



She's been Bewitched,
He's Bewildered

BY MY
SALVATION
BEWITCHED AND BEWILDERED

ALANEA ALDER

USA TODAY AND WALL STREET JOURNAL BEST SELLING AUTHOR

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My Salvation

Bewitched and Bewildered

ALANEA ALDER



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Dedication

~Omnia Vincit Amor- Love Conquers All~

~Sometimes the best love is the quiet comfortable moments
between shared laughter.~

PROLOGUE

Priest rolled out of bed and landed on the floor on his hands and knees. He fought back the urge to vomit as he gulped down air, trying to slow his breathing.

In his nightmare, his mate, his beautiful mate, was ripped apart by hundreds of grasping hands. He tried to reclaim each piece of her from the faceless shadows but couldn't.

A knock at the door had him looking up. He dare not answer. With his head hanging, he prayed that the person would go away.

Seconds later, he heard a static crack, and the door opened, revealing Heath Clover, Upsilon's witch.

"Gods above," Heath whispered. He shut the door behind him before he knelt down at his side. "I want you to concentrate on my voice. *Conquiescere, frater meus*. Be at peace, my brother. You are not alone, and the darkness will not win."

Heath rose and gently helped Priest stand to his feet before easing him over to the bed. Priest rested his elbows on his

knees and buried his face in his hands. Heath sat next to him. “Talk to me Priest, or I’ll get Zoe to purify the room of negative vibes, and knowing her, she’d torch the place.”

Priest smiled, though he felt like raging. His chuckle was without mirth and sounded empty even to himself. “How’d you know?” he asked, sitting up to face his unit brother.

Heath’s eyes were filled with compassion. “I’ve picked up a thing or two over the years.”

“Empathy?”

Heath shook his head. “Not quite. It’s more like my healing abilities have a barometer. Elevated temperature, heart rate, that sort of thing, has gotten a boost that added an emotional flavor to it. Sheer terror was flooding the hallway in waves from your room,” he explained.

Priest exhaled. “You know how Ari and Gage had dreams about their mates?”

Heath nodded. “Ari saw Bri walking away, and Gage saw Zoe surrounded by flames” He shrugged. “Makes perfect sense now.”

Priest clasped his hands together in his lap to keep them from visibly shaking. “I see her. Gods, Heath, she is so beautiful. Silky blonde hair, eyes the color of the sky at sunrise, but it’s her smile that pulls me in.” He tilted his head to look at his unit brother closer. “Her eyes are like yours, filled with... I don’t know, compassion.”

Heath nodded. “She could be a healer.”

Priest shut his eyes, trying to recall her face again. Immediately the images began to taunt him.

“Priest. Open your eyes,” Heath ordered.

Priest swallowed hard and looked directly at Heath. “She’s ripped apart right before me. I can’t save even a single piece of her.”

Heath's eyes widened. "Gods above. Why would you be shown such a thing?" He placed his hand on Priest's shoulder, and the terror, anxiety, and tension seemed to melt away.

"Thanks, Heath."

"Maybe you should go to Aiden with this?" he suggested.

Priest shook his head. "That man has more shit on his plate than anyone."

Heath went to speak, hesitated, then continued. "Go to Meryn."

Priest stared. "Excuse me?"

Heath winced. "I know, it sounds a bit crazy, but by now, we've all seen her in action. Besides the commander, she's the only other one who was present as each couple came together. She may have some insight into your nightmares."

Priest felt the stirrings of hope. "Do you really think so?"

Heath chuckled. "Either she'll be able to help or implode the situation so badly that your nightmares will be the least of your worries."

"I fucking hate you," Priest muttered, a smile tugging at his lips.

Heath laughed outright at his declaration. "I know, eaglet, I know." He stood and stretched. "Get some rest. I have a feeling tomorrow should be interesting." He walked to the door and opened it. "If it gets this bad again, come to me. Don't let the darkness get a foothold."

Priest nodded. "I will. Thanks again, Heath."

"Anytime." Heath waved and shut the door behind him.

"Meryn, huh?" Priest wondered out loud.

He lay back down and stared up at the ceiling.

"What's the worst that could happen?"

Chapter One

“But, I just miss her so much, you know?” the old man sniffled.

Cas laid a hand on his, mindful of the bruising he sustained from his last hospital stay. Since he was diagnosed with Stage Two cancer, Mr. Clemson had been coming to her on again, off again for the past six months. Then three weeks ago, just when he got that beat and was in remission, his faithful cat of sixteen years had passed away in her sleep. The poor man was awash with the color blue, which she always associated with sadness and despair. He was on the verge of giving up.

“I see something peculiar in your aura Samuel.” She’d give him hope even if she had to fudge things a bit.

“Something new? I know I’ve been bringing ya down with my blues as you call ‘em,” he teased, with very little mirth in his eyes.

To the humans who visited her little shop she was one step up from a palm reader. She held many psychology degrees but ultimately used her fae gift to get people talking about their feelings. She ‘somehow’ always knew what to ask to get people to acknowledge their hearts, which made them grow and feel better. Word of mouth had developed her client list until she was scheduling people months in advance.

“There’s a small cafe not far from your apartment, isn’t there?”

He nodded and let her continue.

“I see a small black cat huddled in a corner. He’s an absolute terror, hissing and half-feral, but I see your paths crossing.” She prayed this was the right thing to do. For all her gifts, she wasn’t omniscient.

He scowled. “What’s a cat doin’ in a cafe?”

She smiled. “It’s one of those new cat cafes. You go in, buy a cup of coffee and you get to pet and play with the cats. If you get along with one, you can adopt them.” She rubbed her

forehead only slightly dramatically. “Now, this little boy is withdrawn, and I feel like his time is running out. If he keeps hissing at the customers, he may end up on the kill list.”

“Why is he hissing?” Samuel asked indignantly. “Cats don’t hiss for no reason.”

Cassie knew little Dow’s story as she had stopped in the cafe just two days ago for coffee. “He’s sad. His human child, whom he loved with all his heart, died. The parents didn’t want him around as a reminder of their lost daughter, so they gave him up to the cafe. He’s scared.”

Samuel rubbed his chin. The blues swirled faster and faster before blossoming into a pretty yellow. Hope, purpose. “Well, maybe I could head over there and sit with him a bit. My old girl was feisty at the end,” he chuckled. “They are their own selves, you know.”

She nodded. “Ask for Shadow. That’s his name on file at the cafe. But, his human was young when they met. She could only manage to say, Dow, he’ll respond to that more.”

Samuel stood, knees popping. “I reckon I got time now.” He smiled, and this time there was warmth in his eyes. “You really moving away? You do you a lot of good to a lot of people, myself included.” He held out a hand to help her stand.

Cas fought back a sigh as she stood. Her Queen had issued the decree for all fae to return to Éire Danu a while ago. She packed up her apartment but had a hard time leaving with so many ‘last’ appointments. She was thankful that Samuel looked to be turning a corner now.

She nodded. “I’m needed back home.”

This time he was the one to lay a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Anything I can do to help?”

She patted his hand on her shoulder. “Samuel, you are a rare gem amongst men.” She winked at him, causing him to guffaw. She shook her head. “It’s just jitters about returning after having been gone so long. I imagine I’ll settle in quickly enough.”

He gave her one firm pat, then headed for the door. “Home is always the place you can return to, no matter what. I hope that it goes well for you.” With a final wave, he walked out, leaving her alone in her shop.

Sighing, she looked at the empty shelves where she once sold handmade crafts from community artisans. Samuel had been her last appointment. Now, she had to figure out how to get her things to the portal outside the city.

With a heavy heart she locked up her small business for the last time and walked less than half a block to her apartment building. It was a gorgeous old building that had been well-maintained. She had an apartment on the third floor. The landlord was an older lady who didn’t need the money. She was just renting to keep the building occupied. When Cas first applied there, the sweet older woman gave her a discounted rate because there wasn’t an elevator. Running those stairs kept her fit over the years.

She had just put the key in her lock when a loud booming voice exclaimed. “Cassie! What in the hell are you still doing here?”

“Ilian!” she screeched and threw herself into the arms of the seven-foot fae she hadn’t seen in over a year. “You’re back! Did the whole squad return? I watered your plants like you asked me to.”

Ilian swung her around in a hug, then set her on her feet to rub her hair every which way.

“Hey!”

“Cassie, you know the edict went out weeks ago. Why are you still here?” he demanded, his hands on his hips.

“I couldn’t just leave when I still had appointments. I managed to cancel most of them, but the ones coming up had people who really needed me.”

Ilian ran his hands over his face. “What do you know?”

“About what?” she asked, feeling slightly concerned.

Ilian looked up and down the hallway, then pulled her into his apartment.

“Cassie!”

“Oof! Dammit, Reston, put me down!” she yelled as Ilian’s squad leader squeezed the daylights out of her. “Why in the hell are you still here?” he demanded, setting her on her feet.

She rubbed her left ear. “It’s like there’s an echo or something.”

“She only knows that we’ve been called home. Civilians weren’t told anything,” Ilian explained.

Reston nodded. “Probably to keep panic to a minimum.”

Cas swallowed hard. “Why would there be a panic?”

Ilian held up his phone and pointed to a small ‘V’ app. “Sit down, Cas. I’ll try to explain as gently as I can.” Ilian led her to a cardboard box and had her sit.

Twenty minutes later, Cas ran for the bathroom and threw up her lunch.

“Oh hells Cas, I’m sorry!” Ilian said, dropping to his knees to hold back her hair.

“I don’t think there was a good way to explain things,” Reston said, holding a sleeve of crackers, looking worried.

“Why are you both in the bathroom?” a male voice asked.

“Cassie is sick,” Reston said, pointing with the crackers.

“Kill me now,” she moaned.

“What? Let me through!”

“Hey, Luca,” she greeted weakly.

Warm hands rubbed her back as the witch whispered his spell. Suddenly, her head felt a bit clearer. “Thanks, buddy.”

Luca helped her stand. “Let’s brush those teeth. You can use Ilian’s toothbrush,” he offered.

“Hey!” Ilian protested.

Luca gave him a flat look, then slammed the door in his face. Reaching under the cabinet, he pulled out an unused toothbrush and handed it to her.

“Couldn’t you just spell this away?”

“Of course, but you’ll feel more normal using a routine,” he explained.

She nodded, feeling silly. Of course, something like that would help her deal with shock. She added toothpaste to the brush and began brushing her teeth.

Luca took advantage of her inability to talk. “Please tell me you’re at least packed?”

She nodded.

“Good. I knew you were still here but didn’t tell Ilian or Reston. They’d probably have gone AWOL early to get home.”

She tilted her head, giving him a questioning look.

He snorted. “You really didn’t think we cared about that dinky little succulent, did you?”

She continued to stare.

He sighed. “We set up a camera in the kitchen. As long as you were coming once a week, we could keep an eye on you.”

“Whaaa!” she protested.

Luca laughed. “I was the one checking the camera for the past two weeks, so I knew you stayed behind.” He gave her a severe look. “You had to have known something was happening, Cas. Why didn’t you move in with Cam and the Monroe squad?”

She spit into the sink. “Because they’re slob.”

“And?”

“I can’t live like that, Luca.”

“Did Ilian and Reston get you caught up?”

She nodded solemnly. “How is this happening?”

Luca wrapped an arm around her shoulder and opened the bathroom door. Ilian and Reston were waiting for her in the hallway. “Because evil exists, baby girl, plain and simple.”

“Cas, are you okay?” Ilian asked.

She walked over to him and gave him a hug. “Sorry to scare you.”

Ilian exhaled. “I’m just glad Coop and Link weren’t here.”

Cas couldn’t help but laugh. Ilian, Reston, and Luca shared the apartment next to her. Lincoln and Cooper had the apartment below hers on the second floor.

Ilian Ri’Elwin was a fellow fae, and Reston O’Brien was the wolf-shifting squad leader. Luca Brambles was their witch, while Cooper Braxton and Lincoln Allard were the squad’s heavy hitters. Coop was one of the largest men she had ever seen, which made sense as his animal was a polar bear, and Link was pure muscle. What he lacked in bulk, he made up with compact sinew. Coop said punching him was like punching a steel plate.

“Why is she still here?” a deep voice asked.

“There goes that echo again,” Cas observed sourly.

Coop stomped over to her and held out his hand. “Key.”

Sighing, she dropped her apartment key in his hand.

“Come on, Link, we have to carry Cassie’s stuff to the van,” Coop said, walking back out of the apartment.

“Why is she still here?” a male voice asked before the door shut.

“Ugggh!” she yelled, throwing her hands in the air.

“Ilian, she should eat something before we head to Cam’s,” Luca recommended.

Ilian steered her back toward the kitchen. “Why are we going to Cam’s?” she asked, plopping a slice of pizza from the open box onto a paper plate before heading over to the microwave.

Ilian pulled his phone back out and set it in front of her. “The Unit Commander’s mate created a Vanguard app for us to register. She posted updates as to what’s been going on in our world,” Ilian’s face darkened. “It’s more than we’re getting from the council.”

Reston clapped a hand on Ilian’s shoulder. “You know why things have been kept quiet.”

“Because people would freak out,” Cas said, watching her slice of pizza spin in the microwave.

“Exactly,” Reston said.

Cas turned away from her spinning snack. “Why do you have to go to Cam’s to register?”

Reston exhaled. “We have to be verified before we’re allowed to register.”

“Verified?” she asked, suddenly not really wanting to know the answer.

“The Unit Commander has evidence that there is a rogue unit out there,” Reston explained.

She snort laughed, then looked from Luca to Reston, then finally to Ilian. “You’re serious? Unit warriors don’t turn!” she protested.

Luca pulled her into a tight hug, then kissed her forehead. “It’s very, very rare, but it supposedly happened.”

Cassie looked to Ilian. “How do you get verified?”

He lifted his sleeve and pointed to his unit tattoo. “A simple glance, that’s it, honey. Black, we’re fine. Red, we’re feral.”

“I could have been one of the ones taken,” she whispered, reaching for the edge of the box serving as a kitchen chair. It was like she was processing things in segments.

Luca sat her down, then got her pizza. “Eat something, honey.”

“Thank all the gods you weren’t,” Ilian said, shaking his head.

Reston sat across from her. “I think the fact that you were living above and beside Vanguard warriors and were a single person kept you safe. It wasn’t worth the risk to take only one person.”

“Yay, for the single life,” she joked weakly.

“Cas, did you have anything else you needed to pack?” Reston asked.

She shook her head. “Everything is in boxes, I pulled this outfit from my bedroom box this morning. I returned my furniture last week, they were rentals.”

“So was ours.” He nodded. “Good, we can leave as soon as Coop is done loading your stuff.”

“What about our leases?” she asked.

“Don’t worry about them. We paid for all three apartments for the next ten years. Vanguard can use them when they’re in town, and Ms. Johnson doesn’t have to worry about vetting new tenants.”

Cas giggled. “She said she likes renting to you strong military boys.”

Reston’s cheeks turned pink. “She’s a nice lady.”

Cas took another bite of pizza. She had never met a warrior that wasn’t a closet softie. Maybe that many muscles released a kindness hormone or something.

Before she knew it, she was in the backseat with Luca heading toward the Monroe Vanguard’s house. When they pulled in, she could only stare.

“Holy shit.”

“You can say that again,” Reston said, then laughed.

All around her, men in a variety of uniforms were milling around out front.

“What the hell, Reston?”

Reston parked then turned to face her. “Hun, when the Queen put out the edict for all fae to return, did you really

think Vanguard squads around the world, deployed or on missions would let our fae brothers return alone?”

She looked out the window. “It’s like Christmas,” she whispered.

“Come on, hun, let’s head in to get verified,” Luca said, taking her hand.

“Do I need to be verified too?”

Coop snarled. “I’d like to see someone try.”

“Down, big guy, I’m just saying, I’m the only woman here...” She smiled, then reached for the door. “What an amazing day!”

“Hey!” All five of her Vanguard friends protested at once.

Luca followed her out of the van.

“Fuck! Another squad just showed up, Cam!” a frazzled-looking warrior said, talking into his earpiece. “It’s like something got fumigated, and Vanguard are coming out of the woodwork.”

“Asshole!” another warrior called out, smiling.

The man turned to her, then broke out into a huge smile. “Hello, darlin’. How can I help you?”

She jerked her thumb toward where Coop now stood directly behind her. “I’m with this particular group of Neanderthals.”

The man looked them over and sighed. “This is going to take forever.”

Cas grinned evilly, then reached for the bullhorn at his waist. He was all smiles as she played with his belt disconnecting the device. But when she brought it to her lips, he frowned in concern.

Climbing on top of the van, she ignored Reston complaining about dents.

“Hello, gentlemen,” she began. Immediately nearly a hundred handsome warriors were turning and smiling at her.

“I believe you all are here to get verified.”

“Yeah!” many yelled back.

“Wouldn’t it go faster if you all stripped your shirts off and killed anyone with a red tattoo?” she asked.

There was silence then the men began pulling off their shirts.

“Cassandra Vi’Illiya, you are going to hell,” Reston chided.

Pulling the bullhorn away from her face, she blew kisses at him. “Pass me my *Diet Coke* and *Doritos* bag.”

Grumbling, he passed her the snacks and she passed him the bullhorn to return to the now gob-smacked warrior trying to organize things. “Better strip, darlin’. You’re falling behind,” she said, laughing.

“Godsdammit all, Cassie,” he scowled, then pulled off his own shirt.

“Like I said, what an amazing day.” She popped a chip into her mouth and watched the chaos created by so many men flexing for no damn good reason.

Even with her helpfulness, it still took close to two hours to get everyone verified. It did go by faster as the men laughed and took turns posing for her. She would clap and whistle, and the vile lime-green color of fear began to fade from the warriors’ auras. She was introduced to the Monroe squad who were equal parts amused and flabbergasted at her assistance.

Eventually, everyone was checked, and en masse, they headed toward the portal.

“How long has it been for you, Cas?” Luca asked.

“Since mother and father faded. Too much reminded me of them,” she said quietly.

“You have a place to go?” Reston asked.

She nodded. "I actually own a huge estate. I was going to offer up rooms to the Vanguard," she said, pointing to the men around them.

Cam grabbed her shoulder. "Are you serious?" he asked, with a hope-filled expression.

"Of course, why?"

Cam exhaled. "Cas, all the fae have returned home. Space is at a premium." He went to the front, then made two fae hoist him up.

"All right, listen up, men. Lady Vi'Illiya has graciously offered up space at the Illiya estate."

Cas felt her heart stutter. "Cam! I haven't had a chance to fix the place up yet. I doubt there's any food either."

One of the men turned to her with a confused expression. "Why would you worry about that? We'll take care of everything. You're doing enough just giving us a place to stay."

"Well said, Gael!" Cam responded. "Cas, honey, let the guys take of things."

Reston stepped forward. "Run everything by my squad. We'll relay things to Cas. We don't want to overwhelm her."

Coop and Link edged closer, practically burying her between them.

Gael laughed, and Cam stared at them flatly. "Let the girl breathe," he ordered.

Coop and Link stepped back an inch.

Cam palmed his face, then brought the bullhorn back up. "Remember, men, these folks have suffered a great deal. Get situated as quickly and quietly as you can, then send a representative to the palace to get orders from our Unit Commander. He has been blowing up my phone, demanding to know what's going on. The only thing I could tell him was that the Vanguard came home. Reston, you're in charge of our special crates. My squad will be shipping your other things through as soon as possible, so you'll live out of your diddy

bags for a bit. For anyone who has been or is from Éire Danu, just brace yourselves. It won't be the city you remember."

With that, the fae lowered him then turned to ignite the portal. Five across and twenty squads deep, the men began marching through.

"Cas, you walk ahead of us in the middle," Reston ordered.

"Sir, yes, sir!"

Link snorted. "Smart ass."

Luca shook his head, smiling at her.

It took longer than she would have thought. When they brought up the rear and walked through the portal, she instantly knew why. It was cold. Horribly cold.

"Cas, here," Coop said, pulling his hoodie over his head and handing it to her. On either side of the now dark portal, the men looked around in shock. The city was dark and cold.

She began to shake.

"It's okay, honey, here, arms up," Luca ordered, taking Coop's hoodie and pulling it over her head.

"It's not just that," she said, when her head popped out. "It's..." she looked around. This was not the glimmering, golden city of her childhood. "Gods, Luca, is this Éire Danu? Are we sure?"

"Holy shit! I told you my app wasn't broken! Brrrr, it's cold," a female voice exclaimed.

Cassie turned to see a small group of people standing off to one side.

"Baby, you could have waited at the palace," the large warrior at her side fretted.

"Yeah, fuck that. I wanted to see them arrive."

Reston stepped forward. "Commander McKenzie, it's an honor to finally meet you in person. I'm Reston O'Brien."

The extremely tall and built man turned to them. "It's a relief to see so many verified Vanguard. We feared we lost you

all when months passed without people getting registered.”

Reston looked around. The other men seemed content with letting him speak since he stepped up first. “Nearly all of us were deployed, sir, or working private contracts. When the Queen ordered her children home, we knew we were needed here.”

“How long did it take to verify you all?” the commander asked.

Reston shot her a rueful glance. “It went quicker when a certain someone suggested the men take off their shirts and KOS anyone with a red tattoo.”

“KOS?” Cas asked.

“Kill on sight,” Luca answered.

The commander’s eyes swung to her, then narrowed. “Just being helpful?”

She smiled. “Sure, let’s go with that.”

The small woman at his side began to laugh. “That’s so freaking awesome. I wish I could have seen that.” Her eyes went to the men. “It’s like a fucking buffet out here.”

“Hey!” the commander said before trying to cover her eyes.

The men around her began straightening their shoulders a bit, grinning at one another.

The man sighed as the smaller woman danced away from him. “Men, this is my mate Meryn McKenzie, the designer of the Vanguard app.”

“Thank you!” Gael yelled.

Around them, the men shouted their thanks.

Meryn looked confused. “For what?”

Reston pulled out his phone. “You put in a section for updates. We knew how the enemy changed and the best ways to fight them.” He turned and pointed to the stack of crates. “We come prepared.” Grinning, he turned back to their

commander. “Sir, most of us hit every military depot we could on the way home. Those crates contain thermal imaging goggles.”

The man practically sagged in relief. “Thank the gods,” he whispered.

“*Denka*, perhaps we can let the men get settled,” the beautiful Asian man suggested, wrapping a shawl around the smaller woman’s shoulders.

“I’m fine, Ryuu, besides it’s not every day you see a paranormal army. This shit kicks ass!” Meryn protested.

“Baby, please?” the commander asked, resting his hand on her very distended tummy.

“So, it’s cold? I grew up with all four seasons Aiden. This is nothing new to me.”

Cas stared. “It looks like you swallowed a basketball.”

Aiden smiled and gave her belly another protective pat before pulling Reston aside with some of the other men for an update.

Cas stayed near the smaller woman.

Meryn’s eyes turned to her. “Yeah, my belly really popped out last week. I’m about six months along.” She sighed. “I thought sleeping was hard before. This sucks.”

Cas saw mostly pink and yellow in her aura. Happiness and hope, which she found odd given the circumstances.

“Are you seeing pictures?” Meryn asked.

“Huh? No. Why? Do you?” Cas asked, shocked. So far, no one had been able to determine when she was looking at auras.

“Yeah.”

“That’s amazing,” she said, moving to stand closer to the woman. “I see auras and colors,” she admitted.

“My friend Serenity does that too, sort of.”

“Is she fae?”

“Half-fae, half-witch. I’m half-fae too. What color am I?”

“Mostly pink and yellow. Happiness and hope.”

Meryn scowled. “Are you sure?”

Cas laughed. “You can be grumpy and happy too, you know. What about me? Do I have a picture?”

Meryn’s eyes became unfocused. “A dinky little white flower,” she said, then shook her head. When she looked up at her, her eyes were back to being focused and sharp.

“Thanks?”

Meryn shrugged. “My pictures are weird sometimes. Like, I thought Ari was a fruit basket, because I thought the belladonna looked like stars and fruit.”

“So, you created a metaphor without knowing the context of the flower?”

Meryn shook her head. “I knew what it was after it was explained to me, but I couldn’t recall it on my own. It’s like the picture pulled information I learned in ninth grade and used it, but present me forgot I knew what it was.”

“Fascinating.”

“So, you have a name?”

Cas laughed. “No.”

Meryn’s eyes widened. “Seriously?”

“Of course, I have a name.” She thrust out her hand. “I’m Cassandra Vi’Illiya.”

The short firecracker took her hand. “I’m Meryn McKenzie. Nice to meetcha!”

Chapter Two

Earlier that morning

“She’s what?” Meryn asked, eyes wide.

Priest exhaled. “Torn apart.”

“Sounds painful,” Meryn quipped.

Priest just stared at her.

She just bopped her head about as she nodded. “Okay, okay, let me think.”

Priest remained quiet but noticed that Aiden kept looking over to where he sat alone with Meryn at a smaller table, away from where everyone was getting updated. The only other one near them was Meryn’s ever-present squire, Ryuu.

“So, first off, I don’t think she will actually get ripped apart.”

Priest was afraid to hope. “You sound pretty sure.”

Meryn took a bite of her cream-covered scone, chewed, then continued. “Most of the dreams have become pretty metaphoric lately. In the dreams where the guys saw their mates dying from something real, like being stabbed or bled to death, those events happened, but because they knew what was going to happen, the foresight saved their mates. But, for someone like Grant and Etain, they said they saw their mates surrounded by and drowning in darkness or death, something non-tangible. It was more like the dreams used images to convey a warning.”

Priest exhaled explosively. “Thank the gods for you, Meryn. My dreams have had me on the brink of a breakdown for days. Hearing what my other unit brothers have gone through has helped immensely.”

He had just relaxed back in his chair when a scone bounced off his forehead. Blinking, he stared at Meryn, who frowned at him.

“Share this shit before it gets that bad. I can’t help if I don’t know.”

Priest chuckled. “I didn’t want to add to your or Aiden’s burdens.”

She shrugged. “Out of all the shit we’re dealing with, this is easy.”

“Are you done monopolizing my mate?” Aiden demanded from the larger table.

Priest stood and held out his elbow for Meryn. She lay her hand on his arm, and he escorted her to her mate, who promptly pulled her into his lap. “Yes, sir. She helped me see something that has been bothering me in a new light. It has helped more than you know.”

“Anything I should know about?” Aiden asked, raising a brow.

“Just normal mate nightmares, babe. I was telling him about the gruesome ones the guys in Noctem Falls had,” Meryn said, meeting his eyes before rolling hers. “Besides, that’s not even the most important thing right now.”

Aiden, Kendrick, and Thane froze before Aiden swallowed hard. “Did you figure something else out?”

“Yeah, you forgot to order my brownies. I’m about to get real unhappy up in this bitch.”

His heart melted just a bit. She deflected the conversation away from his troubles, and if he wasn’t one hundred percent sure his commander wouldn’t maul him, he’d have kissed her for it.

Aiden exhaled explosively. “You can’t do that to me.”

“Why not?” she asked, looking confused.

Around the table, more than one man shook their head, looking pale.

Amelia chuckled, then elbowed her own mate. “I have yet to try those brownies. One would think my mate doesn’t care for me or their unborn child.”

Darian choked on his tea. “I will order some immediately,” he started, then his eyes narrowed. “Wait, can you have chocolate?”

Amelia smiled sweetly. “You better pray to whatever god you fancy that I can.”

Darian looked from Meryn to Amelia and then over to Anne. “Can she have chocolate? Meryn had caffeine yanked a while ago.”

Anne smirked, looking amused. “Amelia is doing very well. I have been keeping an eye on her for Rheia. Considering her mixed heritage, she should be fine.”

“Fine? She’s threatening me with violence over brownies,” Darian protested.

Aiden looked over to the fae prince. “That really isn’t all that surprising. Chocolate is very important to females. And honestly, threats of violence are commonplace.”

Darian snorted. “Yeah, when you’re mated to Meryn.”

Aiden grinned wickedly. “Or, mated to her cousin.”

Darian turned white and stood quickly. He was two steps from the table before he turned and dropped a kiss on his mate’s cheek. “I’m heading there now. Is there anything else you or the baby wants?”

Amelia smiled up at him. “Maybe some of those apple fritters.”

“Anything for you, my love.” He was nearly to the door when Aiden called after him. “Place another order for me. Peter has my account information.”

Darian nodded, then hurried out the door.

Amelia turned to look at Aiden. “That was awful. I am proud of you.”

He winked and kissed the top of Meryn’s head. “I have learned from the best.”

Priest felt his spirits lift at the light-hearted banter. Sitting down, he reached for a scone of his own. When he delicately began to cut one in half, he felt something hit his head. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a scone as it hit the floor. Reaching up, he brushed crumbs out of his hair before he looked over and saw Meryn frowning at him. “You’re doing it wrong. Watch.”

She picked up the entire scone and dipped it in a light pink cream mixture. She dunked it twice before taking a bite. “Ooo try,” she said, with her mouth full.

Looking down, he dumped his serving of jam into the bowl of clotted cream, then mixed it well. Picking up his scone, he dunked it as he had seen Meryn do, then took a bite.

He looked over to Meryn, eyes wide.

“I know, right,” she said, nodding sagely.

He was about to respond when Meryn and Aiden’s phones began dinging.

Aiden picked up his phone and held it out to Meryn. “Why is it doing that?”

Meryn looked down at hers, and her eyes widened. “No fucking way!”

She began to tap furiously, then jumped out of Aiden’s lap. “How? When?”

Aiden stood to hover near his now pacing mate. “Baby?”

She held up a finger. “Hold, please.” She tapped her phone and brought it up to her ear. “Cam, what the fuck, dude?” She looked around, then put it on speaker.

“Whatever you’re getting from the app, it’s true. I got squads arriving from Norfolk, Langley, Gods Meryn. They’re

coming in from everywhere!”

“Are they...okay?”

“We’re verifying now, but so far, so good. Your missing Vanguard were deployed overseas, Menace, but they’re home now.”

Meryn began to jump up and down. “Hell yeah!”

Aiden took her by the shoulders. “Baby, does this mean what I think it means?”

Meryn waved her phone around. “Twenty squads of Vanguard are home. Over one-hundred warriors are getting verified!”

“Cam! Report!” Aiden barked, hope a living thing in his expression.

“Sir, it’s just like what I told Menace. What each squad is telling me is that when their fae brothers were recalled to Éire Danu, they knew something was wrong. They all went AWOL.” Cam laughed. “US Military will be pissed, but give it fifty or sixty years, and they’ll re-enlist.”

“Where are they now?”

“On my fucking front lawn.” Then in a softer voice. “They’re not feral, sir, none of them so far.”

Aiden reached around for his chair and collapsed into it. “Thank the gods.”

“I’ll text you when they’re leaving for Éire Danu.”

“Roger that,” Aiden replied, then Cam disconnected.

Meryn brought her phone up and began scrolling. “There’s so many of them! They were all military? Yum.”

“Meryn!” Aiden barked.

She smiled at him and continued scrolling. “Hey babe, if they’re all coming here, where will they stay?” she asked, her eyes still glued to her phone.

Aiden looked to Ari, who looked to Brennus, who looked to the Queen.

She tapped the crystal next to her chair, and a few moments later, Portia entered. “Yes, Your Majesty?”

The Queen smiled. “Where can we house one-hundred Vanguard warriors?”

Portia stared. “I’m sorry, what?”

“We’re getting reinforcements, but they need a place to stay.”

“Your Majesty, if you could give me a few moments, I will check with Molvan.” She bowed, then shut the door behind her.

Ari exhaled. “We’d love to have them at the warrior villa, but we don’t have the room.”

The dings kept echoing from Meryn’s phone, but each one meant another warrior was safe; everyone around the table was smiling.

A few minutes later, the door swung open, and Molvan practically skidded into the room. “What? What about one-hundred Vanguard?” he asked, eyes wide.

Meryn looked up. “Dude is gonna stroke out,” she observed, then looked back down at her phone.

The Queen stood and quickly went to her aide’s side. “This is a good thing, Molvan. The warriors are safe, and they’re coming here to help.”

“There’s no room! Anywhere!” the man screeched.

Meryn looked back up and watched as the normally composed man unraveled. Sighing, she walked over and laid a hand on the man’s shoulder. “Molvan, they’re military. They’ll probably just pop tents or create base-like things or whatever. Where’s a flat, central area they can take over?”

Molvan blinked rapidly. “Your Highness, you are a genius.”

“I know.”

He brought his hand up to rub his forehead. “Since the dramatic temperature decrease, we’ve had Lady Zoe and Master Kincaid set up warming stones in the fountain area of the shopping district. They could set up there.”

Meryn patted him a few times. “See? Not so bad.”

Molván straightened. “Your Majesty, with your permission, I’d like to head to the main portal to help direct them as they arrive.”

The Queen inclined her head. “Of course.”

The man turned to Portia. “Maybe an update to the people, so they won’t...” he hesitated, as if searching for the right words.

“Freak the fuck out?” Meryn suggested.

“Exactly,” Molván confirmed.

Portia nodded. “Not a bad idea.”

Together they left the room quickly, discussing the logistics of the sudden influx of warriors.

“Baby, I’m proud of you,” Aiden complimented.

Meryn shrugged. “The screeching was kinda annoying.” She went back to her phone, hiding her pleased expression at his pride.

Ari lifted his phone to his ear. “Hey, Rex. No, I’m fine. Listen, can you ask Cord if he’s willing to head over to Dav’s pub and help prepare some food? Why? Oh, we’re getting twenty Vanguard squads reporting to the city in the next hour or so.” Ari grinned at the squawk of surprise that came from his phone. “Can you also let Dav know to shut down the bar tonight? We have a welcome party to host. Yeah, yeah, I know. Thanks, bro.” Ari tapped his phone. “I figured you’d want someplace a little less formal to meet with the men,” he said, looking at Aiden. “I’ll text Aeson so the Éire Danu warriors can provide a proper greeting.”

Aiden sighed in relief. “Are you sure you don’t want to be second in command in Lycaonia?”

“Hey!” Brennus protested.

Aiden smiled. “I’d send you Colton.”

Brennus scowled. “You know that’s not a fair exchange. You’re the only one that can control that wolf.”

Aiden nodded. “True.”

“Any idea on assignments?” Kendrick asked.

Aiden sat back in his chair. “As much as I’d love to keep them here, Molvan is right. There just isn’t enough room. Squads would be stepping over each other.” He strummed his fingers on the table. “If they’re willing, I’d like to send six squads to the other pillar cities, Storm Keep being the exception. We’ll only be sending two squads there. I think even the Witches’ Council would notice six squads of men appearing suddenly.”

Kendrick nodded. “I’d like to speak to whichever squads head to Storm Keep.”

“Of course. You know that city best.”

Priest lifted his own phone to text Gage. His unit brother stayed behind this morning, waiting for Zoe and the boys to finish breakfast. After that, they were going to go with Zoe to another spell center with Kincaid.

The response was immediate. *Fuck yeah! As soon as Zoe is done with this center, we’ll head home and help prep!*

Ari turned to him. “Gage updated?”

Priest grinned. It figured Ari would know he’d update Gage. “As soon as Zoe is done with today’s spell center, they’re heading home to help the guys prep.”

Ari turned to his mate. “What’s our next step?”

Brie pulled out a small notebook from her back pocket. “I’ll be touching base with Ben later since he took over at the

morgue. I handled our first batch of confirmed names from Noctem Falls, but I can't do them all, so I want to go over some 'breaking bad news' basics I learned on the force with the guys." She looked around, then paled. "I'm sorry, we were doing good news just now."

The Queen sat down next to her mate. "In a way, it is good news, Brie. We can finally lay them to rest."

Brennus wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close.

"Yeah, it's not like they're *more* dead because you're talking about them," Meryn added.

Everyone turned to stare.

She looked up from her phone. "What?"

Amelia closed her eyes and slumped back in her chair. "Tact, Meryn. Do you remember talking about tact?"

"Yeah, but then it seemed like a pain in the ass to keep track of conversations and people's expressions and stuff. It's too hard."

Thane winced. "She's technically not wrong."

Meryn looked confused. "They're still people even if they're dead right? I don't think they'd get pissy if we talked about them."

"They're still people," the Queen whispered, then stood. "She's absolutely right. We've been focusing too much on their deaths, not their lives." She rushed over and hugged Meryn tight. "Thank you!" She hurried from the room, calling for Portia.

Brennus was frozen in shock for a moment, then practically sprinted from the room to keep up with his mate.

"Huh?" Meryn asked, looking at her squire.

Ryuu simply patted her on the head gently. "As usual, *denka*, you see things clearly."

“I guess.”

Aiden stood, then stretched. “Meryn, did you want to come with me to meet the Vanguard?”

She leered. “Does a bear shit in the woods?”

Around the table, everyone began to crack up.

Aiden scooped up his mate, then turned to her adopted brothers. “What do you boys want to do?”

Pip exchanged glances with Nigel and Neil, who, in return, shrugged. Pip looked back over to Aiden. “Can we go to Dav’s and help with decorations?”

Aiden nodded. “Good idea. We’ll meet you there later.”

Priest also stood and fell in step with Aiden. When Aiden looked down and raised a brow, Priest simply pointed to Meryn. The pleased expression on Aiden’s face told him he made the right decision. With so many new warriors about, Ryuu and Pierce may need help keeping the Menace in line.

As they were leaving, Meryn popped up to look over Aiden’s shoulder at her cousin. “Amelia, we may need to add a Vanguard section to our database.”

A loud smack had Meryn’s eyes nearly popping out of her head as she rubbed her bottom. “I can’t believe you just did that.”

At the table, everyone was having a hard time breathing as they were laughing so hard.

“Rude!” Meryn yelled as Priest shut the door. Laughter from the Queen’s chambers was heard for a while as they walked down the hallway toward the front gate.

It was nearly two hours later before the main portal lit, and squad after squad began to come through.

Aiden had to direct the men as they arrived because, to the man, each froze in place, reacting to the darkness and the cold.

Priest lingered near Meryn as Aiden walked away with a squad member named Reston to get more updates. When he stepped closer to the fae woman speaking to the Menace, a tantalizing perfume tortured him. It was sweet yet hinted at a warm spice like cinnamon and nutmeg. “Gods, what is that aroma?” he wondered out loud.

