as well when people started showing up. “Can you just tell them all that I don’t know what I did or what happened?”

“I will. Tell me what you did though,” he muttered.

Right, he needed to know that part. I told him that I tried to fly on my own and my magic exploded.

“This is why she needed lessons with us and you’re all fuckers,” Iolas bellowed at the others there. He reached over and moved his hand to my forehead. “I didn’t think you were to that point or I would have warned you. The moment you’re strong enough to take off on your own, you’ll get a jump in your magic.”

“Right, which for me means the possibility of leveling a city?” I drawled.

“You did no damage, Your Highness,” one of the other commanders said. “The area is teeming with magic. You shot up trees, the grass is overgrown, and...” He cleared his throat.

“The animals are breeding,” Lageos chuckled. “Your mate just informed me that your magic made all of the animals want to breed.”

“I’m useful like that,” I grumbled, tapping his arm to set me down. “Ask River if Iolas can teach me how to take off so I don’t do anything crazy again.”

Lageos sighed but then nodded. He nodded again after a moment. “He says Tamsin safe is most important and to rub his belly later.”

“Deal.” I gave myself a healing rune and tried to shake off what I’d felt, but the moment I extended my wings again, I felt energized. I couldn’t figure out what was going on now, but Iolas looked amused. “This is normal?”

“Yes, but you just super-size everything,” he answered and pulled out his phone. “I found this clip—you always talk about visuals and movies. I’ve been watching some in my spare time and I found the perfect thing to show you. This is how we take off basically.”

I nodded and took the phone from him after he brought up what he wanted. I frowned when I saw it was a Marvel movie, the clip focused on Thor arriving. Right, that two-parter movie. I remembered that.

I instantly understood when Thor used his axe to focus his lightning and that practically propelled him into the air. “So instead of using a rune to jump higher, I basically use my magic to lift off. Like Dad caught me with magic but toss myself up with magic.”

“Yes, you want to build it like you’re being slingshot up and let the magic seep into your wings to get you off the ground fast.” He moved us away from the others and then told me to hold his hand. I felt exactly what he was doing and let go at the right time before he went into the air and let his wings out.

Smart. It could work with our wings out already or not. Sometimes you had to get out of the way and in the air before you could even get your wings out and open to fly. That was an extremely smart way to teach different ways to handle the situation you found yourself in.

I backed away even more and my magic was ready to go, not even needing to build. I was just in the air and soaring as easily as breathing.

Wow.

I flew up towards River, reaching out and smacking his foot before flying back and doing the same to his tail. “That’s for dumping me off the first time.” I laughed when he simply snorted at me. I flapped my wings and darted out in front of him, the dragon not happy from the way he chuffed behind me.

I saw a magic flare from the ground and realized it was my dad. He wanted me to come back down.

Fair enough. I'd probably scared everyone once again.

I folded in my wings and dropped fast, a squeal catching in my throat as I basically did skydiving without the chute. Lageos caught me in his magic and gave me a look that he knew exactly what I'd been doing... And he completely approved of my need for fun.

Nice.

"So no one sane lands that fast," Iolas warned me, already back on the ground as well. "But you basically catch yourself in magic to land fast. You still have to be careful, and you need to practice catching people in magic first so you don't risk yourself, but that's the basics. Some full catch, others a bit and run out of it. It's your own style and what you need from the situation."

"Your mother used to basically dive-bomb into the fight and use magic to shove everyone down for a time-out and land at a damn roll," Lageos told me. "It terrified me every damn time."

"Yes, well, you did lots that scared her too, and Meira couldn't stand to see people fight or get hurt. Now you just told her daughter how to break up battles using flying to stop fights," Iolas said, his voice dripping with disapproval.

Oh well, it wasn't a normal day if these two weren't poking at each other.

There was a roar above and a stream of fire when I looked up. Clearly, River was done waiting and either wanted to land or... Yeah, probably just land.

I raced over by his clothes and grabbed them before moving to the edge of where people were and waving them back. I basically made a landing zone for my dragon.

