



volume two



SENT TO A
FANTASY WORLD
AND NOW ALL THE
MEN WANT ME

JACLYN OSBORN

Sent to a Fantasy World and Now

All the Men Want Me

Volume 2

Jaclyn Osborn

**Sent to a Fantasy World and Now All the Men Want Me:
Volume Two**

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Published by Jaclyn Osborn

Cover artwork by Artly Inspired

Typography by Sleepy Fox Studio

Edited by Keir Editing & Writing Services

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Note to Reader

While super low angst, this book does have a minor content warning for mild battle related violence. Thank you for going on another adventure with Evan and his men! I hope you enjoy the ride.

-Jaclyn

Chapter One

A New Adventure Begins

“This is the last of it,” Maddox said, setting a small crate overflowing with books on the floor.

Briar frowned at the books before aiming that frown at me. “I don’t like this. You living here. It’s too...” He swept a finger across the desk against the wall, creating a line through the layer of dust, “dirty.”

“Eh, it’s not so bad.” I put my hands on my hips and studied the bedroom. I had cleaned it before we’d brought my things that day, but it could use more dusting and scrubbing. Maybe a new rug.

“The bed is too small.” Maddox pressed his hand down on the mattress, making the frame creak.

“It’s not small.” I eyed the queen-size mattress. “You’re just really big. In more ways than one.”

He smirked. “Ready for more hard labor?”

“I was born ready. Watch and be amazed.” That ‘hard labor’ consisted of unpacking my belongings and moving

furniture into my new home; the cottage I'd found nestled in the woods.

I still couldn't believe it. My dream of opening my own café was finally becoming a reality. The two-story cottage would be my business and my home, with me living on the second floor.

Over the past two months, I'd gotten my affairs in order: approved for a loan to purchase the building, filed for a business license, and set up suppliers for ingredients. The entire downstairs had needed to be renovated too; the old equipment replaced, fresh coats of paint applied, and new hardwood flooring laid.

Prince Sawyer had pulled some strings to help speed up the process too, encouraged further by Kuya's excitement about eating my baked treats. They'd all played a part in making this happen. Opening day was a week from now, and I was a bundle of nerves but excited too.

"This is ridiculous," Maddox said. "You should just stay with me. You can leave early for work and come home at sundown. It's unnecessary for you to move here."

"We've talked about this." I slipped my arms around his waist, resting my chin on his chest as I stared up at him.

"You talked," Maddox said with a huff. "I merely listened, thinking the idea of you moving foolish."

"As much as I love hopping between your bed and Briar's, I want my own place. Laying down roots, remember?" During the Festival of Lights, I'd chosen to stay in this world

instead of returning to my old one, and I fully intended to make the most of it. Going all-in.

I wanted to build a life in Bremloc, not just float around looking for a place to call my own.

“You’ll be outside the castle grounds, Evan.” Worry clouded in Maddox’s deep blue eyes, revealing the true reason behind his complaints. “If something happens to you, I’ll be so far away. *Too* far.”

“Don’t worry about me,” I said. “I’m a powerful muffin lord. I can take care of myself.”

“Tell that to the rock that tripped you earlier.”

Briar snorted.

“Hey.” I peered over at him. “No laughing. Give me kisses instead.”

“That can be arranged.” Briar approached and dipped his face to my nape for a soft peck. “All the kisses for my love.”

“*My* love,” Maddox said before nuzzling my temple.

“No, he’s *your* muffin,” Briar countered.

Maddox chuckled, the deep sound rumbling in his chest. “That he is.”

I savored every touch and kiss as I stood sandwiched between the two of them—my favorite place to be. *My knight and my physician*. I didn’t think it was possible to love someone this much, let alone *two* people, but I fell harder for them each day.

A loud bang came from downstairs.

“That doesn’t sound good,” I said.

Maddox withdrew from me and stepped out into the hall, peering over the stairway railing. “Callum? Everything okay down there?”

“Yes! Everything’s great, Captain,” came Callum’s reply amidst more shuffling and a few grunts. “We, uh, we just kind of... sort of... dropped a table. But it’s not broken!”

“Baden dropped it,” Duke said.