Ryuu’s mouth twitched as he placed both hands on his shoulders and steered him to stand directly in front of the two women.

“So, you have a name?”

The fae laughed. “No.”

Meryn’s eyes widened. “Seriously?”

“Of course, I have a name.” The gorgeous blonde thrust out her hand. “I’m Cassandra Vi’Illiya.”

Meryn took her hand. “I’m Meryn McKenzie. Nice to meetcha!”

He took another step forward.

Meryn scowled at him. “Dude, personal bubble.”

Cassandra turned to him, her eyes widening. “Oh dear.”

“Cas, you okay?” asked a Vanguard warrior, as he stepped closer to Cassandra.

Priest growled low in his throat and pulled his mate behind him.

“I don’t fucking think so,” the Vanguard said, squaring up to him.

“Coop, it’s okay! He’s my mate!” Cassandra yelled from behind him.

“What!” Multiple male voices demanded.

Aiden walked over. “Priest, you steady?”

He could only nod. In his chest, his bird felt like it was clawing his organs. “Bird... isn’t... happy,” he grunted out.

“Luca, please help him! He’s all red,” Cassandra begged.

Scowling, another warrior stepped past the one called Coop. He laid a hand on his shoulder, then pulled it back quickly. “Son of a bitch!”

“Luca, you okay?” Coop asked.

Luca sucked on his fingers. “Yeah, I just wasn’t expecting the sharpness of the pain, is all.” With a gentler expression, he put his hand back on his shoulder. “*Conquiescere, frater meus.* Be at peace, my brother. We don’t desire your mate. We have just been looking after her for a long time.”

Inside his body, his bird settled down, and Priest was able to exhale. “Thank you.”

“Thank you, Luca,” Cassandra said, stepping around him to look up. “Hello, my mate.” She smiled so brightly that he felt his heart stutter.

“I swear by all the gods to protect this smile,” he whispered.

“Oh!” She covered her mouth with both hands. “Oh.”

Luca sighed loudly. “Looks like we have a new brother.”

The one named Coop and the equally intimidating one next to him grunted in agreement.

“I turn my back for three freaking seconds... three!” Reston ranted, coming around to stand next to his squad brothers, hands on hips.

“You sure, hun?” Another asked.

Cassandra nodded. “We haven’t been formally introduced...”

“Priest, I’m Priest Vi’Aerdan,” he said, grinning ruefully. “Not the best introduction, is it?”

She nodded, then tilted her head. “You’re a shifter but have a fae Founding Family name?”

“I was adopted.”

Reston rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m not sure who wins.”

Coop was wheezing with laughter.

“What’s this?” Cassandra asked.

Reston pointed to his fae squad brother. “Ilian and I had a running bet whether you’d end up with a fae or a shifter. He’s kinda both.”

Ilian rubbed his chin. “I would say he counts as fae, especially as he carries the name as Head of House.”

Reston pointed. “He is literally a shifter,” he sniffed the air. “A bird of some kind,” he paused, then turned to Cassandra, eyes wide. “Sorry, hun.”

Priest looked down at his mate, who was grimacing. “Sorry?”

She twisted her hands in front of her. “I’m not a huge fan of birds.”

Meryn bopped her head about. “I don’t mind them when they’re outside, and I’m inside, but if truth be told, I don’t like anything that can dive bomb my head, bugs included.” She shuttered. “Especially bugs.”

Cassandra pointed to Meryn excitedly. “Yes, that, that exactly.”

“If it makes you feel better, I’m a terrible shifter,” he admitted.

She ran a hand up and down his arm as if sensing his personal disappointment. “We can talk about it later.”

He shook his head and smiled at her concern.

Just feeling her hand on his arm had him nearly floating. Fingers snapped in his face. “Did you hear what I asked?”

Reston said, smiling indulgently.

“Huh?”

“Yeah, didn’t think so. Did you want to come with us to see what state the Illiya house is in?”

“House?” Why did he feel stuck on stupid? His mate must think him a simpleton.

Cassandra nodded. “I have opened up my house for the Vanguard to stay, mostly because it’s empty. I’m the last of my line.”

“Molvan is gonna love you,” Meryn said.

Cassandra exchanged looks with Reston. “Who’s Molvan?”

“Public Works dude for the Queen. He almost cried when he heard he may have to find a place to stash all these guys,” Meryn pointed to the milling Vanguard.

Aiden turned to the large group. “Men, listen up!”

As one, the men turned and came to attention.

Aiden continued. “Gather your things. We’re heading to House Illiya. After that everyone is to meet at Dav’s bar for a welcome party of sorts. Orders will be given out there.”

One of the fae warriors stepped forward. “I’d like to check on my family, sir.”

Aiden nodded. “I was going to show you on the way to the city.” His expression turned somber as he stepped back and pointed toward the city center. “We have a board up with lists of the missing and confirmed dead.”

The warrior paled and looked past Aiden with dread on his face.

Priest stepped forward. He had to say something as a member of the ranking unit of the city. “You are not alone. Your unit brothers are here and we’ll explain things every step of the way.”

Aiden clapped him on the back. “Good man.”

He felt a small cold hand take his, and he looked over to see his mate watching him closely. Her eyes looked a sort of green color. They were pretty but seemed off somehow. “What’s wrong with your eyes?” he asked.

Seconds later, he felt a punch to the kidney. “Oof!”

He looked behind him, and Meryn was scowling at him. “Dude.”

Turning back to his mate, he was instantly apologetic. “Cassandra...”

She wiped at her eyes, laughing. “One second.”

Priest watched in horror as she seemed to put her finger in her eye.

Moments later, she looked at him, and he stared in amazement. “Gods, you’re...”

“You look like a fairy,” Meryn whispered. “You’re so pretty!” She then frowned. “Why couldn’t I have gotten pink eyes! All I got was a shitty emotion detector.”

Words failed him. Meryn was right. His mate looked ethereal. Her long blonde hair held a slight curl, her skin was creamy, and she had delicate features. “You didn’t look like this a few moments ago.”

She laughed. “Magicked contacts so I could live amongst the humans,” she explained.

Reston sighed. “We suggested them after we had to kill her second stalker.”

Cassandra was smiling and nodding until she heard that. “You killed them?”

Priest held up his fist, and Reston bumped it.

Aiden held out his elbow to Meryn, and she accepted.

Priest did the same for Cassandra. She daintily put her hand on his arm.

“Men, first the city center, then House Illiya.”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

Priest’s eyes were on his mate as she watched the warriors closely as they examined each list.

“Priest, that one!” she exclaimed, pointing to a man standing stock still in front of the boards.

“Luca, that spell!” Priest called as he pulled the witch forward.

Not knowing what else to do, he simply wrapped his arms around the Vanguard warrior as the man’s knees gave out.

“Ellais!” Another warrior pushed his way through the men. “That’s my squad, brother.”

“They’re gone, Amir! My brother and his mate are gone! I should have been here!” Priest sat on the ground holding the warrior as he broke down.

Amir looked around as three other men stepped forward. Priest assumed it was his squad brothers.

Luca laid a hand on Ellais’ head and whispered the spell to calm him.

“We have him,” Amir said, gently pulling Ellais toward him. Priest released him, then looked around. A familiar face in the crowd on the nearby street had him waving. “Ramsey, get over here.”

The lion-shifter jogged forward. “What do we need?”

“Get this squad to the warrior villa. They get our full support.”

“You got it, boss.”

Ramsey helped get Ellais up and steered them away from the city center.

“Cassandra?” he asked, looking back to his mate.

She was rubbing her temples but kept scanning the crowd. “Sadness, but I think that may have been the only one directly affected.”

The men looked around to ensure their brothers were okay and nodded at her.

Reston scrubbed his hands over his face. “We’ll check on them after we get the house settled,” he promised.

Priest had a feeling this morning the men had been twenty different squads, but solidarity had quickly formed amongst them with Reston as their leader.

“Come on men, let’s get you home,” Aiden said, holding a shaking Meryn close.

As they walked to House Illiya, hearts heavy with their brother’s grief, no one said a word.

Chapter Three

The pain, fear, and despair seemed to swirl between the men as they walked down the main street heading toward the palace. House Illiya wasn't a Founding Family like her mate's house, but it was a Noble House, and like the Founding Families, her's was located near the palace. Sighing, she trudged forward at her mate's side. She *really* wasn't looking forward to seeing how much work had to be done. She had left home centuries ago.

"Are you well? Sometimes emotions swamp Meryn," Priest asked, pointing to where the small woman was being carried by her larger mate.

She shook her head. "I am not affected by emotions in the way an empath is. I'm assuming she has empathy?"

He nodded.

She continued her explanation. "I simply see those emotions reflected in the colors of people's auras."

"You were rubbing your temples earlier," he said, still looking concerned.

"It was the transition from beige to blue that had me feeling dizzy. It all happened so fast."

"Beige? Blue?"

She nodded. "I see people's default emotions as beige. It's the color I see when they aren't super happy or sad or angry, just existing. It's like the homeostasis color of emotion when things are well balanced."

"That makes sense I guess." They were both quiet for a minute. "Do you go by Cassandra?"

"I don't really have a preference. When the guys baby me, I hear Cassie, but it's mostly just Cas."

He squeezed her hand. “You don’t seem excited to be returning home.”

She squeezed his hand in return, enjoying the extra support. Her past wasn’t traumatic, just sad. “I was born to my parents when they were very late in life. They were nearly seven-thousand years old when my mother discovered she was pregnant. They had already made arrangements for our house so they could begin to fade.”

He sucked in his breath and held her hand a bit tighter.

“Obviously, their plans got delayed upon my arrival.” She exhaled. “They lasted one-hundred years, long enough for me to come of age. One day, they sat me down and explained what they wanted. They gave me the option of staying with them until the end or leaving to explore the world.” She shrugged. “I couldn’t stay and watch them die, so we had a party. The next day I left and never returned.”

“Gods,” he whispered, bringing her hand to his lips to gently kiss it. “Are you sure about returning? We could stay with my family.”

She held his knuckles against her cheek, enjoying his warmth. “It’s past time for me to return. I’ve been gone nearly two-hundred years. Maybe, having a house full of people will help.”

“Lady Illiya, we can find another place to stay if opening your house will be too painful,” a Vanguard warrior offered. Around them, the men nodded, sympathy in their eyes.

Now she knew she was doing the right thing. These men had hard times in front of them. If she could make it even a bit easier by providing them with a place to stay, she would.

She shook her head at the men’s kindness. “My mother would have agreed with me. She always loved parties and large groups of people. I cannot think of a better way to honor her memory than to re-open House Illiya.” She made a face. “Though I may expect you gentlemen to help with some repairs. I know nothing about handy work.”

“We said it back in Monroe, but you don’t have to worry about a thing. We’ll take care of it,” a warrior to her left offered.

“And whatever they don’t get to, myself and my unit brothers will assist with,” Priest volunteered.

She blinked, then looked down to watch her feet as they walked.

“Weird, huh?” Meryn asked.

She looked up to see the small woman watching her from her mate’s arms.

“Weird?”

“Going from being alone to having tons of people around you. I still don’t know how to ask for help. It gets easier, though, if you just let them do what they want.”

Cas nearly stumbled as what Meryn said really hit home. She was mated, and her self-appointed brothers would be home all the time now. Plus, she didn’t think the other Vanguard would let her struggle, much less Priest’s unit brothers. “Oh.”

Meryn nodded. “Yeah, if I didn’t have Ryuu, I’d have to start shit like Christmas cards in June to keep track of everything.”

Cas laughed. “We had a squire growing up. I missed him as much as my parents when I left. I was so very thankful they had him in the end.”

“I’d probably starve and forget my underwear without Ryuu,” Meryn admitted.

Around them, the men cracked up.

Aiden sighed. “Baby, I am more than capable of feeding you.”

Meryn narrowed her eyes at her mate. “You wouldn’t remind me about my underwear?”

Aiden smiled but remained silent.

Meryn gasped. “Aiden!”

Now, the men were laughing.

Cas watched as a wave of pink cascaded away from them, with Meryn at the epicenter. “You are a delight Meryn.”

Meryn looked over at her from where she was flicking Aiden’s ear repeatedly while the man laughed. “Thanks.”

As they approached her childhood home, she noticed how the other Noble Families had maintained the surrounding houses in such a lovely way. She was cringing, thinking her house would have something akin to an HOA warning plastered to the door.

When they stopped in front of House Illiya, she could only stare. It looked exactly as she remembered it. Nothing looked worn or falling apart. Her mother’s flowers looked to be thriving thanks to small heated stones lining the underbrush.

“How?” she whispered.

The door opened, and a lithe, elegantly dressed man stepped forward. Placing a hand over his heart, he bowed. “Welcome home, My Lady.”

Tears ran unchecked as she body-checked Luca out of the way. “Eion! Gods! You’re here!” She threw herself heedlessly at the man, knowing he would catch her.

“Oh dear,” the man whispered softly. How many times had she heard that phrase growing up?

Behind her, she heard an intake of breath, then Priest asking. “You’re her family’s squire, aren’t you? You helped raise her.”

Wordlessly she nodded, rubbing her cheek on Eion’s robes.

“Oh, that’s beautiful!” Meryn sniffled and wiped at her eyes. Ryuu, smiling himself, passed her a handkerchief.

The man in long dress robes stepped back and wiped at Cas' tears. "I see you have brought guests." He bowed to the group behind her. "Welcome to House Illiya. I am Cassandra's squire, Eion Mormaer."

Laughter bubbled up from around her heart. "Yes, I'm sorry for not letting you know we were coming. I had no idea you were here!"

He smiled slyly. "Where else would I be except waiting for my little miss to return?"

"The house? How? Why? What?" she babbled. She couldn't believe that the man who had been like a second father to her was actually here. When she found herself unable to return, she thought for sure he'd find a new family to serve.

He wrapped a fatherly arm around her shoulders. "Gentlemen, if you would follow me?" He steered her into the house. "While we may not have an individual room for everyone, we should have enough, if most of you do not mind sharing."

Reston stepped forward. "Just let me know which rooms are off limits, and I'll get the men sorted while you take care of Cassie."

The squire inclined his head regally. "You have my thanks." He pointed to the stairs. "Family personal quarters are in the west wing. You may assign any room in the east wing as you see fit."

Reston gave a piercing whistle. "All right, men, let's get our stuff dropped off, then get orders from our commander."

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"You okay, hun?" Luca asked.

She nodded, then wiped her nose on her sleeve. Next to her, Eion sighed. "He's like my dad."

"Good for you, kiddo. We'll catch up with you later, right?" he asked.

Aiden turned to her. "I'll head up there and make sure shenanigans are kept to a minimum. You catch up with your squire. This evening is the party at Dav's pub. Hope to see you there."

Meryn gave her a thumbs up. "I like you. You should come."

She turned to Priest. "Will you be there?"

He gently pulled her away from Eion and into his own arms. "I don't know, my mate, will we?"

A displeased huff from Eion had her smiling. "This should be fun."

"Why do we have to go? It's getting good," Meryn protested.

Ryuu gave a half bow to Eion, then followed his charge as she was carried up the stairs.

"Come, My Lady, I'll start a pot of your favorite tea," Eion said, holding out his arm, pointing toward the sitting room.

"White jasmine?" she asked.

"Of course."

Once the door to the sitting room closed behind them, Eion crossed his arms over his chest. "I suppose introductions are in order."

Cas felt her chest lighten. "Eion, this is Priest Vi'Aerdan. I just found him this afternoon upon returning home. He is my mate." She looked at Priest, drinking in his dark looks, and sighed. "Isn't he wonderful?"

Eion's mouth twitched. "I suppose you could do worse than a Founding Family head and unit warrior."

When she caught Priest's eye, he winked at her and puffed his chest out a bit, causing her to laugh.

Eion finally relaxed when he saw her laughing. "Good. Now, let us have some tea." He moved to the sideboard and

started a kettle to boil.

Cas pulled Priest over to a long couch and sat down. He kissed her forehead before he sat next to her. Taking a deep breath, she turned to the man who had been like a second father to her. “What happened... in the end? Have you been here the whole time?”

Eion kept his back to them as he carefully prepared the tea tray. “They were glad you left. It was... difficult in the final days. Your father went first, and the pain that caused your mother was immeasurable. To her, she wasn’t fading fast enough. She took her own life a week after your father passed.”

Cas swallowed hard.

Eion, in slow movements, organized the tray as he spoke. “The night before, she shared her one regret. That she wouldn’t be there for you throughout your life. She turned over the house to me and asked me to keep it as it was for your return.” The kettle whistled, and he poured it carefully into two cups. “I remember her smiling. ‘Eion, if she is anything like me, she will not return for some time. I have no right to ask this of you, but please stay and keep this house a home.’ As if I would say no?” Eion shook his head, then picked up the tray to bring it over to them.

Cas wiped at her tears. “You could have let me know! I would have come back.”

Eion raised a brow. “But, would you have been ready to come back? I see so much strength in you that was not there the day you left. You were young and scared, unsure of everything. When I opened the door and saw the woman you have become, I knew with utmost certainty that you had done the right thing. If you had stayed, you would have been a living visitor to a mausoleum. Now, armed with the wealth of life experiences you have earned, you can return home and not have the memories drown you. You can enjoy them.” He handed her a teacup.

“You were all by yourself.”

He shrugged. “I caught up on my reading.”

“The house looks amazing. We were expecting to have to do carpentry when we got here,” Priest complimented.

A sparkle appeared in Eion’s eyes. “I discovered a passion for woodworking.” He turned to her. “You may find new built-ins throughout the home,” he hesitated. “I can change anything you do not approve of.”

“Eion, if you had a hand in it, I know that not only is it of near-perfect quality, it will tasteful and suit the room perfectly.” She laughed. “I’ve been living out of a cardboard box for the past week, so even having furniture again will be lovely.”

Both Eion and Priest turned to her and, in unison, asked. “Why were you living out of a box?”

She looked from her squire to her mate. “We need to hurry up and have a daughter so I’m not outnumbered all the time.”

Priest dropped his teacup.

Eion smiled widely. “Please do! Why not a few of each?”

“Huh?” Priest asked, looking dazed.

Had she broken her mate?

“Priest, did you want children?”

He looked down at the mess he created, then looked over to Eion, then back to her. “Huh?”

Eion clucked his tongue. “You are as naughty as ever. Do not muddle the poor boy so Cassie.” He picked up the cup and placed it on one side of the tray. He then picked up a tea towel to begin cleaning up the floor. “Priest is a warrior, after all. They tend to bash each other over the head on a regular basis. He may be down to two functioning brain cells, and you just scrambled both of them.”

Priest startled, coming back to himself. “Hey, I resent that. I have three functioning brain cells, thank you very much,” he sniffed dramatically, sticking his nose in the air.

Cas couldn’t help it as she broke out into giggles. “Stop it!” she ordered.

Priest smiled. “No, I like hearing you laugh too much.”

Eion put the soggy towel on the tray and sat back, watching them. “He is good for you.”

“If you wanna fuck me later, you better feed me soon!” Meryn yelled, somewhere beyond the sitting room door. Masculine laughter erupted moments later.

Cas and Priest looked at each other, then began laughing themselves. “That’s Meryn. She has this amazing talent, Eion. She inadvertently makes people happy.”

Eion rubbed the side of his nose. “She’s also second in line to the throne after Prince Darian.”

Cas sputtered into her tea. “Are you sure?”

Eion nodded. “Very. And you are correct. She seems to have this innate talent for lifting people up. I hear she is also quite brilliant.”

Priest turned to her. “I’ve seen that lil terror in action. One moment everyone in the room is scared and frowning and basically terrified of the future. The next, she’s said something so obvious your mind goes blank, and you wonder why you never had that very simple thought before. Then she says something outrageous, and you forget you were ever upset.”

Eion poured a fresh cup of tea and handed it to Priest. “I heard her cousin on her mother’s side is the one mated to Prince Darian. And it is from that branch of the family where she gets her empathy. Empaths tend to naturally change the direction of conversation or train of thought as a self-preservation technique.”

“I want nachos!” Meryn bellowed, before they heard the front door open and close.

Eion smiled softly. “The fact that she does not have an inborn sense to hide what she is doing tells me she has not been around people very long.”

Cas thought it over a moment. “She said something like that earlier, how it was strange going from being alone to having a family.” She looked over to Priest. “I want to do something nice for her.”

Priest looked excited. “I owe her big time for finding me and my unit brothers when we were lost. Count me in.”

Cas lowered her teacup. “What do you mean lost? How can you possibly get lost in this day and age?”

Priest winced. “We were rescuing kidnapped fae when a bomb in the warehouse went off. Prince Oron barely had enough time to open a portal for us to escape. Unfortunately, the portal opened randomly in the depths of Noctem Falls. It was hours before the search party found us, and they were only able to find us because Meryn used the cameras to determine what level we were on and initiated a plan to use a shifter to search for us. Gage’s back looked like hamburger, my lower spine and ribs were fractured, and Oron’s legs were broken. Meryn was the one who brought us home.” He grinned. “My mother is still adding things to the gift basket she’s been planning to send.”

Eion stood. “Though not a Founding Family, House Illiya is a Noble House,” he looked at her. “We should not be outdone by House Aerdan.”

She jumped up and hugged the squire tightly. “Do whatever you think is best.”

He nodded, then hesitated once more. “You are the proper mistress of this home, I...”

She reached up and squeezed his nose twice. “Honk, honk.”

His eyes widened.

She put her hands on her hips, not liking the light blue color of uncertainty in his aura. “I may be Head of House, but you are absolutely master of the house, Eion. This is your home more than it is mine. I am not above getting down on the floor and begging you to stay.”

Priest stood and clapped Eion on the back. “She said you were like a father. That makes you family.” He batted his eyes at the flummoxed squire. “Please don’t make us cook and clean for ourselves. I suck at it, and she lives out of cardboard boxes.”

Cas straightened. “Hey!”

Eion smiled softly. “How could I dream of leaving two young ones like you unsupervised?” He leaned down and kissed her cheek. “It is wonderful to finally have you home, even if you did bring in a stray.”

“Hey!” Priest echoed his own protest.

Eion winked at her. “Now, I will prepare my Fruit Jubilee for you to take to Dav’s. That many men, any extra food will be a godsend.” He pointed to the courtyard. “There is one more for you to greet.”

Cas took Priest’s hand and pulled him toward the door. “Come on!”

Laughing, he followed her to where her House’s Tree grew. “Coll!” she called out.

In the center of the garden, a low-branched hazel tree grew. Like the fountain area of the city and her mother’s flowerbed, small amber stones around the base of the tree gave off waves of steady heat. “Coll, I’m home!”

From the center of the tree, a shape began to materialize. A small young man stepped forward. He had short, brown, cropped hair, except for a single long braid that was flung over one shoulder. “Cassie!” the young man ran to her, and they swung each other around laughing. “I thought you’d never come home. Were humans really that interesting? They seem

so small to me,” he said, scrunching up his freckled nose. “Are you staying?”

Cas nodded. “I am.” She led the Spirit Guardian over to her mate. “Coll, this is Priest, my mate.”

Coll stared. “You’re one of Liaylia’s, but you’re a bird...” The spirit shrugged. “I like birds.” He turned back to Cas. “Come see your branch! It shows you have mated. I was so happy when I felt new growth.” The small spirit tugged on her hand, and she followed eagerly.

Growing up, Coll seemed more like a younger brother than a Spirit Guardian, but her mother told her he chose to appear that way. When she asked Coll about it, he shrugged and asked if she wanted him to be more grown up. She told him she wanted him to be happy, so whatever he preferred was what she wanted. From that day forth, they played together in the garden. When she got older, she would bring him tea and tell him of her studies.

Saying goodbye to him was a physical pain she never quite recovered from, just learned to deal with.

She impetuously pulled him to her for another hug. “Gods, I missed you so much! I grew hazel trees wherever I went, but it wasn’t the same.”

Coll shook his head. “It helped! It did. I could feel you through the trees, so you never felt far away.”

Peering into the center of the tree, she saw her parent’s grey, petrified branches. Below them was hers and now a small one beside it, signifying she had a mate.

Priest walked up behind her and placed a hand on the small of her back. “It is a blessing to have a place amongst these branches.”

Coll turned to him and gave him a sly smile. “You should bleed on my trunk, then I can steal you away from Liaylia.”

Cas felt her mouth drop. “Coll!”

Priest dropped to his knees to look the Guardian in the eyes. “You honor me beyond measure. I would accept, but I cannot hurt the Guardian that took me in when no one else would.”

Coll nodded slowly as his smile warmed. “I knew you were a good bird. You better take good care of my Cassie.” He pointed to the ground, and a moment later, a small sapling popped up through the earth. Coll bent down and plucked it from the ground, offering it to Priest. “Take this to Liaylia. If she is open to it, we can intertwine our branches. That way, the both of us can watch after the pair of you.”

With trembling hands, Priest accepted the tiny sapling and tucked it under his shirt close to his heart. Coll nodded approvingly. “He is the best of both worlds. He knows how to be a fae, but I bet he reproduces like a shifter.”

“Coll!” Cas screeched at her childhood friend again.

Coll rubbed his ear. “What?” He pointed to his tree. “We need more branches, Cassie. Lots and lots of babies, please. I have been feeling puny for centuries.”

Priest stood at attention. “I swear to do my duty, sir!”

Coll began to giggle. “Oh, I do like him. You did very well, Cassie.”

Cas rubbed her hands over her face. “I cannot win with three of you against me,” she said, thinking back to how eager Eion had been over the prospect of babies in the house.

Coll pointed to the house. “Go get to know each other, then make babies!”

Priest clicked his heels together and brought his hand up to his forehead in salute. “Sir, yes, sir!”

Shaking her head, she dropped a kiss on Coll’s cheek, then walked past her mate to go back inside.

“I won’t let you down!” Priest swore dramatically.

“It’s all up to you!” Coll responded, playing into the drama.

She headed through the sitting room to the kitchen, leaving her mate and spirit guardian acting silly in the garden.

Eion saw her walk in and raised an eyebrow.

“I have been ordered to make lots of babies.”

Eion just shook his head. “Coll, Liaylia, and Aldrya have been moping about for decades.”

Cas had to think about it a moment, then it dawned on her, those were the names of the Spirit Guardians whose houses had dwindled. Coll from House Illiya, Liaylia from House Aerdan, and Aldrya from House Eirson.

“Speaking of Liaylia, can we head to House Aerdan?” Priest asked, stepping into the kitchen. He patted his chest. “I want to get this sapling to her as soon as possible.”

“Sapling?” Eion asked, eyes wide.

“Coll wants to intertwine branches with her so they can watch after both Houses,” she explained.

Eion put the bowl of strawberries on the counter. “That may actually be an amazing suggestion. With so many guardians in shock, supporting each other will benefit everyone.”

“Can we go?” Priest asked, looking extremely nervous.

Cas laughed and took his hand. She’d probably be anxious, too, if she had a guardian sapling under her shirt. “I’d also like to meet your parents, especially since I sprung my family on you without warning.”

Priest’s expression transformed from nervous to boyish. “My mother is going to love you, and so will father. I don’t think they expected me to find a mate any time soon.”

“No squire to interrogate me?”

Priest laughed. “Of anyone in that house, Merrick will spoil you the most.”

Eion chuckled and nodded.

“Then what are we waiting for?”

Chapter Four

Priest kept a hand over the sapling the entire walk over to his parent's home. Though he carried the name of Head of House, it was simply his parent's way of showing support. His father still ran the home. He grinned, wondering if Liaylia had told his parents yet.

“Excited?” Cassie asked, pulling him out of his thoughts.

He looked at her and smiled. “They worry about me a lot. I think me finding my mate will give them a sense of peace.”

“When did they adopt you? I vaguely remember meeting them as a child, but there hadn't been any talk of them being parents.”

Priest thought about how he would answer. “You don't mind being mated to someone younger? It's a hip thing right now for women to marry younger men.”

She shrugged. “Fae are immortal Priest. Time is different for us.”

“I guess now is as good as a time as any to tell you my sad little tale.”

“Sad?”

He winked. “Once upon a time, in the giant nests of the eagles of Éire Danu, two fae visited on behalf of the Queen to see how the eagles were doing. On that particular day, a nest was hatching.”

“Hatching? What are you talking about?” her eyes showed confusion, and he realized he might have to back up his story a bit.

“Harpy eagles are one of the only shifters that bear animal young in the form of eggs.”

“Get the fuck outta here!”

He shook his head, chuckling. “The eggs are incubated, and once hatched, eaglets shift to their newborn human form within a week. After that, they are like any other shifter, finding their animal again around puberty.”

“You were an egg?”

He sighed. “I was an unbroken egg. I didn’t have the strength to crack my shell.”

“Why do I get the feeling that is bad?”

“Because it is. Eaglets that cannot hatch themselves are left in the nest.”

“But... but that means they die.”

“Yes,” he confirmed softly.

“That’s barbaric!”

“That is exactly what my mother said.” Though he had heard the story many times, the thought of his tiny mother snarling at shifters always made him smile. “She took my egg and helped me be born by breaking the shell.”

“Then what happened?” Cassie asked, her eyes blazing.

“The other eagle shifters walked away, and my mother and father had to figure out how to hand-raise an eaglet for a week before I shifted to human form.”

“They adopted you on the spot?”

He nodded. “It was never a question if they should do it. They simply did. Decisive doesn’t even begin to describe my mother. She’s kinda a force of nature,” he confessed.

Cassie began pulling on his hand. “Hurry, I need to meet your mother.”

He let himself get pulled along. When they got to the door, he opened it wide. “Mother, Father, I’m home.”

“We’re in the kitchen, darling,” his mother called out.

He led Cas to the kitchen and had to laugh at the sight before him. Both his parents were covered in flour, and

Merrick looked at his wit's end.

His normally elegantly put-together mother looked like she lost a fight with a bag of flour.

“What on earth?”

“We heard from House Orthames that nearly twenty Vanguard squads have come to Éire Danu, we, of course, had to help, so we decided to make some food to send to Dav's,” his mother explained, then blew her bangs out of her eyes.

His father's mouth twitched furiously. “Yes, son, *we* decided it would be best to take over Merrick's kitchen and attempt to cook things *we* never had before.”

Priest nodded. His whirlwind mother had struck again. He looked over to Merrick and winked. “Niamh and Ciaran Ri'Aerdan, I have someone I want you to meet.”

His mother's light teal eyes drifted over to Cassie, then went wide as if just now noticing she was in the room. “Cassandra Vi'Illiya, my goodness, I look a fright.” She scowled in his direction. “Why didn't you warn me we'd be having company.” She tried to brush off some of the flour from her robes.

Priest wrapped his free arm around Cas' shoulders. “She might as well see you for how chaotic you truly are. She's family now. Mother, Father, Cassandra is my mate.”

Priest watched for some kind of reaction. Instead, all three of them simply stared. “Mother? Father?”

When his mother turned to bury her face in his father's chest sobbing, he froze. This was not the reaction he had been hoping for. Squealing, yes. Screeching and jumping up and down, yes. Weeping pitifully, hell no.

“Am I not wanted here?” Cassie asked softly.

That single question had his mother rushing toward them. She pulled Cas into a fierce hug. “Not want you? You are a thousand times welcome, oh Ciaran!” his mother wailed to his father, still wrapped around his mate.

Cas looked at him and shook her head at his concern. “She’s not blue Priest. She is the most beautiful shade of rose I have ever seen, bursting at the seams with happiness.”

Priest exhaled, then simply wrapped his arms around both his mate and his mother. “Momma, whatever it is, it’s okay. Do I need to kill something?”

“I know it is okay!” She sniffed. “And no, nothing to kill today, dearest.”

He looked over to his father and saw him dashing his own tears away. “Father?”

His father gave him a rueful smile. “It’s validation, son. All the centuries of the eagles second-guessing your mother’s actions...” his voice trailed off as he shook his head.

“I need more than that, Father,” he countered. Because he had no idea why his announcing his mating would have that type of reaction.

His father straightened. “You have a mate, son. You were meant to be here.”

The realization hit him like a ton of bricks. “I wouldn’t have a mate if I had been meant to die,” he whispered.

His mother took one look at him, and her own tears were instantly forgotten. “Priest, you’re pale, sit, my sweet boy.” She pushed him toward the small table and made him sit. “Of course, you weren’t meant to die,” she huffed. “Now those insufferable assholes will know it too,” she said vehemently.

Priest stared at his mother in shock. In all his years, he had never heard her speak in that tone.

His father chuckled. “Do not scare the children, my love.”

Her mother picked up one of Merrick’s towels and wiped her face with it. “We must have a huge celebration!”

Merrick palmed his face in his hand at her declaration.

His father sighed. “With what the city is facing, maybe now isn’t the best time.”

“Pish posh! My son has found his mate! I will go to the palace and ring the city bell myself if I have to.”

Priest shook his head repeatedly. “Please don’t.”

Cas came up behind him and began rubbing his shoulders. “Maybe people need a reminder that there are good things happening too.”

“Exactly!” His mother turned to Cas. “I bet Eion was over the moon at your return. I run over there at least once a week to have tea. Such a lovely squire.”

He pulled Cas into his lap, and she laughed before turning to his mother to answer. “He is. I cannot thank you enough for keeping him company. The stubborn man allowed me time to grow up, but it still smarts knowing he was by himself.” She nodded her head in the direction of House Illiya. “Right now, he’s making his Fruit Jubilee to send to Dav’s.”

His mother pointed her finger at Merrick. “I told you we should help. Those poor boys probably haven’t had a decent meal in decades,” she lamented.

Merrick shook his finger right back. “I didn’t disagree with you. I said *I* would make something.”

His mother looked around the kitchen. “I did make a bit of a mess.”

Merrick’s expression softened. “Your wonderfully big heart tends to outpace everything else,” he said, diplomatically.

“Yes, like logic and common sense,” his father added.

She threw her hands in the air. “Fine! I want to get to know my new daughter now anyway.”

His father sighed in relief and picked up a cloth to help restore the kitchen to order.

Priest thought he was safe until his mother rounded on them and looked from him to Cas and back. “So, when are the two of you planning on having children?”

Cas just burst out laughing as he stared. “Mother! We just met this morning!”

“And? That does not change the fact I need grandchildren.”

Cas wiped at her eyes. “You’re like the third person telling me to get pregnant today.”

His mother blinked. “Who were the other two?”

“Eion of course and my Spirit Guardian, Coll.”

Priest felt his heart leap into his throat. “Shit!”

“Meredith Vi’Aerdan, language!” she admonished, despite having just called the entire population of Éire Danu’s eagles assholes.

His mate turned to him. “Meredith?”

He stood, easily keeping her in his arms. When her pupils dilated at his show of strength, he nearly tripped. “My real name,” he said, staring down into the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen. Meryn had been right when she likened his mate to a fairy. He tightened his arms, afraid she’d disappear when he wasn’t looking.

“What had you cussing?” his mother asked, a smug expression on her face. Her eyes kept going from him to Cas and back.

“Shit!” he repeated, shaking his head, remembering again that he had a sapling under his shirt.

“Meredith!” his mother chided.

“The sapling?” his mate guessed, as he set her on her feet.

“Mother, I need to see Liaylia.”

His mother simply blinked. “Why darling?”

“My Spirit Guardian Coll has gifted him a sapling to intertwine with Liaylia’s branches if she’s willing,” Cas explained.

“Son, what are doing still standing there!?” His mother pushed him toward the back door where their garden was located.

He kept his hand in Cas’, and they both hurried outside. Like House Illiya’s tree, the Aerdan hawthorn was encircled by warming stones. “Liaylia, I’m home. I have someone I want you to meet,” he called in quiet tones. Unlike the rambunctious Coll, the spirit of his family’s tree was on the timid side.

“Priest?” a soft voice called out. From the center of the tree a fragile looking woman floated toward them. “You have found a mate,” she said smiling.

“I have Lia, this is Cassandra Vi’Illiya.” He squeezed Cas’ hand. “We just met this morning, but I cannot imagine a future without her.”

Liaylia’s mouth formed an ‘o’. “Coll must be so happy! We have finally grown our families,” she said, wiping at her eyes. Behind her the tree seemed to pulse, swaying in the breeze.

“He sent this,” he said, unsure how Coll’s suggestion would be received. He gently pulled the sapling from where it had been resting against his heart. “Coll said you, and he could watch over both houses.”

Liaylia hurried forward and gently took the sapling from him, cradling it like a newborn. “I wouldn’t be alone,” she said, smiling to herself. She turned and walked over to her tree. Kneeling down, the ground opened up magically, and she placed the delicate sapling’s roots in the ground. “Priest, can you move that stone closer to him?”

Priest looked around and picked up the warming stone closest to them. “Here?” he asked, setting it down appropriately six inches from the sapling.

She nodded. “Very good.”

Before their eyes the sapling grew and intertwined with the hawthorn’s lower branches.

Cas watched the entire process in fascination. “Priest, I see blue bleeding into the earth itself. Pink is radiating from the sapling.”

Liaylia’s expression relaxed as she took a seat on the earth next to the growing tree. She looked up at Cas. “You’re one of the fae who see emotion as color?” she asked.

Cas nodded. “It’s not an exact science, but I try to use it to help others.”

Lia nodded. “A wonderful gift to pass on to the next generation. The two of you are planning on having children right away are you not?”

Cas threw her arms in the air. “I guess so.”

Priest went to his mate. “Liaylia, I know that everyone wants to grow both houses, but my mate will only have a child when she is ready,” he said firmly.

Lia smiled. “Such a good boy.” She turned to run a hand over the sapling. “I cannot wait to show Abraxas and Aldrya. It has been hard supporting the lesser houses when we have been weakened ourselves. This helps so much.”

Priest hadn’t seen Lia this happy since his tenth birthday when he officially became Priest Vi’Aerdan. He had stood next to his father, shaking inside that she wouldn’t want an eagle. But she had simply placed her hand on his cheek and welcomed him warmly. She had never seen him as anything but a son of Aerdan.

“We’re going to head inside to save Merrick. Mother might want to start cooking again,” Priest said, rolling his eyes dramatically, hoping to make the spirit smile.

Lia looked up, her eyes filled with laughter. “Gods above forbid.” She rose gracefully, brushing off her skirt. She pointed to a thick branch behind her. “The day your father mated your mother I felt a jolt of strength unlike anything I had ever known. That woman’s core is made of steel; her strength is only out-shown by her kindness.” She eyed Cas. “You bring

strength as well, but also a flexibility. I shall enjoy every second of getting to know you better. May I hug you?"