He landed harder than normal, and I felt the air change around me before I was wrapped in his arms. “You’re fucking killing me, Tams. Seriously, I just can’t—what the—”

“I’m fine and I love you too,” I said as I kissed his chest. “But your bits are hanging out in front of a lot of people and those bits are mine.”

He growled and quickly threw on his boxer briefs that I’d been holding.

Then he hugged me again. “You okay? Do you hurt? Should we go eat?”

“I’m fine and we’re always hungry,” I promised, kissing his chest again since he had me smashed against him. “I’m sorry I caused you to worry again. This was supposed to be your time to fly. I didn’t even get to ask what was going on.” I swallowed a sigh when he flinched. So it was about me or us. “You okay?”

“People are stupid,” he grumbled, rubbing his cheek over my hair. “We know that.”

“Talk to me, beastie,” I said gently.

“It can wait until everyone scans you and checks you,” he promised before letting me go.

That worried me until I saw Calarel. I went over to her and let her scan me. I kept Hudson’s gaze though and started humming Jung Kook’s “Seven” featuring Latto. Every so often I sang a line and then went back to humming.

It didn’t take him long because I was a bit obsessed with that song since it had come out. He threw back his head and burst out laughing, looking like my sexy dragon again.

“Your Highness, please hold still,” Calarel chastised me.

“I’m really fine. I feel amped up even. Like after a great workout or promise of a fight. I’m hungry but yeah, I always am.”

“Then let me confirm it.”

I nodded and kept humming as I wiggled a bit to music only I could hear.

“You seem fine. I want you to check your own magic though. You know how like when you cleanse or just take stock. If you do it thoroughly, I will be done.”

Fine, fair enough. I slowly took stock of myself and at first it was fine, but then...

“I can’t feel Faerie,” I gasped. “I mean it’s not like gone, but I have to reach for it. I’d have to—it’s muted.”

Lageos put his hands on me, and I didn’t even have to open my eyes to see it was him, knowing his magic well. I let him feel what I was and showed him how it was almost like a window between the connection to Faerie that I normally felt. I didn’t touch the window or try to get closer, but I studied what was there and he did as well.

“My prayers are finally answered,” he rasped as he kissed me on the forehead. “There’s a wall between you and Faerie. Your magic is strong enough to protect you from Faerie now instead of answering to it like a fairy.”

“You’re sure?” Iolas demanded.

“I feel like I’m in a bubble from Faerie,” I told him as I opened my eyes. “It’s like I can feel it outside just as if you were standing outside my house, but it’s not close to me anymore.”

“She doesn’t know any more than we do,” Lageos cut in before the questions and crazy could start. “I will work with her here in Faerie over break. She’s hit a new peak and we’ll work through it. Calarel will also scan her regularly, just like any new power level.”

“She just hit a huge power jump recently though,” Shael worried.

“So what? Tamsin’s amazing,” Hudson cut in, holding out his hand to me when I looked at him. “Come on, shorty, you need to eat.”

“I’ll be good, I promise,” I told the others. “I’ve got one more final

tomorrow. We'll eat and relax."

"I'm fairly sure you could ace Fairy Crystals III & IV in your sleep," Iolas drawled.

Glad someone was that confident about my abilities. It was actually the one I was most worried about because I'd been slacking off.

I teleported Hudson and me to the portal and activated it. We walked through and I put my hand on his chest. "What's up, beastie?"

He let out a slow breath. "People were giving me shit, but not saying it directly at me. You know, that petty crap we love."

"Sure, but about what?" I nodded when he stared at me. "What did I do now?"

"Nothing. People were talking crap about you not being my date to our New Year's Eve party again and how I've gone from the future king one day to fairy fuck boy. It was just—people are really cruel and I'm tired of how they talk about you."

"Right, but we *are* going together this year. You asked me to and we talked about it."

"Yeah, but I didn't like announce it. That would be suspicious and like we were trying too hard." He blew out a harsh breath. "My final was rougher than I was ready for. I've been stressed with school, my parents keep pulling away from each other every time it seems like they might get back together, and there's other shit going on. I just..."

"You couldn't deal with one more thing pissing you off today," I filled in for him. I stood on my toes and kissed him when he nodded. "Then it's my turn to help you and take care of you tonight, yeah?"