“Piss off, D,” Baden responded. “I only dropped it because I saw your ugly face and got scared. Truly a thing of nightmares.”

“Your brother had no complaints about my face when I railed him last night.”

“You sonofabitch. As if my precious baby brother would ever go for a red-haired brute like you.”

“Does someone have a little brother complex? How cute. I’ll be sure to let him know the next time he’s sucking my coc
—”

“Finish that sentence, and I’ll kill you.”

“No, you won’t,” Duke said. “You love me.”

I choked on a laugh. They were too much.

“Back to work,” Maddox called down to them.

“Yes, sir!” their voices said in unison, though I was sure they continued jabbing at each other, too low for us to hear from upstairs.

New furniture had been ordered for the main dining room and the parlor beyond it; bar stools, tables, and comfy armchairs perfect for curling up in while reading. Callum, Quincy, Baden, and Duke had been put in charge of moving it into place.

“Gods grant me patience,” Maddox muttered as he closed the door and came back over, retaking me in his arms.

Briar breathed out a laugh, the exhale whispering over the back of my neck. “Never a dull moment with them around.”

“Never a quiet moment either,” Maddox said. His blue eyes fell to me as he brushed aside a strand of my hair.

My heart wobbled. He was too damn handsome.

“We could always be loud too,” I suggested, a grin springing forward—much like the beast in my trousers as my two men trapped me between their hard bodies again. I inhaled their scents; one of leather and spice and the other crisper, like fresh morning air and magnolia blossoms. “Let’s put that squeaky bed to use.”

Maddox smirked. “You’re wicked beneath that sweet smile. I like it.”

“This muffin has a dark side.”

And just like that, my sometimes-icy knight captain gave me one of his rare, genuine laughs that lit up his entire face. He glanced at Briar over my shoulder before the two of them tossed me on the bed.

“I’ll never tire of hearing that squeak,” Maddox murmured as his lips found the sensitive place beneath my ear.

“I didn’t squeak,” I lied. “It was a manly gasp.”

“Oh, so manly.” Briar settled on my other side and kissed the curve of my jaw.

Their hands roamed my body, peeling off my clothes, as they kissed and nipped at my exposed skin. I surrendered to their touches and smiled when they met each other for a soft kiss over my head. Along the way, they had formed a bond as well. Both of them loved me, but they loved each other too—even if they hadn’t said it yet. But I knew. I saw it, that tenderness when their eyes met and the gentle smiles after they bantered.

Briar’s mouth came around my nipple while Maddox sucked on my earlobe. I ached in all the right places and wiggled on the mattress.

“Someone’s eager,” Briar said before flattening his tongue against my nipple. He ushered forward a breathy moan from me. A moan Maddox caught with a hard press of his mouth on mine.

One of them gripped the base of my cock while the other palmed my balls. I was unsure which was which; I was too lost in the emotions welling deep inside me and igniting in my core. Maddox feathered kisses along my chest as he moved down my body. Briar flicked his tongue against my nipple in a way that had my toes curling.

“Oh fuck,” I panted as Maddox took my cock into his mouth. The explosion of wet heat had me shuddering and burrowing my fingers into his silky black hair.

Maddox's dark-blue eyes lifted to mine as he took my shaft to the back of his throat. He liked to watch as I writhed beneath his touch. And damn, I liked being watched. By him and by Briar.

"You're making the sweetest sounds, love," Briar said after pulling off my nipple. He lovingly stroked my jaw. "Do you feel good?"

"Mhm." My back arched as Maddox tongued my slit. He then brushed a finger over my opening, not penetrating yet; only teasing.

The two of them brought me to the brink several times before yanking me back, preventing me from going over that delicious edge. Only when I was a sweaty heap on the bed and begging for release did they finally take mercy on me.

Maddox fucked me hard and fast, the bed groaning under our weight.

"Fuck him harder," Briar said as he ran his fingers through my hair. He kissed my temple, cheek, and finally, my lips.

Maddox softly grunted, snapping his hips forward and driving into me with more vigor. His cock hit me in all the right places, sending rippling warmth throughout my body.

I'd lost count of the number of times we'd had sex in the past several months, but the intense pleasure never diminished. Every single time blew my mind. Made me lose it, too, as waves of ecstasy crashed into me, over and over.