Cas brightened. "Of course. I hug Coll all the time."

Priest had a sneaking suspicion that Coll was unlike any other spirit. Most were more reserved, like Liaylia.

Lia hugged Cas then took both of her wrists. "Just as Coll gave his blessing, so shall I." When she stepped back two wooden bracelets now encircled Cas' wrists. "I hope you do not mind, but I wanted a way to watch over you too."

Cas stared at her wrists. "Daughter of Aerdan, and..." she gasped. "Why does this look like a fertility charm?"

Lia blushed. "I thought maybe you'd like the extra help."

Cas sputtered, looked at him, then began laughing. "We never stood a chance did we?"

"Lia!" he chastised gently. In truth if he could get Cas pregnant tonight he would, but this was all about respecting Cas' choices.

The small spirit pouted. "We have to split your children between House Illiya and House Aerdan, so you need to have a lot." She turned to Cas. "It won't make you become with child unless you're ready, but it will help you once you decide to try for one." She then turned to Priest. "And it will help them grow healthy."

Cas put a comforting hand on the sulking spirit. "I thank you for the blessing. I'm not sure when we will try for children, but it reassures me they will be healthy.

Lia looked relieved at Cas' acceptance. "I am so very happy you both have found one another."

Priest took a chance and kissed Lia's forehead. Coll had seemed happy to be treated informally. "We'll visit often," he promised.

Lia covered her forehead with both hands, looking delighted.

Cas took his hand. “Come on, we better see what your mother is up to.”

He waved to Lia and followed Cas back inside.

“Why did she look so surprised?” Cas asked.

“I’ve never done that before, but Coll seemed happier when you treated him like a brother, so...”

“They’re guardians, but I think maybe they’ve been lonely too,” she said, looking back toward the garden.

When they walked into the kitchen Merrick had two empty plates waiting for them on the table. Next to the empty plates platter after platter of fruits, cheeses, breads and meats were near to overflowing. Merrick pointed to the chairs. “Eat something while I get these loaves into the oven.”

Priest licked his lips. “Is that your asiago cheese bread?”

Merrick nodded. “Aye it is. I made extra so don’t try and hide the ones I’ll be sending with you, when you head to Dav’s.”

His mother saw Cas’ wrists and hummed happily. “Liaylia is a genius.”

Priest rolled his eyes at Cas who had to hide her smile. He picked up his plate and began to stack all his favorites high.

“Leave some fruit for Cassie,” Merrick ordered.

Priest nodded and simply moved the fruit platter between their two plates.

Merrick walked up to the table and placed a small warm loaf on each of their plates. “I’m Merrick Baker. Welcome to the family, Cassie.” He paused. “Do you prefer to be called Cassandra?”

She immediately picked up the loaf to start cutting. “Cas, Cassie, Cassandra, I don’t mind any of them really. I’ll answer to them all.”

She slathered a slice with fresh butter and took a bite. Moments later, her low moans had Priest glad his lower half was obscured by the table.

“Gods above! I could live off this bread,” Cas swayed back and forth in her chair happily.

Merrick blushed and smiled shyly. “It’s not at all hard to make. Just let me know whenever you want more.”

“Every meal for forever,” Cas answered immediately.

Merrick belly laughed. “Eion had it easy raising Cassie. She’s so appreciative.” He eyed Priest with a smile. “That one would simply try to cram as much as he could into his mouth.”

Priest had to chew quickly to respond. “It was how I showed you how much I liked your food.”

Merrick raised a brow. “I had to learn the Heimlich because of you.”

Priest picked up his bread. “Dying while eating your food would have been a good way to go.”

His mother looked at Cas. “When...I mean. Where will the two of you be living?” she asked, hesitantly.

Cas opened her eyes then looked at him. Together they both shrugged. “I can’t leave Eion alone, not after all these years, but...” she looked around. “It’s so cozy here.”

Priest thought about it a moment. “Ari and Brie split their time between the warrior villa and the Lionhart estate. I’m sure we could work out something similar.”

Cas stared. “We’re moving to the warrior villa?”

Priest stared, then inhaled as he gasped. A chunk of bread flew down his windpipe. He began hammering his own chest.

Merrick came up behind him and wrapped his huge arms around his torso and lifted in a sudden movement. Seconds later a lump of half eaten dough flew across the table.

Merrick pointed at him. “See what I mean?”

Priest couldn't retaliate he was trying too hard to breathe. When he thought he could form words, he looked at his concerned mate. "I forgot about the warrior villa. They'll want us to live there too."

His mother clucked her tongue. "We should send something over to Aeson, I bet he's been run ragged these past few weeks."

Cas popped a berry in her mouth and sighed blissfully. "I lived next to a Vanguard squad for the past twenty years or so. As long as no one expects me to clean up after the men, I don't mind staying there."

Priest shook his head. "We all rotate chores, so no one person does a lot of anything. In fact I can't see them letting you or Zoe clean anything."

"Which one is Zoe?"

"She's Gage's mate, a fire witch from Storm Keep. They adopted two little boys from Japan to help her not set stuff on fire. They're Ame and Yuki. Two of the cutest kids I've ever seen."

His mother sighed. "Tierla has been in heaven spoiling her grandsons."

He turned to his mother. "I didn't think you were that close to Gage's mother."

She tilted her head. "She is your best friend's mother, of course I had to meet her. What a wonderful woman."

Priest shouldn't have been surprised that his mother knew he had the closest relationship with Gage.

"When are you kids heading over to Dav's?"

Priest looked at his mom, then narrowed his eyes. "How did you know about the Vanguard anyway or that we were heading to Dav's?"

"I worry about your sense of observation Meredith," his mother said, causing Cas to giggle.

“What?”

She pointed to a small crystal mounted to a pedestal in the corner of the kitchen. “Usually Ari updates Leo, who sends out news to the warrior family’s squires. He sent out word that Dav might need help feeding over one-hundred warriors, so the squires got busy cooking.” She snapped her fingers. “Merrick we’ll need to add Eion to the system.”

Merrick nodded.

Priest stared at the crystal. “That’s kinda ingenious.”

“House Orthames came up with the idea, but House Aindin created the communication crystals. House Eirlindol calibrates them for us,” she explained.

Priest stood and pulled the large loaf apart and began cramming cheese and meat in it. “We better head to the warrior villa, they will need help. If I know the guys, it will be Snack Party, deluxe version.”

Cas looked longingly at the fruit.

Merrick ruffled her hair. “I’ll pack it for you. Hold on.”

She hugged him impulsively. “I haven’t had fae fruit in centuries.”

His father went to the refrigerator. “Merrick, what else can we give the poor girl.”

“Oh, I know! Wine!” His mother ran from the room.

Merrick and his father were still packing a large basket of fruit when his mother ran back in holding an armful of bottles. “The one with the bow is for Cassie, but the others are for the boys.”

His father quickly relieved her of the bottles and placed them in a separate basket.

Merrick went to hand Cas the food basket, then turned and handed it to him. Priest grunted under the weight. Laughing, his father then handed him the wine basket. He looked down at his sandwich mournfully.

Cas picked it up. At first he thought she would pack it for him, but she proved him wrong when she took a huge bite.

“Hey!”

Merrick and his father laughed.

“So good.” Cas danced around the kitchen happily.

He pouted. “My sandwich.”

“You’ll be getting plenty of food tonight Priest, let her eat if she’s hungry,” his mother said, watching his mate bop around.

Priest knew sacrificing his sandwich for his mate’s happiness was worth it. “She’ll need her strength for later,” he said, imaging all the names and introductions.

Both Cas and his mother stared at him, Cas blushing.

He had a feeling he was in trouble for something. “What?”

Merrick cleared his throat. “Strength for what, son?”

“Meeting everyone. I mean, just my unit brothers and their mates are nearly forty people.” He looked at his father, who was openly laughing.

“What?”

Cas finished his sandwich quickly. “Nothing, dear.”

Merrick leaned in and whispered. “You made it sound like she’d need strength for your mating later.”

Priest whipped around to face Cas who was blushing, but smiling at him. He shook his head. “No, for that she’ll need one of those crazy espressos Izzy makes, she won’t be getting any sleep.”

“Meredith!” his mother shouted, beet red.

His father stood and clapped him on the back proudly. “We’ll send the bread over to Dav’s. You won’t have to make a special trip back here.”

He walked over to his mother and kissed her cheek. She was still huffing at him.

When he walked out, Cas waved at everyone and grabbed the front door for him. “I can’t believe you said that,” she said, choking on laughter.

“That’s what you get for eating my sandwich. Besides, everyone keeps telling us to have kids. They shouldn’t be so shocked when I actually suggest we practice making them.”

She looped her arm through his. “We’re going to be very happy, aren’t we?”

He looked down at her. “Every day, for the rest of our lives,” he promised.

Chapter Five

Cas walked alongside Priest as they strolled down the dark street toward the center of the city where the warrior villa was.

“I still cannot believe how dark it is,” she said, as they walked past a barely flickering lamp.

“Zoe is getting worried. So far, all the spell centers that tie into the grid that operates the city’s lighting have been in near-perfect condition.”

“I’m sure she’ll find something soon. Then we can get back to normal.” She shivered and moved closer to her mate, looping her arm through his to snuggle close.

“I’d wrap my arm around you if I could,” he said, lifting the baskets he was holding a little higher. “But as usual, my parents went a bit overboard.”

“Hey, be careful with that wine basket. One of those was for me,” she teased.

“I’ve been thinking,” Priest started.

“About what?”

“Mother asking where we will live.”

She laid her head on his shoulder. “I can’t leave Eion.”

“I know.”

“But you have your unit.”

“I know. They are as much family to me as Merrick and my parents.”

“So, what were you thinking of as a solution?”

“Ari and Brie do long weekends at the Lionhart estate. I thought we could do the same at House Illiya. After all, House Aerdan is within walking distance, so it isn’t as if we can’t visit my parents.”

“House Illiya and not House Aerdan,” she asked softly, feeling like there was a reason he chose her home.

He looked down at her, and though he smiled, his eyes were sad. “I think I told you, but I became Head of House at age ten when my father passed Vi’Aerdan to me. It caused quite a stir, not only because of my age but also because I wasn’t fae.”

“I don’t really see your father caring.”

“He didn’t. He wanted me to become Head of House to stop those saying I wasn’t his son. I became Priest Vi’Aerdan, but obviously, he still handled things for the Founding Families.”

“How did that make you feel?” She watched his aura carefully. Tendrils of blue swirled with gold, her color for love.

“At the time, I was overwhelmed with joy. Before that, I constantly questioned my place with them. I never knew if they would suddenly want a child of their own and give me back to the eagles, but when he did that, I knew that was my home for good.”

“But...” she prompted.

“But, as I got older, I realized that being a placeholder, in a way, cemented how much I didn’t belong.”

“You know that wasn’t his intention.”

He nodded. “Of course. It’s been a few centuries, and I’m more aware of how the world works than when I was ten. I imagine my father was beside himself to find a way to settle my heart.”

“Both your parents seem very selfless.”

“They are. But until today, until you, I wasn’t one-hundred percent sure their altruistic methods were always the best choice.”

She stopped, forcing him to stop with her. “You weren’t sure if you should have been born,” she said. Even saying the words made her feel ill. She couldn’t imagine living with that doubt all her life.

He leaned down and kissed her forehead. “It’s why my parents were so emotional today. They knew how I felt.” He tugged gently, and they resumed walking.

All she could think of was what if his mother hadn’t broken that egg. She would have lived out her entire existence bereft of a mate, fading early to escape the loneliness. She wasn’t entirely surprised when she felt tears dripping off her chin.

“That’s why I’d like to live at House Illiya because, to me, House Aerdan is my parents’ house,” he continued explaining. Smiling, he looked down, and when he saw her tears, he set down the baskets and pulled her into his arms. “What? What happened?”

She wrapped her arms around him and held tight. They had only met this morning, but he completed her in a way she didn’t know could happen. His smile lit up the dark places in her heart. His sense of humor filled the empty spot in her soul. He was her mate, but more than that, he was already her best friend and her place to return to.

“Cas, you’re scaring me, honey. What can I do?” Priest demanded, wiping at her tears.

“Gods above, why does Tau keep making women cry?” an irate voice demanded.

Cas sniffled and looked to her right. They were standing in front of a large home.

“Carson, I swear I didn’t do anything,” Priest protested. He kept her tucked to his chest.

Cas looked at the man who was scowling at her mate. When his gaze shifted to her, his eyes softened. “Okay, sweetheart, what can we do to make it better?”

“If - if his m-m-mom hadn’t broken the egg, I wouldn’t have h-h-him,” she stuttered.

Carson’s eyebrows lifted to his hairline, then he smiled. “Did he tell you Aeson stopped serving eggs at the warrior villa for the first couple of months after Priest joined us? He heard that story, and couldn’t bear to cook them.”

Cas stared, then she felt laughter erupt at the silly story. “Was he calling Priest a chicken?” she asked, squeezing her mate tight before stepping back to compose herself a bit more.

“My mate abuses me,” Priest complained.

“As Meryn would say, ‘You like it, you mannequin’,” Carson teased.

She sniffled. “Mannequin?”

Priest bent down to retrieve one basket, and Carson grabbed the other. “Evidently, she can’t say masochist.”

Carson hefted the basket up. “Your parents?”

Priest nodded. “Food and fruit for Cas in this one, and wine for the Vanguard in the one you’re holding, though one bottle is Cas’ from mother. It has a bow. They’ll send the food Merrick is making straight to Dav’s.”

Carson exhaled. “It has been a mad house here since we heard they were arriving.”

“Cooking?” Priest guessed.

Carson nodded. “And helping Dav move furniture. Tables and chairs got moved to the walls, so it will be standing room only.”

Cas snuck a hand in the basket Priest was carrying and snagged a few berries. “That makes sense. There are one-hundred Vanguard alone.” She popped them in her mouth and chewed. She could honestly eat fruit every day and not get sick of it.

“Aiden sent Thane down to strengthen the soundproofing spell on the bar. Men will probably be getting orders tonight,

may even be heading out tomorrow,” Carson explained, holding the front door open for them.

“Then we’ll have to make sure they have a good send-off,” Priest said, taking her hand and leading her toward the back of the house where she assumed the kitchen was. Based on the fact that the smells of delicious food were getting stronger as they walked, she was pretty sure she was right.

When he came to an abrupt stop, she nearly bumped into him.

“Ramsey, load up those trays first. They’re our cold items. They can wait in the foyer. Leon, how are the meatballs?” she heard a male voice ask.

A lighter timbre answered. “Ready to go, Aeson.”

She peeked around her mate and was impressed at the military precision of the operation being carried out in the kitchen. Each person was hustling, but no one bumped into each other or knocked over any food. “This is amazing,” she observed.

As one, the men halted in their steps and turned to look at her. “Is she?” a tall fae asked from the stove.

Priest stepped to one side so he could wrap an arm around her and pull her forward. “Aeson, this is my mate Cassandra Vi’Illiya. Cas, these men are my brothers and the family fate blessed me with,” he announced.

More than one man became wide-eyed and bashful at Priest’s declaration.

Aeson bowed. “Lady Vi’Illiya, you honor us with your presence in our humble warrior abode. We would normally be organizing *your* welcome party, but the Vanguard have descended upon us.”

She waved off his concern. “Just save me a portion of anything made with fae fruit, and I’ll feel more than welcome. It’s been over two centuries since I’ve had any.” She nudged her mate. “Can we refrigerate what your father gave me?”

Aeson stepped forward and took the basket from Priest. “As fae fruit is getting rarer with the colder weather, I will ensure this does not go bad.”

Carson walked past the fae and set the basket he was carrying on the counter. “Priest says this wine is for the Vanguard, except one bottle with a bow, that’s Cassandra’s.”

“Anything we can do to help?” Priest asked.

Aeson shook his head. “Cooking is mostly done. We’re going to head out in about an hour. You could help carry a few trays.”

“Sounds good. I’ll have time to show Cas where we’ll be living.”

Aeson’s head tilted. “Priest, Cassandra is the Head of House Illiya. I’m not sure...”

She held up a hand. “We’ve decided to split our time between here and House Illiya. Back in Monroe, I lived next to a Vanguard squad who became my closest friends and brothers, so being here will feel like home.”

Carson looked over at here where he was organizing the wine. “Which squad?”

She turned to him, smiling. “Reston is their squad leader.”

He nodded, looked at a few labels, then set three aside. “Since they watched over you, they get the better bottles.”

“You heard him. Reston squad gets family benefits,” Aeson announced.

“Family benefits?” she asked, curious.

Aeson shrugged. “We will, of course, do what we can for all the squads, but family always comes first.”

Priest looked around. “Speaking of family?”

The warrior who welcomed her walked over carrying two trays. He turned to one side to set them on the counter closest to them. “Ari and Brie are finishing up at the morgue. Gage,

Kincaid, Zoe, and the kids are heading back now. They called earlier, and we had them swing by the Brick Oven to pick up desserts since we didn't have time to bake any."

"Aeson isn't it?" she asked.

The man bowed again. "Yes, Aeson Vi' Liordon. I am the unit leader for Chi unit. Ramsey Lionhart, Matthieu Lucien, Leon March, and Carson Elderberry report to me," he said, pointing around the room.

She nodded her thanks at the introduction. "There was a Vanguard warrior that was brought here, Ellais. I think his name was, how is he?"

Aeson's expression became somber. "We answered as many questions as we could. Chi was one of the units that hit the warehouse where his brother was found. It was the more tragic one. We missed saving them by hours."

She gasped. "Gods above."

"Psi will be staying here with them tonight when everyone else heads to Dav's. We'll make sure they're taken care of." He pointed to several trays. "Food has been set aside for them."

Carson held up a few bottles. "I'll add these to their pile. The years these ones were made had a higher alcohol content. Should fuck him up faster."

Leon scrunched up his nose. "We can do better than that. I'm pretty sure the following year had better taste and only a slightly lower alcohol level. We have that downstairs."

Carson and Leon began arguing over the better wine to send up.

Priest kissed the top of her head. "I imagine Aiden will have them assigned to Éire Danu for a bit. Ellais will need the support of his brothers."

Aeson pointed to the ceiling. "Better show her the rest of the house while we have time." He looked down at his watch. "We now have less than an hour before we leave." He glanced

around the room, and immediately the men laughed and resumed what they had been doing before their arrival.

Priest gave a mock salute and took her hand. “Come on, my love. Let me show you my home.”

She took his hand and found herself nearly giddy with excitement. His eagerness was contagious. He obviously loved his parents, but this was a space he could call his own.

As they made their way toward the foyer, she was pleasantly surprised at the simple yet homey decor. Polished woods and cozy fabrics gave the entire space a rustic cabin feel. It screamed, ‘Here is a place to rest, everyone is welcome’.

After he showed her the different rooms downstairs, he led her up the front stairs. “My quarters are toward the front since I’m in Tau.”

“Why the front?”

“Unit members are kept close together, and since Ari is our acting leader, he needs to be toward the front for updates.”

When they reached the top of the stairs, a familiar man was waiting for them.

“Sorry to bother you, but I saw you come in and was debating whether I should come down to speak to you,” he started, running a hand through his hair.

Cas stepped away from her mate. Burnt orange radiated from this man. He was frustrated beyond measure. Blue despair and red pain lingered around his heart, but frustration was his primary emotion.

“Amir wasn’t it?” she asked. “How is Ellais?”

His hand dropped as he faced her. “Yes, ma’am, Amir Nassar. That’s why I wanted to speak to you. Are you a healer of any kind? You knew he was suffering before we did. I...” he exhaled. “I don’t know what to do for him.”

She placed a hand on his shoulder, and he sagged forward. “You are a good man. I’m sure you have done everything you can.”

“But he...”

She tapped his nose with her finger surprising him. “I’m not exactly a healer, but I do help people process their emotions. I can try to help if you think he’ll be open to it.”

He rubbed his nose and nodded. “He’s drowning right now. He’s drowning right in front of us, and we can’t reach him.”

She looked back at Priest, who nodded.

“Then let us go throw him a life preserver, shall we?” he suggested.

Looking relieved, the man turned and led them toward the suite where they were staying.

Behind her, Priest laid a supportive hand on her back. “You amaze me.”

She shook her head. “I just do my best.”

“That’s what’s amazing,” he countered and held open the door for her.

But sometimes that’s not enough, she thought to herself and followed Amir inside.

When they walked into the sitting area of the suite, the first thing that struck her was the chaotic state of it.

Amir turned to Priest. “We’ll pay for the damages.”

Priest shook his head and placed a supporting hand on the man’s shoulders. “We’ve been meaning to redecorate, don’t worry about it.”

Redecorate? Cas was finding it hard to avoid stepping on broken furniture or glass.

“Ellais, Lady Vi’Illiya is here. She said she may be able to help,” Amir said, looking to the center of the room where a figure sat, face in hands, elbows on knees.

“No healer can help,” Ellais said harshly.

Cas took a deep breath. “I’m not a healer.” She looked around the room. “I help people with their emotions, but I usually have privacy for my clients.”

Ellais snorted. “There is nothing you can do or say that would have me put my brothers out of this room.”

“Okay then.” She stepped closer and made her way over to the sofa that was miraculously right-side up.

One of Ellais’ squad brothers offered her his arm to help her step over the lamp. “Thank you...”

“Flynn Branigan, My Lady.” He bowed.

She looked around the room. “I might as well meet you two,” she said, giving them smiles. “After all, we’ll be housemates soon.”

Flynn frowned. “We’re staying here, My Lady. We won’t be able to join you at House Illiya.”

She pointed to Priest. “My mate is a unit warrior for Tau. So, to support him, we’ll be splitting our time between House Illiya and the warrior villa.”

“A thousand blessings on your mating,” the smaller of the other two men said, bowing. “My name is Elliot Crossvine. This is Alderic Charroux.”

She nodded to them, then sat across from Ellais and tried to sort out what she was seeing. She was expecting the deep purple color, which she knew to be grief, but she was shocked to see the large amounts of emerald green, which to her was always guilt.

“Ellais, which family are you from?”

He looked up, his eyes rimmed red. “My grief has turned me into a churl. I am Ellais Ri’Arlan.” He swallowed hard, then wiped at his eyes. “Ellais Vi’Arlan now I guess.”

“I am so sorry for your loss.”

“We are not a people used to loss, are we?”

She nodded, knowing what he meant. Fae were immortal. Even those living outside of Éire Danu rarely faced death. To lose so many in such a short amount of time had been nothing short of catastrophic.

“I won’t state the obvious and tell you I see grief and sadness.”

“I appreciate that,” he said, reburying his face in his hands.

“But I will ask you about the vast amount of guilt I am seeing.”

His head jerked up, his eyes wide. “What?”

“You’d think emerald green would mean greed, you know, green with envy, but to me, it always reflects guilt. Why are you carrying such a heavy burden?”

Ellais fell back into the chair, looking stunned. “I... I don’t think I even realized that was what I was feeling.” He rubbed his chest. “My brother, Kespar, didn’t want me to leave. His mate had just gotten pregnant, and he wanted me to stay close to home. But we had orders, and I couldn’t leave my squad.”

“Ellais...” Amir started.

The fae shook his head. “I wanted to go with you all. I figured it would be the last tour before coming home for a while.” He drove his fist through the very substantial-looking solid wood end table. “If I had been home, if I had been with them, I could have saved them.”

“Priest, do the units have any information on how people were taken?” she asked.

“No,” Priest answered from behind her.

“Ellais, for all you know, a small army swooped in to take them away. You could have been killed in the process,” she pointed out.

“Then I could have died helping them! Maybe I could have bought them enough time to get away!” he shouted.

She went to her knees in front of him to lay a hand on his leg. “There are thousands of different scenarios that could have happened, but at the end of the day, put the blame where it belongs, with the ones who perpetrated this tragedy.”

His aura began to shift from emerald green to a deep blood red, her color for anger. “Ellais, do you know what grief is?” she asked him softly.

“Pain,” he said, through clenched teeth.

“No, it’s something much more simple and actually quite beautiful.”

He looked at her, tears streaming down his face, his expression defiant. “Nothing about this is beautiful.”

“Grief, is love, with no place to go,” she explained.

She knew she had gotten through to him when the blood-red color drained away, and a burst of gold shone through.

Sobbing, he leaned down and rested his forehead on her shoulder. She held him close and stroked his hair. “It will be hard. Today will be hard, and tomorrow will be hard. The day after that might be a bit easier, but maybe the day after that will be worse. But, each day you live gives you a whole day to experience things to tell your brother about when you see him again. What kind of stories do you want to tell him? Ones of anger and pain? Or of joy and discovery? You can tell him of the things you saw and learned. Things you can experience for him in your lifetime.”

“I miss him!”

“I’m sure he misses you too, but you are not alone, Ellais. You have other brothers with you. Your Vanguard squad who have not left your side and your new unit warrior brothers,”

she exhaled. “Who are probably still arguing over which wine will fuck you up the fastest.”

Ellais lifted his head and blinked. “Really?”

She used her sleeve and dabbed at his cheeks. “Yes. It started to sound very scientific when they were quoting percentages. Honestly, I tuned them out.”

Ellais straightened, then stood, helping her to her feet. “You have the most amazing gift. It would have probably taken me weeks to figure out I was feeling guilty.”

She motioned for him to bend down, and when he did, she patted him on the head. “You’re a good boy. You would have figured it out.”

He stared at her incredulous. “I am pretty sure I am older than you.”

She shrugged. “That won’t stop me from mothering everyone in this house.”

His cheeks tinted slightly, then he turned to Priest. “You better take damn good care of her, especially if she’s going to be our little mother.”

Priest just gave him a dopey grin. “I plan on giving her whatever she wants whenever she wants it.”

Ellais stretched, then looked around the room. “Gods,” he whispered, looking ill.

Amir, who was now smiling, stepped away from the wall. “We’ll help you clean this place up.”

“Guys, I’m so sorry,” Ellais said, looking at each of his squad brothers.

Elliot looked like a different man, as relief had him smiling nearly as brightly as Amir. “I’ll go ask for a broom.”

Alderic stood to walk with him. “I’m going to go ask about that wine they were arguing over. I think we’ll all indulge tonight.”

Amir nodded. “Good idea.”

Ellais turned to Priest. “What about the meeting tonight? I don’t think I’m up for a party.”

Her mate walked over and pulled her against him. “Don’t worry about it. We’ll tell Aiden you’re our guests until you’re ready to resume duty.” He surprised her by ruffling her hair about.

“Hey!”

“You, my dear, are a liar.”

She gasped at the accusation. “I am not!”

Ellais chuckled a bit, then looked surprised he was able to do so. Shaking his head, he pointed at her. “I think I know what he means, and yes, you did lie.”

She twirled around to face her mate, her hands on her hips. “Explain yourself, sir.”

He flicked her forehead. “You *are* a healer.”

She rubbed the irritated skin. “I am not. I don’t have that kind of magic.”

Amir stared. “Is she serious?”

“My love, we have a few witch healers in the house; they weren’t able to do anything for Ellais, yet, you were. It may not be the type of magic you’re thinking of, but what you do is no less impressive,” Priest explained, pride in his eyes.

“I just talk to people,” she mumbled.

“Actually, that isn’t true either,” Ellais countered.

“What now?” she demanded.

Ellais held up his hands in a type of surrender. “You talk, yes, but more importantly, you get people talking about the festering wound in their hearts.” He rubbed at his chest. “I don’t think the type of healing I needed, the kind that takes time, could even start while I was so angry. You helped that along.”

She turned back to her mate. “You don’t mind what I do?”

His mouth dropped open. “Mind? You save people in ways no others can. I think you’re amazing, and I’m blessed to be your mate.”

“I sometimes hold people, like I did with Ellais, you don’t mind?” she asked, needing to know the answer. She had had many previous boyfriends accuse her of cheating.

Priest looked confused. “Touch is healing, though, right? It’s not like you’re sleeping with them. My brothers hug me all the time.”

“Priest, you’re amazing yourself,” she said, wrapping her arms around his neck. “I’m pretty sure I’m half in love with you.”

Priest pouted. “Only half?”

“We did just meet a couple hours ago.”

Ellais sniffed and wiped at his eyes.

Instantly Cas was contrite. “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head. “Don’t be. My grief shouldn’t dim another’s joy. I think I get what you were saying about experiencing things to tell my brother. Because I can’t wait to tell him about the two of you. You remind me of my brother and his mate, they would tease, but the love was nearly tangible between them.”

Priest sighed. “Don’t forget to tell him that she steals sandwiches.”

“Priest!” she screeched.

Ellais and Amir both chuckled at her embarrassment.

Ellais wiped at his eyes again. “Thank you. Laughing makes me feel like tomorrow is real.”

Alderic and Elliot returned, each carrying the item they had left to find. Alderic jerked his thumb back toward the hall. “Aeson said you have ten minutes.”

“Shit!” Priest grabbed her hand. “If you gentlemen will excuse us.”

Cas shook her head as he dragged her from the room.

“Let’s get that wine open,” Amir said.

Cas couldn’t help but smile. Ellais was now blue with sadness, of course, but the anger and guilt had been replaced with hope and love. She knew that his squad brothers would see him through.

Chapter Six

Priest swung open the door to his quarters and escorted her inside. “These are my rooms.”

She walked in and immediately noticed the lack of color. Smiling, she eyed her mate. He was beaming so proudly, she didn’t want to discourage him.

“It’s very... clean looking.”

Priest shut the door, then led her around the room. A cream leather sectional created a, homey-looking nook in front of a very impressive-looking television.

“Don’t tell Meryn, but I love to game every bit as much as she does,” he confessed.

“What kind of games?”

“You’d think being a unit warrior, I’d like first-person shooter, but I actually love survival games.”

“*Minecraft*?”

He blinked. “No way.”

“*Ark, Conan, Valheim*... shall I continue?”

“Platform?”

“Console.”

He hurried to the wall beside the tv. “I have an *Xbox* and a *Playstation*.”

She eyed his setup. “Same.” She pointed at the wall. “Do you think we’ll have room to mount a second tv?”

“I’ll make room.” He stared at her. “Never in a million years did I think my mate would be a gamer. You’re just so...”

“So what?”

“Elegant. Articulate, gorgeous, perfect.”

“Why can’t I be an elegant gamer? Is this a sexist thing?”

He scratched his head. “I think it’s more a fae thing. They’re the race that has yet to embrace human technology.”

“Well, this fae has lived her adult years amongst the humans and was there for every iteration of games as they evolved.”

“Meryn will try to recruit you for *Call of Duty*. Tell her she’s out of luck. You’re on my team.”

“I thought you didn’t play fps?”

“I mean, shooting nazi zombies is always fun. She has Jaxon, Noah and now Nigel and Neil. She can’t have you too.”

She turned to look at the room, and the lack of decor and color made sense. Most of his attention was focused on this sitting area.

Seeing her look around, Priest pointed to a far wall. “The bathroom is to the left. On either side, I had them install his and hers walk-in closets. On the right, there are two offices with a small kitchenette in the middle with a jack and jill half bath.”

“You had his and hers closets installed?”

He blushed. “I did have hope I would find someone eventually.”

“Priest, I don’t mean to sound judgmental...”

He shook his head. “We can change out whatever you want.”

“Overall, I wouldn’t change a thing. It suits both our needs beautifully without being crowded. I actually love the layout and think it’s perfect. It’s just the lack of color.”

He blinked. “I would have thought the lack of color for you would be a relief.”

She shook her head. “I love color. I wouldn’t want to decorate with ones that have a negative connotation, but small pops of color would be amazing in here. ”

He picked up a small pad of paper that was next to a controller on the end table. “What fabrics and colors, my love?”

She eyed the sofa. “I love the cream, but maybe gold chenille throws?”

“What else?”

“I know I’ve told you blue is despair, but navy is contentment. Maybe bedding in navy. Also, emerald green is guilt, but like a freshly cut grass green is life and excitement. We could add figurines and pillows in those shades.”

He frowned as he made notes. “I’d rather add excitement to the bed, not contentment.”

“You don’t want me happy with you in bed?”

“I second thought. That seems fine to me.”

“We could use plants for color as well. If it’s the color from a living thing like flowers, the imagery I see for auras doesn’t apply. We could do a lot with plants.”

“No trees, though. I don’t want a mini Coll or Lia in here.”

She laughed. “Of course not.”

A banging on the door had them both jumping. “Come on, lovebirds, time to head to Dav’s,” Carson called out from the hallway.

Priest put the pad down. “We’ll continue picking out colors when we get home.”

She smiled. “Home.”

Priest took her hand and kissed it gently. “It’s more of a home now with you here.”

“Lead the way. Show me how warriors party.”

She didn't know what she was expecting, but what she was currently looking at wasn't it. She stood to one side and watched as the men milled around and formed small groups, talking and joking with one another. Aeson and the other unit warriors helped Dav set up long tables of food and walked around with trays of drinks. The color grey was everywhere. Boredom.

“Boring, huh?”

Cas looked down and saw Meryn looking up at her. “Actually, yeah, it is.”

Meryn pointed to her left. “Bubbles is my cousin, the one that smells like coffee heaven is Izzy, and the one shaking her head is Anne, super nurse.”

The one with curls the same color as Meryn's short spikes glared at her cousin, then smiled at her. “My name is Amelia. It's nice to meet you.”

“Is it just me or...” A milk-chocolate skinned goddess said as she approached.

The redhead at her side just laughed. “Brie, be nice.”

“I am being nice, Zoe. I haven't at all said this looks like a knitting circle,” Brie said, shaking her head.

“Wanna do keg stands?” Meryn offered.

“Meryn, you can barely stand upright these days, much less upside down, and you can't have alcohol,” Amelia pointed out.

“Heifer,” Meryn grumbled.

Brie stuck her hand out. “Brie Wilson now Lionhart, Ari is mine, he's...” she looked around. “Talking to Aiden,” she pointed.

“You already know I own Aiden,” Meryn said, grinning.

“Kendrick is the one on the other side of Aiden. He definitely belongs to me,” Anne said smugly.

“Oron, the tall fae with the warm dark blond hair is mine,” Izzy said, pointing to the other side of the room. “He’s with his brother Darian who is Amelia’s mate.”

Meryn eyed the tall fae. “How’s his hand?”

Izzy smiled, looking tired. “We got to him in time. Thane was able to set the bones before they began to knit incorrectly. There was no lasting damage.”

“Thank the gods for that,” Anne said, looking relieved.

Cas turned to Izzy. “Would it be insensitive of me to ask what happened?”

Izzy looked down to the floor. “The enemy made a comment that Oron helped them find a way to Éire Danu. He punched the wall and obliterated his hand.” When she looked up, her eyes were shiny. “He’s an amazing artist. We were all afraid he’d lose the ability to hold a pencil.”

Cas looked over to the fae in question. For all he was smiling and laughing with the others, emerald green swirled around his heart. Turning her head, she noticed that her own mate also had a constant blue smudge in his aura that had yet to dissipate. It was something she observed when they met and honestly thought it would have gone away after finding her.

Her eyes darted back to the fae, before she turned to Izzy. “You need to call him on his bullshit. His aura is covered with guilt,” she said, then sipped her beer.

Izzy’s eyes narrowed as she eyed her own mate. “I’ll torture him later in bed.”

Brie laughed and clinked bottles with Izzy.

“Gage is the dark-haired one with Kincaid. He’s mine,” Zoe said, waving to her as a form of greeting. “I don’t think he feels guilty or anything.”

Cas looked at the man and shook her head. “He’s at peace.”

Zoe nodded, looking proud.

Cas shook her head. “There’s so many names.”

“This is just one city. Try memorizing like two others,” Meryn said groaning. “I need a spreadsheet to keep everyone straight.”

Cas looked out at all the men and sighed. “I was kinda expecting more machismo or something.” She scrunched up her nose. “Does that make me sexist?”

Meryn thought about it. “Maybe or just horny.”

Amelia sprayed out the juice she had just sipped. “Meryn!”

Cas eyed the smaller woman. “Roll with me?”

Meryn’s eyes brightened. “Ride or die.”

Cas held up her fist, and both Meryn and Izzy bumped it.

“Were we supposed to touch hands?” Zoe asked, looking at her fist.

“Sure.” Meryn held out her hand to Zoe, who bopped it.

Amelia paled. “Gods.”

“This should be good,” Anne said, sipping her wine.

Brie simply kicked back her beer, then nodded approvingly.

In a loud voice Cas yelled out. “No way! I saw them earlier, the Vanguard definitely out muscle the warriors.”

Not missing a beat, Meryn shook her head. “I have personally watched the warriors train, the Vanguard would be hard pressed to keep up.”

Around them, the men quieted, their eyes darting around to see who else was listening.

“Meryn, these guys just got out of the military.”

“Well, units are like the military.”

“I’m telling you, what I saw this morning would be impossible to beat.”

“Bet me!” Meryn yelled, then looked over to Ramsey and another warrior who could almost be his twin. “Guys!”

They both made their way over. “What’s the matter short stuff?”

“Ramsey can you and Broden show Cas how buff you are?” Meryn asked, her eyes wide and pleading.

Both men broke out in identical shit-eating grins and immediately began to strip off their shirts.

Cas tried to keep a straight face. “Now, don’t get me wrong, they are pretty cut, but…” She eyed the crowd as if looking for help amongst the Vanguard.

More than one Vanguard stepped forward, pulling off their shirts as they did this morning. “We’d be more than happy to represent the Vanguard, Lady Vi’Illiya,” the broad-chested man said winking at them.

Cas pointed to the men. “See Meryn.”

Meryn narrowed her eyes. “That’s just a couple. We can’t make a decision on just a couple.”

Around them, the men removed their shirts, much to the chagrin of the mated warriors who stood together looking dumb-founded.

“Meryn!” a deep male voice roared.

Seconds later, Aiden stalked over, his eyes black as he pulled her close to him, rubbing his cheek on her head and glaring at the men.

“Where’s Rex? I wanna see Rex’s arms,” Meryn said, squirming under her mate’s exuberance.

“As an Elder, I feel obligated to represent those who serve on the council. And I can hardly disappoint you ladies.” With a seductive grace, he removed his shirt.

Cas and Meryn stared.