"Please?" The begging and hoping in his voice was a dangerous mix and made me want to be bad.

I gave him a hotter kiss and then whispered what I wanted in his ear.

“I’m in,” he chuckled. “Whatever you want, shorty.”

“Exactly what you should say,” I purred and teleported us to the quad. People were done with the second morning final and lunch was about to start soon, so there were enough people in the quad to witness what we were plotting.

Hudson dropped his clothes in his hands and backed up. “Let’s fly, Tams.”

Damn right. I had been backing up as well and I took off towards him. Hudson linked his hands and squatted down so I could put my foot there. The moment I did, he used his arms and legs to launch me up in the air.

I let my wings out and flew up, glancing down to see he’d shifted into his dragon right in the middle of the quad. I went up higher and then teleported River to me. He appeared right under me and flapped his wings to go up, catching me on his back. I laughed and rubbed his scales before jumping up and flipping off of him. I flew around him and then in front of him, wiggling my butt until he chuffed.

He brought us right to dragon territory and I took the hint. We wanted to show off a bit and have fun, not really fly again when I promised others that I’d be good. I dropped onto his back and then he landed with us.

Hudson shifted back and looked a bit wiped. I gave him a kiss and teleported us back to his clothes, glad when he yanked on his pants. I would have wrapped my wings around him but that wouldn’t have covered him much. I could have done a barrier, but honestly he did it so fast that it wasn’t a big deal.

“I saw nothing unless you did damage I need to know about,” Headmaster Edelman said as he walked by us.

“Nope,” I said, not having any clue if that was right or not. The quad looked fine, so I let him go. I smiled at Hudson. “Let’s get food and go take a

soak at the hot springs at my castle. I promised to rub your belly for worrying you, right? Anything else you want me to rub, beastie?”

He chuckled when people started talking around us. “Yeah, I can think of a few things, Tams. What food do you want?”

“Nope, you get to pick. Tonight is all about my dragon.” I pursed my lips for a kiss, glad when he chuckled again.

It was all over school and social media that we were flying together and our relationship was way more solid than people realized. Good. Even if we had issues or bumps, that wasn’t for everyone else to know, and I needed to protect him just the same as he would me.

And the soak was amazing, exactly what we both needed. But we didn’t stay at the castle. I didn’t feel comfortable letting down my guard like that around Faerie.

But maybe that could change? Would this new power jump be the answer I’d been hoping for?

I really hoped so. I wanted to do my best to take care of the realm—the world my mother gave her life for. I couldn’t do a very good job of that if I couldn’t even stay the night in Faerie.

21

The vision changed. That night while lying in bed with Hudson, I had the vision of Darby leaving me again... But the ending changed.

Again.

Yeah, it was way beyond time to get some answers and stop living with my head in the sand because it would be painful to get them.

It was painful not to have them too.

After my last final—which I got a B+ on—I packed up to head home for winter break and left it all for my detail to handle.

I had something else to take care of.

Once in Faerie, I cloaked myself and teleported to my castle. I was glad when I saw guards taking their jobs seriously and checking out everything on their rounds. Everything was also perfectly clean and the castle seemed lighter than I remembered.

Aired out? I didn't think that was what really had changed, but maybe just that there was life in it again?

There were guards stationed at the wing of the royal bedrooms and another pair outside of my mother's room specifically. I teleported inside and was glad it went okay. Lageos had repeatedly warned me about not teleporting to places I'd never seen before unless I was teleporting to someone specifically.

But I figured just to the other side of doors wouldn't be that big of a deal. Her room was very regal and pretty.

And cold.

I expected something completely different from the way everyone described her. Then I realized I was putting her into the frame of reference I knew.

Namely, being human. I expected pictures of her and Lageos, especially like a wedding photo on the wall. Maybe her with her unicorns. There was none of that. It was just... The room of a queen, not Meira.

How sad. I shook my head and remembered why I was there, feeling almost gross that I was going to go through her things. Then I decided to let my magic see what I could find.

And it found a piece of me?