Briar smiled against my mouth and encouraged Maddox further. Still holding me with one hand, he slid the other

between his legs and stroked himself as he watched me being fucked to within an inch of my life. Sometimes, he preferred that to participating.

My sexy voyeur.

Afterward, Maddox tugged me to his sweat-dampened chest. He reached over and cupped the side of Briar's neck before pulling him down for a hard kiss. With me on my side facing Maddox, Briar spooned me from behind, feathering kisses to my nape. He slid an arm across my belly and placed his hand on Maddox's forearm.

The three of us were connected. Bonded.

In love.

"I'm so happy we don't have to drink those flowery after-sex tonics anymore," I said, my voice slurred. Orgasms always wore me out. Cuddling with them didn't help with that. They made me feel so comfortable and safe.

The post-sex tonics were used in place of condoms—though, condoms could still be used if preferred. However, the tonics cleansed the body of any diseases that could be sexually transmitted. It was only necessary to drink it once, unless you planned to sleep around with different people. But since the three of us were in a committed relationship, we didn't need to drink it anymore. Thank god. That shit was revolting.

"I don't know," Maddox said into the top of my hair. "You may need to take one just as a precaution. What do you think, physician?"

Briar exaggerated a sigh. "The captain's right. We can never be too safe. I should whip one up for you."

“No,” I whined, wiggling. “I’ll puke. Y’all are supposed to shower me in kisses and love, not be mean.”

Briar grinned. “I don’t recall making that promise.”

Maddox chuckled and gently bopped my chin. “Your whines amuse me.”

“Yeah, well, my fist is about to amuse your face.”

“Is that so?” He snatched hold of my wrist and lifted my hand to his cheek, a humored glint in his eyes. “I’m terrified. Truly.”

I smoothed my thumb across his lips. They were soft and parted beneath my touch. His long black lashes created shadows on his cheeks as his lids hooded, giving him sexy bedroom eyes.

Maddox was a battle-hardened knight with scars to prove it and a strict exterior that had the potential to make even the bravest men cower... but with me, he was so damn gentle.

“Wanna know what terrifies *me*?” I rested my forehead against his jaw and reached for Briar’s hand. “Knowing a single day without either of you.”

“You’ll never have to know one,” Briar murmured into the back of my hair, threading our fingers together. “We belong to you.”

“And I belong to you,” I said, drawing back to look at them. “Both of you.”

“We know.” The softness in Maddox’s eyes reflected in his voice.

The backs of my eyes burned. “I’m going to miss you.”

“Miss us?” Briar asked.

“Yeah. I’m moving here, while you both have to stay on the castle grounds. You can’t leave your clinic because you have to be close in case of an emergency with the royal family or knights.” I looked at Maddox. “And as captain, you can’t leave your unit unattended. You said so yourself; it’s so far away.”

“Ten minutes on horseback,” Maddox responded, the edges of his eyes tightening. “Fifteen at most. But say the word, and you can return with us. No one is forcing you to leave the castle grounds, Evan.”

Hope filled his tone. He wanted me to change my mind. Hell, a part of me wanted to as well. But I really did want to build a life in Bremloc. Having my own place was an essential part of that.

“Ignore me,” I said. “Being on my own is just kinda scary. Which is dumb because before coming here, I lived alone. I’ll be fine.”

Maddox stared at me for a moment. “You’re coming home with us, even if I have to throw you over my shoulder and carry you. I forbid you to stay here alone.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m just whining. I *want* to live here.” My gaze trailed to the window and the forest of trees beyond it. The cottage was peaceful and would make for a great home. “I’m excited to start this next adventure in my life.”

“As am I.” Maddox nuzzled me. “But the only life I crave is the one where you’re by my side. Now and always.”

I smiled and returned his nuzzle. “We can figure out details later. The café opens in a week, so until then, I can stay with you while we continue getting this place ready.”

“How fortunate you came to that conclusion on your own,” Maddox said, his deep rumbling voice pleasant to my ears. Like a growly purr. “I had no intention of letting you stay here tonight anyway.”

“Bossy knight.”