“Holy shit!” Zoe exclaimed.

Meryn looked smug. “I told you he had the best arms.”

Cas tapped her lips with her finger. “But he’s neither unit warrior nor Vanguard.”

Meryn nodded. “True.”

“What in the hell are you doing?” Aiden demanded.

Meryn looked up at him confused. “Comparing muscles. Why?”

“What did I tell you when we first met, my mate?” Aiden demanded in a gravelly voice.

“If I was gonna look at naked men to look at you first.”

“Well?” Aiden said, glaring down at his mate.

“Well?” she demanded back, plucking at his shirt.

Snarling he pulled off his shirt. Meryn sighed happily. “I was right, unit warriors are the best.”

Behind Aiden the men had taken to comparing forearms and biceps, which led to impromptu handstand competitions and arm wrestling.

Cas sipped her beer smiling, gone was the dingy grey, it had been replaced with yellow for happiness and the vibrant grass green for excitement. She nodded. They would definitely need to add throw pillows in that color.

“Enough testosterone for you?” her mate asked, coming up behind her. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her close so he could rest his chin on her head.

“Barely,” she teased.

“Were you that bored?”

“No, but they were. Everyone was grey, sliding toward blue. We needed to shake things up a bit,” she explained.

Priest kissed her hair. “You never cease to amaze me.”

Aiden stared. “This was for the men?”

She nodded. “Look at them now, Aiden.”

The Unit Commander looked out across the room where the men were laughing uproariously and forming friendly competitions. All the while their chests were puffed out and they were strutting.

Aiden shook his head. "I am beyond trying to understand the gifts you ladies bring us," his expression turned pained. "Did you have to have them strip?"

"Of course not."

His mouth dropped. "Then why?"

She shrugged. "Because it was more fun this way."

Aiden pointed to her and Izzy. "Meryn, from now on stay away from those two."

"Hell nah, we're ride or die."

Aiden pinched the bridge of his nose. "You are not ride or die."

Men chanting had everyone turning.

Meryn's eyes widened. "Is that Pip?"

Behind them, Nigel and Neil had floated a shirtless Pip above the crowd, and the small man was flexing for all he was worth.

Pip pointed to his arm. "This is what you need for cuddles," he explained.

One of the men frowned. "I think you need something else besides that." His friend elbowed him in the side causing him to gasp.

"Oh my god, I fucking love him so much," Anne said, watching with a huge smile.

Meryn began hopping up and down. "Pip! Pip! Pip!" she cheered.

Pip seeing Meryn supporting him, held out both arms showing his tiny biceps. "You men need to do better if you ever want to be in charge of cuddles," he lectured.

“Pip! Pip! Pip!” the men roared.

Aiden rubbed his chin. “He’s actually put on some definition. I’ll up his training regimen.”

Brie, Izzy, Zoe, Anne, Meryn, and Amelia were all calling Pip’s name.

Cas gave a piercing whistle in support.

With his cheeks flushed, Pip turned toward Meryn. “Did I win?”

“Fuck yeah, you did!” she yelled.

Nigel and Neil floated him down, but he was immediately lifted to the shoulders of the men and passed around in celebration.

Once the men had calmed down and put their shirts back on, Aiden stood on the bar overlooking the large crowd of warriors.

“First off. Meryn is my mate, you can die for her, but that’s it.”

“Aiden!” she yelled from the back of the room.

“Don’t worry commander, I don’t think anyone would have a problem sacrificing themselves for such an amazing actress,” one of the Vanguard called out, causing all the men to laugh.

Blushing, Meryn chuckled. “Busted.”

Aiden nodded. “Good. Now, before we go any further. Are there any squads that want to rotate to inactive status?”

No one spoke up.

Aiden smiled approvingly. “I didn’t think so. Normally, when a Vanguard comes back into active status, they would rotate out with a unit warrior, but unfortunately, we need every warrior we have, given current events.”

All the men nodded as they agreed with Aiden.

“That being said, I’d like to create an active Vanguard status that would work hand in hand with the units in the pillar cities,” Aiden began. “Six squads will be assigned to Lycaonia with the designations Alpha, Beta, Delta, Epsilon, Gamma etc...” Aiden looked out at the men. “These assignments will not be based on rank. I’m looking for volunteers based on need.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “One squad will be staying here as one of their members lost a brother in the wave of fae murders. If anyone has family in the pillar cities, I’d like to take that into consideration. Now, who would like to head to Lycaonia?”

Immediately three hands went up.

Aiden nodded. “Do those serving with those men agree with the Lycaonia assignment?” The men nodded.

“I need three more squads for Lycaonia.”

The men looked at one another, and three other squads stepped forward.

“Who needs to go to Noctem Falls?” Aiden asked.

This time five squads stepped forward. Aiden smiled. “You’ll be reporting to Adriel. One more?”

In the corner two squads squared off to do rock, paper, scissors. The winning squad joined the other five.

“We have one squad already assigned to Éire Danu. I need five more,” Aiden looked around the room.

Cas looked on, feeling impressed. Aiden was making sure the men were where they wanted to be. He wasn’t being high-handed and putting them wherever he wanted.

“Sir, we’d like to stay and continue to keep an eye on Cas,” Reston said, stepping forward.

She felt tears prick her eyes. “You guys,” she said softly.

Behind him, four other squads walked over to stand behind Reston.

Aiden nodded. “Good.” He turned and eyed the remaining two squads. “Men, you’ll be first reporting to Kendrick Ashwood and Thane Ashleigh tomorrow morning.”

The two remaining squads nodded toward Kendrick.

Aiden looked out at the men. “You have no idea how much your presence will help. Thank you.” He placed his hand over his heart and gave a bow.

Every unit warrior around the room placed their hands over their hearts and did the same.

The Vanguard looked stunned.

Reston waved his hands about. “Sir... please don’t.”

Aiden grinned and straightened. “I can and I will. As unit warriors, we are sworn to protect the people of the pillar cities, but the Vanguard have already done their duty and served. You’re volunteering to join the fray. You have my utmost respect and gratitude.”

Reston, like the men around him, swallowed hard and nodded their acceptance.

“Can we eat now?” Meryn demanded, breaking the silence.

Cas shook her head. That woman had impeccable timing.

The shift from mauve-colored embarrassment to a heather-colored appreciation was a relief.

Priest squeezed her hand. “Want to leave a bit early?”

She scanned the room. Everyone seemed to be in a good place. Smiling, she nodded. “Maybe swing by the warrior villa so you can grab some things, then head to House Illiya? I’d like to spend my first night back there.”

“Sounds like a plan to me. Let’s go.”

When they walked through the door Eion met them in the foyer. He looked pleased. “I was not sure where you would go tonight, but I prepared your room just in case.”

Cas frowned. Her childhood room had been wonderful growing up, but she wasn't sure it'd be large enough for the two of them.

“Cassie, I had your things moved years ago to the master suite,” Eion said gently, accurately guessing her concerns.

Every muscle in her body tensed. “But, mother and father...”

He shook his head. “They deliberately moved to the east wing after you left. All the furniture in the master suite is what they picked out for you. Over time I updated the bedding and, of course, the electronics as they came available.” He laid a hand on her shoulder. “They knew you would come home and wanted to ensure that you could take over House Illiya without feeling any sadness.”

“Where did they...”

Eion smiled. “In the garden, of course.”

Priest pulled her close, and she took comfort in the warmth from his body. “Is this something you want?” he asked.

She turned to meet Eion's eyes. He nodded slowly. “I promise you, their things have been packed away for you to look at later. You will be pleasantly surprised, I think.”

She exhaled. “I want to see what they did for me,” she confessed, looking up into Priest's dark golden eyes. At first, she thought they were brown, they were so dark, but she loved the fact that they were gold.

“Then let us go see our new bedroom.” He grinned and did a mock two-step toward the stairs.

She felt all the tension in her body dissipate as she joined him. “You make me happy.”

“Good, because I know I don’t deserve you, so making sure you’re happy and stay happy is my lifelong goal.”

“Goodnight, children. See you in the morning.” Eion bowed, then walked back toward the kitchen.

She led her mate up the stairs and toward the left into the west wing. The master suite was at the end of the long hallway and took up the breadth of the home on one side. When they reached the door, she hesitated.

“Shall I?” he asked.

She nodded, and he swung the door open. He reached around inside the room on the wall for a few seconds before the light came on. She could only stare. “It’s so different.”

Priest smiled. “Good. That is good, right?”

She walked in and couldn’t stop looking around. Growing up, the walls had been painted a deep green color with dark wood floors. There had been heavy drapes along the walls of windows that prevented a lot of the natural daylight from coming in, but it was all gone.

“The walls are beautiful.”

Priest made a face at her. “I thought you didn’t like white.”

She gestured to the wall. “Are you color blind?”

“No. Maybe. Wait, what?” He walked over to the wall and stared closer. “It looks white to me.”

“Men!” She joined him at the wall. “It used to be this foreboding dark green, very oppressive. This is a gorgeous, slightly marbled ivory with flecks of gold and silver. See how the light catches? It gives the entire space texture and depth.” She spun and walked over to the windows, which took up most of the wall space. “They used to have heavy jacquard drapes. Look at this!” She gently touched the light, airy fabric. “The sheer panels are fae made. It allows the light to come through but gives you privacy.” Turning, she finally took a closer look at the furniture. “They would have hated this for themselves,” she said, laughing. Her parents’ room had always

centered around a solid mahogany bedroom set that dominated the space; in its place, a pale oak set seemed to work with the room, leaving it feeling open and spacious.

The headboard reached from floor to ceiling. The section above the mattress looked to be a set of clever modular panels. The one to catch her eye acted as a picture frame of a portrait she had never seen before. She ran over and climbed up on the bed. “Priest! Come here, look!”

Priest hurried to her side and looked at what she was pointing to. “Your parents?”

She kept wiping away tears as she nodded. “They look so happy here.”

Priest’s fingers traced the lips of the infant they were holding. “I can see why. This is you.”

She nodded and kept investigating the headboard. “What on earth is this?” She opened the small wooden door to reveal a storage area. A leather pouch sat on top of an envelope. With shaking hands, she picked them both up. She held up the letter.

“Did you want me to read it?” Priest asked.

She shook her head, then slowly opened it. When the parchment felt supple under her fingers, she knew it had been magicked to last. She slid the letter out and opened it.

To our dearest daughter and most loved treasure,

The house is so quiet with you gone. As much as my heart breaks at our parting, I know it was the right thing to do. When you were born, we were equal parts thrilled and terrified. We knew we were not long for this world and dreaded the day we would fade and leave you on your own.

Know that the emptiness of the void growing in our hearts and minds are the only thing that drives us from you. It is

better to say goodbye now than to become someone or something you would abhor.

We have asked two of our most trusted friends to watch over you. First, of course, is Eion. He has promised he will remain and keep the house ready for your return. As our days grow short, we have found great joy in making this room perfect for you. At least, we hope it will be perfect for you. The second person we have asked to keep you safe in our stead is your father's closest friend and your athair Ilian...

She gasped and crumpled the letter to her chest.

“What?” Priest asked.

She shook her head, sobbing, unable to form words.

“Cas, you need to say something, honey, or I’m going to get Eion or Meryn or someone.”

Laughing through her sobs at his desperation, she simply wrapped her arms around his neck and wept.

After a few minutes, she calmed down enough to sit back.

“He has watched over me all this time,” she was finally able to say once the tears subsided.

“Who, baby?” he asked, rubbing his hands up and down her arms.

“Ilian. He was my father’s closest friend and my *athair*. He never told me.”

“That makes sense,” he said, nodding sagely.

“How does that make any sense?” she demanded.

He blinked at her. “If I knew for a fact that, for some reason, I wouldn’t be around to protect my baby girl, I’d ask my unit brothers to watch after her in my stead. There’s no better choice in keeping someone safe.”

She sat back. “He became a Vanguard to watch over me,” she whispered. “I had to leave Éire Danu. He couldn’t stay a unit warrior and watch after me.”

“He sounds like a good man.”

“I’m going to kill him,” she vowed through clenched teeth.

“Cut the poor guy some slack, honey. It had to be a thousand times worse on his end. How many hoops has he had to jump through to avoid being seen?” Priest pointed out.

“I think he ended up having to introduce himself after the first stalker,” she said, remembering meeting him for the first time.

Priest’s eyes narrowed. “Someday, you *will* get around to telling me about these stalkers.”

She sniffled. “But not tonight.”

He shook his head. “Not tonight.”

Taking a deep breath, she continued reading the letter.

“...Ilian Vi’Elwin. We would have introduced you at your coming-of-age ceremony, but we knew our end was close. We have the utmost confidence he will look after you every bit as much as we would have.

In the pouch, you will find House Illiya’s signet ring and the dedication bands your father and I had made for one another. It is our hope that whenever you find your mate, you can wear them yourselves and maybe think of us often because of them.

We may be stepping onto the path leading us away from you earlier than any of us would have liked, but we take our love for you with us. Know that we are waiting patiently to see you again when it is your time to join us. We look forward to hearing all about your life. We know you will do amazing things.

With all our love,

Your mother and father.

Wordlessly she opened the pouch passed Priest her father's ring and slipped her mother's over the ring finger of her left hand. It instantly sized itself. She kissed it then looked over to her mate that was smiling down at the ring on his own hand.

“Vi'Elwin? He was Head of his House?”

Priest laid back on the bed. “If he knew he would be gone for a while, he might have passed it along.”

She felt the letter slip from her fingers. “I thought I was alone all this time. But I had Eion here waiting for me and Ilian at my side.”

Priest folded his hands behind his head and stared up at the headboard. “It's like an advent calendar of stuff.”

Frowning, she joined him at the foot of the bed and looked up. “You're right. It's beautiful, though.” Some squares were storage, some lighting, and some even had more portraits. “I can't wait to explore the whole thing.”

Priest pointed to the rest of the furniture. “I don't think they stopped at the headboard, my love.”

She looked at the picture of her parents beaming down at the infant they held, love in their eyes, to the room of custom-built furniture. “Priest, I think you may be right.”

He sat up and took her hand. “Do you know what I think would be perfect right now?”

She shook her head. “What?”

“Your bottle of wine from my mother, that plate of snacks from Eion by the door, and a tub of hot water along with the box of desserts I took from the bar.”

“You, my mate, are a genius.”

He smiled. “Let's go.”

Chapter Seven

Cas pulled out bottles from under the sink and looked at them. Most were her favorite scents. She checked for expirations and shook her head. Of course, Eion would cycle them out as needed.

She debated for a moment, then decided on the sandalwood. It was a favorite, and she knew Priest would appreciate not smelling like jasmine.

“Knock, knock,” Priest said, then swung the door open. He had already undressed and wore a towel wrapped around his waist. In his hands, he had a tray of snacks and desserts and the now opened bottle of wine. “Which flower will I smell like later?” he asked.

“Sandalwood, you ungrateful wretch.”

Laughing, he set the tray down on the counter. “Water done yet?”

She looked down. The tub was close to half full. When you factored in two bodies, it should be about done. “Yes, I’m adding the bubble bath now.”

She poured the woody liquid into the bath and was surprised at the thick froth it produced. After a minute or two, she stopped the water and turned to her mate, who was leaning against the door, watching her with a soft smile on his face.

“What?”

“This feels right.”

She thought about what he said and realized she was about to get into the tub naked with him, and it never registered for her to be nervous. “I thought matings were supposed to be about a grand passion?” she asked, nervously playing with the sash on her robe.

He shrugged, then walked over to her. “I like what we have. I’d rather be comfortable and be able to laugh and talk

with you than be twisted after a few moments of passion.”

“Only a few moments, huh?” she teased.

He pointed to her. “That right there, that’s what makes us perfect. Do I desire you...”

She, in turn, pointed to his towel. “I would say so.” Gods above help her. What his body was inadvertently advertising had her mouth watering. She kept her tone light to avoid sounding desperate. Like most shifters, he carried a bit of muscle. But maybe because he was a bird shifter, he was on the leaner side, somewhere between the typical shifter build and the vampire physique. To her, he was perfection. Unlike the fae, he had dark brown hair, but like his bird and most fae, he had golden eyes that always seemed to dance with laughter. Coll had been right. He was the best of both worlds.

His hands on her arms brought her back to the present.

“Where did you go?”

“Your body,” she blurted out.

“This ole thing?” he asked, wiggling his hips.

Moments later, his towel gave up the fight and floated to the floor.

She stared. How could she not?

“Cas?”

He looked like cut marble.

“Cas?”

The head looked so angrily purple.

“Cassandra?”

She looked up and saw he was chuckling. “I’m sorry. What were you saying?”

“Your turn, my mate.”

“But I’m not marble,” she babbled.

His head tilted to one side. “Good?”

Shaking her head, she tried to pull herself together. She undid the sash and let her robe fall.

“Sweet gods in heaven,” he breathed.

She felt her nipples tighten under his gaze, and a familiar warmth began to spread from her clit outward. She made the mistake of looking down again. “Priest, it got angrier.”

“Huh?”

She pointed down at his cock. “It’s more purple.”

“Trust me, he’s not angry.” Taking a deep breath, he held out his hand. “My mate, would you like to join me in the bath?”

Shyly she nodded, and holding his hand, she carefully stepped into the bath and sunk down low. The hot water soothed away the cold her body felt all day. Moaning, she closed her eyes.

“Definitely not angry,” she heard him mutter.

She watched as he carefully lifted the bath tray and set it on the far side of the tub before he stepped into the bubbles and sat down. Groaning himself, he got comfortable sitting to her left. She laughed as they wove their legs around one another to get comfortable.

He passed her a glass of deep red wine and picked up a second for himself.

She accepted the glass. “I normally don’t drink red.”

“Trust me, mother has impeccable taste.” He took a sip and shuddered. “Excellent.”

She took a sip, and the tannins immediately seemed to coat her tongue, but the rich and bold flavor seemed to expand down her throat as she drank. “Oh, dear.”

Smiling, he handed her a single square of milk chocolate.

She scrunched up her nose. “I like dark chocolate.”

He wagged it in front of her. “Trust me.”

She took the chocolate and popped it in her mouth. The smoothness added an entirely new dimension to the wine. “Priest, you’re amazing.”

He laughed. “Wine is one of my mother’s passions. I learned from the best.”

She took another sip, then eyed her mate. “You mean you could do this with any wine?”

He nodded. “Pairings? With most wines, I can. I prefer to have tasted the wine at least once to be sure, but that’s harder to do with the rarer fae wines,” he said, holding up his glass. “I lucked out.”

“Rare fae wine?”

He nodded. “Mother picked this bottle out when I was a baby as a present to my future mate.”

“That bottle is over two-hundred years old!”

“There about.”

“Priest! This should be served at the palace or something, not in a bubble bath.”

“It’s the first intimate interlude I’m having with my mate. I can’t think of a better time to enjoy it.”

She took another healthy sip, practically emptying her glass, then handed it to him. “Fill me up for a toast.”

He downed his glass and filled them both before handing hers back.

She held it up. “To being mated to my best friend so that each night feels like the most exciting sleepover, with hot sex thrown in.”

“To being mated to my best friend so that each night has hot sex with an exciting sleepover thrown in,” he said, clinking their glasses together.

Not breaking eye contact, they both emptied their glasses.

She felt the exact moment the alcohol began to kick in. “Yesssss...” she set her glass down on the edge of the tub.

Under the bubbles, Priest’s hands began to massage her feet. “That’s it, I’m lost,” she admitted, relaxing against the back of the tub, eyes closed.

“Lost what?”

“My heart. I’m so in love with you it’s scary.”

His hands around her foot froze.

Peeling one eye open, she saw he was staring at her. “Priest?”

“I don’t offer much. I’m Head of my House in name only.”

“I don’t need much,” she waved her hand about. “We have a house already. And I’m the Head of my own House, so it would be greedy of us to have two, right?”

She felt like she was tap-dancing between tipsy and drunk, and it felt wonderful after the day she had had.

“I’m just a unit warrior,” he continued.

She sighed happily. “I know, so fucking sexy.”

She felt him gently begin to pull her body toward him until she was nestled comfortably between his legs. She leaned back and enjoyed the feel of his arms around her.

“I’m not the strongest or the fastest. I don’t have any political clout or witch powers. I’m not really fae or a shifter,” he admitted quietly.

She exhaled impatiently. “You are you. That makes you mine because you are you. You make me smile, and nothing seems to get you down. You have a blue smudge, but that’s okay. I can make you happy.”

“Blue smudge?”

She nodded, noticing her head felt heavier. “It’s always in the same spot, even when you’re laughing. It’s weird.”

“I’m weird?”

“No, it’s weird.”

“Cas, listen, okay. I’m not the best choice of warriors, but I swear it on my life I will always put you first. I will deny you nothing and try to make each day better than the one before.”

“I know, that’s why I lub you.”

“Lub?”

“Yes, all the lub.”

He sighed. “I wonder if my mother knew the wine would be this strong?”

“I’m not drunk, just happily...hmm, blurry.”

He chuckled. “I’m happy too, my love.”

When she snuggled back against him, she felt evidence of his ‘happiness’ currently poking her lower back.

“Is it supposed to be this easy?” she asked.

“What? Becoming mated? I don’t think it’s supposed to be hard.”

“I feel like we used a cheat code.”

“No, we just know that life is short and to grab happiness when you can.”

“Grab happiness, huh?” she turned and wrapped her hand around his hard length.

His breath left him in a long hiss. “Cas, baby, you’re tipsy.”

“I’m not that tipsy, Priest Vi’Aerdan.”

“Gods help me.”

“No one can help you now,” she mock threatened.

Lazily she began to stroke him but noticed, for all water around them, she didn’t have the slickness she needed to really work him the way she wanted.

Twisting, she unstoppered the bath, and water began to drain. Smiling, she picked up the bubble oil she used earlier and poured a liberal amount into her hand.

Her mate's golden eyes had darkened to a honey brown. "You should see yourself. A tantalizing seductress."

When the water drained enough, she wrapped her oiled hand around him again, and this time, she was rewarded with a loud guttural moan.

Alternating between long pumps along his shaft and quick flicks of the head had him panting her name. "Cas...Cas... I'm coming."

Feeling mischievous, she twisted harder than usual as she leaned down and bit on the tendon between his neck and shoulder.

Shouting, her mate came hard. She felt stickiness hit her chin and chest between them. "Gods, that's so sexy," she whispered as she licked her bite mark gently.

"Throw a towel over my corpse and tell my brothers to bury me in this tub," Priest said, gasping for breath.

Giggling, she sat back, feeling proud of herself.

Stretching, she turned the shower on, spraying them both with ice-cold water by accident.

"Ahh!" she exclaimed, laughing.

"Cas! I can't move!"

This only made her laugh harder as they waited for the water to warm.

Priest had a tragic expression as he stared down. "Poor guy, bliss, then he had to run for his life."

"Stop, I beg you," she wheezed.

"Here lies Priest Vi'Aerdan. He reached the heavens before being frozen to death."

Shaking her head, she stood under the now lukewarm shower stream. “You’ll live.”

“Lies!”

She moved her body to one side so that the water hit his face again.

“Aggh!”

Laughing, she rinsed her body and washed up. “Come on, my love. As sexy as it is to be covered in jizz in romance books, the harsh reality is that it’s sticky and it smells.”

“I don’t smell.”

“Priest, all bodily liquids smell.”

“Spit doesn’t smell.”

“Yes, it does.”

“Really?” he asked, standing. He reached for the shampoo and began massaging her scalp.

Groaning, she leaned into him. “Your magic hands are what have us showering and wasting our perfectly good bubble bath.”

“Oh, I know.”

She let him move her back under the water to rinse.

When they were both done, they got out and dried off. Priest rescued the wine and the snacks, and they moved to the cozy sofa in the small sitting area to relax.

He poured them both another glass and set the bowl of snacks between them.

She sipped her wine, then, with a brush in hand, began to braid her wet hair. In the human world, hair, her length, almost always attracted attention, so she wore it up a lot. Here amongst the fae, it was common for hair to be nearly to the ground. It was easy to grow to that length when you had an eternity.

“I’ll return the favor when we lay down,” Priest promised.

She shook her head. “It wasn’t about that.”

“That doesn’t mean I don’t crave a taste of you.” The dark promise of pleasure in his eyes had her recrossing her legs.

“I’d rather let it build for when we make love for the first time.”

He nodded slowly. “And that’s not tonight?”

She shook her head. “I like this slow pace. Maybe tomorrow, I’ll do just enough to keep you on edge all day.”

His towel began to tent again.

“Promise?” he asked in a breathy voice.

“I promise to keep my mate primed for most of the day, then sensually bring him to climax to see how far he can shoot his load,” she said, delighting in the power she had over him.

“I’ve never tried edgeplay before.”

“Is that what it’s called?”

He nodded. “What would you call it?”

“Sweet torture.”

“Turnabout is fair play,” he reminded her.

“I’m sure it is.” She took another sip of wine and cursed the hair tie as it snapped. Reaching into her pocket, she grabbed another one. Once her hair was done, she sat back, balancing her glass in her lap. “What are we doing tomorrow?”

“I have to report to the palace with Tau for updates.”

“Updates?”

He exhaled, then took a healthy sip of his wine. “Zoe will let us know about the magic centers. From what she’s said so far, they’re all working properly. Which means there’s something else wrong. That will go on one of the lists Meryn is maintaining. Then we have Brie updating us about newly confirmed names from Noctem Falls.” He began ticking off

things on his hand as he kept going. “Gage will be asking about an update regarding the Witches’ Council.”

“Why ask about the Witches’ Council?”

“They imprisoned Zoe at the Fire Temple, tried to force a mating on her, then tried to take her back to Storm Keep under false pretenses,” he said, practically growling.

“You’re close to Gage, aren’t you?”

He blinked at the question. “Tau is a bit different. Technically our unit leader is Brennus, but obviously, he’s busy being Consort, so Ari leads us as a four-man unit. Gage and I take point a lot to help carry the load and look after Kincaid.”

“Why does he need looking after? He seemed pretty competent to me.”

“He is. Don’t get me wrong, he’s an amazing unit warrior. And even with half his spells going sideways, his power is not to be ignored. He’s just the youngest.”

“Ahh, the youngest,” she said, smiling.

Priest exhaled. “I remember when he showed up.” He smiled, shaking his head. “He was all bright, wide eyes and a eager to please personality. When we trained, he was always apologizing when his spells went wrong, but he worked harder than any three warriors. He was so earnest that we all felt like we had to protect that.” He sat back, looking a bit smug. “It was his spell that captured two of our enemies. He created this box thing... don’t ask me about the particulars. Kendrick and Thane started rattling off temperatures, and I kinda zoned out, but it was a near impossible feat.”

“You’re proud,” she observed, seeing a wonderful shade of magenta bloom.

“I am. He has struggled for so long trying to get his powers under control that I can’t help but feel excited for him to finally get the help he needs.”

“So, updates from everyone, then what?”

“Whatever needs doing usually. Meryn will let us know.”

“Meryn? Not Aiden?”

He shrugged. “They’re kinda the same at this point. Meryn has been the one to track the warehouses and missing people. Aiden may be the one to formulate orders but make no mistake, he’s taking direction from his tiny mate.”

“She’s carrying a lot of trauma,” she said, watching his expression.

He only nodded. “I heard she watched a communication orb where she watched her parents die. She had grown up thinking they died in a car accident. She had no idea she was part fae.”

“That had to have been hard.”

“There are also rumors going around that the warriors in Lycaonia want to have her grandmother’s corpse moved outside the city for desecration as a present for her.”

Cas nearly choked on her wine. “Are you serious?”

“Evidently, this woman was an evil piece of work.”

“It’s amazing she turned out half as normal as she is.”

“Technically, she’s our princess now, so we’ve been torturing the Lycaonian warriors that we’re keeping her.”

“Anything else you want to get done?”

He eyed her, then smiled. “I may have a surprise for you, but it’s a fifty, fifty if you’ll like it.”

“If you take the time to do something for me, I’ll like it.”

“I’ll remind you of that tomorrow.”

She looked at the clock. It was just striking midnight. She held up her glass. “To our first day being mated.”

He held up his. “To an eternity of many more.”

They drank and set their glasses down. Standing he held out his hand to her. “Ready for bed?”

“I am.” She stood and followed him to the bed.

Neither of them bothered with pajamas, and both sighed happily when their bodies were tucked close to one another.

“Priest?”

“Yeah,” he mumbled against the back of her neck.

“The light.”

“Alexa, turn off light.”

She scoffed for about a second before the room went dark, and a disembodied voice said. “Okay.”

“How’d you know?”

“I figured Eion would have been just as excited as Merrick to install smart home features. It makes things easier for them.”

“You guessed?”

He yawned. “Yeah.”

She pulled his arm around her and latched on to it like a new favorite stuffed animal.

“Goodnight, my love,” she whispered.

“Goodnight, my everything.”

Opening her eyes, she had to admit, she had never slept more soundly.

“Time to get up,” a chipper voice said above her head.

She glared at her mate as he stood over her, smiling happily.

“No.” She turned away from him and pulled the blankets over her head.

“Cas?”

“Cas?”

“Go away.”

“Hmmm.”

She heard the door open, then close.

Sighing, she let her eyes close and began to doze again.

“Cassandra, time to get up.”

Her brain tried to place the voice. Ilian? Is he back? Ilian. Her *athair*! She was home! Eion!

She bolted upright in bed. “Eion!”

Her squire smiled down at her holding a cup with steam wafting upward. “You still sleep like the dead.”

“Coffee?”

He nodded and passed her the cup.

“You scared your mate.”

She looked around. “Where is he anyway?”

“He said something about his commander being a genius and chocolate, then left in a hurry.”

“If that man comes back with chocolate or coffee in any form, I’m having his babies.”

Eion chuckled. “I had thought that would eventually happen anyway.”

She sipped her coffee. “Yes, but I’ll move it up on the to-do list.”

He bowed. “As it were. If the young man does return with chocolate or coffee, it might be best you eat something substantial beforehand.”

“After coffee,” she countered.

“You have ten minutes, or your eggs will get cold,” he said and headed for the door.

“Meanie.”

“But of course,” he admitted, shutting the door behind him.

She took another sip and began doing mental math. If he was saying the eggs would be cold in ten minutes, that meant the rest of breakfast was already made, and he only had the eggs to cook, which he would start the second he got to the kitchen. If she only did powder for makeup, she could be dressed and downstairs in five minutes.

She sat back and held her coffee to her chest. “I still fucking hate mornings,” she said to the portrait of her parents.

Sighing, she placed her coffee on the nightstand and swung her feet out of bed.

All in all, she was downstairs with a minute to spare and carrying an empty coffee cup.

“Eggs scrambled with sharp cheddar. Biscuits or croissants?” Eion asked, setting a plate down on the table.

She sat down and eyed the perfectly cooked eggs. “Biscuits.”

“Juice or more coffee?”

“Juice with breakfast, coffee afterward.”

“The small bowl to your left is your favorite fruit parfait, and the platter to the right is the meat platter. We have bacon and sausage this morning. I put it between you and Priest so he can eat when he returns.”

“Eion, you’re amazing. I haven’t had a breakfast this good in decades.”

He harrumphed. “I see that you have lost weight living amongst the humans. We will have to make sure you get proper nutrition from now on.”

She lifted her fork and had just taken a bite when she heard the front door open and close. Moments later, Priest appeared in the doorway. He saw her and looked relieved. “You’re awake. Good.”

He set a box and a to-go cup next to her. “For you, my heart.”

“Coffee?”

He nodded emphatically. “Peter got his first espresso machine recently. He actually mixed his own syrups.” He pointed to the cup. “He said that one will be his best-seller. It’s his dark chocolate truffle brownie taste in a mocha.”

She licked her lips, then Eion cleared his throat.

Right. Real food first. “Eion can you ensure this stays hot?” she asked, holding up her cup.

“Of course,” he said before placing it in a warming box.

She eyed the box. “And those?”

“Something lighter. A fae raspberry cheese danish drizzled in dark chocolate. I remembered you haven’t had fae fruit in a while. I hope this helps your morning start with a smile.”

“Priest, when you’re changing diapers, just know it was your own doing,” she warned, then attacked her eggs with gusto.

Her poor mate looked confused as he sat down at the table. “Whose else doing would it be?” he demanded.

“Yours.”

“Why are you threatening me with diapers?” he asked, grabbing nearly all the bacon.

“No reason,” she answered sweetly.

Behind them, Eion laughed, then coughed quickly. “Will the two of you be coming back here for lunch?”

She turned to Priest, who was shaking his head. “I have a surprise planned for Cas this afternoon, and honestly, I have no idea what the evening holds for us, so I’m not really sure about dinner either.”

“Understood. If you will be coming back here for dinner, let me know so I can prepare,” he said, pointing to the newly

installed crystal in the corner.

Priest grinned. "I can let Ari know, and he can let Leo know, and he can tell you."

Cas held up her cell. "Or I can just call."

Both men turned to her with wounded expressions. Boys and their toys. "Or we can use the crystal network."

Eion beamed. "It is very exciting to be included on warrior updates now."

Her heart melted a bit. Eion had been alone for so long, now he was being drawn into everything, and from the looks of things, the man was eating it up.

Making sure all her eggs had been eaten and she had at least one piece of bacon, she reached for her danish.

Chuckling, Eion removed her plate and replaced it with a fresh one. She opened the box and inhaled deeply. Her mouth instantly began watering. Behind her, she heard Eion remove the coffee Priest had gotten her from the warming box.

As she was placing a slice of the danish on her plate, Eion set her mocha down by her plate.

Taking her first bite, she had to grip the table to hold back her moans.

Gods above.

With literal concentration, she released the table and picked up her mocha. There was no hiding her reaction this time as the smooth yet bitter dark chocolate swirled in her mouth, mixing with the raspberry.

"Oh gods, oh gods, oh gods!"

Priest chewed his bacon, a smug expression on his face.

Turning in her chair, she looked her squire in the eye. "Cover your ears," she ordered.

Eyes wide, Eion covered both ears with his hands.

She swung back to her mate. “I’m gonna fuck you blind tonight. I won’t stop until I’m pregnant out of season.”

Priest’s fork dropped to his plate as he inhaled and began to choke.

Eion moved quickly and began the Heimlich. Seconds later, her mate was breathing again.

She looked at her squire. “According to Merrick, he does that quite often.”

“You!” Priest gasped.

Ignoring his labored breathing, she took another sip of her mocha. “Perfection.”

Eion went back to the stove laughing, and her mate eyed her like she was a rare steak and he was starving. Meeting his heated gaze, she smiled. “Game on, my love.”

Chapter Eight

Priest kept giving her sidelong looks on the walk to the palace. Finally, she looked at him. “What?”

“Were you serious?”

“About fucking you blind? Yeah.”

“No, about trying to get pregnant.”

She shrugged. “If it happens, it happens.” She waved her bracelet from Lia about. “We have the extra help after all.”

He nodded absently, looking very distracted. She sighed. Had she broken him again? She peeped at his aura. She thought she’d see gold for love, but yellow was the prominent color. Hope, along with a lot of lime green, fear.

“You’re afraid?”

He blinked, then looked down at his chest. “You can see that, huh?”

She gave him a wry smile. “I can’t *not* see it.”

“Right. And yes, I’m afraid that the woman I am coming to love more than my next breath will be heavy with child as ferals are attacking. Éire Danu isn’t safe anymore.” He rubbed his stomach. “Gods, how do the men in the other cities do it?”

“You mean function without being tucked safely away in a parallel dimension?”

He pointed all around them to indicate the state of things. “Not so safe now. But yes, something like that.”

“I’m not afraid, Priest, because I have you, your unit brothers, the vanguard, your unit commander, that wacky human genius, and the grumpy witches looking after things.”

Priest looked at her and smiled. “It’s not so bad when you remember we’re not alone.”

“Exactly. Plus, I think your commander is forgetting one very important thing, which I plan on reminding him of during this meeting.”

Priest grinned. “I love the look he gets when he realizes he’s missed something.”

“I live to make you happy,” she said, bringing up his hand and kissing it.

“I’m so spoiled.”

The guards at the door nodded, then allowed them to walk through. Priest knocked on the queen’s chamber door, shaking his head. “I never thought I’d be visiting the queen so often.”

Brennus swung the door open and smiled at them. “We are glad you do, though. Come in.”

Priest released her hand and went to a chair next to his unit to sit down. She was relieved to see there was an empty chair next to him. Before she did anything, she went to her queen and curtsied low. “Your Majesty, I have resumed my position as Noble Family Head of Vi’Illiya. I renew my vow of fealty.”

“Welcome home, young Cassandra. Let me look at you,” the queen said, standing and walking over to her.

Cas fought hard to keep her expression neutral. There was hardly anything to the queen’s aura, and what she did see was deep purple and blue. Grief and despair.

“Gods above, you look just like your mother. I miss her so much,” the queen said, taking her hands and smiling at her. The purple and blue flared, as the queen remembered her lost friend.

Her parents began to fade around seven thousand years old. The queen was much older. She turned to see Brennus smiling at them. Maybe she’d have more time because she found her mate later in life.

She studied the queen’s core and felt bile creeping up her throat.

“I know why the lights are dimming,” she whispered. Not wanting to speak the words aloud.

Around them, the room quieted.

“Good, because I can’t find anything wrong with the spells so far,” Zoe said brightly.

The queen’s expression became resigned. “I had hoped I was wrong, but I forgot you share your mother’s gift. How long?”

She could only shake as she clutched her queen’s hands.

“There, there child, it will be okay,” the queen pulled her into a warm hug.

Suddenly it was like being held by her own mother again. She buried her face in the queen’s shoulder and wept like a baby.

Seconds later, Priest was behind her pulling her into his arms. “Cas, what is it?”

She wiped at her eyes, gathering her composure. She could only shake her head, refusing to say the words.

The sound of a chair crashing to the floor had her turning to face the table. Darian stood, all color drained from his skin. “No,” he whispered.

Oron flew across the room and forced his mother to sit.

“No,” he repeated.

“What! Dammit! Someone tell me what the hell is going on,” Meryn demanded, looking spooked.

The queen smiling, looked at Meryn. “I’m fading.”

“No, you’re not!” Darian shouted, then joined his brother at the queen’s side.

The queen shook her head. “I held on to the hope that it was the spell centers, but Cassandra has confirmed it. I am fading, which means my magic is also fading, leaving Éire Danu getting colder and darker.”