I blinked at the dresser, seeing items on there, but that wasn't what my magic wanted me to find. No, it was behind the dresser.

Carefully moving it with my magic, I found a small safe behind it. Some part of me was in there. I reached out and touched the magical safe and it popped open. Inside there was a thick journal... With a piece of my hair secured to it with a clip and ribbon.

So she wanted me to find this. Okay, this was what everyone had told me to be ready for and she would have.

I was prepared to find something, but there was nothing that could have prepared me for what I found when I opened it.

Tamsin, my beautiful daughter, the heart of my soul,

I can never apologize enough for what I have done to you. I will never ask for your forgiveness. I should have been a stronger mother and queen so things never happened as they did, and you could grow up safe with both of your parents. But I failed. I failed you. I failed my one love. I failed Faerie.

Please know I regret that always, but I will never regret you. Even if I

could not give you the life you deserved, I will never regret having you, my perfect Tamsin. You deserved so much better, but the alternative was to never have you, and that wasn't an option from the moment I saw you in my visions.

I prayed and prayed that the best outcome happened, but if you're reading this, I did not survive. Yes, that was one of the possible futures. I could not tell your father that and give him hope. I do not ask your forgiveness, nor your understanding, but if you ever are cursed with the gift of my visions, I cannot apologize enough. I would not wish them on anyone, especially not my beloved child.

But I have seen you with them. That was one possible future. I saw you come for this journal because you needed it. If that is the reason you read this, I am so very sorry, my child.

I'm already rambling in a way that doesn't make sense. I have started this journal so many times and thrown them out. There is no way to prepare you for everything you need to know. This is not the way you should have been told so much, and I'm sorry you must figure out too much on your own.

I never saw you with visions before you were born. It was only the last days before my death that I saw it, and everything was too late by then. I will never regret giving you life, but you may curse me for giving you a life with such burdens. I won't ever blame you. Curse me as I will curse myself for failing you.

The first thing you need to know is the visions can change. Some you may be able to change, others cannot or will simply have another fate. That was the case with Prince Alok. No matter what I did, I could not change his fate.

You will face the same, and I'm sorry for the pain it will cause you. The pain is like no other, and I hate myself for leaving you to suffer that alone.

I saw hundreds of versions of the events that Lageos has told you about by now. Hundreds. Most were the same. Subtle changes as to the timing or

who exactly was around me when it happened. That is how most of my visions have been, basically the same, but little things could shift.

This was the first time I had such drastic outliers of visions when hundreds were the same. The one I pray for is that I survive and can be reunited with you and Lageos. If that happens, I will be there to explain it for you. If it doesn't... Know I tried my best to have that version. I truly did, Daughter. Even if I lost my magic forever, living to be with you was worth it.

I would have given up my magic, my crown—everything a million times over to be able to raise you, Tamsin. Anything but Lageos or all of the people in Faerie. Any other price I would have gladly paid.

I set down the book and took a few deep breaths. She saw a version of her living, but it cost her all of her magic. Wow. Just... Wow.

And I fully understand why she didn't tell Lageos that and give him hope. I wouldn't snitch on her when she was gone. That would be too much and it didn't happen anyways. I took a few more moments and then continued to read when I felt I had myself together.

As much as I hoped for that future, I cannot be anything but honest with you and I knew it wouldn't happen. The outliers of your visions won't come true. They simply torture you or make you doubt yourself from my experience. Thousands and thousands of visions, and only one outlier vision has come true in all of my years.

My best advice to you is to ignore the outliers. I wish I had always. I would have saved my heart from so much loss and pain and been able to focus more on where I should have. I should have let Lageos—my regrets are many and they aren't for you to bear. Know I have them, and I know how many mistakes I've made.

I know you won't understand why I got you out of Faerie first without Lageos. Your father hated the plan but knew his focus couldn't have been split between us, and he made it clear he would not leave me to die alone. He will never forgive himself for not being able to save me, but it was my cross to bear for not saving Faerie before this.

Take care of him, Tamsin. I know it is not the responsibility of the child to care for the parent, but your father is more special than any of us can ever realize. He has done so much for so many over his thousands of years and yet he is pure of heart. Others won't understand him and most will fear him. Be the one person who won't judge him and only love him. He was always that person for me.