“That’s captain.” Maddox playfully nipped at my nose.

“About the living situation, I’ll speak to Thane,” Briar said. “His skills have greatly advanced over the past two months. He can perform many tasks without my supervision now. I’m sure he can handle things at the clinic for a night here and there, so I can stay with you, at least for a few nights a week.”

“Callum can watch over the unit in my absence as well,” Maddox said. “I can stay the night with you and leave for the barracks at first light.”

My heart lifted into my throat.

“You won’t be alone, love.” Briar rested his face against my nape. “We’ll find a way to make this work. Don’t worry.”

I turned my head to meet him for a kiss before doing the same to Maddox. The cottage was big enough for all of us to live together, but I understood they had their own obligations. Maybe it could happen someday though. Building a home together.

A light rapping came at the door. “Captain Maddox?”

Callum.

“Yes? What is it?” Maddox responded in a deep voice that shot straight to my groin.

“We’ve finished moving the furniture, sir,” Callum said through the closed door. He may be a cinnamon roll with a dimpled grin and dough-eyes, but he was no fool. He’d no doubt heard the noise we’d made and wouldn’t come in without permission, knowing he’d probably see something that would scar him for the rest of his days. “Is there anything else you’d like for us to do?”

Maddox looked at me for an answer.

Funny how that sent excited tingles through my veins. He was the captain of the Second Order, yet he was looking to me for orders. Fuck, it was hot.

“Um.” I shifted to a sitting position on the bed. “I just have one more request. If that’s okay.”

“Of course.” Callum’s tone was more casual than when he’d spoken to Maddox. “Anything for you.”

Maddox huffed under his breath, while Briar chuckled.

“I want you and the other knights to stay for dinner. As thanks for all you’ve done today.”

“We’d be honored.”

Callum’s steps then retreated down the hall, quicker now than before.

Moments later, a voice boomed from downstairs. “We get to eat the Thorn Prince’s cooking?” Duke asked. They must’ve

been standing at the foot of the stairs for us to hear them so clearly. “Better than a handful of silver.”

Maddox wrapped an arm around me and dragged me down on the bed. “Whatever you cook, I get the first bite.”

“Not if I get to it first.” Briar snuggled into my other side. He had taken off his glasses earlier, so he was able to burrow his face into my hair without knocking them askew.

“You can’t eat if you’re dead,” Maddox told him.

“You would kill me over food?”

“Not all food.” I felt Maddox smile against my neck. “Just over a muffin.”

Damn if my heart didn’t soar. The two of them were ridiculously adorable when they bantered like this.

I pushed my face against Maddox’s collarbone and reached for Briar, positioning his arm over my stomach. “I’d say there are more muffins in the bakery, so why fight over one? But I’m selfish, I guess. I want to be the only one for both of you.”

“You are,” Briar said.

Maddox didn’t say anything, but he didn’t need to. He kissed my temple and let his lips linger on my skin before skimming them to my hairline.

Before meeting Lupin and being transported to another world, I’d spent my time escaping into books because it was more fulfilling than the world around me. My romance had been limited to the heartthrob characters I’d read about in those books because they were sure as hell better than the real

men I'd met and, very briefly, dated before realizing just how shitty they were.

The two men in my bed had changed my perspective on romance. They'd turned me into a lovesick puppy who one-hundred percent believed in true love and fairy-tale endings.

And our story was just beginning.

"Kuya smells cake!" Kuya bounded into the kitchen, his reddish-brown ears standing tall and his long tail flicking in excitement. His purple crop top showed his toned, tanned belly, and he was barefoot as usual. He hated shoes.

I had sent word to the castle, inviting him and the prince over for dinner.

"Hey!" I greeted him. Kuya was like a beam of sunlight after a stormy day. His energetic personality was refreshing. It was hard not to be happy when he visited. "I just put the cake in the oven. It'll be ready soon."

"Cake needs to be ready now." Kuya hopped up into one of the bar-style chairs at the counter and frowned at the oven, as if that would force it to bake faster.

The kingdom of Bremloc exuded medieval vibes with some of the décor, architecture, and way of life, but there were modern conveniences too. Or something close to them. Magic was such a prevalent part of everyday life and used to power things in the same way electricity would.