Brennus ran a trembling hand over his mouth, then exhaled. Moving to stand behind the queen, he took her hand then kissed it. “Where you go, I will follow.”

“No! I just found you! It’s not fair!” Meryn cried out, standing, gripping the edge of the table tightly.

Behind her, Ryou placed a hand on the back of her neck. “Meryn, you have to calm down.”

“No! I won’t lose anyone else! I won’t let it happen.”

“Oh, my dearest heart, I am so sorry.” The queen sighed. “It was losing so many of my children. My heart and soul feel weighed down with grief. There have been so many I have lost in the past ten-thousand years, I do not think I can take anymore,” she admitted.

“Then we’ll save the rest. You won’t lose anyone else!” Meryn promised and began to glow a deep azure blue. “I’ll kill all the ferals myself.”

“Abraxas!” Ryou shouted.

The door to the courtyard burst open, and the Elder Tree Guardian appeared, his face like a thundercloud. “What has happened?”

“She needs to calm down, but the magic is too unstable to quell.”

Aiden was on his knees on the floor. “Baby, I will take care of everything. Just calm down,” he begged.

The queen shook off the calm acceptance of her own plight and turned to her struggling niece. “Meryn, darling, please calm down.” She walked over to stand next to Abraxas.

“No. No more losing family,” Meryn whispered, her voice surprisingly even and quiet.

“I am right here. Fading does not mean I will die right away. It could take years,” the queen said, in soothing tones.

Abraxas strode over to Meryn’s side and took her wrist. “Gods above, she’s mastering your magic,” he whispered,

holding up her arm for all to see.

Cas stared as an agitated blue dragon twirled around Meryn's wrist. She realized the dragon was a sight to behold, but what had her riveted in place was the blooming darkness in Meryn's chest.

Gasping, she ran to the table and grabbed one of the many salt shakers. "Stand back!" she ordered, as she unscrewed the top.

She gently pushed Meryn away from the table and looked at Ryuu. "Step back."

He shook his head. "Never."

Heedless of her own safety, she poured a solid line of salt around the three of them. When she turned back, the black was writhing and pulsing, fighting to escape its prison. Never did she think the fairy tales taught by her father would help her in facing demons. It did, however, make her wonder how much of what she had been taught had been fiction.

She watched Meryn carefully, who was frightfully serene in her anger. "Meryn, who has the better ass, Broden or Ramsey?"

Meryn blinked. "Huh?"

"Personally, I think Ramsey has the better shape, but Broden has more junk in his trunk, you know," she teased, keeping her voice light.

Meryn blinked slowly. "Ramsey has the better ass of the two," she said, sounding distracted.

The blackness vibrated, then popped, dissipating completely.

Meryn's face turned thoughtful. "But, if we're talking about amongst the warriors, Colton has the best ass I've seen," she said, sounding more like herself.

"What the fuck just happened?" Aiden demanded, standing his toe against the salt line.

Cas eyed the smaller woman, who was now yawning. “Meryn, have you been associating with demons?”

Meryn’s eyes widened. “Shit.”

Ryuu stared down at her. “I knew it! It was when you were asleep, wasn’t it? When neither Felix nor I could sense you.”

Meryn turned to look up at her squire. “He isn’t so bad.”

“Gods above, bring light where darkness grows. Give strength where weakness threatens to fail,” Brennus recited, hands clasped and eyes closed.

Around them, others joined in.

“Bring hope where despair thrives and protect your children from all harm,” the room whispered, completing the prayer.

The queen stood, back ramrod straight. “In my palace, in my own home, demons dare approach that baby.”

Cas marveled as the despair and grief faded to the background, still present but for the moment, overshadowed by a color she had never seen in a living person. Silver.

“Righteous anger and the desire to protect,” she whispered.

“Mother?” Darian asked, going to her side.

“I may be fading, but my job as queen will not be done until I see that demon purged.” She turned to Aiden, who was still waiting to get to his mate. “We may need to call Gavriel here. He has the most experience in dealing with that vermin.”

Outside they could all see the courtyard now streamed daylight, brighter than it had been when they walked in. The queen’s determination was seen in the rays of the sun.

Cas, using her toe, broke the salt line. Instantly, Aiden scooped Meryn up. “Gods above, please protect my mate,” he pleaded.

Meryn scrunched up her nose. “I’m telling you, he wasn’t that bad. He’s kinda nice, actually.”

Abraxas, the queen, and Ryuu turned to stare.

Aiden shook his head and firmly ensconced her in his arms so that only her little face was visible.

Kendrick turned to Thane. “The old magic?”

Thane nodded. “We have some material, Demonology volumes one and four, but we don’t have two and three.”

Kendrick waved his hand. “I have copies.”

“Hello? Is no one listening? I don’t think the demon guy is all bad,” Meryn protested.

Cas turned to Meryn. “You’re aura turned pitch black just now.”

Meryn shrugged. “That may have been him knocking.”

“Knocking?”

She nodded. “Yeah, evidently, when I asked to talk to whoever was in charge in Noctem Falls, I opened the door for communication with him.” She looked at Ryuu. “I did tell him not to stop my heart anymore.”

Ryuu stared down at his charge, disbelief written all over his face.

Meryn ignored his incredulous expression. Turning to her aunt. “No fading.”

The queen only gave a short nod. “For the time being. I have a demon to deal with.”

Outside, the light dimmed slightly, but remained brighter than it had been that morning.

With shaking hands Cord began pouring liberal amounts of liquor and tea.

“With the queen fading and a demon nearby, I will strengthen the other Guardians,” Abraxas turned to Priest. “Coll and Lia may have stumbled on a way to help us all. Good work.”

Behind her, Priest bowed. “It was an honor to help them.”

Abraxas, with a sour expression at first, which quickly morphed into a grin, stared down at Meryn. “Of all ways for you to take after your father,” he said, shaking his head. His hand cupped the wooden bracelet on her wrist, and it flared bright green for a second, then resumed its normal appearance. “Any demon will have a hard time influencing her now.”

He turned and walked back toward the courtyard. Along the way, he dropped a kiss on the queen’s forehead, causing her to blush furiously. “Grief can weigh down our branches, but your roots are strong yet. Do not be in such a hurry to leave.” He clapped a hand on Brennus’ shoulder, and the man visibly straightened with renewed vigor. “You all are not alone. The Guardians yet protect their children.” He met Darian’s eyes and bowed low before walking into the courtyard.

Brennus’ eyes swung to his niece. “I think you have some explaining to do, young lady,” he said in a firm voice.

“Fu-u-uck!” she exclaimed.

“Right now,” he ordered.

It took a few minutes to get everyone situated and with a recovery beverage. Priest introduced those she had not yet met, but soon all eyes were on Meryn.

“Well?” Brennus said, looking stern.

Meryn fidgeted in her mate’s lap. “So, he visited me. That time you couldn’t wake me.”

Aiden went from looking pale to grey with worry.

Meryn continued. “And he said that he wasn’t responsible for killing my parents, that he had only wanted to ask my dad about something he needed to have made, but the ones he sent wanted to kill both my mom and my dad. He didn’t even know what happened, the bad guy, Oron’s dad, lied to him, saying random ferals attacked. So, he offered me a deal.”

“No,” Aiden said, shaking his head.

“Gods above, you didn’t,” Brennus said, looking ill.

She nodded slowly. “In exchange for one memory which I got to pick, he would kill all those responsible for my parents’ deaths and give me that memory in its place.”

No one said a word.

“Which memory did you not value enough to keep?” Aiden asked darkly.

Meryn looked up at her mate, shocked at his tone. “It was one of my happier ones from when I was a child. The day I got released from the attic and got ice cream.”

Ryuu stepped forward. “You gave him a happy memory?”

She shrugged. “He’s in a dry, hot box, like the attic. I remember how I wanted to die and go to my parents. I figured being locked away for hundreds and thousands of years had to be worse, so I gave him that memory.”

“All your memories are precious, Meryn. You should not be so quick to give them away,” Aiden reprimanded sharply.

Meryn wiggled until she stood next to his chair. With a furious expression, she unleashed on her mate. “You don’t get to judge! You don’t know what it’s like. You had a mom and a dad that loved you. You had a home and friends and food! You have no idea how that kind of heat saps the very life from you. How your dry lips crack and bleed. How the smell of your own shit and piss evaporating in a bucket in the corner makes you want to vomit, but you have neither the hydration nor substance to do so because you haven’t had anything to eat or drink in days. How bugs crawl over your skin to eat at the healing, bloody scabs from the lashes you got from the belt because you didn’t climb the attic stairs fast enough. He has had no relief, so yeah, if I had to give him a memory, I gave him one that could help him escape for a bit. While you were training and eating Marius’ food, I was praying for death, so you do not get to tell me about what memories I get to keep.”

Aiden slid from his chair, knees hitting the floor, and buried his face in her chest. “No more, my mate, I beg you.” He wept unabashedly in the face of her trauma and pain.

Meryn looked out at the room. “There are worse creatures in this world than demons.”

Cas watched Meryn carefully. Despite the terrible things she shared, she was glowing magenta, glowing with pride.

Cas clapped her hands. “Oh good for you! You should be proud Meryn. You had the strength to survive.”

Meryn turned to her, then blinked. “Oh yeah, you’re like a mood ring decoder.”

She patted Aiden’s hair and kissed him gently. “I’m not stupid, and I’m not weak. Have some faith in me.”

Standing, he easily picked her up as he straightened, then sat back down, holding her gently. “I have faith in you. It’s the demon I don’t trust.”

Brennus could only stare, his eyes vacant as he processed everything he heard. When he blinked, his eyes came back in focus. “The beautiful lie,” he whispered.

Meryn shrugged. “Why tell them my life sucked?”

Nigel, Neil and Pip were surprisingly dry-eyed. They nodded with an understanding that had her worried for the boys.

Pip moved to lay his head against Meryn’s left side. “Bad times go away like night facing the dawn. You just have to hold out.”

Nigel and Neil scooted in from the other side to place a hand each on Meryn’s leg. “The memory of hunger pains fades when you enjoy new foods with those you love,” Neil said.

Nigel smiled. “Scars heal when you laugh with family.”

Meryn smiled at her brothers. “Exactly. You can’t stay stewing in your shit.”

Cas shook her head, a new appreciation for Meryn’s humor. “So eloquent,” she quipped.

Meryn winked at her.

At the other end of the table, Amelia was on her cell phone. “I don’t care if it’s forbidden, Father! Find a way for me to hurt that woman, or so help me, gods!”

Darian was hovering around his mate looking frantic. “Calm down, honey.”

“You calm down!” She shouted in her mate’s face, causing Darian to stumble back and fall on his rear.

Turning back to her phone. “Yes, mother. It was a thousand times worse than you can imagine. Tell him to figure it out. Love you, too.” She tapped her phone and crossed her arms. “At the very least, we can move that hag to Lycaonia’s border.” She thrummed her fingers on her arm as the floor under them undulated.

Kincaid closed his eyes and the floor stopped vibrating. Grinning he turned to Meryn and the boys. “I did it.”

Meryn gave him a thumbs up.

Thane and Kendrick’s eyes widened at Amelia’s outburst. Cas had a feeling they rarely got to see the happy-go-lucky Bubbles truly angry. In that moment, she could see that she really was Meryn’s cousin.

“I don’t know anything about undead magic or whatnot, but I can help design the most obnoxious and ugly headstone,” Brie promised.

Izzy’s response shocked Cas the most. “And we can torture anyone that is still alive that knew Meryn was getting abused.”

Cas took in the room. The men had fallen to pieces, but the women, the women, were pissed.

“Scorched earth, baby!” Zoe said, hands erupting in flames.

“Later, hun,” Gage said, blowing on her hands in an attempt to extinguish the flames.

Meryn looked around, taking in everyone’s reactions. “I didn’t mean to upset everyone,” she said softly.

The queen shook her head. “You have carried that pain on your own since you were nothing but a baby. It was past time for you to share some of what you experienced so we can help you carry that burden going forward.” The queen looked to her niece, and the fierce pride in her expression had Cas smiling. “Look at you. Look how wonderful you have become despite it. Meryn, you are a miracle.”

Meryn looked back at her squire. “Trust me, please.”

Ryuu’s face contorted. “He’s a demon,” he started.

Meryn pointed to Gage. “And he’s a vampire. According to most human folklore, he’s a blood-sucking fiend that should die with a stake through the heart.”

“I would shield you from this darkness,” Ryuu said, placing a gentle hand on her head.

“Maybe I’m not supposed to be shielded. You’re the one that keeps saying I see things clearer than most.” She pointed to her chest. “He has done wrong. He’s probably responsible for killing thousands of people, but for some reason, he doesn’t feel evil. I can’t explain it.”

“I will be your shield,” Ryuu repeated stubbornly, then he sighed. “But I will be a shield that you can lift when you feel it’s needed.”

“Thank you, Ryuu. That means a lot.”

Aiden rubbed his cheek along her spiky curls. “Just tell me what to do, baby, and I’ll do it.”

She frowned. “You do that anyway,” she said, sounding confused.

Pip giggled, which set off Nigel and Neil.

Around the room, terror and fear faded, and the light of laughter brought about sunbursts of golden love from everyone.

She turned and met the queen’s eye. The queen nodded. Of course, she’d sense it too.

“A miracle,” Cas whispered.

Kendrick and the queen stared at Meryn, looking contemplative.

Ari, with his hand subconsciously still on his sidearm, sat back. “Can I take it we’re tabling the demon thing for now?”

Meryn looked around. Everyone was nodding. She nodded to Ari. “I think that best for now.” She then looked at the queen. “No fading,” she repeated.

The queen smiled. “As I said before. For now.”

Meryn’s expression became stubborn.

“I lost both of my parents when they decided to fade, Meryn.”

Meryn turned to her, looking surprised. “Fae really do that?”

Cas laughed. “Of course they do. I know to humans, eternal life sounds like a blessing, but in a way, it can be a curse too. Both of my parents were so tired, so very, very tired.” She thought back to her last days with them. “I was young, barely of age when I left, and like you, I was stubborn. I did not want to lose them, but now, hundreds of years later, I understand a bit more.”

Meryn grunted.

“Meryn, have you ever visited a cancer ward?”

She shook her head. “Never had to. Sounds depressing.”

Cas nodded. “It can be, but it was also liberating. Humans have such short lives, but some of those people were embracing their end with excitement for what came next. Death is closest friends with humans, and they feel it. But, what I felt from each and every one of them, even those that were recovering, was a bone-deep weariness. It was the closest I have ever seen humans come to fading. They were just ready for everything to be done. No more pain. No more of each day bleeding into the next. Apathy terrifies fae more than the threat

of death.” She smiled at her queen. The one permanent fixture in her life, in all of the fae’s lives. “I realize now that fading should be celebrated, not feared.”

“But I will miss them!”

Cas eyed the smaller woman. “That sounds like a personal problem.”

Meryn’s mouth dropped, then slowly, it closed. “I guess it is. But it sucks.”

Cas turned to Darian and Oron to see them staring at their mother.

Gods guide my words, let them become the foundation to help them face the future, she prayed.

“Fading to the fae is like stepping into the next room. They are not truly gone, just enjoying new scenery.” She stood and curtsied to the queen again before straightening. “Our queen has been working the equivalent of doubles for thousands of years.” She swallowed hard against her own grief. “If there is anything I can do to help your transition, please command me,” she offered.

The queen wiped at her own eyes. “I think you are doing exactly what needs doing. Stay by my sons’ sides and help them. That is all I ask.”

She placed a hand over her heart and bowed. “I will serve both of my princes gladly.”

When she was stood, both Darian and Oron looked tired, but the terror had dispersed.

“Well, this changes my timeline a bit,” Meryn muttered, reaching under the table.

“What timeline, baby?” Aiden asked.

“The things to do with Uncle and Auntie timeline. I distinctly remember someone promising me fishing trips.”

Brennus grinned. “What else is on that list? Because if I join Eamon and you do not have at least the very basic

memories of a happy childhood, he will kick my ass.”

Meryn opened her laptop. “I want to go to an amusement park. I think Auntie will like corndogs.”

The queen looked concerned. “You want me there too?”

“Duh. I also want to try bumper cars. They looked destructive.”

“What about a water park?” Brie suggested.

Meryn half gagged. “I’m not swimming in other people’s pee.”

Brie laughed and nodded. “There is that.”

Meryn hesitated. “But, more than anything I...”

Brennus wasn’t the only one leaning forward. “What is it, darling? You can have whatever you want.”

“I want a real family Christmas. I want to stay up and drink cocoa and watch Christmas shows, and then the next morning, I want a HUGE breakfast and to open gifts and eat lots and lots of food,” Meryn said, in a rush of excitement. “And snow! And snowmen and caroling and going to an ugly sweater contest.” She smiled shyly. “I want to know what it feels like to have my own family.”

“Cord!” Brennus yelled. “We have to start a list of holiday foods.”

The queen tapped at her lips. “I have also heard of sledding. That seemed exciting.”

Cas watched all of this in wonder.

Priest squeezed her hand under the table. “I told you. From fear and terror to love. It’s what she does.”

“Thank all the gods for that.”

“Amen.”

Chapter Nine

Talk of the upcoming Christmas dominated the conversation for a while before, eventually, they had to face reality again.

Aiden looking completely exhausted, scrubbed at his face with his hands. “Kendrick, how did the meeting with the two Vanguard squads go?”

“Well. They all served before, so they knew the struggles of working with the Witches’ Council.” He paused. “I found them to be refreshingly mature.”

Aiden snorted. “They’re older than unit warriors, Kendrick. All of them have done full rotations in pillar cities.”

“Very true,” Kendrick agreed. “Speaking of Storm Keep,” his eyes swung to Meryn. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about a certain orphanage worker dying suddenly would you?”

Meryn sputtered in her coffee. Ryuun passed her a napkin. She wiped her face and looked at Kendrick. “Seriously?”

Next to her, Nigel and Neil exchanged high-fives, and Pip danced in his chair.

Kendrick frowned. “Based on that reaction, I am guessing you didn’t.”

Meryn began to grin evilly, then chuckle. “Maybe he expired all by himself,” she suggested innocently.

“Yeah, maybe he died on the shitter or something,” Nigel suggested.

“Or ate himself to death. That would be amazing,” Neil countered.

“Or maybe, maybe he tried to eat himself to death and had to poop so much he died,” Pip added, jumping in on the fun.

Thane palmed his face. “I’m going to kill those idiots.”

Meryn bristled. “My boys aren’t idiots.”

Thane shook his head. “No, they are adorable. I’m talking about my idiots.”

Kendrick blinked. “Ah. Yes. Your brothers. I had forgotten they returned home. So sad to hear about the worker.” He paused for a second. “Anyway.” He turned back to Aiden. “I gave the Vanguard orders to infiltrate the city in pairs, not revealing that two squads had returned. They’ll be checking in with Caiden regularly.” He sighed and looked at Amelia. “Though he and his brothers may be busy wrangling your mother.”

Amelia sniffed. “I regret nothing.”

The queen turned to Kendrick. “Any word regarding Zoe’s situation? I know that the Elder Councils of Lycaonia, Noctem Falls, and Éire Danu have all submitted inquiries. We have had little to no response.” Her expression turned frosty. “Magnus has also run into a dead end, as it were, tracking down who might have been responsible for the Committee nonsense.”

Kendrick snarled. “Dead end, my ass. Literally every lead we had ended up with a corpse or shallow grave. As much as I would love, and I do mean love to find those responsible, I feel any more efforts in that direction would be wasted.”

“Muppets,” Meryn said in a growly voice like Kendrick.

“Exactly,” he snorted. Continuing, he looked back to the queen. “To add to the frustration, the Witches’ Council went into closed-door proceedings a few days ago. Normally, I’d ask Caroline to eavesdrop if she could, but since she helped Zoe escape, she had to go to Noctem Falls to avoid the fallout. I have no idea what they’re up to, but it’s something big.” He brought his hand up to rub his jaw. “Very big. They haven’t left the council chambers in days.”

Meryn exhaled loudly. “And those assholes aren’t tech savvy, which means I have nothing to hack into. They still use crystals to communicate, for goodness sake,” she paused, then

eyed Kendrick. “Any luck finding a way to detect forming portals?”

Kendrick slumped back in his chair. “It’s taking longer than I had hoped it would. If it were a normal portal, I would have access to see how they work by bugging Darian to create a few, but theirs are different, darker. There’s an unknown element involved that has proved to be a delightful challenge.”

Anne looked at her mate. “Well, as long as you’re entertained, I guess,” she drawled.

Meryn laughed.

There was a knock at the door, and the queen quickly turned to the table. “Not a word, please.”

Cas understood. If it got out at all that their queen may be fading, especially given what was happening, it would be pure chaos.

Portia stepped in, smiling. “My queen, we have a rather unique visitor.” She sighed, shaking her head before she wrinkled her nose, then pinched the skin between her eyebrows. Despite the obvious frustration, the normally austere woman was still smiling.

“Unique? Portia, I do not think I have ever heard you describe someone that way.”

She dropped her hand and gave a wry grin. “You will see.” She leaned back out the door and nodded.

Moments later, the entire doorway filled.

At first, all Cas saw was fur.

When the person turned to face them, after going through the doorway sideways, she realized that it was fur. A lot of it.

“Holy shit Gilheim, did you bring us a boar?” Meryn said, staring at the newcomer.

There was a loud thump as the man dumped his gift on the floor.

“Oh, gods above,” Cas whispered.

The tall, raven-haired individual was, for lack of a better term, exquisite.

His torso was bare, showing off perfectly sculpted arms and chest, but on his lower half, he wore fur breeches. “Greetings, Daughter of Eamon!” Gilheim smiled, showing off a perfect set of pearly white teeth.

Cas clutched at her chest and noticed every woman at the table was similarly affected.

Meryn hopped out of her chair and ran around the table straight for the gorgeous green male. “I missed you,” she said, hugging him around the waist.

The large man simply lifted her and hugged her close. “And I have missed you as well.” He sat her back down gently. Pointing to the floor, he beamed proudly. “I remember how much you enjoyed the one you had in our village. I could do no less than bring you your own.”

He looked around. “How is little Creelee?”

Izzy sighed, looking sad. “He’s been helping to take care of Meryn’s sprites, Felix, Feris, and Finley. He isn’t as affected by the cold as they are, so he’s been making sure they have plenty of food and blankets in their tiny house.”

Meryn sniffed. “I miss my lil guys, but they’re safer by the warming stone Zoe made.” She eyed the large animal that was dripping blood on the floor and brightened a bit. “Heck yeah! I haven’t had boar since my visit. I bet Creelee would like some of this.”

Gilheim frowned. “Does your mate not hunt for you?”

Meryn thought it over a moment. “He orders me brownies.”

Gilheim looked over to where the men sat as if evaluating each individual. “Ah. I see.” He smiled down at Meryn. “I will hunt for you so that you and your child will stay healthy.”

“Now, wait a damn minute,” Aiden said, standing quickly.

All the men present bristled at the unsaid implications.

Oron looked down at his mate. “That’s the goblin you met when you snuck off to the Dark Forest?”

Izzy chuckled nervously. “Yeah, neat, huh?”

Cas whirled to face Izzy. “He’s a goblin?” She was raised in Éire Danu and never thought of going to the Dark Forest. Looks like she had missed out.

Meryn nodded at the question. “I know, right?”

Aiden went to his mate and pulled her next to him. “I can hunt for my mate.”

Gilheim tilted his head. “But do you?” The goblin then nodded sagely. “It is wise to know one’s limitations. There is no shame in not being able to hunt. That is why most villages have hunters. I will help feed Eamon’s daughter as I am a hunter for my people.”

Aiden sputtered, unable to form words.

Meryn shook her head. “I’ve been miserable eating fruit.”

Gilheim looked concerned. “With the colder weather, you will need a good fatty piece of pork to keep you warm.” He looked around the room. When he saw the queen sitting with her crown, he asked. “Ms. Queen, have the fae forgotten how to be cold?”

The queen blinked, then blushed, having been caught staring as well. “It has been a long time for us. Do your people remember?”

Gilheim nodded. “Yes, from the stories passed on to each generation.” He pointed to his pants. “My friend made me these. Her family remembered how to use the fur of the animal to make clothing. It is much warmer than a loincloth.”

“He had a loincloth,” Amelia choked out the question.

Izzy sighed. “Oh yeah.”

“Is-a-belle,” Oron ground out each syllable.

Meryn looked over to Cord. “Cord, what do we do with my boar?”

Cord was already rolling up his sleeves. “It’s been a few decades, but I can butcher this with no problems.”

“Yes! Can we grill it?”

“Grill, sauté, or even fry,” Cord assured her with certainty. “I seem to recall someone wanting pork belly tacos.”

Meryn nodded enthusiastically, then looked up at her tall friend. “You didn’t have to come all this way to bring me a boar.”

Gilheim ruffled her hair. “I was sent here by my village elder. The boar was a happy coincidence.” He looked around. “Which one of you leads the fae warriors?”

Aiden cleared his throat. “That would be me.”

Gilheim nodded. “If you hunt the foul ones, then maybe you do not have the time to feed your mate.” He shook his head. “You should still find a way to provide her with meat, though.”

Aiden stepped forward. “Foul ones?”

Gilheim opened the pouch at his waist and pulled out over a dozen necklaces.

Aiden took them and counted. “Fourteen?”

“They wear these to blend in with the forest,” Gilheim grinned wickedly. “They underestimated the hunting techniques of the goblins and the dangers of the Dark Forest.”

“Gilheim, you are badass!”

He looked hurt. “My ass is bad?”

The word ‘no’ was spoken around the room. The men eyed their mates with sidelong glances.

Meryn shook her head. “What that means is that it’s really, really cool that you can defeat so many enemies.”

Gilheim scratched the back of his head. “It wasn’t that hard, honestly.”

Aiden’s mouth dropped. “How?”

Gilheim clapped a hand on Aiden’s shoulder. “As you are a warrior and Meryn’s mate. I can show you the fighting techniques of the goblins. I would feel better knowing you can defend her.”

“I can defend her just fine!” Aiden refuted.

Brie half-shoved Aiden to one side. “Ignore him for the moment. I’d like to learn, please.”

Priest stood. “As would I.” Cas moved to stand next to her mate. She was not going to miss this training session.

Gilheim turned thoughtful. “I believe that the more who know how to fight the foul ones, the better. It would benefit everyone. I can show you the basics. Though I am unsure how much you can learn, you do not have the ears or nose of a goblin.” He looked around. “May I use that open space?” he asked, pointing to the area by the courtyard door.

The queen nodded. “By all means.”

Gilheim walked over to the space and closed his eyes. “You may attack.”

Aiden walked over, then hesitated. Looking back at Meryn, he seemed unsure if he should actually attack the goblin.

Cas could almost hear his indecision. ‘Should I hurt the goblin that my mate has befriended?’

“I can hear you breathing, mate of Eamon’s Daughter. If you do not swing, I will,” Gilheim said good-naturedly.

Aiden shook his head, pulled back, and let his arm go.

Gilheim easily took one step back. Reaching out with his fingertips, he was able to swat the punch away.

“Whoa!” Meryn breathed.

Brie, who was standing at the edge of the area, shook her head. “How did you know where his fist would be?”

Gilheim pointed to his pointed ears. “I could hear the air moving.”

“This is some monk-type shit,” Meryn whispered from her place next to Brie.

“Again,” Gilheim said, folding his hand forward in a gesturing motion.

Aiden calculated his steps, then, with as little movement as possible, tried for an uppercut.

Gilheim simply leaned back to avoid the punch. Throwing his weight backward, he flipped, catching Aiden under the chin in an arcing kick.

“That is so cool!” Meryn cheered, ignoring her mate on the ground.

Aiden was smiling when he stood, though he was rubbing his jaw. “He’s taking it easy on me. Thank you for the demonstration.”

Gilheim opened his eyes. Being closer, Cas could see how beautiful they truly were. Double irises in different shades of green that were filled with kindness.

“I feel maybe the shifters could achieve this. I am unsure about the senses of the others,” Gilheim said.

Gage stood at the table and walked over. He pointed to Aiden. “He had us start training to fight blind when he first arrived. He concentrated on listening for movement, like the rustle of clothing and whatnot, but that’s not what you’re doing.”

Gilheim shook his head. “Goblins hunt in the Dark Forest. We have to use all our senses. I can try to show you what I do, as I said, the basics, but there are some things I do not have words for. Like how my sense of smell works with my hearing to create a picture,” he said, fumbling with the words.

Brie placed a hand on his arm. “No, you are explaining it well.” She sighed. “I’m only human with some mate-shifter perks. I don’t think I can learn this.”

“Gilheim, can you observe me?” Gage asked.

Gilheim nodded and stepped to one side.

Gage took his place and closed his eyes. “Ok, sir. Try to hit me, but maybe hold back a bit in case this doesn’t work? I promised the boys I’d help them with dinner tonight. I don’t need to be in traction.”

Aiden rolled his eyes, but when he took a fighting stance, his eyes were sharp and calculating. Again, trying to move as little as possible, Aiden darted forward. At the last minute, he fainted left, then swung.

Gage turned his head and brought his arm up and blocked the blow. His eyes popped open. “Fuck, I did it.”

Aiden playfully shook Gage’s shoulder back and forth. “Hell yeah, you did. What did you do differently?”

Gage pointed to Gilheim. “It was what he said about his sense of smell compensating for his hearing. Vampires have decent hearing, but I was concentrating on the wrong thing. Blood, Aiden! Blood! I ignored the sound of cloth moving and focused on where the sound of flowing blood was. I played to my strengths.”

Cas snapped her fingers. “That’s what I was going to tell you and forgot in all the revelations earlier.” She wagged a finger at Aiden. “Like the ferals, I think you’re underestimating the citizens of Éire Danu.”

Aiden looked offended. “I have not.”

Cas nodded. “You have, but in your defense, you’re not the only one,” she eyed the queen, who also looked surprised at the accusation. She continued. “How many fae craftsmen have you contacted to make gear to track the enemy? I have a gift for seeing auras, but I’m not the only one. Have you asked the people for help in monitoring the area?”

The queen sat back. “We have not.”

Cas stood straighter. “We are not a city of potential victims, Your Majesty. Put a little more faith in your children. It is our duty to protect you, not the other way around.”

The queen shook her head. “I cannot lose any more of my children.”

Gilheim went to the queen and placed his massive hand on her shoulder. “Then you dishonor them, and I believe you are better than that, Ms. Queen. Meryn told me how you love all your children, even those of us who live in the Dark Forest. But we knew that already. We have not forgotten how you created a place for us to live peacefully. It would hurt me deeply if you did not allow me to fight to defend my home.”

Cas took a step forward. “Your Majesty, it is exactly as he says. This is our home too. It is our right to fight and defend it.” She turned to Aiden. “What about House Aindan? They make fae weapons.”

Aiden sighed. “I have been foolish. You’re right, we haven’t reached out to the people at all.”

Ari walked over to Gilheim. “Can we assume the Dark Forest is secure?”

Gilheim smiled. “There are no foul ones within our wood. Remember, it isn’t just the goblins who call the forest their home. A number of dark fae have taken to playing with the foul ones before killing them. They haven’t had this much fun in a millennium.”

The queen took in everything Gilheim said. “You are right. I have been discourteous to my children.” She took a deep breath and looked to Meryn. “Thanks to your insight, I have started a project with Portia. Across from the bulletin board listing our missing and dead, I have asked the families of the slain to create murals of the accomplishments of the departed to celebrate them.” She looked at Cas. “They should not be remembered as victims. They are more than that. When the announcement goes out to our people explaining the project, I

will have Portia ask for volunteers to step forward if they have a gift to share in the defense of our city.” Turning to Darian, she smiled. “I would like for you to organize those efforts.”

Darian stood and placed his fist over his heart before bowing. “It shall be as you command.”

Gilheim nodded. “I must get back to my village.” He clapped a sympathetic hand on Aiden’s shoulder. “Do not worry, my friend. I will hunt for your mate.”

Once again, Aiden was shocked into silence.

Gilheim moved past him and lifted Meryn up for hugs before setting her back down. “When the foul ones are a thing of the past, I will show you the deepest part of the forest. I think you will find some of the dark denizens amusing.”

“Hell yeah!” Meryn threw her hand in the air.

“Good hunting,” he waved to the others and left.

A collective sigh echoed around the room.

“Lordy be,” Brie said, shaking her head.

Cas chuckled. “His aura is nearly pure white. He does not have a devious bone in his body.”

Meryn nodded. “He is a good peep.”

Nigel pointed to Pip. “Is he nearly white too?”

Cas eyed the young vampire and shook her head. “He is mostly white, but Master Pip has a mischievous streak in him a mile wide. He is actually a bit more devious than you would think.”

“Badass!” Pip said, sounding like Meryn.

Meryn walked over to the boys and patted Pip on the head. “I’m so proud of you.”

Cas looked around the room. “The next closest in innocence is that one,” she said, winking at Kincaid.

The witch blushed. “I’m not all that innocent. I can be badass too.”

Kendrick stood and stretched. “Cas, your ability, can it detect lies?”

She nodded. “Absolutely. Not all who see auras can, but it is something I honed in on, living with humans.”

“Could you come with us to interrogate our prisoners?” Kendrick asked.

Cas looked to Priest who was thrumming with excitement. He nodded. “Our afternoon activity isn’t until later, we have time to see how amazing my brother is.”

Kincaid swallowed hard, looking sick. “I *think* I know how to open the box, but I can’t make any promises.”

“Box?” she asked.

Priest pointed to Kincaid who was being manhandled by Nigel and Neil. “In one of our raids, he created that box I told you about. The super temperature one. He created it around two of the ferals who kidnapped the fae. He was the only one to catch them alive.”

“No time like the present,” Kendrick pointed to the door. “The sooner we can track down the rest of the missing fae, the sooner we can concentrate our efforts on eliminating the ‘foul ones’.” He looked around the room. “Who’s in?”

Gage turned to Priest who nodded. “I got him.”

Gage smiled. “I’ll have to bow out on this one. I have plans with the boys.”

Ari and Brie looked at each other then, both sighed. Brie eyed the queen. “We got more names last night from Vivi in Noctem Falls. We’re going to arrange the meetings with the families and update that damned bulletin board.”

The queen nodded solemnly.

Darian looked down at his mate, then over to his brother.

Oron grinned. “Are you asking if I will stay here and eat cake and drink coffee with both our mates all afternoon? Then yes, yes I will.”

Darian chuckled. “Asshole.”

“Darian! Do not call your brother an asshole,” the queen chided.

“Of course, mother,” Darian said agreeably. Then turned slightly so that his back was to the queen and mouthed the word, ‘asshole’ to Oron, causing the warrior to laugh.

The queen shook her head and turned to her mate. “That is your influence.”

Brennus shrugged. “I know.”

“We’re in!” Meryn said, walking over to where Kendrick was.

Aiden looked uneasy. “Baby, maybe you should stay here with Izzy and Amelia and eat cake.”

“Fuck that. Those dudes have been in that box for like weeks. I wanna see if they’re still alive.” Her eyes brightened. “And if they are, I wanna see what state they’re in.”

Aiden sighed. “Okay baby.”

“Remember, I may not be able to do anything!” Kincaid shouted as Nigel, Neil and Pip pushed him out the door laughing.

“I am very interested to see how their auras look,” Cas admitted. “I may be able to share what I learn with others in the city who can see auras. Maybe that could help in keeping watch?”

“It would be more than we have now,” Aiden admitted.

“Hurry up! I wanna see if ferals turn into zombies if left locked up long enough!” Meryn said, pulling on Aiden’s hand.

Anne shuddered. “I’m definitely staying here then, eating cake.”

Kendrick kissed the top of her head. “Do not worry my love, they will not be around for long.”

“Good,” she said, picking up her teacup.

“Come on!” Meryn bellowed from the hallway.

Cas shook her head as she and Priest followed the impatient woman out the door.

Chapter Ten

Cas followed the group down to a building in town that had warriors standing out front. She looked up at her mate questioningly, who in return got the deer in the headlights look. “Umm this is the building that we’ve been using as the morgue.”

Cas stopped at stared. Her people were in there, cold and dead.

“The portal is just on the inside. We don’t have to go where the storage part is,” Priest explained, pulling her close.

“I’m being silly.”

“You’re kinda not,” Meryn said, eyeballing the building. “Dead bodies don’t bother me, but morgues are just fucking creepy.”

Cas exhaled in relief. “So, it’s not just me.”

“Nope,” Meryn said, popping the ‘p’.

Pip walked over with a parasol held over his head. Why he needed a parasol when it wasn’t bright or raining, she didn’t know, but he looked surprisingly good with one. He took Meryn’s hand. “I can help you.”

Meryn melted on the spot. “Thanks, Pip.”

Swinging hands, they walked through the door.

“I kinda want one,” she admitted.

“A kid?” Priest asked.

“No, a Pip. He’s adorable.”

“I’m afraid you’re stuck with me instead,” he said, offering her his hand.

Feeling devilish, she brought his hand up and nipped it playfully. “I’ve been remiss in torturing you today.”

He closed his eyes and groaned. “My brothers are going to think I’m the world’s biggest pervert if I walk in there with a hard on.”

Chuckling to herself, she led them into the building. She concentrated on the floor and tried not to look around much. The idea her people were dead on slabs here made her ill.

“And I wore slacks today, so it’s totally visible,” Priest complained.

She looked up and saw he wasn’t worried about his pants in the slightest. He was trying to make her smile. “I love you,” she admitted. It felt so right that the ease of saying the words no longer bothered her.

He blinked. “Huh?”

“Actually, this is where you’re supposed to say, ‘I love you too’.”

“I do! Gods, I wish I could get some time alone with you. I feel like saying the words aren’t enough.” he admitted.

Behind them someone cleared their throat. When they turned the fae warrior frowned. “Honestly Priest, there’s a time and place for that sort of thing,” he said, pointing to Priest’s crotch.

“Balder, I swear, it’s not what you think.”

“I’m sure. Head on in, everyone else has gone through.”

“Balder...” Priest said, walking past the warrior on his way to the portal.

When Cas looked up the warrior gave her a slow wink.

Unable to help herself she burst out laughing.

“Gods! Cas, you can’t do that, umm Balder, she’s just nervous to be here,” he stammered.