The outliers tore me apart this time. I admit it and know that it's normal. I hate to discuss them after you have suffered so much but you must understand how vast the visions can be. One I was able to live if my magic was sacrificed and one Lageos could not escape the magic meant for fairies and those of Faerie. It was too horrible to even see in a vision, and I cried for days that there was even a chance of that being his fate.

But one chance out of hundreds won't happen, they never do, good or bad. The worst part of the curse of visions is what you keep with you from them. Not only what will happen, but what won't happen. I carried that pain of seeing him trapped in the darkness for decades alone, scared, and fighting to get to you. It hurt my soul to see even if I knew it wouldn't happen.

By the gods, if that was the vision that was real, I will never forgive myself. I will never look upon either of you in the afterlife. It was so horrible that my mind could not make sense of some of it. You were so different, beautiful and strong but your soul was so abused and beaten from the hell you survived alone without your father. I carry that pain and grief from you never having a childhood.

So please understand and take my warning seriously. If nothing else, take my warning that you cannot handle the visions alone, Daughter. I only survived them and kept my sanity because of your father. You need support in place if the visions will be your curse. Please trust me in that.

And if anything happens differently than the hundreds of visions I had of the same outcome, know that I wouldn't have done what I did. I was only able to let this happen because I knew you would be safe and with Lageos until you could reopen Faerie. I was willing to sacrifice my life that should have been with the two people I love the most, but I would never have sacrificed either of you.

Never.

I closed the book, tears flowing freely. She knew. She'd seen the version of events I'd lived and she'd still risked that for us. I knew what she was saying logically, and I even believed she thought it would never happen.

But it did. Even if it was a one in five hundred chance, she took that chance and left me to suffer as I did, as Lageos did.

Yeah, I knew the pain of this was going to be big, and I wasn't sure that it was worth the answers I'd received so far. The journal was thick, but I couldn't read it anymore. I couldn't.

Especially after reading that my mother thought my soul was broken because of the fate she'd left me to.

She wasn't wrong. She wasn't. I couldn't get mad at her for saying that.

It simply hurt. I hurt.

I hurt too often, and I didn't need more reasons to hurt. So I locked the journal back up and for now, that was where it would stay.

I couldn't risk my soul being any more broken right then and especially not because of what my dead mother wrote to me.

The End

THANK YOU for reading this book!!

Thank you so much for reading the next book in Artemis University. I woves all of you lots for your support and wanting more of my books. Please, *please* leave a review. It really helps me out to know which series people are eager for. I appreciate the time it takes!

Artemis #21 is done and in editing. It's looking like an October release, nothing definite. I'm not sure what comes after that. I'm about 20k into a book, but the outline isn't fully gelled so I'm not committing to that being next. If it works out, it's something a lot of you have been asking for or pointed out REPEATEDLY that it's a series I've neglected so I hope I can pull it off.

Welcome pumpkin season and fall, I've missed you!

All my best,

Erin

And Vader

Find A New Series To Love...

Accidentally Wolf: Seraphine Thomas 1
Gives New Meaning To Workplace Injury

Special Agent in Charge, Seraphine Thomas, lives for her job at the FBI. One of the youngest female agents with her own team, she thrives in undercover work to make the city she loves safer. But Sera's on-track life is thrown into chaos when she's attacked during a bust gone bad and is left figuring out what it means to be a werewolf.

Right away, she learns that she's more powerful and able to do things that she shouldn't be able to do so quickly after her transition. The rules of her old life don't seem to apply to much now that she's a shifter, and knowing who she can trust is even more complicated.

When she's transferred to a special branch of the FBI made up of paranormals policing others of their kind and given a promotion, things start looking up—until her abnormal level of power creates a list of enemies for her before she's even learned who her allies are.



Upended Life: Artemis University 1

My name is Tamsin Vale and my life is about to get real... Really complicated and ridiculously dangerous. Which is almost funny given at nineteen I already know too much of the darkness of the world and people, the secrets they keep.

Or so I thought.