Ovens and other kitchen equipment functioned just like the ones from my old world. As I flipped the tiny switch that turned on a light for me to see through the oven's glass door and check on the baking cake, I could've sworn I was back in the café I'd worked in prior to coming here.

"Evan's head is in the clouds," Kuya said, appearing beside me. He peered through the glass door too, and his rainbow eyes widened. "Strawberry?"

"Yep." I smiled. "I know it's your favorite."

"You made this specially for Kuya?"

I nodded. "If it's okay, I'd like to name it after you too when I put it on the menu. Kuya Berry Delight. It'll have sliced strawberries on top with a strawberry buttercream frosting."

The kaleidoscope of colors in his eyes swirled as he flashed a toothy grin. "The perfect name for a perfect cake."

"Did Prince Sawyer come with you?"

He shook his head. "He's busy with paperwork. Has to sign documents and..." His ears drooped a bit, "choose another bridal candidate to meet with."

My heart went out to Kuya and Sawyer. The prince needed to find a bride, as was the way of royalty, because arranged marriages helped strengthen alliances with foreign kingdoms and fortified peace and prosperity with other nations. But anyone with eyes could see that the two of them belonged together. Whether they had ever acted on their feelings, I wasn't sure, but their depth of emotion was palpable.

Their heartache was too.

“How much longer does he have until he has to make a decision?”

“Not long,” Kuya answered. “King Eidolon says if he hasn’t picked one by the time the leaves start changing, he’ll choose one for him.” He stared at the cake in the oven, but the faraway look in his eyes told me his mind was elsewhere. “Kuya doesn’t want Prince Sawyer to marry anyone. He doesn’t have a choice though. Come winter, he’ll more than likely be betrothed to a beautiful woman who can give him what Kuya can’t.”

The ache in my chest deepened. “Do you want to help me finish cooking?” I asked, hoping to distract him from his sadness.

His ears perked up. “What does Evan want Kuya to do?”

“Have you chopped vegetables before?”

Kuya shook his head.

“It’ll be a good learning experience, then. Just don’t cut yourself. Otherwise, my head will be on the chopping block instead of this zucchini.”

Sawyer would kill me if his precious Kuya got even a scratch.

He watched as I chopped a zucchini, and then I supervised him as he chopped the second, showing him the proper way to hold the knife.

“Let the knife do the work for you,” I instructed.

“Kuya did it!” he exclaimed, beaming with pride. “What can Kuya chop now?”

“Easy, killer,” I said with a laugh, eyeing the knife as he tapped it on the cutting board. I grabbed two yellow squashes. “Chop the ends off first, then cut them the same way you did the zucchini.”

He was too cute as he got to work, tail flicking as he chopped the vegetables. Uneven cuts, but it was okay. Not bad for his first time. Once he’d finished, I tossed them in a cast-iron skillet on the stove. Earlier, I had marinated chicken breasts and thighs in a mixture of olive oil, lemon juice, dried rosemary, garlic, and salt and black pepper. In a separate skillet, I started cooking the meat.

Voices filtered into the kitchen from the other room where Maddox, Briar, and the knights waited. I loved the sound. Growing up, I had been shuffled from one foster home to another, often feeling neglected. Alone. Family wasn’t something I’d ever had. But warmth filled my chest as I heard their laughter.

I’m not alone anymore.

Love wasn’t all I’d found in Bremloc. I had found a family too.

Once the cake was done baking, I pulled it from the oven and set it aside to cool. I’d frost it after dinner. I had also made a batch of chocolate chip cookies earlier, some with pecans and some without.

Just call me Evan, the baking machine.

“It smells incredible in here,” Briar said from the doorway. His cheeks held a slight flush, a sign he’d been drinking. He had brought over his homemade wine to celebrate a job well done after moving everything into the café. “Need any assistance?”

“Just finished.” I set the chicken breasts on one platter and the vegetables on another. “Wanna help me carry it out?”

He smiled. “Of course.”

The three of us took the platters to the main dining area where the men had scooted tables together. We then sat and loaded food onto our plates; chicken, vegetables, and buttered rolls. Maddox was to my left and Briar sat on my right.