Still laughing she pulled him through to the other side.

Priest looked mortified. “Balder is going to hate me.”

“I sincerely doubt that,” she said, wiping her eyes.

They walked through what looked to be an empty warehouse toward a large white box in the middle of the floor.

Kincaid looked at Kendrick forlornly.

Kendrick shook his head. "This is all you, witchling."

"You got this Kincaid!" Meryn said encouragingly.

"We beleeeb in you!" the twins echoed.

Kincaid exhaled. "Right, just like the warming stones. I just have to let it know what I want."

Kendrick blinked. "I thought we told you two not to do unstructured spells?"

Kincaid pointed. "You have a better idea?"

Kendrick shook his head. "I don't actually."

Kincaid closed his eyes and placed his hand on the wall facing them. Taking a deep breath Cas heard him whisper. "Release."

Seconds later, the wall crumbled, and the foulest stench she had ever smelt assaulted them all.

Meryn simply leaned over and puked onto the concrete. Thane and the twins were there as Ryuu held her gently.

Aiden seeing his mate was taken care of, grit his teeth and stepped inside where a single feral was hissing at them from the corner. He turned back to Kincaid. "I thought you said you trapped two?"

Kincaid was swallowing repeatedly. "I did," he answered, weakly.

Using magic, Thane cleaned Meryn and the mess up, then turned back to the box. "There's only one?"

Meryn held her nose and peered in. "Yeah, it looks like he ate the other one," she said, pointing to a place on a bone that bore teeth marks between the rotting flesh.

Pip had both hands over his nose. "It smells worse than poop in there."

Neil steadied himself and exhaled shakily. “Still not worse than finding Augustus Pettier in sewage.”

Meryn’s eyes widened. “Really?”

Nigel nodded. “Yeah, that was way worse.”

“Dude,” she said, looking impressed.

The feral swiped at Aiden who knocked the hand away easily, looking annoyed. “Well?”

Kendrick stepped forward to look down at the feral. “Tell us what you know.”

“Why?”

Kendrick looked around the inside of the box. “Tell us what you know or we reseal you inside this box.” He eyed the rotting body. “That may hold you over for a few more weeks.”

The feral’s eyes looked spooked. “No. Anything but that.”

“Tell us what you know, and I will kill you quickly.”

The feral looked around as if calculating his chances of escape. Seeing no way out he slumped forward. “Okay.”

Cas went to step closer but her mate placed his body in front of hers. He was no longer laughing or concerned about Balder. He had gone into full protective mode. Gods, he was so sexy.

She reached out and ran her hand over one of his ass cheeks. He turned back gave her a smile, then a quick shake of his head.

Right, he needed to focus.

If he wouldn’t let her step forward without standing in front of her, she simply pushed him forward staying behind him. He stepped where she needed and she got a good look at the creature’s aura.

She thought it would have been pure black, but it wasn’t. It was a dark grey covered in what looked like a brown sludge that kept bubbling and coating the aura. She covered her

mouth with her hand. The tumbling motion coupled with the smell was making her ill.

“Why kill so many fae?” Aiden asked.

The feral laughed. “The fact that you are asking means you don’t know as much as they feared.”

“Who is they?” Kendrick demanded.

The feral grinned, showing yellow jagged teeth. “The Eirsons, of course. The ones who discovered a way around becoming feral even before the necklaces.”

“How did they manage that?” Kincaid asked.

The feral snarled. “If I knew that, I wouldn’t need the necklace would I?”

Cas looked at him and was surprised at how she felt. She thought she would have felt anger or even grief over the loss of the people this man had killed, but seeing his rage, his own terror at the end he faced, she felt pity.

“What were you called? Before?” she asked softly.

The feral turned to her, shock in his expression. He looked down. “I was Raul, I had a wolf in me before.”

“Raul, do you have any family you would like notified so they don’t continue to look for you?” she asked.

He looked up, his eyes half-crazed. “They make you kill your family first.”

A light amethyst covered his aura, her color for a lie. It flickered. A possible half-lie.

She stepped back. Priest reached behind him, to take her hand.

“Raul, you have betrayed your people, and you will be facing our gods in the next few minutes. If what you tell us helps save others it may make a difference that will help you in the hereafter. Where can we find them?” Aiden asked, his eyes stony.

Raul looked back down. “The gods abandoned us centuries ago. You have no idea what has been done.”

Cas saw a flare of light purple light erupt around the man’s heart again.

“Where can we find the missing people?” Kendrick demanded again.

“Starfire network, user, rbircham, password... well, I’ll let you figure that out,” he said before launching himself right at Meryn, teeth aimed for her throat.

In one smooth swing, Aiden brought his hand down, crushing the man’s skull and driving him into the white porcelain floor, blood splattering around the flattened skull.

Seeing the threat eliminated, Ryu removed the blue glow from around Meryn’s body.

Meryn looked up at her mate. “I need my laptop!”

“I know, I know. You need to tap tap on your magic frisbee. Hold on, baby.” He looked to Cas. “Was he lying?”

She nodded. “He lied twice, or he spoke in such a way he believed he was lying twice.” She felt tears gather. “The first was a half-lie. It was when he said they make you kill your family first. I believe they are still alive, he either feared we’d use them against him or he feared them learning what he had become. The color flickered when he said it. I think the process of killing families first was true, but he hadn’t, which made it a half-lie. The second lie was when he said the gods abandoned us. He didn’t truly believe those words.” She looked at Aiden. “He was *not* lying when he said we have no idea what has been done.” She looked to Meryn. “And he wasn’t lying about the network information.”

Meryn had Aiden’s hand and was pulling for all she was worth, unable to move her mate a smidge. “Ai-den!”

Aiden lifted his mate into his arms. “Come on boys,” he said to Nigel, Neil and Pip. Together with Pierce and Ryu in tow they headed toward the portal.

Kendrick laid a hand on Kincaid's shoulder. "Damn fine work you did. If Meryn can get even a single address from the network information, you could have saved hundreds."

Kincaid flushed. "I wish I could have figured out how to open it sooner."

Thane shook his head. "You can't think like that. This thing had both Kendrick and I stumped, and we've been around a lot longer than you, Bayberry."

Priest turned to Kendrick. "Can you let Ari know I'm taking Cas out for a bit?"

Kendrick nodded slowly. "Take every precaution."

"I will, sir. I would never risk my mate. It will be a very quick trip, then right back to Éire Danu."

Cas turned to her mate. "We're leaving Éire Danu?"

He nodded. "For what I want to show you, yes."

Cas began to feel a bit nervous and a bit excited.

"Gentlemen," Priest said, dipping his head. With her hand in his he led her back toward the portal where Balder waited for them.

The fae looked pleased. "Good work in there."

Priest puffed out his chest. "Kincaid could be the key to cracking this thing wide open."

Balder looked just as proud. "I'll make sure he gets extra desserts tonight."

Priest pointed to the portal. "Can you open it to my happy place?"

Balder's eyes darted to Cas, then he raised a brow. "You sure?"

Priest nodded. "I'm sure. They have a very special guest right now."

"You have your own way back, right?" Balder asked.

Priest nodded. “Yup, it’s a custom portal as a gift from the queen.”

Balder shook his head. “I would say you’re spoiled, but Her Majesty likes to take care of us warriors.” He placed his palm on the stone frame and a new portal shimmered into place. “Have fun,” he drawled.

“Priest, where in the hell are you taking me?” she asked.

“Trust me.”

“I do, but...” She cast a glance back at Balder as they walked toward the portal, he was wiggling his fingers at them.

“We’re fine,” Priest reassured her.

Sighing, she stepped through the portal and prayed she wouldn’t have to kill her mate.

She had to shield her eyes once they were through. “It’s so bright here.”

Priest looked sad. “Just normal daylight, hun.”

She realized that her eyes had adjusted to the dimmer sun of Éire Danu. Looking around, she took in her surroundings to distract herself. Frowning, she pointed to a worn couch. “Are we in an apartment?”

She felt relieved. She wouldn’t have to kill her mate.

Priest nodded. “It’s mine.”

“I figured that, or we’d have some explaining to do. Why are we here?”

It looked so generic it felt odd. There was nothing of Priest here. It seemed to be for show. “You live here?”

He shook his head. “No, I rent this place because it was the closest location I could secure that is within walking distance

of where I want to take you,” he explained.

“Come on.” He went to the door and pointed to the hallway. “Your surprise awaits.”

Grinning, she hurried to catch up with him.

It didn’t take long for the signs to appear on the side of the road they were walking down.

Black Bay Bird Sanctuary.

Correction. She *was* going to have to kill her mate.

“Priest?”

“Hmm?”

“That sign says there’s a bird sanctuary here.”

“Imagine that.”

“I’m going to murder you.”

“Now Cas...”

“Horribly. In your sleep. You know I hate birds!” she exploded. Then looked at him. “No offense.”

Rolling his eyes skyward, he pulled her along. “I have someone I want you to meet.”

“If it’s a bird, I’ll tell Kincaid to lock you in a box!”

“Cas...”

“I’ll have Meryn add you to every Most Wanted list in the country,” she continued, fuming every step of the way.

He sighed. “You’ll see.”

“I eat birds, Priest. They are not my friends.”

He leered at her. “You can eat me later.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You really wanna risk that right now?” she asked, her eyes looking down at his crotch.

He gasped. “Babe! That’s cruel. He didn’t do anything to you. He’s still recovering from the ice water from last night.”

She couldn't help herself. She laughed.

He smiled.

“You're not forgiven.”

She kept giving him the evil eye as they walked through the sliding glass doors of the very modern-looking facility.

“Mr. Aerdan! If you had let us know you were coming, we could have made arrangements, lunch at the very least,” a small round woman said, fussing over her mate.

“Danielle, I'd like you to meet my wife, Cassandra,” he said, lifting Cas' hand to kiss.

The portly woman turned to her and actually dabbed at her eyes with a small white handkerchief. “Oh, bless you. I've been so worried about this one, always alone, you know. Such a good boy too. Donates probably more than he should.”

“Donates?” she asked.

“Oh yes! I don't think we could operate at all without his generosity.” She turned to Priest. “I imagine you're here for your special friend.”

Priest nodded eagerly. “I'd like to introduce Cassandra.”

Danielle smiled. “Normally, I'd have to educate you on what to do, but I know Mr. Aerdan here will show you the ropes. This way.”

They walked past what looked like small infirmaries, cages, and even a play area with hoops and perches.

Using a keycard, she unlocked the door. “Have fun, you two.” She waved, then walked away.

Priest held the door open, and she eyed him.

“Trust me, my love.”

Stepping through, she didn't see anything threatening, so she continued walking all the way inside.

“Wash your hands, then use the sanitizer,” Priest instructed from the sink.

Grumbling about slow deaths, she washed and sanitized her hands.

Priest went to the small cage to the left.

“Hey baby girl, did you miss me?”

Baby girl? What was he crooning at?

He opened the cage and pulled out a tiny feather ball.

“Priest, what the hell is that?”

“Don’t be shy, Precious. This is my mate. She won’t hurt you,” he said in gentle tones.

Priest lifted the tiny thing so she could see it clearly. When it blinked at her, Cas’ heart was lost. “Oh my gods, Priest, what is that?” she asked, keeping her voice quiet to not scare the baby.

“This is Precious. She’s a saw-whet owlet. She’s only just fledged.”

“Oh, look at those eyes!”

“She is my special friend.”

The small owl rubbed her beak along his thumb.

“She’s so tiny.”

“Most birds are.”

“Is... is she okay?”

Priest nodded. “She is now. Had a slight fracture in her wing, but we took care of that here.”

She looked at her mate as he held up the bird and bopped his nose to her beak. “They’re all abandoned, aren’t they? The birds here.”

Grinning ruefully, he nodded. “I try to help out as much as I can. Did you want to hold her?”

She shook her head but blew the tiny thing a few kisses. When the owlet replied with a few clicks back, she knew she was a changed woman.

He gently placed the tiny bird back in her cage and covered it up with an adorable pink baby blanket. He walked back over to the sink and rewashed and sanitized his hands. “So, what do you think of birds now?”

“They’re not so bad.”

“Good, because you are kinda mated to one.”

“Is that why you brought me here?”

He nodded. “That and you’re too loving and beautiful to truly hate anything, especially something I care deeply for.”

“Does she need any food? Doesn’t she need light?” she asked, turning back to the cage, pointing to the cover.

“Look at you, becoming a bird momma,” he teased.

“You’d have to have a heart of ice and stone not to be affected by that level of cute,” she protested.

“She’s fine. Remember, owls are usually busiest at night, so she’s resuming her nap.” He walked over to a small fridge and pulled out two bottles of water. He handed her one, then sat down at the round table by the window.

Cas took her water and joined him. “Does coming here help with your bird?”

He shook his head. “He and I don’t get along, never have. I don’t know how to bird, and he doesn’t understand fae.”

“Danielle seemed really comfortable letting you back here.”

He grinned. “About twenty or thirty years ago, I got permission to spend time in the human world to pursue my degree in Zoology, with a concentration in Ornithology, or the study of birds. I thought it would help me to shift, but it didn’t.” He pointed to the building. “But, I met so many people wanting to help and study birds that I knew I had found something I could do. It didn’t matter if I was a shifter or a fae. I was Mr. Aerdan, philanthropist and bird expert, as it were.”

“The eagles back home wouldn’t help?” she asked.

He shook his head. “To them, I am dead. I tried once to ask questions. When I saw one in the city, they walked around me as if I didn’t even exist.” He began playing with the edge of the bottle label. “The eagles of Éire Danu are different than the lions. The lions integrated socially and politically. Not only do Ari and Declan serve as unit warriors, there are also Broden and Ramsey. I am the only harpy eagle shifter to serve as a unit warrior. They keep to themselves in a very insular fashion.”

Cas took a swig of water. “I honestly forgot they even lived in Éire Danu until I met you. You never see them in the city.”

“They own the skies and the canopies. They prefer it that way.”

“Could the queen do nothing?”

“Once she heard what was happening, she issued an edict that prevented any one group from acting in such a way that went against the fae’s values.”

“How was it received?”

“Supposedly, they began cracking the shells of eggs with baby birds too weak to break free themselves, but thus far, none have survived.”

“That’s bullshit.”

He shook his head. “The queen insisted on the fae observing hatchings for the following three decades after I was born. Since I am such an anomaly, the eagles think that the method they had was more humane. The babies simply fall asleep in their shells and pass peacefully. Once that shell is broken, the baby struggles to break free. If they’re too weak, they can suffocate from being unable to hold their heads up. They’re simply too weak to survive.”

“But...” She looked over to the cage that held the baby bird.

His hand covered hers. “Unhatched eggs are few and far between. Less than a dozen since I was born.”

“Do they have Elders? Could none of them help?”

He nodded slowly. “They do have Elders, and they did support the changes dictated by the queen.”

“Did they reach out to help you?”

He shook his head.

“Assholes. If I never see one in life, it will be too soon.”

He winced. “We may have to visit them.”

“Why on earth would we go see them if they treat you like shit?”

“We’ll need a nest.”

“A nest?”

He nodded.

Gears turned in her brain, and everything fell into place.

“Priest! Will I lay a motherfucking egg?”

“Maybe?”

“Maybe!”

“I don’t think there have ever been any eagle, fae matings before, so this is all uncharted territory.”

She pointed to the cage. “That’s why you brought me here! I’m going to have a baby bird.” She froze. “Oh, gods.”

Priest stood and rounded the table to kneel next to her. “Just for a week or so, then they’ll shift to their human form.” He took her hands. “And that’s if you even lay an egg.”

“Do you hear the words coming out of your mouth! *If* I lay an egg! Lay an egg!”

“It’s a part of what I am,” he said softly, looking dejected.

“I know that! It’s just...just... mother didn’t cover egg laying when I was a girl, Priest.”

He smiled up at her. “Neither did mine.”

“Not funny.”

“Kinda funny.”

“We need to speak to the Eagle Elders.”

“I know.”

“Let’s go seem them right now.”

He stood. “Now? As in now, now?”

“Do you really think I’ll be able to sleep tonight, much less do anything sexy, if I don’t know what will happen?”

He paled. “You’re right. We can head there now.”

“A fucking egg,” she shook her head.

“Cas, I’m sorry.”

She looked at him and stood to wrap her arms around his neck. “Don’t be sorry, this isn’t bad... just different.”

His aura lightened. “I love you.”

“I know,” she said, watching the gold cover his aura.

“This is the part where you’re supposed to say, ‘I love you too’, remember?”

She placed a hand over his heart. “I know because I can see it.”

He exhaled. “Okay, let’s go talk to the assholes.”

“Then head back home. No offense to anyone else, but I need some quiet time after this afternoon.”

“Maybe some Eion-made, top-notch snacks, and *Minecraft*?”

She jumped up and down. “A new world play through?”

“Of course.”

“Sounds perfect.”

As they were leaving she looked up at her mate. “Can we decorate the egg?”

He frowned and didn't answer.

She'd take that as no.

Chapter Eleven

“I hate it here,” she said, not caring how loud her voice was.

After they used the portal in Priest’s apartment to return directly to his quarters at the warrior villa, he let Ari know they were heading to the eagles to see about a nest.

Of course, his entire unit wanted to come to show support.

They were now standing in a beautiful white marble courtyard built into the canopy of the city’s central tree. From this height, you could easily see colored ribbons indicating flight paths to other treehouses high off the ground.

“Kinda stuffy, isn’t it?” Brie asked, looking around.

“It’s like museum quiet,” Zoe said, looking down at her boys. Ame had claimed her left hand and Yuki her right.

Cas had fallen in love the second she saw them. “Remember, boys, you can come to Auntie Cas if someone is mean to you,” she reminded them.

“But Auntie Brie is the one with the gun,” Ame pointed out.

Cas nodded. “Fair point.” She looked up as if she were thinking. “Then how about I can be in charge of hugs? I’m pretty good at those.”

Ame blushed and ducked behind Zoe. When his little face popped back out, he nodded.

“You know, I wouldn’t mind eggs if they resulted in kids like you two,” she said wistfully.

“That shit blows my mind, girl,” Brie admitted.

Izzy shrugged. “Ten centimeters is ten centimeters, I guess.” She looked over to Cas. “How big of an egg?”

“No fuc...” She looked down at the boys. “No freaking idea.”

The women stayed close together while the men walked to the council hall to request a meeting.

“*Hahaue, chichiue* is back,” Yuki said, pointing to the council hall doorway.

The men walked over, each wearing varying degrees of frustration in their expressions.

She laid a hand over Priest’s heart when he joined them. “That bad?”

He gritted his teeth.

Ari answered for him. “They never registered his birth, so his request to secure a nest is taking longer. Honestly, I don’t think they know what to do.”

Gage glared at each passerby. “I knew your past, but to hear them so casually dismiss your very existence.” He turned to Ari. “The lions aren’t like this.”

Ari hissed at a male who was sneering at them, then turned to Gage. “Thank the gods for that.”

After a few minutes, a tall, dark-haired eagle-shifter walked toward them. “Priest Vi’Aerdan, correct?” he asked, emphasizing the last name.

Behind him, a radiant female watched them carefully. She was older like the male. Cas assumed both were Elders.

Priest nodded. “That is right.”

“I am Gaius Aquilina, Elder of the Eagles here in Éire Danu.” He took the hand of the woman behind him and gently pulled her to his side. “This is my mate Vesta.” The softened expression he had for his mate melted like snow in the sun when he turned back to Priest. “I hear that you have requested a nest. On what grounds?”

Priest wrapped his arm around Cas’ waist. “I have met my mate, and we have been discussing children. We thought it

best to get this done sooner rather than later.”

Cas watched the two carefully. The man’s aura was painted in red, pain. His mate was a swirl of greens. Lime green for fear, emerald green for guilt, and the sickish yellow-green she associated with longing.

“Why should a nest go to a reject like you?” Gaius demanded.

“Da fuck?” Izzy whispered.

Cas later would not be able to recall rearing back and punching the Eagle Elder, but according to Brie, it was a perfect swing. She did remember seeing the blue expand over Priest’s heart, and the next thing she knew, she was moving.

Pain shot through her hand and up her arm. “He isn’t a reject! You’re just an asshole!” she screamed.

Gaius had taken a few steps back and had his head tilted back as he tried to staunch the flow of blood from his nose.

Turning to Priest, she held up her hand. “He hurt my hand!” she wailed and wept her tears of frustration.

It wasn’t fair that jerks like this had the power to hurt her mate so much.

Priest glared at the Elder. “Look what you did!”

Gaius’ head came down in shock. “What I did?” he demanded, in a nasally tone, still pinching his nose.

Cas pulled away from Priest and whirled to face the Elder. “He is my mate! How many have you sentenced to a half-life? Forced to live alone because *their* mates were left for dead?”

Gaius’ hand dropped. “They were too weak to live! They never would have had mates.”

“Priest did! I am proof of that.”

Gaius could not look her in the eye. “We...”

“We were wrong,” the melodic voice behind him had everyone turning. Vesta’s eyes were streaming with tears. “We

were wrong when we abandoned Priest. Every other egg hatched with no problems, yet his wobbled around frantically. We knew he lived and was struggling, but our hands were tied.”

Cas stared. There was so much pain in this woman. “Gods above, you’re his mother,” she whispered.

Vesta shook her head. “I do not deserve to be called his mother.”

Gaius went to support his mate, but she shook her head, denying herself the comfort he offered. “The only thing that kept me going is ensuring that the queen’s decree was followed to the letter of the law.” She met Cas’ gaze. “No other that should have lived was lost, this I promise.”

Priest’s knees gave out. Instantly Ari and Gage supported him on either side.

Ari snarled. “He was your son?” he asked of Gaius.

Gaius looked away. “He ceased being my son when the fae carried him away.”

Cas poked the man in the chest. He looked down at her, shocked. “You don’t mean that!” she pointed to him. “You are nothing but red pain. If you truly didn’t care, you’d be grey or apathetic. Is there no small part of you that is glad he lived?”

“Of course, I’m happy he lived!” the man exploded. “He’s my son!”

Silence filled the courtyard.

That was when she finally saw it. For both of them, behind the pain and guilt was endless love and pride.

Turning her back to them, she walked up to Priest and helped steady him on his feet. Looking into his face, she mouthed the words. ‘They love you so much.’ Out loud, she added. “It’s beautiful.”

Priest regarded the man. “I have parents. They’re the ones who changed my diaper, fed me, and tended to me when I

scraped my knee. I have a father that loved me so much he gave me his name,” he added bitterly.

Cas watched as a deep burgundy covered Gaius’ aura. Burgundy, the color of a pain that has lasted years.

Just as Priest would not allow her to hate, neither would she allow him to hang on to this pain when he could let it go.

Stepping away from her mate, she looked at the two broken shifters. “Just as a fae couple adopted Priest, a shifter, maybe the two of you being shifters could look after me, a fae? I lost my parents young in life, and if I am to have an... egg. I will need guidance.”

“Cas!” Priest yelled, spinning her around. “You don’t know them, they...”

“That’s the thing, Priest, neither do you. It won’t be easy, but together we can bridge this gap.” She moved his hand to her lower abdomen. “Someday we’ll have an eagle... fae mix. I don’t want to deny them family if we can help it.” She looked over her shoulder.

Vesta and Gaius’ auras held nothing but hope. Their expressions made it clear they were clinging to it desperately.

She stood on tip-toe and whispered in his ear. “How much of the pain between the three of you is really about you being an unbroken egg? Instead of hurt pride and the loss of a child?”

Priest pulled back to look at her. “I don’t know if I can...”

Exhaling loudly, she pointed to Vesta. “If I have to lay a fucking egg, Priest, I need help, or don’t you care about that?”

Priest waved his hands in front of him. “Of course I do!”

“Am I saying we’ll all be hunky dory tomorrow? Of course not, but I want you to at least try.” Without waiting for him to respond, she faced Gaius and stuck her finger in his face. “And you! Be honest about how you feel for once. A lot of the heartache the three of you have endured is because you didn’t say anything.”

He opened his mouth, then closed it. "I..." He sighed. "You're right. I should have gone to Ciaran and Niamh and fell to my knees begging for him back."

Vesta placed a hand on her mate's back, then looked at Priest. "We couldn't. Our laws forbid us from acknowledging you. But... please know this. We thought of you every day. I thank the gods every morning when I rise that Niamh was strong enough, brave enough, to save my baby."

Cas looked to Vesta. "But the laws changed centuries ago."

Gaius shook his head. "What was done, was done."

"That is silly," Ame said from behind Zoe.

Both Vesta and Gaius looked at him. Vesta knelt down so she was at eye level with both boys. "What do you mean?"

"It was silly that the love you had was wasted because Uncle Priest never felt it. That's silly and sad. There isn't much love in the world, you know," he answered, keeping half his face behind Zoe's skirts.

Gaius looked to Priest. "Uncle Priest?"

Priest nodded. "I am a brother to my fellow unit warriors, uncle to their children."

Vesta swallowed hard. "It was wasted, wasn't it?"

Ame nodded. "Love is meant to be shared. *Hahaue* tells us every day she loves us." He wrapped his arms around Zoe's waist.

Zoe smiling softly, rubbed her hand over his hair. "You are impossible not to love."

Vesta stood and walked over to Priest. "I wasn't brave that day, but I will be from here on out. I will suffer whatever punishment you see fit, but I will tell you, finally, speak the words. I love you. I am glad for you. And I am so very proud of you."

Priest wiped at his eyes. "I'm not going to punish you, for goodness sake. But I don't know where to go from here."

Gaius stepped next to his mate. “Let us meet with your parents. I will not have them feel slighted in any way. We will abide by anything they say,” he said, looking resigned.

Vesta turned to Cas and laid a gentle hand on her arm. “Your gift is a miracle. There was no other way we would have had the courage to speak what was in our hearts.”

“I couldn’t see so much pain and not say anything.”

Vesta smiled. “Now, you said something about a nest?”

Cas glared at Priest. “Someone only told me about that today.”

“Guys, everyone is still staring,” Izzy said, waving to a random stranger.

Gaius looked to the crowd, then back to them. “I am Elder here, and I was punched,” he eyed Cas.

Cas simply scrunched her nose at him, causing the older man to laugh, much to her surprise. “I think they’re making sure all is well,” he explained.

A man that looked eerily like her mate walked up. “That is exactly what we were doing. Everything okay here, Elder?”

“Helios, yes, ummm,” Gaius rubbed the back of his neck.

Two women walked up behind Helios. “Father?” The one that looked like a younger version of Vesta asked.

Priest blinked. “Holy shit.”

Vesta hesitated, then took Priest’s hand. “Helios, Aurora, Iris, this is your younger brother Priest.”

Helios stared. “Excuse me, what?”

Aurora looked from Helios to Priest and back. “He was the unbroken egg, the one that changed everything? You never said he was our nestmate!”

Iris flung herself at Priest, who fumbled at catching her. “We’re together again!”

Gaius was trying to fight off Aurora's tiny fists as she batted at her father. "There were four of you." He looked down. "Aurora, darling, please."

Helios' eyes darkened. "Mother, tell me again why I can't maul Father?"

Vesta pinched the bridge of her nose. "Because it wasn't only his fault, and you would regret it, eventually."

Gaius looked offended. "Vesta, I'm sure he'd regret it immediately."

Aurora abandoned the idea of pummeling her father and joined her sister in hanging from Priest like a Christmas ornament.

Priest let himself be swayed back and forth between the two women as Ari and Gage laughed their asses off.

Cas walked over to Helios. "If you are his brother, I guess that makes you mine as well. I am Cassandra Vi'Illiya, Priest's mate."

Helios gave a half bow and kissed her hand in greeting. "What a blessed day it is to gain both a brother and a sister."

Priest snapped out his shock to point at Helios. "Lips to yourself."

Helios smiled. "Can I not greet my new sister?"

Aurora rolled her eyes. "Helios, quit acting like a dick and come greet our brother instead."

Brie pointed to the feisty one. "I like her."

Helios winked down at Cas and walked over to where Priest was still smushed between his sisters.

Gage pulled Cas to stand between him and Zoe protectively. "Helios is like a taller, suaver Priest."

"I can be suave!" Priest protested.

Cas watched as the blue smudge over his aura shrunk a bit.

Priest looked at his siblings. “Maybe they didn’t need me if they had you all,” he said softly.

Helios’ expression turned contemplative then he raised his hand and cuffed Priest soundly. “Gods, I’ve always wanted to do that. Can’t really do that with the girls. They’d cry.”

Priest stared at his newfound brother. “What the hell?”

Helios blew across his fingers. “Need another one? Done feeling sorry for yourself?”

Priest’s mouth opened, then closed, then opened, then snapped shut before he grinned. “Thanks. If I had been home, one of my unit brothers would have probably done the same thing.”

Helios looked at Iris and Aurora. “That’s what older brothers are for.” He pulled Priest to his chest so the four of them were intertwined. “Complete at last,” he whispered. “We always felt something was missing, but couldn’t articulate what it was.”

Vesta and Gaius wiped at their tears at the sight of the children finally together.

Helios cleared his throat, then looked about. “You’re Ari Lionhart, aren’t you?”

Ari nodded, eyeing the man closely.

“Good. I’d like to become a unit warrior. How does one go about doing that?”

Ari’s eyebrows shot to his hairline. “What?”

“What?” Priest whispered.

“What!” Gaius roared.

Helios grinned. “I have a baby brother to look after, and honestly, I feel like I need to spread my wings a bit.”

“Can we join too?” Aurora asked.

Iris twisted her hands in front of her. “I can’t fight, though.”

Gaius stalked over. He looked at Helios. “No.” He then looked down at his daughters. “Hell no.”

Aurora placed her hands on her hips. “Times are changing. Priest serves, why can’t we?”

“Umm yeah,” Iris added.

Ari was rubbing his forehead worriedly as Brie laughed at his side.

“If the Elder’s sons can serve, does that mean we can?” a male voice asked in the crowd.

“Adriano, you have no idea what is happening in the city,” Gaius started.

The blond man stepped forward toward them. “Yes, we do, Elder. The younger generation visits the city more than you think. We know that ferals have found a way into Éire Danu, and we want to help. We don’t want to be stuck up in these trees forever.”

Vesta covered her mouth with her hand. “This is what the elder generation truly feared when they sided with tradition, Priest. Change.”

Gaius threw his hands in the air. “So, I’m supposed to let all you children go fight ferals?”

“Yes!” Aurora shouted.

“No!” he shouted back. “That was a rhetorical question.”

The woman crossed her arms over her chest. “My wings work just fine, Father.”

Priest stepped beside Gaius and faced the crowd. “Your Elder is right. What we are facing right now is different than anything the units have ever fought before. It would be suicide to face them without training.”

Gaius harrumphed, sounding vindicated.

Priest grinned wickedly. “That being said, it was my own mate who recently reminded the Queen that Éire Danu belongs

to all of its inhabitants. I'm sure there are things that the Eagles of the city can do."

Adriano walked forward, hand thrust out. "Adriano Aetos. I happen to be your brother's best friend. It's an honor to meet an eagle who serves in the highest-ranked unit of the city."

Gaius regarded Priest with surprise. "Highest ranked?"

Ari slung his arm around Priest. "We are the Tau Unit. We answer directly to the Queen's Consort, Brennus Ri'Eirlea."

Gaius smiled softly.

Priest turned to Gaius. "We'd like to take care of what we came here to do if that's possible?"

Helios frowned. "Why did you come all the way up here?"

Priest pointed to Cas. "We need a nest."

Aurora and Iris squealed. "A baby!" They enveloped her with their enthusiasm the same way they had their brother.

Helios grinned. "What wonderful news? It's been years since the last eagle has been born."

Cas laughing, stepped back. "Not yet. But we didn't want to wait until the last minute."

Helios stared at his mother, then blinked, then began to laugh. "For a distant cousin, my ass!"

Vesta blushed.

Iris and Aurora gasped, looking at their mother, then began laughing as well.

Cas exchanged looks with Priest and Ari, who looked equally confused.

Aurora took her hand and began pulling her toward a large glass dome.

"Hurry! We can show you. This is our aviary, where our babies are born. Mother has already made a nest for you!"

Priest looked at Vesta. "You did?"

Looking at the floor, she nodded. “It was the only thing I could do.”

Cas watched as Priest hesitated, then took her hand. “Then I guess you can show us how this setup works.”

Vesta wept but smiled as she nodded. “It’s more than I deserve.”

Ame tugged on her skirt. “Sharing love is okay, remember.”

“Out of the mouth of babes,” she whispered, then looking at Zoe for permission, who nodded, she held out her hands, and Ame went to her. Hoisting him up on her hip, she cuddled him close. “Let me show you where your Uncle Priest was born. He was a fighter from the very start.”

Walking behind them, hand in hand, she and Priest watched as Ame looked back at them and executed a perfect wink.

Priest turned to Ari. “Maybe the boys have been spending too much time around Meryn?”

Brie kicked the back of his legs, causing him to stumble a bit, making everyone laugh.

Only Cas knew that the hand holding hers was trembling. But thanks to her gift, she knew it was due to excitement and love, not the gut-wrenching fear he had felt when they first arrived.

Chapter Twelve

“They what?” Niamh asked, sinking into one of the kitchen chairs.

After a whirlwind afternoon, Priest now stood in his parent’s kitchen. “They want to meet with you. Gaius said they would not offend you for anything.” Priest knelt next to his mother. “I told them that you were my parents, but,” he took a deep breath. “I would like to try to get to know them if that’s okay.”

His mother simply pulled him to her chest and held him tightly, then released him to look him in the eye. “Are you sure you still...” She looked over to her mate. His father walked over and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Your mother and I would understand if you wanted to claim them and take your place with your...real family.”

Priest stood, his mouth dry. “You are my real family unless you don’t want me?”

His mother jumped from her chair and elbowed her mate solidly in the stomach. “That is not what we are saying at all. We just know that there was a pain in you that we couldn’t heal. Make no mistake, you will forever be my son.”

His father nodded, rubbing his belly. “Our son,” he corrected. He looked his way. “I misspoke, son. What I meant to say was we would understand if you wanted to get to know your *biological* family.”

Priest exhaled. “Biological. That’s a good phrase.”

Cas chuckled. “Niamh, he has an older sarcastic version of himself as an older brother and two sisters that pop about like they have a caffeine drip.”

His mother smiled. “It’s hard to believe we got the sweet one.”

“Hey! I’ll have you know, I am sweetness and light personified,” Priest sniffed indignantly.

His father looked at Cas. “Were they as dramatic?”

Cas shook her head. “He definitely gets that from Niamh.”

His mother sighed. “I am so misunderstood.” She gestured to the chairs, and everyone sat back down.

Priest took his time and relayed everything that had been revealed that afternoon. “They missed me all this time,” he admitted softly, still unsure if he believed it.

His mother took his hand. “Of course, they did. You’re their child. I cannot even imagine...” She shuddered.

His father messed up his hair. Priest ducked under his hand.

Smiling, his father patted his head once more. “It was not the best scenario to begin with, but having you here, alive, is the best outcome your biological parents and we could have hoped for. The fact that they are willing to admit their wrongs and want to move forward is amazing, Priest.”

He looked at his father. “Really?”

“Really. Remember, eagles don’t live as long as fae. Your mother and I have a few more millennia under our belts. We know change does not come quickly or easily. What was accomplished this afternoon is nothing short of miraculous.”

Priest looked to his mate, who was happily munching away on berries and smiled. “Maybe we just needed a miracle worker.”

His mother looked at him. “So, you have a nest?”

He nodded. “Vesta, my um biological mother, she made it for me. She said it was the only thing she could do for me.”

His mother blinked back tears. “That’s lovely.”

He took both her hands in his. “I won’t use it if you don’t want me to.”

She waved her hands at his concern. “I’m just so happy that they are finally helping you.”

“Someone better,” Cas muttered.

Priest winced. He *knew* she was still pissed about the egg thing.

“Whatever is the matter, dear,” his mother asked.

“Evidently, we need a nest because I might lay a freaking egg,” Cas complained.

His father choked on his wine, and his mother’s eyes widened. “I mean, I knew it might be a possibility given we hatched Priest ourselves, but... oh dear,” she said frowning.

Cas held up her glass as Merrick hurried over to fill it. “Thank you, Merrick.”

The squire nodded. “If anyone deserves it, it’s you.”

His father turned to him. “Will you be joining us for dinner?”

Priest checked his watch. “Not tonight. I wanted to take Cas shopping for pillows, then check in on the Menace before heading home.” He looked over at Merrick. “Can you let Eion know via the crystal we’ll be having dinner there? He’s been dying to receive more messages.”

Merrick smiled and nodded.

His father gave him a look. “Pillows?”

“My room lacks color. Something I intend to rectify for my mate.”

“It is very plain,” his mother agreed.

Cas downed her wine and held up her glass again.

Priest winced. She was *really* upset about the egg thing.

Merrick looking sympathetic, poured her another glass.

His mother eyed his mate, then stood and went to the side counter. Wordlessly she began to slice some of the fresh bread

Merrick had made. She wrapped it in a towel and handed it to him. He mouthed 'thank you'. She winked at him.

"How big are eagle eggs?" Cas asked.

"We can figure that out later, my mate," he said.

His father frowned. "From what I can remember, Priest's egg was about the size of an ostrich egg."

His mother's eyes widened, and she buried her face in her hands.

Cas frowned. "Ostrich egg..." she took out her phone.

Priest held his breath.

"Thirteen centimeters! Are you freaking kidding me!"

"Oh, Ciaran," his mother said, shaking her head.

His father looked confused. "What? She wanted to know."

Cas downed her second glass of wine. "You know that promise about me fucking you blind, well you can forget it, Mr. EggPenis!" she stood, wobbled, then marched out of the house.

"Fuck!" Priest banged his head on the table.

"I am so sorry, son," his father said remorsefully.

Priest stood. "She would have found out eventually, but I was kinda hoping it would be after tonight."

His mother pointed to the door. "Go after your mate Meredith and keep one thing in mind. Most girls think and even dream about giving birth. I can guarantee none of her dreams involved an egg that wouldn't coo or snuggle in her arms afterward."

He kissed his mother's cheek. "You know everything. Thank you, Mother."

"Anytime, son."

Priest walked down the front walkway and looked around. She couldn't have gone far.