Turns out those quirky abilities I've been keeping secret expose me to a world I didn't know existed. Sure, I knew I wasn't human—but how exactly do I find out more without ending up in the wrong hands?

And I'm not so sure I'm in the right hands now given some of the reactions to finding me. They say I'm the last fairy. I'm not sure I should trust them when

their thoughts are mostly of power and how to use me.

But I'm also not sure I have much of a choice. My powers are dangerous and I don't know how to use them. They promise to teach me what I need to know and give me a chance at something I've never had before.

A normal life. I don't think anything about Artemis University and those who attend is normal, but it's still better than the life I've been living if they keep half their promises.

I think hoping they'll keep half is generous.

Artemis University is a hot burning reverse harem, university-age paranormal academy series with darker elements, strong language, violence, and a heroine who follows her own moral compass of what is right... And who she ends up giving her heart to.



No Longer Home: House of Garner 1

My name is Inez Garner, and my story has sort of been told... But not. I'm turning twenty-three and find out I'm not human; I'm apparently a vampire. Sure, who hasn't read that story? Oh, but I'm a princess. And there's a zombie apocalypse—although I'm debating where the line is of apocalypse vs. post-apocalypse. There's also a quest that I'm compelled to be on, and it might all be coming from the Goddess.

Awesome. It seems She has big plans for me. And I have to deal with ghosts. When I kill corrupted—the nice PC name people call zombies, as it's not their fault they eat people—I then have to deal with their ghosts. Which is super when being hunted for years by some guys I don't want to know better.

Add to everything, I have to apologize to heroines for judging them when they fall in bed with the hot guy and buy the story he gives. I get it now. Sex is splendid. I'm not one to believe a con, but he's got answers I need, like why I have no memories before I was eighteen.

Plus, the fangs sort of sold it for me. I hope he forgives me for shooting him.

House of Garner is an apocalyptic hot burning WhyChoose romance with darker elements, strong language, violence, and a heroine that doesn't let anyone get in her way.



Undisclosed Assets: Untraceable Succubus 1

A succubus working as a stripper sounds like a cliché or start of a bad joke, but Lola Chase is in a human only province in Canada for other reasons. Someone is murdering women society looks down on, and she's there to stop it. As a demon, she's bottom of the supernatural food chain and knows how often people ignore crimes against them.

From the start there isn't much to go on, and she ends up getting in a bit of trouble following any leads she gets. Things get complicated when an ancient, big name vampire takes interest in her and getting away from him proves to be much harder than her normal admirers.

Thankfully, although her cover is a stripper, Lola loves to dance and the fun she has helps balance out the stress and worry of the case.

Plus, she finds some very hot men to play with and feed from. The question is whether or not she can balance it all and find a murderer before he kills again.

Untraceable Succubus is a murder mystery series where the sex is hot and often and the main character kicks some serious ass on the road to finding out if she can have real love in her life even if it comes from multiple men.



Demon of Death: Enchantress 1

Soraya Devil is the Enchantress, one of the most powerful magics in the

world... But she's so much more than that, and everyone's constantly attempting to unravel her past and secrets. She's not worried though, as many have tried and never find out the truth.

It's safer for everyone that way.

The owner of Paranormal Investigations—among other companies—she has her own answers to find. Though she's continuously pulled in too many directions, she always answers the calls that make even her magic tingle in warning at the danger.

When a sprite begins killing people in Chicago, she has to team up with SPU—Supernatural Police Unit—to figure out who summoned the demon and why before more die. While that's enough of a challenge, the main hurdle is the team lead on the case who loathes all magics. But when he can't seem to get past his hate and do his job, can Soraya make an ally from an enemy, or will the evil unleashed in the city she loves win the day?



Rough Beginnings: Karma Bakery 1
Starting a New Business Takes Magic

Imagine there weren't three main gods of Olympus, but four. A sister who went through something so horrible, so traumatic she left and was written out of history.

Arabella Baker and her two adopted daughters are moving to Boston to open a new business and start over. Things will be different this time with the new names and new life. The twins will live on their own at college—though still right in Boston—and experience something a bit more normal. The store she bought has a hefty price, but the location is fantastic, and she got the best spot in the new development... Which apparently comes with an immensely attractive man who owns it all.