Kuya fluttered around the table, switching seats until he found the one he liked best.

Sir Noah had accompanied him that evening and stood against the far wall. His raven black hair was combed back, but a strand fell forward, falling into his whiskey eyes. He kept a stern expression as he stared straight ahead.

Sawyer could’ve sent any number of knights that evening to watch over Kuya, yet he had chosen his personal knight. Further proof of the prince’s feelings for the demi-human. He trusted only the best to keep Kuya safe.

“Come sit,” I told him. “There’s enough food for everyone.”

“I’m on duty,” Noah responded. “Though, I appreciate the offer.”

“Duty or not, you can still eat. Please?”

Callum stopped stuffing his face and glanced between me and Noah, a dimple surfacing. *What was so amusing?*

“Very well.” Noah took the vacant seat beside Duke. “Gratitude for the meal.”

“You’re welcome.”

The knights ate like they hadn’t eaten in weeks, scarfing their first plate in record time before diving in for seconds. Maddox shook his head at them and said they needed better table manners; however, he nearly fought Baden to the death over the last bread roll in the basket.

“I’m your captain,” he then said. “My rank says I get the last roll.”

“Pulling rank? That’s low, sir.” Baden surrendered the bread, his upper lip snarling as Maddox tore into it.

I nearly choked on a squash medallion as I laughed. “You’re just as bad as they are.”

Maddox’s expression remained serious as he ate the bread, but I caught the very subtle twitch in his cheek.

“The café opens in a week, yes?” Quincy asked me before shoving more zucchini into his mouth.

Nerves tumbled into my gut at the reminder. “Yeah, on Friday.”

“Have you hired anyone to help you run it?”

“Yep. Two people,” I answered. “Peter and Alice. Neither have much cooking experience, so they’ll mainly be working part-time in the dining room taking orders. Depending on how

the grand opening goes, I'll assess whether I can afford to hire them full-time.”

“With cooking like this?” Callum pointed to his empty plate. “I have no doubts as to your future success. You'll have a line out the door.”

“Kuya chopped those veggies,” the cat-boy said, then flipped around to me, a realization sparking in his rainbow eyes. “Kuya can work with Evan. Free cake as payment.”

It was certainly an idea... though perhaps not a good one.

Kuya would eat all of my inventory.

After dinner, I brought out the cookies, and it was game over. All of them swarmed the bar where I'd set the platter, and within a minute, only crumbs remained.

“Vultures,” I muttered before returning to the kitchen and frosting the cake. Booming laughter sounded from the dining room, and I smiled as I sliced strawberries to put on top.

Steps sounded behind me before strong arms encircled my waist. The scent of leather and spice reached my nose. “Thank you for the meal. The men enjoyed it.”

“I'm glad.” I relaxed against Maddox and turned my head to nuzzle his jaw. He hadn't shaved that morning, so his light stubble tickled my cheek. “Bread thief.”

“I'm no thief. I won it fair and square.”

“Fair? Really?” I faced him. “Is that what they call it when you use your position to get what you want?”

Maddox released a rumbling chuckle, the stoic mask breaking away to reveal the playful male who too often hid

beneath it. He smoothed his fingers along the curve of my neck as something tender touched his blue eyes. “I pray I’d be so fortunate as to have many more days like this one.”

I placed my hand over his. “Me too.”

The air stirred on my left side before I caught a blur of reddish-brown hair. Kuya grabbed the cake off the counter and scampered away with it.

“Hey!” I called after him. “You have to share that with the others!”

“It’s Kuya’s cake.” He grabbed a sliced strawberry from the top and purred as he licked off the frosting. “It has Kuya’s name on it. Evan said so.”

“That’s the last time I name something after you. Hand it over!”

“No!” Kuya took off running with it, giggling as he dashed from the kitchen at lightning speed.

Moments later, Callum’s voice rang out from the main dining area. “He has the cake! Get him, boys.”

“We can’t miss this,” Maddox said, amused.

Seeing grown-ass men chase Kuya around the café—who evaded them all with ease, grinning as he did—was the best thing I’d ever seen.