He jogged back toward House Illiya and saw Eion standing in the doorway. “She here?”

Eion nodded, his mouth twitching. “For clarification, is she lamenting the fact that you only have a thirteen-centimeter penis? She was ranting so much, nothing made sense.”

Priest went to answer, and his brain shut down when he tried to do conversions. “Wait, what’s that in inches?”

Eion could barely keep from laughing. “About five inches.”

Priest exhaled. “Definitely a bit bigger there. No, she’s upset that the egg she may be laying has a circumference of thirteen centimeters.”

Eion stared. “An average birth is ten.”

“Oh.” Priest blinked. “Oh! Well, shit.”

Eion nodded. “I’ll prepare separate sleeping quarters for you across the hall.”

Priest groaned. “She may kick me out entirely.”

Eion pointed to the back. “She’s with Coll.”

Priest walked to the back of the house and eased his way into the courtyard.

Cas was sniffing, lying with her head in Coll’s lap. Coll looked up and narrowed his eyes. “All I know is she’s upset. If it’s with you, I suggest you leave,” he threatened.

He sat down across from his mate, and his heart tore at her quiet tears. “You’ve had a lot thrown at you these past two days, huh, baby?”

She nodded. He handed her the towel-wrapped bread. Wordlessly she opened it and began munching on the snack.

He looked at Coll. “She’s afraid she’ll lay an egg because she’s mated to an eagle shifter.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Coll scoffed.

Cas sat up. “It is?”

Coll nodded. “Cas, you’re fae.”

“I know.”

Coll pointed to her belly. “You’re a girl.”

She nodded. “I know that too.”

“You already have your eggs. He’s just going to fertilize them,” Coll jerked his thumb toward Priest.

Cas scrubbed at her eyes. “Really?”

Coll smiled. “I’m willing to bet my favorite warming stone. Biologically you don’t have what it takes to create an eagle egg.”

Cas held her midsection. “I already have eggs.”

“Yes, you were born with them.”

She looked over at Priest. “Would you be disappointed if we had a real baby?” Her eyes went wide. “I mean a human-shaped baby.”

He laughed, then grabbed her wrist to pull her into his arms, sending the bread flying. “I don’t care if we have an egg or a baby. I don’t even care if we adopt like my parents did. The only thing I care about is your happiness, and if we have children, their health, that’s it.”

“Were you really going to take me pillow shopping?”

“I was actually going to take you fabric shopping and have our things made.”

Coll stood and patted each of them on the head. “You’re both good kids. I’m proud of what you accomplished today.”

“Meeting his biological parents?”

Coll shook his head. “You cracked open the shell of the egg the eagles had trapped themselves in and showed them it was possible to co-exist with others. The trees feel so much lighter today.”

Priest shrugged. “I just wanted a nest for my mate.”

Cas scoffed. “That’s what you wanted. I wanted to tell your Elders to eat shit and die.”

Coll giggled. “She’s sweet, but don’t get on her bad side.”

Priest stood and helped her up. “If we leave now, we can get to Baba’s before she closes.”

Cas looked confused. “Aren’t there other stores?”

“None that the warriors are willing to shop at. Most of the tailors snubbed Oron when he returned. Baba was the only one who sold clothes to Izzy when she arrived, with only the clothes on her back. So, we support Baba in return.”

Coll stood on tip-toe and kissed Cas’ cheek. “Go forth and scramble eggs or whatever.”

His mate paled. “I think I know why Aeson stopped serving eggs for a while.”

Shaking his head, he waved to Coll and led his mate away from the Founding and Noble houses.

Cas groaned. “I can’t believe I said that in front of your parents.”

He rubbed her back. “They didn’t mind.”

“*I* mind.”

“And you deserve the time you needed to process.” He checked his watch. If they hurried, they could hit the Brick Oven, then head to Baba’s. “Come, my mate. I know of a substance that will have you feeling better.”

“Drugs?”

“Better.”

When they made it to the bakery’s storefront, his mate gasped. “It’s so cute!”

He opened the door, and she practically ran inside.

Peter glanced up from the counter, took one look at Cas’ tear-streaked face, then back to him. He held out his hand. “Credit card.”

Sighing, he got out his wallet, then passed it to the large baker. “First order is to be billed to my father at House Aerdan. Everything else can go on the account you set up.”

“Oh, I like that, and that, and that, and oh! Babe! Look at the brownies!”

Priest grinned. “Whatever she wants gets billed to my father,” he said, grinning at her exuberance.

Peter chuckled and wrote down his credit card information. He passed him back his card and turned to Cas. “Okay, honey. You tell Peter what you need.”

Priest frowned. “You don’t have to say it like that.”

Cas ignored him and smiled up at Peter. “Are you the sorcerer who created these works of wonder?”

“That would be me.”

“I’ll take two of everything from here, to... here,” she said, swiping her finger along the bake case.

Peter laughed. “You warriors are great for business.”

Cas turned to him. “Should we pick up something for Meryn? She might need the extra sugar working on that network.”

He leaned down and kissed his mate’s forehead. “You’re a genius.”

Peter looked between the two of them. “Anything for Princess Meryn is on the house.”

Cas eyed the bake case. “Maybe the mocha truffles?”

Priest shook his head. “I heard she had to limit her caffeine intake.”

Peter leaned across the counter. “I use a mocha extract. There’s no caffeine in it except what’s in the chocolate.”

Cas nodded. “Let’s get a dozen of those...” She eyed the boxes behind him. “Are the boxes bricks?”

Peter smiled. “I designed it myself.”

“If you order enough, you can make a wall,” his mate whispered to herself.

Priest looked at Peter, who nodded. His mate could have as many boxes as she wanted. “What would you like now, and where would you like the rest sent?”

“Since we’ll be shopping near closing time, should we bring Baba something?” Cas asked.

“Not a bad idea. I want to stay on her good side.”

Peter nodded. “If it’s for Baba, I have her favorite strawberry cheesecake in stock. I can box up some for you.”

“Thanks, Peter,” Priest said, watching his mate flitter from one case to the next.

“Peter? Can I get the brownies now? Send half of the rest to the warrior villa and the other half to House Illiya.”

“Of course, you can, darlin’,” he said, opening up one of his to-go boxes.

“You enjoy flirting with our mates too much,” Priest grumbled.

“They are the highlight of my day, warrior. Let this humble old man enjoy the presence of such beauty,” Peter drawled.

Cas blushed prettily at the baker’s words.

In his chest, he felt his bird stir unhappily. He placed a hand on his chest, surprised.

Cas turned to him. “Are you okay?”

“Bird is being crotchety.”

She kissed his chest. “After we drop off Meryn’s treat, we’ll head home, okay?” she asked, giving him a smoldering look.

“Will I be able to see tomorrow?”

“Definitely not.”

“Thank the gods,” he whispered.

Peter winked at them and passed them their treats. “Have a good night.”

Shaking his head, Priest led his mate to Baba’s.

“I’m surprised you went for the teal?” she said, looking back at Priest.

He shrugged. “I like all shades of blue.”

Baba had been a delight to meet. The older woman listened to what she had to say about certain colors and made quite a few suggestions on unobtrusive ways to add colors to their living areas.

Cas was feeling happier than she had in a while. She wasn’t sure how much of it was the brownie she had or the relief over not laying an egg, but she was sure she was floating down the street.

“Soon,” Priest murmured against the side of her neck, sending shivers down her spine.

“Not soon enough.”

Priest waved to the guards at the palace doors, and they made their way down the hallway to the queen’s chambers.

Her mate knocked and waited. Moments later, a worried-looking Darian opened the door. Frowning, he looked at him, then at her. “How did you know something was wrong?”

Priest’s hand went to his sidearm, and she looked past the prince to see everyone sitting at the table looking at Meryn.

Brennus looked over. “Cassandra, thank the gods you’re here.”

She and Priest hurried inside, and Darian quickly closed the door behind them.

Cas took one look at Meryn and inhaled. “Oh no.”

Aiden held one of her hands, looking frantic. “What’s wrong with her?”

Outwardly Meryn was staring straight ahead, blinking every so often, yet wasn’t acknowledging they had entered the room.

Cas stared at her aura. “It’s entirely black.”

“What if we poured salt down her throat?” Izzy suggested.

Ryuu had both hands on her shoulders. “It’s like something is blocking me from getting to her.” He pointed to her bracelet, which was glowing light green. “I have no idea if it’s working.”

“Of course, it’s working,” a deep voice said from the far side of the room. Moments later Abraxas walked in, frowning forebodingly. “The demon will not be able to sway her heart.”

Cas looked over to the small sitting area. Kendrick and Thane were pouring over books, and Amelia wept softly in the Queen’s arms.

Cas stared, blinked, rubbed her eyes, then looked closer. “She’s...”

“What?” Aiden demanded.

“She’s laughing,” Cas told them, watching as Meryn’s aura flared then chortled pink and yellow.

“She would be, the crazy lil shit,” Brie said, shaking her head.

Priest went to his unit leader. “Ari, what do we do?”

Ari pointed across the table. “For now, nothing.”

“Gage and Zoe?”

Ari sighed. “Back at the warrior villa. I’m thankful the boys aren’t here.”

Cas turned to Meryn’s squire. “Her health?”

Ryuu exhaled slowly. “Never better. Her blood pressure is perfect.”

She sat down and continued to monitor Meryn's aura.

"Do we have coffee?" she asked.

She had a feeling they'd need it.

"Whoa! Dude, I was working on something!" Meryn scowled up at the handsome demon who had kidnapped her yet again.

"My apologies, but I felt I owed you a treat for defending me so lovingly," he teased, then indicated for her to sit.

She flopped down on the sofa and sighed as she sunk in. "I wish I could have these in the real world, they're so comfy."

"As do I," he remarked.

She blinked. "Oh yeah, sorry about that."

He waved off her concerns. Then eyed her speculatively. "You were very angry earlier. It's how you got my attention."

Meryn shrugged. "Wasn't nothin'."

"Now, my dear, I thought we were past lies."

"We hafta be if you can't lie, right?"

He chuckled. "Exactly. Think of it as using a level playing field."

She laughed. Nowhere was there a level playing field with this guy.

"As I was saying. You were very angry. Is it something I can help with?"

Meryn blinked. "No way. I did one deal in a moment of weakness, you're not getting me all cozy to sell my soul or something."

He frowned. “Meryn, why on earth would I want your soul? It’s pretty damaged actually.”

“Ouch, dude.”

“You should know by now my currency is a bit different.”

“Memories?”

“And favors. Though you paid for the exchange last time, you still freed me up me to do something that works heavily in my favor. I feel like that, in addition to your stalwart words has earned you one of my favors.”

Meryn stretched and cracked her back. “What can you do?”

“What can’t I do?”

“Leave your box,” she replied.

He stared. “That was very blunt of you.”

She blinked. “Was that bad?”

He shook his head. “I keep trying to treat you like a human, that is my mistake. What can I do for you?”

“Not much at the moment. I’m working on some network stuff. Aiden and peanut are cool,” she said, pointing to her belly.

“You threatened to kill a lot of ferals earlier, all of them if I remember correctly.”

Meryn felt flushed. She wanted to kill the ferals so her aunt wouldn’t be stressed and fade, but she didn’t think that would help now. “I don’t think it will matter now.”

“Then shall we call it a favor owed then?”

“Sure.”

“Then I shall let you return.”

“Return? Shit, how long have I been asleep now?”

He shook his head. “You’re not asleep, just staring off into space.”

“Dude, that’s totally sus.”

“They know about me now anyway.”

“Oh yeah.”

“Will you be closing the door between us, Meryn?”

She thought about his question then shook her head. “I stand by what I said. I don’t think you’re evil. You do bad things, but not because you have like a raging hard on to do them, it’s just a means to an end right?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Then I’ll wait and see what that is before I make my final decision about you.”

“It may be too late by then,” he warned, as the room began to fade.

“Tough titty then.”

His seductive male laughter echoed in her heart and her ears as she blinked and looked around the table. “Shit.”

Cas put her coffee cup down. “The blackness is completely gone, she should be herself again.”

“I’m fine guys, really,” Meryn said, twisting this way and that under Aiden and Ryuu’s worried inspections.

“Meryn, is it true that the demon contacted you,” the queen asked?

Meryn nodded. “He said he felt how angry I got earlier and asked if I needed any help killing the ferals. I told him I was cool. So, he said he’d just owe me a favor.”

Aiden shook his head. “No, you were not cool! You were unresponsive!”

Meryn held up her finger. “My heart didn’t stop and I wasn’t stuck sleeping for like forever then waking up to a bursting bladder. This was a cakewalk.”

“No it wasn’t!” Both Aiden and Ryuun shouted at the same time.

Meryn rolled her eyes, then looked around. She spotted the small brick box. “Snacks?”

Cas pushed the box closer. “We brought them to help with the network stuff. Those are Peter’s mocha truffles.”

Meryn’s grabbed the box and popped the lid open. “Hell yeah.”

Pip laid a hand on her arm. “Are you really, really okay?”

She nodded. “Yup. I wouldn’t lie to you, Pip. Right now, demon dude is nice. Maybe in the future, he won’t be nice, but for now, what we want aligns, so he’s not killing me.”

Pip nodded slowly. “That’s...good?”

“It sure is! I’ll take a hot guy being honest about possibly killing me than a lying douchebag saying nice shit while stabbing me in the back, any day.”

Pip thought about it. “Okay.”

Nigel laid a hand on her head. “You’d call out to us if you needed help right?”

Meryn shoved an entire truffle in her mouth and nodded. “Ooo an Re-oo,” she said with her mouth full, pointing to her squire. She swallowed. “Where’s my laptop?”

Neil picked it up from the end of the table and handed it to her.

Groaning she lifted it open. “This shit is hopeless.”

Behind her Aiden was still pacing and ranting about reckless behavior. Ryuun had yet to move his hands from her shoulders.

Abraxas eyed her then nodded. “You are handling him well. Remember you have my favor if he decides to act on his baser impulses.”

She gave the Guardian a thumbs up. “You got it!”

Sighing and shaking his head, he returned to the courtyard.

Brennus eyed his niece. “You’re really okay?”

“No. My eyeballs hurt looking at this train wreck,” she grumbled, pointing to her laptop.

Ari chuckled. “Sounds like Meryn to me.”

Meryn looked over to where Priest, Ari and Brie sat. She held up her hands and made two finger guns. “Pew pew!”

Brie shook her head. “Yup, that’s her.”

Aiden pounded the table next to Meryn, causing her laptop to shake. “No more demons!”

Meryn sighed. “Dude.”

“Don’t dude me, Meryn. You have no idea what they’re capable of!” Aiden shouted.

Meryn picked a shiny silver stick. “Go ahead. Keep yelling.”

Aiden stared, then pointed at his small mate. “That must be the demon’s influence.”

Ari wasn’t the only one who openly laughed.

Pip looked at Aiden, tilting his head, confusion on his face. “She threatens you all the time.”

Aiden stared down into Pip’s earnest face. “I know, it’s just...”

Meryn set the stick down. “Aiden, did you hear me say anything like, ‘Oi! Hot demon, come high jack my brain when I have lines of code to unravel!’?”

“No,” Aiden grumbled.

“Exactly. I didn’t instigate this little interlude, so get off my nuts!”

Aiden collapsed in the chair beside her. “Nothing can happen to you. I would cease to exist.”

“Right back at ya, stud. Now, get me some coffee because your nightly blow jobs just got put on hold while I work on cracking this network.”

A flush worked up the back of Aiden’s neck. “Whatever you say, baby.”

Izzy cackled. “Yeah, she’s fine.”

Brie leaned in. “Is their system that good? I didn’t think anything could stump you.”

Meryn gagged dramatically. “It’s that *bad*. It’s disgustingly functional for what it is, which means nothing is where and what it should be. It’s a fucking nightmare.”

Kincaid sat back, looking worried. “I hope we get something from it.”

Meryn snorted. “Dude, even if we get nothing, seeing a feral so strung out from being locked up and eating his friend made all the effort worth it.”

The young witch brightened. “There is that, I guess.”

The queen paled. “He what?”

Meryn looked up eyes bright. She brought her hands up and mimicked eating corn on the cob. “He was like nom nom nom on the other guy’s femur. Had teeth marks and everything between the rotting meaty bits.” She paused. “Do ferals poop? Maybe some of the smell was him shitting digested rotten flesh.”

Ari dry heaved.

The queen became still. “That sounds...unpleasant.”

Brie wiped her eyes as she continued to laugh at her mate’s plight.

Amelia kept a napkin to her mouth. Behind the napkin, her eyes were smiling. "I'll take her as she is, no matter what."

Meryn blew a big kiss at her cousin. "Right back 'atcha." She sighed. "I might have an update by breakfast tomorrow."

Cord bowed. "I heard of your trip earlier today. Should we remove eggs from the menu?" he asked, eyes twinkling.

Meryn looked back at her. "Are you for reals gonna lay an egg? And if so, can I watch?"

She shook her head. "It was uncertain for a while though, I was about to get celibate real fast, then Coll, my Spirit Guardian said I'd have a human baby since I'm fae."

Meryn became thoughtful. "Are there shifter chickens?" she asked out of the blue.

Aiden shook his head and leaned forward letting his forehead rest on the table.

"What? It's a valid question. If there are eagles, there might be chickens," Meryn protested.

The queen chuckled as she shook her head. "I do not believe so, Meryn."

The small woman got to her knees in her chair and turned to look at her squire. "You wouldn't feed me shifter nuggies, would you?"

He shrugged. "That depends on how angry they made you."

Meryn sighed happily. "You *so* get me." Spinning around, she sat back down.

At her side, Aiden was banging his head on the table slowly.

Priest stood. "Imminent danger over?"

Ari nodded. "Why? Hot date?"

Priest grinned. "You'll notice, Cas said she *almost* became celibate."

Ari waved them on. “Go make eggs,” he teased.

Cas looked at Brie. “Has your mate gotten you Peter’s latest mocha brownies?”

Brie’s eyes narrowed. “He has yet to get me anything from the Brick Oven.”

Ari’s mouth dropped. “Low blow.”

Cas shrugged. “I’m only concerned with Priest’s blows.” She winked at Brie who winked back. Cas led her mate from the room, closing the door behind them.

“I think holidays will be amazing,” she said as they walked back toward House Illiya. Having sisters-in-arms, as it were, when it came to dealing with the warriors was turning out to be some of the best fun she had had in years.

“I can almost guarantee it,” Priest promised.

Chapter Thirteen

Cas felt a deep-seated contentment that warmed her heart and kept a smile on her face. She peeked over at her mate and saw that his face also bore a soft grin, and his eyes twinkled with happiness.

“How about we postpone our gaming evening and relax at House Illiya tonight,” she suggested.

Priest nodded absently. “Whatever you want, darling.”

You, you silly man. I want you.

She had plans to seduce her mate. She just had to get him alone for a while and shut out the world for the night.

“I wonder what Eion made for dinner,” she mused out loud.

“Knowing his sense of humor, chicken,” Priest guessed, causing her to giggle. It actually wasn’t that far-fetched of an idea.

Upon arriving at home, they made their way to the kitchen. “We’re home!” she called out.

Eion came in from the side sitting area. “Welcome home, dearest. Everything okay now?” he asked, raising a brow.

She walked around the island and gave her squire a hug. “Yes. Sorry for worrying you earlier.”

He kissed the top of her head, then steered her to the table where bowls and platters of food waited.

Priest joined her at the table. “Smells amazing, Eion.”

“I was going to serve roast chicken, but thought that might be insensitive given today’s events,” Eion said before lifting the cover off the center plate.

Priest snort laughed and pointed at the Eion as if to say, ‘I told you so’.

“Cord, from the palace, gifted us some delectable pork. He said they’d be unable to use it all before it went bad, and for something this good, it would be a waste to freeze it. The visiting Vanguard appreciated it as well.”

Priest rubbed his hands together. “Hot damn!”

Eion began cutting the tenderloin, and juices ran from the meat, sending delicious aromas into the air.

Cas held up her plate. Eion served her, then Priest.

Next, he added a large helping of the carrots and potatoes he prepared. Looking around, she smiled when she spotted the salad. In a separate large bowl, she helped herself to a generous portion of mixed greens and vegetables as Eion added potatoes to Priest’s plate. “How are the guys doing?”

Eion smiled. “It was strange at first to have others here, but I find that it is most enjoyable. They keep earlier hours than you do, so it in no way interferes with my duties in serving.”

She looked over and saw that Priest only had pork and potatoes on his plate. “At least try a salad,” she suggested.

Priest shrugged and, using the tongs, put two leaves on his plate.

Behind her, Eion chuckled.

“I guess it’s a start.”

She heard the pop of a cork, and a white wine was poured for her. “Thank you, Eion.”

After pouring for Priest, he placed the bottle in a chiller. “I’ll be in the sitting area if you need me. Leave the mess. I’ll clean up later.”

“Did you eat already?”

He nodded. “I indulged in the cuts of the pork the Vanguard smoked earlier. Enjoy.” He winked at her and walked out.

Grinning, she sipped her wine. Time to start torturing her mate.

Priest was halfway through his pork when he glanced up and saw the look of rapture on his mate's face as she moaned over her salad. Instantly, his body reacted. "I understand that reaction for the pork, but the salad?" he asked, trying to ignore his body.

"Don't underestimate how much I craved fae fruits and vegetables while I was gone." She lifted her fork and wrapped her tongue around it, chasing after some dressing.

"Cas," he started, then winced when his voice cracked. He cleared his voice and continued. "Let me know what your favorites are, and I'll pick some up for you."

"You're sweet."

He smiled and went to take another bite when she began to pop the sliced carrots into her mouth and licked her fingers clean after each bite.

Squirming in his chair, he tried to get comfortable.

She looked at him. "Are you sure you don't want to try the carrots? Eion roasts them. They're quite amazing."

"Nope. I'm good."

When she picked up a slice of pork and began sucking the juices off the meat, he dropped his fork. If he had been chewing, he'd probably be choking... again.

"Gods above, this is good!" she exclaimed.

"Uh-huh."

"Dammit it all!" she frowned down at her shirt, juice from the pork had dropped onto her front.

Sighing, she pulled it off over her head and stood to go to the sink. “Eion always said to use cold water, I think.”

“Uh-huh.”

Food was officially forgotten.

He could only stare. Her pale skin was tinted slightly with golden undertones. Her back was covered by the cascade of her long blonde hair that always made him think of dessert. The sweet smell of honeysuckle teased him when she walked to the sink.

Now that her shirt was removed, he saw that she wore a simple, white lace bra with a tiny pink bow in the middle. The mounds of her breasts filled the satiny cups, and he didn't think he had ever seen anything so beautiful in his life.

Turning, she gave him a heated look. Then ran her thumb between her breasts before popping it in her mouth to suck on. “More juices,” she explained.

“Uh-huh.”

At this point, his mate was laughing and watching him closely. “My poor mate. How are your three functioning brain cells?”

“They shut down when you began moaning,” he admitted freely.

“I was going to tease and seduce you, but dammit, you're too adorable like this.” She held her hand out to him. “Priest, will you take me upstairs and make love to me?”

Priest stood so fast that he knocked the chair over. He ignored her hand and simply scooped her up.

“Go through the dining room to get to the stairs, and we won't have to parade in front of Eion,” she said, pointing to the far door.

“Right.”

Practically sprinting, the stairs flew under his feet until they were at their bedroom. She leaned down and opened the

door. Walking in, he kicked the door shut behind him. He went to the bed and sat her down gently. Seeing her sitting there in her bra and slacks, looking up at him, her hair spread across the covers and her cheeks tinted pink, he knew this one moment would be forever etched in his heart and mind.

Going to his knees, he reached for her shoes and removed them one at a time. He slid her socks off and reached for her pants. Winking, she unbuttoned them and shimmied out of them until she was only wearing her bra and panties.

Not wanting to waste a single moment, he began removing his clothes. When he got to his pants, the zipper ran over the side fabric and chewed it into the small metal teeth.

Frowning, he tugged, then tugged again. It wasn't moving.

"Priest, are you joining me?" she asked, laughter in her voice.

"Yes, give me just a second."

He repeatedly pulled on the zipper, begging every god he knew of to help him.

On the bed, his beautiful mate was rolling around and giggling at his plight.

He stopped his attempts at getting the damned zipper to work and simply watched her. "You're almost too beautiful to look at," he said, taking in the long expanse of skin that was now exposed to him.

"So are you. When your clothes let me look at you," she teased.

Priest looked around, and when he confirmed his travel bag was in the corner, he simply ripped the fabric away from his body.

On the bed, his mate inhaled, and the laughter ceased. She was now watching him with hungry eyes. Heedless of tomorrow's clothing situation, he recklessly removed his bothersome attire and, finally naked, stalked toward his mate.

When she reached for his cock, he shook his head. “My turn.”

She quickly removed her bra and panties and sat back on her elbows. “I’m all yours.”

He climbed onto the bed and simply pulled her into his arms. He couldn’t hold back his moans as their heated skin met. He intertwined them, wanting as much contact as he could manage.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, and he could feel how wet she was as she bathed his abdomen.

He reached down between them and parted her folds, looking for that special little nub that would have her screaming. When he found it, he circled it lazily, and her breathing increased. It wasn’t until he ignored the very top and massaged either side that she began to writhe under him.

“Priest! Not like this, please,” she begged. “I want you in me.”

Leaning back, he looked into her face. She was completely flushed with passion, and her eyes half-lidded. “I love you, Cassandra Vi’Illiya. I think I loved you before I even met you. I will love you for the rest of our existence, and when the time comes for us to pass from this world, I will love you in the hereafter.”

She reached up with a trembling hand to trace his brow. “I love you, Priest. You bring a lightness to my heart and life I didn’t know I needed. I crave your laughter and your smiles. Bind us together, my love, so that we’ll never have to be apart again,” she pleaded.

Using his hand, he guided his cock to her opening and nudged forward slowly. His mate, reaching the end of her endurance, lifted her hips and impaled herself fully.

“Yess,” she hissed.

He started slow, withdrawing at a steady pace, but when her head began to thrash back and forth, he knew she was

ready. Without warning, he slammed forward roughly.

“Gods! Yes!”

He felt her reach up and dig her nails into his back. Within his chest, his bird stirred. For the first time in his life, he seemed passive and curious.

“More,” his mate demanded.

He kept up the deep thrusts until he saw her expression twist in frustration. Reaching between them, he set his middle and pointer finger on either side of her clit.

“Fuuccck!” she screamed.

He kept pace until he felt her spasming around him. Only then did he lean in to bite the side of her neck.

The taste of her blood on his tongue had his bird screeching within him.

Above them, parts of their souls surged forward to merge as one. They swirled together before separating and returning to them. The essence that headed toward his mate had spectral wings. His was a cloud of rainbows.

When the colorful cloud covered his heart, he knew they were bound for eternity.

He collapsed to one side, still deep within her body. Breathing hard, he pulled her close.

“Did he hurt you?” he asked.

“Your cock? No, he was perfect,” she said, sighing blissfully.

He withdrew, causing them both to hiss at the loss.

“No, my bird, did he hurt you?”

She rubbed her chest. “No. He seems to be nesting now. Getting comfortable.”

He went to roll and stand at the edge of the bed and miscalculated. When he landed on the floor, there was silence,

then his mate's face peering down at him from the mattress.
"You okay?"

"Yup. Legs just forgot how to leg for a second." He sat up and wobbled his way to the bathroom. He ran the water until it grew warm. After cleaning himself up, he brought back a couple wet and dry cloths for her.

When she was done, she passed them back to him. "Priest, I'm kinda still hungry. Actually, I'm famished now."

He walked over and threw the washcloths in the sink. Grabbing a towel, he wrapped it around his waist. "I'll go back down for our plates."

When he opened their door, he saw that a tray filled with the food from dinner was waiting for them. Grinning, he picked it up and carried it over to the bed. "I love squires."

Cas blushed but then laughed. "He has always been amazing."

He sat the tray down on the bed, and they both fell on it ravishingly.

"What was he like when you were growing up?" he asked, curious about her childhood. He took a bite of pork and sighed happily.

"He was this wonderfully odd mixture of second father and older brother. Sometimes, I needed a partner in crime, and he was there for me, but other times, he reeled me in. I think he indulged me more than he should have, knowing I would be losing my parents young. He wanted me to have nothing but happy memories growing up. What about you and Merrick?"

Priest scowled at the bite of salad on the fork she was holding out for him, then took the bite. He was surprised at how much flavor there was from the combination of the vegetables. He chewed and swallowed. "Well, you've met my parents."

She nodded.

“Merrick was like the voice of reason in the home. Whenever my mother had a crazy idea, he was the one to talk her off the ledge and onto more reasonable territory. He backed up my father when he had to corral my mother, and basically my entire childhood, he shot me desperate, suffering expressions as if to say, ‘I love your mother, but please do not take after her. I can only handle one’.”

Cas laughed. “It must have been beautifully chaotic.”

He nodded. “I think that’s why not much gets to me. I was raised in the chaotic crucible of my mother’s making.”

“She has a heart of pure gold,” Cas refuted.

He nodded. “Of course she does. But around that heart swirls a tempest of ideas and plans waiting for execution.”

“And your father?”

“He indulged her at every turn. I don’t think he’s ever told her no.”

“That’s beautiful.”

“Because she got her way?”

“No, you ass. Because that means he accepts her, chaos and all. Like Aiden and Meryn. You know that woman drives him up the wall, but it doesn’t matter to him.”

“You can drive me up the wall all you want,” he offered, leaning in to nip at his bite mark.

She turned and kissed the tip of his nose. “I have a feeling I might be the one to drive you crazy.”

Laying back, he patted at his full belly. “Let’s just both be crazy,” he suggested, then yawned.

“Priest set the tray on the floor. I’m tired.”

Sitting up, he swung his legs over the bed and stood. He was pleasantly surprised when they cooperated. He lifted the tray and walked it over to the long dresser. Shivering against the nighttime chill, he hurried back to snuggle with his mate.

She reached for him, and he wrapped his arm around her waist. "You're so warm."

"Is that all I'm good for?"

"Yup."

When he licked the back of her ear, she squealed and struggled to move away. "I will have vengeance!" He wagged his tongue back and forth.

"Nooo!" she screamed, giggling breathlessly.

He was able to get the back of her neck once before he was laughing too hard to continue. "What else am I good for?"

"Sex!" she shouted.

He'd take that. "Good." He settled down and pulled her close again.

"Priest?"

"Yes, baby?"

"Don't ever change."

"I won't," he promised.

Chapter Fourteen

“Nothing can bother me today,” Priest said as they walked hand in hand toward the city center.

“Nothing? I must have done a damn good job last night, then,” Cas said, smiling wide.

“That you did.”

Last night had been everything he had ever dreamed of having a mate by his side. And it wasn't just the sex. It was having her next to him. She completed him in ways he couldn't explain. He rubbed his chest where her light now warmed his heart. Squinting, he saw the faintest of colors pass by with each person.

“It gets easier.”

“I love it because it's a part of you.”

“I felt your bird accept me last night. I think he likes me.”

“He's an asshole,” he said, shaking his head.

She batted at his arm with her free hand. “Don't say that.”

He spun her around and dipped her in the street. “I just don't like talking about my bird.” He nuzzled her neck then stood them both back up straight. “Look, we're going to help catalog fae volunteers, grab an amazing lunch at Dav's, then head to the warrior villa for gaming and snacks before indulging in spectacular sex for the night.”

“Don't threaten me with a good time.”

“We're going to have the perfect day,” he said, grinning broadly.

“Priest! Report!” Ari yelled from across the courtyard.

Frowning, he ran over. “What's up?”

“Come on, orders to be given at Dav's,” he said, then lifted his phone to his ear. “Gage, get your ass to Dav's.” He hung

up and exchanged worried looks with Brie.

Priest groaned. “What the fuck now?”

When they arrived at Dav’s, Aiden stood in front of a pacing Kendrick while Anne spoke to someone on the phone. Off to one side, Darian leaned against the wall with a murderous expression on his face.

“Who are we killing?” he asked.

Aiden and Kendrick looked at him. “The Committee,” Kendrick answered.

“Well shit, let’s go,” he said, pulling out his sidearm.

“That just upped your ranking,” Meryn said, whipping out her phone.

“What ranking?”

“Warrior sexiness ranking,” she explained.

When Gage, Zoe, the boys, and most of Chi filed in, Dav shut the door and locked it. “Go ahead, Commander,” he said, flipping the sign to ‘Closed’.

“At least we made it to Dav’s,” Cas pointed out.

Chuckling, he shook his head. Looking around, all his unit brothers, most of the old guard, the Lycaonian transplants, and the Vanguard were present. The only ones missing was Ellais and his squad. “Who’s running patrols?” he asked.

Aiden shook his head. “Suspended for the next half hour. We need to reorganize.”

“Can’t we just go already!” Kendrick demanded.

“Give me just five more minutes, then we can go. You know Colton won’t let anything happen,” Aiden said. He placed a hand on Kendrick’s shoulder. “Neither will I.”

Kendrick exhaled, then gave a short nod.

Aiden looked out at the men. “Yesterday, the Committee arrived in Lycaonia under the pretense of investigating our new perimeter. This morning, they started making impossible

demands. That was when my father contacted me. He reports that the Elder Council has delayed as much as they can, but they feel we're now past the point for negotiations and meetings. My father anticipates they will make a move in the next hour or so." He looked at Ben and Sascha. "All Lycaonian units are to return to Lycaonia with me." The men nodded. "Sascha, you are to take Gamma and head directly to the Council Manor and back up my father, René and Celyn."

Sascha nodded. "Back them up against whom?"

"Any force the Committee has invited to Lycaonia," Aiden explained.

Sascha whistled. "Are we sure we want to tangle with them?"

Aiden snarled. "They're trying to take Keelan."

Sascha's face transformed from congenial to menacing. "Permission to kill first and say 'fuck you' later?"

Aiden nodded. "I won't technically order you to engage..." he started.

Sascha held up his hand. "Aiden, we don't do politics. They fuck around with warriors, they gonna find out."

"More points to Sascha," Meryn said, still on her phone.

Aiden ignored her. "I'll be heading back with Kendrick and Darian. We'll swing by the Council Manor first then meet up with Gavriel. He should have left Noctem Falls already to rendezvous with us at the Alpha estate." He looked at Ari. "I'm leaving you in charge."

Ari swallowed, then nodded. "Yes, sir."

Aiden turned to the Old Guard. "Continue to assist with patrols, especially in the Border City. Most of the fae returning from living amongst humans have moved there, so there's more to protect."

Dav nodded. "You take care of your boy. We'll watch the city."

Finally, Aiden looked to Reston. “Active patrols, around the clock.”

Reston smiled. “We got this, Aiden. You go take care of business.”

“Come on, Meryn,” Aiden said, pointing toward Darian.

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“I mean, no. I’m staying here.”

“What?” Aiden stared down at his mate, looking confused and a bit hurt.

She waved her wrist about. “You really want me anywhere near those assholes when I still have my gun and newly discovered powers?”

Aiden paled. “Good point.” He eyed Ryuu, Pierce, and the boys. “I leave the most precious thing to me in your keeping.”

Pip hugged Meryn’s arm. “We’re gonna meet fae, order new weapons, and eat food. Easy, peasy, lemon squeezy!”

Aiden nodded, looking relieved, then he eyed the quartet. “Weapons?”

Meryn frowned. “Maybe I should go with you. I can double-tap all of them and blame it on pregnancy hormones.”

“You know what, you’re right. Stay here and enjoy getting to know the fae volunteers. I’ll be back before you know it, my love.” Aiden kissed her gently, then placed a hand on her belly. “Behave, Peanut.”

“Go kick ass, daddy!” Meryn said in a high-pitched voice, causing the men to laugh.

Most of the units dispersed leaving Tau, Chi and Reston’s squad lingering at the bar.

Aiden nodded to Darian, and the portal to Lycaonia opened. Aiden was walking through when Meryn asked. “Where’s the strippers?”

“Mery- -” Aiden’s voice was cut off as the portal closed, with him on the other side.

Within moments, Meryn pulled out her laptop and opened it. She tapped for a few seconds, then they heard a light male voice ask. “We’re set up. What are our orders, Meryn?”

Ari, Gage, and Priest walked around the table and looked down at Meryn’s laptop. A small window with two young men was in the upper left-hand corner.

“You got eyes inside?”

“Negative. Ever since we used the city cameras, all the douchebags became techno conscious,” the blond explained, a look of disgust on his face.

“We do! I did it!” A tiny girl stuck her head in front of the camera beside the dark-haired one, who lifted her into his lap.

Meryn frowned. “Did what, Penny?”

“Hi, Auntie!”

“Hey, baby girl. What did you do?”

“Yes, honey, what did you do?” a woman asked off-screen.

“Hey, Rheia.”

“Hey, hun. I’m assuming Aiden left already.”

“Yeah, I think he was heading to the Council Manor first before returning to the Alpha estate.”

“Gavriel is here.”

“Hello, *solnyshko moya*,” a deep voice greeted.

“Hey, Gavriel.” Meryn pointed to the screen. “Back to baby girl. What did you do?”

“Yesterday, while I was coloring, I heard Jaxon and Noah say they wished they had eyes on the inside, so I tole Uncle Graham I wanted to see PapaByron, so he tooks me to the council place. I was able to go to the room where everyone looked mad. I gave PapaByron a hug, and I leff your car

there.” She sat up proudly. “It can hear, an it can see.” She looked down. “Did I help?”

“Fuck yeah, you did!” Meryn exclaimed.

“Penelope Carmichael! How did you know to do that?” Rheia asked.

Penny pointed to the screen. “Auntie always says you gotta know shit to rule shit.”

Priest, along with most of the men left at the bar, cracked up.

“Where did you leave it, baby girl?”

Penny looked around. “Where is Felix?”

“It got cold here, so he’s not feeling well,” Meryn explained.

“Does he have a hand warmer? I can send my scrunchie,” Penny asked, looking worried.

Meryn slapped a hand to her forehead. “Of course!” She smiled at the girl. “Don’t worry, Auntie will take care of Felix. Can you tell me where you left the car?”

“Under da table.”

“Good job!”

“Bringing it online now, Meryn,” the blond said, and moments later, a second window popped up, this time in the upper right. It was a video streaming what looked to be the wooden underside of the table and a lot of shoes.