Nothing goes smoothly in opening a new business though, sample days, crazy busy, and fluff interviews taking dark turns. Honestly, it leaves Arabella

asking one main question—why did she think opening in such a large city and right before the holidays was such a great idea?



Meave: Naughty Witches 1

Leaving NYC and a troubling past, Meave Washington is starting over. She has a good plan, but she's probably bit off more than she can chew. So she embraces the chance of fate that lands help at her feet—and if he's smoking hot, all the better.

Distracted by a text while driving, Ashton Perry injures Meave. He's horrified that he could have killed someone, and steps up to make it right... And not just because she's the most beautiful woman he's ever seen.

Sparks immediately start flying and the desire is undeniable but it's not that simple to take the leap. But Ashton's barely a man, and Meave is hiding something important. When the woman is older, age isn't just a number and Meave isn't sure Ashton can be who she needs.

Ashton steps up to prove he's not just a man, but the man his bewitching lady deserves. He doesn't care what she is—only who she is. And he'll do whatever it takes to prove it.

Naughty Witches is a burning paranormal romance novella series with strong female leads, fun so sexy it raises the temperature, and mismatched people who find HEAs that give us all hope fate won't forget us. Each book is a new pairing in the same world, with an overall series arc.



The Turning: Dr. Kelly Murphy 1 *One Bite Can Change Everything*

Graduate medical school, start competitive internship, don't get cut from the program, become a surgeon. It was a great plan. One Kelly Murphy loved

and had dreamed of most of her life... And it was blown to hell in a night with an uninvited bite.

Now she's missing three days of her life, trying to handle her freaked out best friend and parents who called the police when she went missing, all as she realizes she's not the same person she was before. She's different. Like has fangs different.

When he shows up on her doorstep claiming to know what happened to her, Kelly's not sure that makes things any less confusing. But at least he can guide her, right? Either way, she has a plan and a choice she didn't make won't stop her... Even if she might have the urge to bite her patients from now on.

Owned: Secure Settings 1

Kate Boyle has lived through more loss than most people twice her age. She's strong and independent, so letting people in to help her handle her grief or problems is next to impossible for her.

The owner of a successful company, Secure Settings, Kate devotes all her time to keeping people safe and rescuing those who can't save themselves. When she gets the call that her grandpa died and she's now inherited his ranch, a storm of epic proportions starts. Smart enough to know she can't watch out for danger while grieving, she calls in a favor for help.

Jared and Dean Acker just got out of the Marines and are a little lost as to what comes next for them. So when they're asked to back up a friend of a friend, they're in... And meet the woman of their dreams. Now, if they could just convince her.

Wounded: In My Dreams 1

Authors Dream Of Their Happiness Too

Gas station coffee is the highlight of Lily Slone's boring outing until fate intervenes... Along with the barrel of a gun and a lost soldier who saves her life.

Jasper Hutson—a homeless Marine, discarded by his family after returning home from the war wounded—reacted on instinct. But this one act brings him to Lily's attention, and not because he saves her life. She sees something else in him. Something no one else sees.

Refusing to give up on him when everyone else does, Lily offers Jasper a place to stay and an opportunity to get back on his feet. That one offer will change her world. When they grow closer and Jasper makes Lily's life so much easier, she's not sure she can go back to living without him.

As life moves forward and they get into their own rhythm, Lily discover something about Jasper that he's kept hidden. Will she continue to reach for her happily ever after or will they both remain wounded?

About the Author

Erin is a born Chicagoan who has lived in several states which gives her an interesting perspective from which to write characters. Still a loyal Cubs fan, she also cheers for her alma mater, the Illini from her home outside Boston. To date, she has published hundreds of paranormal books in different genres that have dedicated readers who await each release to her numerous series. With her canine editor-in-chief Lord Vader Flynn at her side, she has no plans of stopping anytime soon and looks forward to new adventures and worlds on the horizon.

ErinRFlynn.com

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Owned
Claimed

IN MY DREAMS

Wounded
Alone
Broken

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