“The council will be busy for at least the next hour formulating a response to our demands. Tell them to get the men together, then move in and retrieve our package,” an unfamiliar voice ordered.

Meryn made a signal, and the blond nodded. “We’re muted.”

Pulling out her phone, she dialed and waited. “They’re on the move, heading toward the Alpha estate. Divert Gamma for

backup.”

“Roger that, Menace,” Sascha replied, and she hung up the phone. Looking down at the laptop. “Gavriel...” Meryn started.

“No one shall enter this house and live,” he promised.

“I want you in the room with Keelan. We’ve seen dark portal fuckery here. I don’t trust them not to portal right into his room.”

Only silence answered.

“He fucking disappeared. How fast is he?”

“No idea, Jaxon, but it’s badass.”

“Bad ass,” Penny repeated.

“Honey, it’s badass, one word,” Rheia corrected absently.

Meryn nodded as she typed. “Yeah, unless you want to emphasize how cool something was, then you can say bad... *ass*.”

“Badass!” Ame said from Meryn’s left. Standing, he was at eye level with the laptop.

Penny’s eyes widened. “They’re my age! Can they come play?”

Yuki looked up at Zoe from Meryn’s other side. “Can we go play?”

Zoe nodded. “Maybe after this mess with the Committee is done.”

Penny looked straight at the camera. “Hurry an fix it, Auntie.”

“I’m working on it, EGIT.” She picked up her phone and dialed once more. “The path to hell is open,” she said ominously.

“Noah, we’re witnessing some next-level shit,” Jaxon said, looking excited.

Meryn smiled. “I just like doing nice things for the ones I care about.”

“Like Uncle Aiden?”

Meryn shook her head. “I like doing nice things for him because he has a prehensile tongue.”

Across the bar, more than one man spat out their beer.

“What’s prehensile?” Penny asked, sounding out the word.

Meryn blinked and realized what she said. “Um, you know how when you stick your tongue out at Uncle Aiden, he always wins because when he sticks his tongue out, it’s all twisted?”

“Yeah.”

“Like that.”

“Oh. Cool.”

“Meryn McKenzie! How have you crammed months worth of corruption into a five-minute zoom meeting?” Rheia exclaimed.

Meryn shrugged. “Talented, I guess.” She held up her finger. “Listen.”

“Who unlocked the door?” A male voice demanded from the car’s video screen.

“Who are you?”

“You are not permitted in here!”

“Now, now, don’t get ya panties in a twist. We have a special invite from our *cher*.”

“Why are you shutting the door?”

Within seconds, the sound of gunfire through silencers was heard from the car’s microphone.

“Noah, open up our line and turn off the car’s video,” Meryn said, hanging up her phone.

“Good to go,” Noah said.

“Hey, boys,” Meryn said in greeting.

Male laughter was heard. “Just like ole times, *cher*.”

“Under the table, there’s a toy car. Can you pick it up and head to the coffee shop I told you about? That’s your exit point. You can leave the car with the owner.”

There was a rustle of sound as the car was lifted, and then it was quiet again.

“Let our friends know we’ll be back soon,” the man requested.

She picked up her phone and tapped out a text. “Will do.” She looked at the screen. “Noah cut the connection.”

“Connection terminated.”

“Meryn, did you just...” Ari started.

She smiled up at him. “Did I what?”

Ari stared down in horror.

“Meryn, we’re hearing gunfire outside,” Jaxon announced suddenly.

“Rheia, take Penny to Keelan’s room. Not only has Kendrick spelled that thing seven ways from Sunday, but Gavriel is in there dying to kill people. There’s no safer place.”

Penny was lifted out of Jaxon’s lap. “We miss having you home. Hurry back, okay?” Rheia said.

“I’m doing my best.”

Multiple roars were heard, and then a flash of red could be seen flaring around the young men from whatever was happening outside.

Meryn laughed. “Aiden and Kendrick are there.”

“I’m taking Doodlebug upstairs. Love ya.”

“Yeah, yeah, love ya too.”

“Noah, can I get a visual update?”

Noah stood and disappeared from view. In a fainter voice from across the room, he began reporting. “Umm, Aiden just ripped the head off this guy, then tossed it to Colton, who roundhouse kicked it into another guy and... Meryn! They knocked that guy out...wait. Nope, they’re high-fiving. The dude that got hit by the severed head is dead. Kendrick is shooting flames from his hands. That is so cool!” He got quiet for a second. “Hmm. We may need new landscaping before summer. Shit. Aiden is yelling at Sascha. He definitely found out you redirected them.” They heard an ‘eep!’ noise. “He’s coming inside.”

“Jaxon, I’m disconnecting. Run command line, *Wizard of Oz*.”

“Bye, Meryn, be safe.”

“You too.”

She pushed several buttons, and *Minesweeper* came up on her laptop before she closed it and put it away.

“Okay. Now, I’m hungry,” she announced.

Priest could only stare. Meryn’s aura was glowing pink with happiness. This morning, over breakfast, Cas had gone over most of the major emotions and colors. Pink, he was sure, was happiness. He watched as she hummed as she looked around the room. She wasn’t bothered by the sounds of the Committee getting assassinated at all. Given what the Committee had been doing lately, he couldn’t find it within himself to care either.

“Little lady, you can get whatever you want,” Dav said, passing her the menu.

Ari looked around. “Men, we will never, and I do mean *never*, speak of this again.”

Pip looked confused. “Speak of what?”

Ari went to answer, then grinned.

Pip bounced in his chair. “I got him!”

A few minutes later, when Meryn was halfway through her chicken tenders, a portal opened in the bar. A fuming Aiden and a laughing Darian walked through.

“Hi, baby!” Meryn said, greeting her mate enthusiastically.

“I... you.” He exhaled. “They... who?” He inhaled, then exhaled again.

“Want a tater tot?” she asked, holding one up.

His nostrils flared, his mouth a straight pressed line. “Eat while you can. You will need every scrap of energy possible for what I have planned for you tonight.”

Meryn eyed her mate carefully. “Do you mean that in an ‘I’m going to get fucked silly for giving you an awesome present kinda energy’ or an ‘I’m going to get spanked, then fucked silly for giving you an awesome present kinda energy.’?”

He just smiled down at her.

“Babe?”

“Maybe some sugar, too,” he said, pulling the plate of cookies closer.

She shivered and grabbed a handful of cookies.

He sat down and pulled her into his lap. “Do I even want to know?”

“Nope,” she said, popping the ‘p’.

“Okay.”

Darian simply bowed low to Meryn, then sat across from them. “Dav, a pint of your finest.”

Meryn held up a tater tot to Aiden’s mouth, who relented and ate it. “Did you scare Noah?” she asked.

Aiden rolled his eyes. “That lil shit has a backbone of steel. Stood toe to toe with me.” He chuckled. “*Minesweeper* baby? Even I know that no one plays that game.”

She popped a tater tot in her mouth. “Where’s Kendrick?” she asked, her mouth full of potato.

“Larik from Beta will be sending him back. He wanted to ensure Keelan was okay.”

“What about Gavriel?” she asked, passing him another tater tot.

He accepted, chewed, and swallowed. “He’s staying in Lycaonia. Beth will be returning in the next few days when she wraps things up in Noctem Falls.”

Meryn’s phone went off. Looking down, she smiled then answered. “Hey, Magnus. I have you on speaker, but we’re with warrior peeps, so it’s cool.”

“Meryn, my sweetest darling child. What can I gift you?”

“Hmmm.” She looked over at Zoe. “What kinda rocks would you need to make warming pebbles for the sprites to wear?”

Zoe’s eyes widened. Then she stepped forward excitedly. “Basalt or soapstone are amazing for retaining heat and releasing it slowly, if at all.”

“Magnus, do you have any basalt or soapstone in the levels?”

“We do not have much soapstone. It is usually found in your neck of the woods in the Appalachia. But, there have been deposits of basalt found here in the city. How much do you need?”

“Enough to make all the sprites lil body warmers so they don’t get sick.”

“Sebastian, send a runner up to Level Five and see what we have in our stores,” Magnus said, then returned to the phone. “I will gift that to Aleksandra as a present between nations. Now, what can I do for you, personally?”

“How do you know I am deserving of a present?” she asked.

There was silence.

“Right, super prince powers and whatnot.” She hesitated. “Can you come visit when I get my family time stuff?” she asked quietly.

Magnus clucked his tongue. “I would do that anyway.” There was a bit of silence before Magnus spoke again. “I will be sending you some jewelry. I noticed whilst you were here, you only wore what the gown provided. At the very least, as a princess, you need a tiara.”

“You’re awesome!”

“And you, my dear, have saved me weeks of headaches.”

“Even if you have to replace the Founding Family head for Regis again?”

Magnus chuckled darkly. “I completely forgot that Jourdain was on the Committee!” The deep laughter heard from the phone was so contagious that Meryn began chuckling. “I will also be sending you some imported chocolates. What a delightful child! Goodbye, dear.”

“Bye Bye.” She tapped on her phone, then picked up another chicken tender.

Ari looked down at her. “You really do have his Regalis card, don’t you?”

“Shiny gold business card with squiggles? Yeah. I wanted to trade it in for unlimited meat kebobs, but he told me to save it for something more important,” she explained.

Priest stared. To be the recipient of a Regalis card meant the entire vampire race owed her a debt.

Ame tugged on Zoe’s hand. “Time for volunteers.”

“Crap! Gage, hurry up. I wanted to see who turned out for the queen’s request,” Zoe said, taking each of the boys’ hands.

Gage stood and placed a hand on her lower back. “I’m assuming we’re good?” he asked, looking around.

Meryn nodded, then crammed an entire tender in her mouth before pointing to the door, indicating to Aiden that she wanted to leave as well.

Gage chuckled and led his mate toward the exit.

Aiden shook his head at her antics and kissed her brown, spiky curls before standing, picking Meryn up as he straightened. “Darian?”

“I’ll be heading back to the palace to update Mother, then I’ll be in the city center organizing volunteers.”

Aiden, holding Meryn close, looked to Nigel, Neil, and Pip. “Come on, boys.”

Ari looked at Aiden. “Um sir...”

Aiden smiled. “You’re still in charge for the day. Tell the men to stand down from emergency protocol and return to normal patrols.”

“Yes, sir,” Ari said, then winked at Meryn.

Meryn rubbed her hands together. “Finally! Super fae weapons.”

Aiden shook his head, smiling. “Whatever you want, my love.”

Priest looked at Cas. “So, our plans are a little out of order, but how about we get chicken to-go and head to the city center to help where we can?”

“Sounds perfect to me.”

Chapter Fifteen

Cas reached into the bag that held their chicken tenders and pointed to where one of the fae set up a stand for clay creations.

“Let’s look over there.”

The queen’s request for fae volunteers had turned into a craft exposition. In addition to the line of men and women waiting to register talents with Darian for the defense of the city, many of the artisans set up impromptu booths to showcase new items created with the Dim in mind.

Cas approached the booth and was amazed. “They’re beautiful.”

The fae man behind the counter smiled. “We have been working with young Kincaid and Zoe in bespelling items like stones. These clay vessels are designed to hold and radiate heat in a fashionable way.”

Cas eyed one piece in particular, glazed in a bright grass green. “I’d like this one, please.”

He nodded. “To be billed and sent to House Illiya,” he asked for confirmation. He cleared his throat. “Did not mean to sound presumptuous, but you look like your mother.”

“I find that to be a compliment.” She smiled. “And yes, to House Illiya would be wonderful. I can’t wait to add this to our bedroom.” She looked around. “Do you have anything in navy?”

He pulled out a mid-size vase from under the counter. The center had a spiral cut from it to allow one to see the interior stone’s glow. “Took three applications of paint, but I finally got this deep blue you see.”

Cas ran her hand over it. The edges were perfectly smooth. “Bill this one to House Illiya, but please send it to the warrior villa for Priest Vi’Aerdan.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He nodded and began wrapping each piece in protective paper.

Cas gave her thanks and looked to see what the next stall contained. At her side, Priest followed, a smile on his face. The man was ridiculously easy to keep happy. “Did you like the one for our room at the warrior villa?”

He nodded. “I never would have picked out anything like that, but I can easily see it going with the other decor you ordered from Baba.”

“Lady Vi’Illiya, can I interest you in some light catchers?” a female voice called out.

Cas grinned, and she walked over. “Bellia, I’m surprised you remember me,” she said, greeting the woman warmly.

Bellia pointed up to Cas’ eyes. “You look just like your mother.”

Cas felt happy at the comparison. She looked down at what the woman was selling. “Light catcher?”

Bellia nodded. “These have been magicked to catch and reflect light. Keeps spaces bright and cheery.”

After going through an entire box of stock, Cas finally found a half dozen in colors she could use. “These are amazing.”

The woman shrugged. “Necessity is the mother of all invention. We have all been adapting.” She said, pointing to the other crafters. “You want these sent to House Illiya?”

Cas nodded. “I’ll sort them for each house later.”

She said goodbye and grabbed her mate’s hand. “Where do you want to go? I feel like I have monopolized our time.”

Priest just smiled. “Anywhere is fine as long as I am with you.”

She looked around. “How about we see what Gage and Zoe are up to?” she asked, pointing across the courtyard.

He nodded. "Let's go."

Walking up, she noticed Zoe was talking animatedly with an older gentleman. Ame and Yuki were playing with tiny crystals happily, and Gage was watching his mate with an adoring expression. Glancing over at Priest, she saw he was watching her with an equally adoring expression. Maybe it was a unit warrior thing?

"Good afternoon, Zoe, boys," Cas greeted.

"Hi Cas! This is my good friend Dirk Vi'Eirlindol. He does amazing work with crystals," she gushed.

The old man just grunted.

Cas inclined her head. "A pleasure to meet you, I'm Cassandra Vi'Illiya."

The man's eyes widened. "Eibhlhin's daughter?" He shook his head. "Of course you are. Look at you."

Cas raised a brow to the older fae. "I would look at myself as you suggested, but there are no mirrors about."

Dirk blinked, then barked out his laughter. "And there's Caelin's wit and humor. You do this old man's heart good. Seeing you home reminds me that life finds a way, does it not?"

She chuckled along with him when he compared her to her father. "Did you know them well?"

"Aye, I did. It surprised everyone when you were born." He looked over at Priest. "You boys seem to be finding mates every time I turn around."

Priest grinned. "Just lucky, I guess."

"*Hahaue*, look," Ame said, holding up his crystal. It had changed color from white to blue.

"It's beautiful. What do we say?" Zoe asked.

Ame and Yuki both turned to Dirk and gave a half bow. "Thank you," they said in unison.

Dirk flushed a bit and messed up each boy's hair. "They are good boys. Reminds me of my nephew. Polite as can be. He liked my color-changing crystals, too."

"*Hahaue*, can we give him a 'thank you' gift?" Yuki asked.

Zoe nodded, a puzzled expression on her face. It was clear she had no idea what the boys would gift the older fae.

Grinning, the boys held hands and closed their eyes. Moments later, large fluffy snowflakes began to gently float down out of the sky.

Dirk's expression was one of awe. "They did this?" he asked.

Zoe nodded. "It's their magic."

Around the courtyard, people were stopping and looking up in wonder. Underfoot, the walkways turned white as the gentle snow began to accumulate.

"Priest, both Ari and Darian look like they're about to snap. Want to help them for a bit?" Gage asked.

Priest turned to her, and she waved him on. "I'll be here with Zoe and the boys. Go make sure our fearless leaders don't get paper cuts."

Dirk guffawed again. "Aye, there's Caelin, alright."

As the boys chatted with Dirk about the colors, Zoe leaned in close. "Earlier doesn't seem real. Less than an hour ago..." She nodded to where Meryn was walking toward them.

Cas nodded silently.

"She is so small but so amazing."

"And crazy."

Meryn looked from Cas to Zoe and back. "Who's crazy?"

Cas pointed right at her.

"Oh, yeah, probably. Anywho. Aiden wanted to help Darian since the line was just getting longer. Each fae wants to

describe in detail what they can do. It's taking forever to get them listed."

"Our gifts are complicated," Dirk added, eyeing Meryn.

"Dude, if they're that complicated, they need to type that shit up and bring it with them," Meryn countered.

"Dude?" Dirk asked, his brows nearly disappearing into his hairline.

"Never heard that one before? It's kinda like a gender-neutral expression for a person, with a slang bent to it," Meryn explained.

"I am hardly a 'dude'," he grumbled. "I am Dirk Vi'Eirlindol. Head of House Eirlindol."

Meryn shrugged. "Good for you, I guess."

Behind Meryn, Ryuu and Pierce wore identical smug grins at her nonchalant attitude.

"Meryn! Look what we found!" Pip yelled as the boys ran over.

Dirk paled. "Meryn?"

Cas hid a smile as he realized he had been correcting his princess.

The woman in question turned to the boys. "Whatcha got?"

Pip held up a long shawl, then wrapped it around his neck. "It's fluffy!"

Meryn reached out and touched the grey-blue material. "It's super soft! And the color really suits you, Pip."

"Really?"

"Yup." She looked at Nigel and Neil. "Didja'll find anything?"

Neil held up a small ceramic disc. "This keeps your tea or coffee at the perfect temperature. I got you one, too."

Nigel held up what looked like a simple metal rod. “You add this to your bath water, and it keeps it hot no matter how long you’re in it.”

“Where did you get that?” Both Cas and Zoe asked at the same time.

“On the other side of the registration table,” Nigel said, pointing across the courtyard.

“*Hahaue*,” Yuki whispered lowly.

The fear in his voice had everyone turning to the small boy.

“What is it, my little love?” Zoe asked soothingly.

“There’s footprints and no people, like last time,” he whispered.

As one, the group turned toward the center of the courtyard and watched in horror as multiple sets of footprints headed in their direction.

Seconds later, Zoe screamed and was jerked backward, then disappeared entirely.

“*Hahaue!*” Ame yelled.

Around them, people froze, unsure what was happening.

“Zoe!” Gage shouted, running their way, only to be broadsided by an invisible force. Blood appeared across his chest as he was slammed to the ground.

Meryn climbed onto the top of the closest booth counter. “Aiden! Zoe was taken!” she screamed.

On the other side of the courtyard, Aiden and Priest started their direction but were also attacked by unseen forces.

Around them, people were being knocked down and thrown about.

The air around Meryn shimmered suddenly a bright blue, and a patch of cobbles was exposed as an invisible body landed. Someone attacked, not knowing she was protected.

Dirk pulled Meryn into his arms. “Cassandra to me!” he ordered.

She shook her head. “I can’t. I’m the only one that can see Zoe. Protect them!” she said, scanning the street, looking for one aura in particular.

Dirk nodded. “Squire, are you in or out?”

“Out!” Ryuu yelled.

Setting Meryn on her feet, he wrapped an arm around Ame and Yuki and pulled them close. Nigel and Neil stepped away, leaving Pip with Meryn. Seconds later, the five of them were encased in crystal. Ryuu levitated and landed on the top, setting the entire thing ablaze with azure light.

Pierce jumped into the street and pulled Gage out of the fray.

Cas turned to the twins. “I can follow her!”

“Then go! We’re with you,” Neil yelled.

Cas exhaled and finally saw the bright red sphere that was Zoe. At the edge of the city center, the sphere stopped moving, and the red changed to beige. Cas knew Zoe had been knocked unconscious. Less than a block away, a dark portal wavered unstably.

Pumping her arms and legs faster than she had ever done before, she was able to catch up. Without hesitation, she launched herself right at the beige aura, tackling it to the ground.

Behind her, Nigel had his hands raised. One hand held a large earthen shield, the other a maul. Neil had multiple vines growing from the ground he was using as whips.

“Come on, Zoe, wake up!” Reaching around blindly, she felt for the woman’s face and tapped it gently.

“Cas, what happened?” she asked, slurring her words.

“Bad guys took you and made you invisible. How do I undo it?”

“Necklace?” Zoe asked weakly.

As Cas was fumbling around Zoe’s neck, she felt claws rake down her back. Screaming out her pain, she wrapped her arms around Zoe to keep her safe.

“Drop her!” a voice ordered.

Cas couldn’t hold back her tears. She wasn’t a warrior. She was hurt and afraid. “Priest!” she screamed, from the depths of her soul.

An inhuman screech echoed off the buildings. The hands trying to force her away from Zoe froze.

“Shoot her! We gotta get out of here! We can heal the witch later if we have to.”

She heard the first shot. Fire bloomed from her back outwards. She heard the second shot, but it felt more like a punch.

Darkness began closing in, and she locked her hands in place. They would have to cut her fucking arms off to get Zoe!

Overhead, the sky dimmed as something passed over them.

“Holy fuck, please, gods, let that be one of our guys,” Neil prayed.

She felt the earth quiver as something landed behind her where the small alley she was in opened up to the city center.

Opening one eye, she glanced behind her, and couldn’t figure out what she was seeing. The creature stood nearly as tall as the second-story buildings around her. Its body was covered in feathers in varying shades of grey, and it stalked forward on taloned feet. She closed her eyes. If she didn’t see the monster, it wouldn’t see her.

Another ungodly screech reverberated around them.

Within her chest, she felt a flutter.

Opening her eyes, she saw that the beast was getting attacked by assailants he could not see in his attempt to get...

to her.

She focused on the bit of light she had shared with her mate the night before. It glowed brightly from behind the thick plumage.

“Priest! Look for their auras! Brown sludge over grey! Kill them, baby!” She choked on her tears. “Kill every single one of them!”

His angry screech was no longer scary, but reassuring.

At first, there was one answering screech above, then two, then three. A cacophony of bird cries filled the air. The Eagles of Éire Danu had answered his call.

Iris, then Aurora landed in human form, wings behind them like avenging angels.

In front of them, Gaius, Vesta, and Helios drew blades and stalked forward.

“Sorry about this, folks,” Nigel called out, then unleashed a torrent of mud splatter.

Suddenly, invisible enemies were very visible.

Pumping their wings, Helios and Gaius took flight and began impaling their enemies at every turn.

Priest simply ripped them apart. Like an angry toddler pulling off a doll’s head, he simply tore them limb from limb.

Vesta knelt beside her. “What are you holding on to?”

“It’s me, Zoe.”

“You can let go now, Cassandra,” Vesta said in even tones.

Cas shook her head, then looked to their left. The portal remained. “They came for her,” she whispered.

“Cassandra, mate of my son. You are dying. Please let go,” Vesta begged.

Cas laid her head on Zoe, keeping her arms locked in place.

She heard a pop, and suddenly Zoe could be seen. Tears streaked down her face. “I’m okay, Cas! Please!”

Only when the portal collapsed and disappeared did she relax her grip and slumped fully onto the witch.

“She needs a healer! Now!” Vesta screamed.

The monster that was her mate launched himself skyward, then flew back toward the courtyard.

She was lifted gently and placed on her belly next to Zoe.

“Mother, she’s lost too much blood,” Aurora fretted.

“Keep your hands pressed hard,” Vesta ordered.

She heard sniffing and knew it had to be Iris crying over her injuries.

Above them, the steady beating of wings got louder as Priest landed. In each claw, he carried two struggling warriors. Without ceremony, he dropped them in front of her.

“Cas!” Luca cried out, seeing the state she was in.

Reaching up, he fumbled at his comms unit. “Ilian, Cas has been shot. We need help.”

Over the unit, she heard a voice as familiar to her as Eion. “You do whatever you have to! Do you hear me, Luca!” Ilian ordered.

She felt Luca’s hands over her wounds. “I can stop the bleeding. I could even heal the wounds if she didn’t have bullets in her!” Luca yelled. “She needs more than I can provide.”

“Not looking too good, are you, hun,” the other warrior asked, kneeling down on her other side.

“Heath, right?” she asked, feeling weaker.

“You have a good memory, but considering I’m one of the handsomer warriors at the villa, I can see why you’d remember me,” he said, his eyes twinkling.

“I’m dying, aren’t I?”

Heath nodded. "At the moment, yes."

Priest screeched behind them, then smashed his claws into the building next to them.

Heath huffed. "Do you want to knock stone bits into her wounds?" he demanded, glaring at the impossibly large bird.

Gaius stood next to Priest. "He's in his third form. They can rarely be reasoned with."

Priest opened his beak wide.

"If you screech one more time, I'll give you diarrhea for a month," Heath threatened.

Priest closed his beak.

"Isn't he cute?" she asked, no one in particular.

"You know it's love," Neil said.

"Yeah, because right now, he is straight-up nightmare fuel," Nigel agreed.

Heath turned to Luca. "Tell Ilian to get either Meryn or Aiden to arrange a direct portal to Noctem Falls," he ordered.

Luca relayed the message, and they waited.

"Doesn't hurt," she whispered.

"That's not exactly a good thing, hun," Heath said, worry in his eyes.

"I want Priest."

Heath looked over. "She wants you, and your huge fluffy ass won't fit through the alley, so rein your shit in. That is an order."

Gaius shook his head. "He won't..."

The creature that she knew was her mate doubled over and screeched in pain. They could hear bones snapping as he fought his bird.

She concentrated on the piece of him that was within her. "It's okay, my love."

Priest suddenly shuddered and shimmered back to his normal human form.

Without saying a word, Helios removed his pants and offered them to his brother, leaving him standing there in his boxer briefs. Gaius stripped off his shirt and helped Priest dress against the cold.

Trembling Priest stumbled toward her. Taking her hand, he gave her a trembling smile. “This was not on our list of things to do today.”

She smiled and closed her eyes. “I was really looking... forward...”

“To the spectacular sex? I know,” he joked, wiping his eyes with his free hand.

“No...idiot. Our... *Minecraft*...game,” she said, then opened her eyes to look at him.

“We’re clear for transport!” Luca said, hand to his ear. “We have to get her to the city center. The portal is open, and they are expecting her in Noctem Falls.”

Heath stared. “They couldn’t open a portal here?”

Luca shook his head. “They tried at the end of the street. Something residual from the other portal is blocking it. The city center was the closest they could get.”

“We need to keep her flat.”

“Helios, grab Aurora’s arms,” Vesta ordered.

Cas felt something moving across her belly.

“Gaius...”

“I’m here.”

Moments later, she was lying across their forearms as they walked quickly toward the portal. Priest held her hand, walking backward.

“Zoe... shot?” she asked, looking around.

“I’m here, Cas. You can’t see me, but I’m walking just behind you with Nigel and Neil. I wasn’t shot. The bullets are with you. I’m safe,” she said, then broke into sobs. “I’m s-s-safe because of y-y-you.”

“Tired.”

“I know you are, hun, but you need to hang on a bit longer,” Heath said from the other side of Vesta. Both he and Luca’s hands were glowing as they walked.

When they emerged from the alley, Cas couldn’t help but smile. The ferals picked the wrong day to make an attempted kidnapping.

Warriors were standing over bodies everywhere she looked.

Yet, none of them had been felled by bullets.

One feral had iron bands wrapped around his body.

Another looked practically mummified in linen, with only his eyes visible.

Two had been impaled by crystal.

Three looked like they died from glass shrapnel.

“Gage? Where is he? If he were okay, he would have come for me,” Zoe asked, looking around frantically. “Where are my boys!”

“This way!” Darian said from beside the portal. “Gage has already been taken through. He went immediately into surgery. They’re waiting on Cas now. Meryn has the boys on Level One with Pip,” he explained. “Avery and Warrick are waiting to take you to the waiting room on Level Six, where the hospital is.”

He looked to Priest. “Your brothers will be right behind you,” he promised. “I’ll see to it your parents and Eion are brought to you.” He waved them on. “Now go.”

Cas closed her eyes at the portal’s bright golden light. When they passed through, it was comfortingly dark and cool.

“What do we have?” A female voice demanded.

“Two gunshot wounds and claw marks down her back,” Luca explained. “Shock has set in.”

“Place her on the gurney. On one, two, lift!”

Cas felt cool cotton on her cheek.

“I have to stay with her!” Priest yelled.

“You will do her more good here, out of the way, son,” a soft female voice said.

“Let them do their jobs, Priest. She’s in the best hands possible,” Vesta said.

“Love you,” she said, feeling weak.

“Gods, I love you too, baby! Fight! Do you hear me? Fight!”

She snorted. “That’s your...job.”

“She’s got a sense of humor. I like her already. Okay, people, let’s get this party started!”

Cas closed her eyes as everyone began to move around her.

She hoped she lived. She really was looking forward to snacks and their *Minecraft* play-through.

The first day was hell. His parents sat on either side of him. Their very presence kept him grounded. Eion and Ilian stood against the wall, like sentries, as if they would fight death itself to protect his mate.

On the second day, a badly wounded Gage fell to his knees in front of him, where he sat in the hospital room and sobbed his thanks. Zoe and the boys got him to his feet but wasn’t able to convince him to go back to his own room. The hospital staff moved a reclining chair into the corner for him. Gage

refused to be more than a few feet from him. Priest felt relief that his closest brother was with him.

On day three, Ari made him shower and change into his own clothes. Brie and Aeson took turns force-feeding him. Kincaid somehow made jasmine bloom along one wall. The scent was soothing and helped him in the long hours of the night. Gage no longer needed the hospital bed and took turns with Ari in their round-the-clock vigil with him.

On the fourth day, his biological family hovered outside the door. Looking over to his parents, they nodded. His father waved them in and immediately embraced Gaius. His mother, of course, went to pieces over Vesta. Both his mother and father broke down crying their thanks that Gaius and Vesta had been there for him. Priest watched and knew that it no longer mattered what happened in the past. When he and his mate needed them most, his other family had been there for them. Merrick was working double duty to feed everyone.

Finally, on the fifth day, he felt his bird stir. Looking up from where he had been lying on their clasped hands, he saw his mate trying to wake. Of course, his bird liked his mate more. He was fine with that.

“Hey there, beautiful,” he whispered.

She blinked. “Did I die?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“That sucks.”

He simply brought her hand to his forehead, then kissed it. “You have no idea.”

“Zoe?”

“Safe, all thanks to you.”

“I had to.”

“I know. I am so proud and so mad at you.”

“Anyone else taken? Hurt?”

Priest shook his head. “Only the enemy. The people of Éire Danu fought back.”

“I remember seeing someone wrapped in a sheet,” she said, then struggled to sit up.

He motioned for her to lay back, then hit the button for the nurse. “The fae who did that has magic with fabrics.”

“Hi! How’s our girl?” A bright voice asked from the doorway.

“Hey, Ellie. She’s awake,” Priest announced. He met Ellie during his last visit to the Noctem Falls hospital. He knew he shouldn’t trust her more than the other doctors, but being mated to a fellow unit warrior made him feel at ease.

The woman nodded, smiling. “I can see that.”

She walked over to the other side of the bed. “Hello, Cassandra. My name is Dr. Eleanor Douglas. I wasn’t your surgeon, but I will be helping with your follow-up care. How do you feel?”

Priest eyed his mate worriedly.

Cas stretched a bit. “I feel fine, actually.”

Ellie nodded. “You healed beautifully once we got the bullets out of you.”

“How long have I been asleep?”

Ellie looked at her watch. “Today is the fifth day, I believe.”

Cas’ mouth dropped. “If I healed beautifully, then why have I been out for five days?”

“Blood loss. Your body simply needed time to recover. Did you want to try getting up?”

Priest surged forward. “No! She should lay down.”

Ellie’s mouth twitched. “I see.” She went to the doorway and motioned someone forward.

Ari and Gage walked in. Seeing Cas awake, they broke out into jubilant smiles.

Ari turned to Ellie. "Plan A?"

"Yup," she said.

Gage came up on his left and Ari on the right.

"Guys?"

They held him securely before he felt a pinch in the back of his neck. When Ellie came into view, she was putting a syringe away.

"Why?" he asked, as the room swam.

"She slept. You didn't," Ellie explained. "Lay him out on the chair recliner."

Ari and Gage lifted him and helped him to lay flat in the reclining chair.

"Hey Ellie, did you page me?" a female voice asked.

"Yeah. Serenity, can you use your magic to help the sedative along?"

A pretty red-head appeared over him. "Oh, you poor thing. You're exhausted."

"He is?" he heard his mate ask.

"Meryn avoided the room because she thought he turned into a zombie," Ellie said, grinning. "She hates zombies."

"Who doesn't?" Cas asked.

He felt a cool hand on his forehead. "Just rest. Your mate is safe, and when you wake up, you can head home. Your families are waiting for you there." She pulled a blanket up over him and tucked it around him.

"Okay?" he said, before closing his eyes.

Chapter Sixteen

Cas couldn't help but smile as Priest pouted to Aeson. "They let them knock me out," he complained.

"No!" Aeson exclaimed, not looking shocked at all.

"I have been betrayed," her mate continued.

She noticed that he was 'especially' betrayed when he was hungry and wanted to be spoiled a bit.

Upon returning home, they had been converged upon at House Illiya by his parents and his new bird family. She stopped saying biological because it sounded too clinical. Walking into the house, she saw Ilian pacing nervously in the family room and simply opened her arms. "Thank you, *athair*."

He had wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. "No more almost dying, young lady," he ordered her in an emotion-thick voice.

That evening she told Priest that his blue smudge was gone. The sadness had belonged to his bird at being rejected. But after coming together to save her, he seemed to be doing better.

That was two days ago. They were currently at the warrior villa to get a break from family, but she underestimated how mothered they would be by the warriors themselves.

Leon set a plate of pancakes in front of them. "Raspberry compote is almost ready, or we have maple syrup," he said, setting a white ceramic pitcher next to the plate.

Priest dove into the pancakes, creating a stack of six, which he then proceeded to douse in syrup. She put two on her plate and waited for the compote.

A couple minutes later, Leon set a bowl next to her. "Fresh from the stove."

She dug into the cooked fruit mixture and coated her pancakes.

Behind them, Heath walked in. Seeing them, he smiled. “How are you feeling?”

She got up and gave him a huge hug. She remembered his even-keeled attitude and how he managed Priest at his snarliest. “Better, thanks to you.”

He shook his head. “The doctors deserve that praise.” He steered her back toward her chair, then sat on the other side of her at the breakfast bar.

“Priest, I thought you said your dream saw her being ripped apart. But she almost died from bullet wounds,” Heath said, spearing three pancakes for himself.

Cas turned to her mate. “You saw what?”

“Right before I met you, I dreamt you were ripped apart by many hands.” He scowled. “Why didn’t I get a warning about ferals with guns?”

She sat back. “I was getting overwhelmed. In the months before the queen’s edict, I had so many clients, and I was trying to help everyone. Though I’m not an empath, some of their stories haunted me. I think you were seeing what I was experiencing at the time. In my dreams, you were the light that refreshed me.”

“So, they’re not prophetic?” Kincaid asked, almost desperately.

Priest shook his head. “I don’t think so. Meryn said the dreams can sometimes work in metaphors, too.”

Kincaid nodded. “Metaphors. Right. Of course.”

“You okay over there, witchling?” Heath asked.

“Never better,” he answered almost too quickly.

Heath, Leon, and Aeson replied. “Uh-huh.”

Cas turned to Aeson. “Any fallout from the Committee randomly expiring?”

Leon laughed out loud. “Who is there left that can complain? We sent a message, and it was heard.”

Priest shoved a huge forkful of pancakes in his mouth.

Heath covered his pancakes in syrup. “Did Kendrick ever make it back?” he asked.

Aeson grinned. “Yes, and evidently wants to send Priest a bill for the therapy the twins need after seeing Priest’s third form.”

Her mate inhaled in indignation and began to choke.

Heath continued chewing as he stood and began the Heimlich.

Seconds later, a wad of half-chewed pancake shot across the kitchen.

Priest gasped for air. “That...that’s not fair.”

Heath shook his head. “*I* may need therapy. Make sure you never do that in front of the kids.” He smiled. “It was amazing though. I heard Gaius put your name forward as future Eagle Elder because of it.”

Priest shuddered. “No way.”

Leon looked at her. “Priest is allergic to responsibility.”

Priest threw a napkin at Leon. “I do my work. I’m just not volunteering for more work.”

“So, what’s next?” Cas asked.

Aeson pointed to her plate. “Finish your breakfast.”

“Then what?”

“I think you and Priest have some games to play,” he said, pointing to the counter behind him. “I have snacks all lined up for you.”

Cas felt her eyes fill. “Thank you.”

Heath placed his hand on her head. "Take each day as they come and enjoy every second."

Priest took her hand. "We will."

EPILOGUE

Kincaid picked up a pancake and headed for the door.

“You sure you’re okay there, witchling?” Aeson asked with narrowed eyes.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’m going to go check in with Kendrick for additional lessons.”

“Okay, but if I find out you’re lying...” Aeson let the threat hang between them.

Kincaid swallowed. Of all his unit brothers, Aeson was the biggest mother hen of them all. “It’s not bad.”

Aeson stared.

“I’m not freaked out.”

Heath stared.

“Okay then. Heading out.”

“We’re here if you need us,” Cas said, hi with sympathetic eyes. He winked at her, and his brothers seemed to relax at his playful nature.

He waved his pancake at them and walked out the front door.

Though the city was still dim and people were still in mourning, the streets felt lighter. More people greeted one another as they walked by. Or they stopped to compare battle stories.

It had been a disaster, and they had almost lost Cas, but the city had rallied together, and it helped somehow.

He thought back to his dreams from the night before.

Children. He saw his mate surrounded by lots and lots of children.

That couldn't be bad, right?

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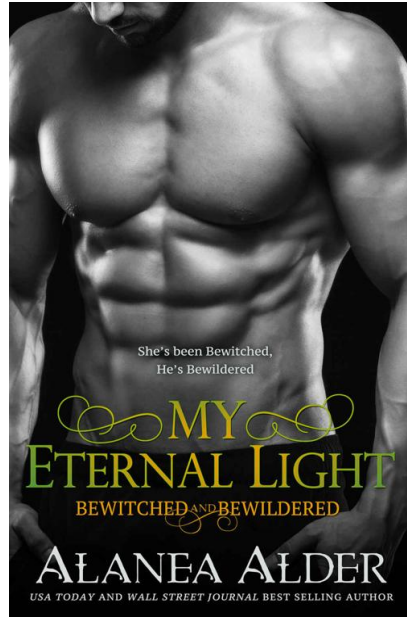


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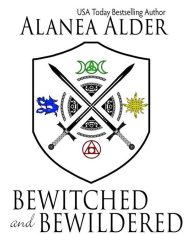
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