Duke dove toward him, and Kuya spun on his heels to dodge, causing the knight to crash to the floor with a frustrated *oof*. Baden and Quincy tried to trap Kuya behind the bar, taking a stance at both exit points, but Kuya crawled over the

bar and jumped off the other side, somehow managing not to damage the cake in the process.

My stomach hurt from laughing so hard.

“Do something,” Callum said to Noah, as the other three knights tried to corral the cat-boy into a corner.

Noah stood against the wall, arms crossed over his chest. “I’m unsure what you want me to do. Prince Sawyer’s orders were to keep Kuya safe and make sure he’s happy. And he looks awfully happy with that cake.”

Kuya ran past Noah, then stopped, spun back around, and handed him a strawberry. “A reward for Sir Noah’s loyalty.”

Noah accepted the strawberry and smirked at Callum as he popped it into his mouth. “So good.”

“Traitor,” Duke said. During the commotion, his medium-length red hair had fallen free of the leather strap he’d had it tied back with. “We’re brothers in arms. You’re supposed to be on our side.”

Noah nodded to Kuya. “His side has cake.”

Kuya flashed his sharp canines as he grinned. He then stuck a hand into the cake and shoved some into his mouth. “Kuya Berry Delight tastes yummy.”

“Get him!” Quincy roared. “We can’t surrender now, boys!”

Briar stepped up on my other side. “Should we tell them about the second cake?”

I had made a chocolate cake earlier to test out the oven but hadn’t frosted it yet.

“Nah.” I returned my attention to the chaos. “This is too fun.”

“That’s my wicked muffin lord,” Maddox murmured as he pushed his face into my hair, arm secured across my back. “Forget the cake. I’ll just devour you instead.”

A shiver passed through me—a reaction to both his words and the gravelly voice he’d used to whisper them in my ear.

Briar smiled at me. “That blush is too precious.”

“I’m not blushing,” I said. “My face is just hot.”

Once I’d felt Kuya had tortured the knights enough, I returned to the kitchen with both of my men in tow, and they helped me frost the chocolate cake and bring it out to the others. Perfect timing too, as Kuya had eaten more of the strawberry cake with his hands, smearing frosting all over his face and fingers and earning the ire of all the men in the room. They eyed the half-eaten cake, visibly pondering whether it was worth still eating after Kuya’s hands and face had been in it.

Did Kuya slobber outweigh their sweet tooth?

“Crisis averted.” I placed the chocolate cake on one of the tables. Briar set plates and silverware beside it. “We have another.”

“The Thorn Prince comes to the rescue,” Duke said, breaking into a smile as his gaze lowered to the cake. “Hand that beauty over to me.”

Maddox then turned into the authoritative—and oh, so sexy—knight captain he was and said in a firm tone, “Eat a

slice and then clean up the mess you made in this room. I then want all of you back at the barracks for lights out.”

“Yes, sir,” the knights said in unison.

“I love when he does that,” I said to Briar.

“Don’t tell him I said so... but so do I.” Briar adjusted his glasses, his gaze roaming to our captain’s perfectly toned ass. The heated look told me he wanted to take a bite out of those cheeks.

A while later, after they helped clean the café, I locked it up, and our group set out for the castle. Kuya rode on the back of Sir Noah’s horse, and I rode with Maddox. Briar, begrudgingly, shared a saddle with Callum, appearing uncomfortable as he sat behind the younger knight, having to hold on to his waist as we galloped toward town.

Noah and Maddox rode at the front with Callum behind us. The rest of the knights had their own horses, and they spaced out around us; one on each side and one at the back, as if to act as a sort of shield in case of an attack.

As we reached the castle gates, the guards allowed us to pass.

“Good night, Evan,” Kuya said in a sleepy voice, as we neared the fork in the path that would take them to the main part of the castle and us to the knights’ quarters. He snuggled the back of Noah’s armor. “Thanks for the yummy food.”

“Night, Kuya. Tell Prince Sawyer I hope he enjoys the treats.” I had packed cookies for Kuya to give to him. I had made another bundle for Thane, Briar’s apprentice, who also

loved my baking. He was around my age and had become a friend.

It was still weird for me to wrap my head around. Back in my old world, I could count the number of friends I had on one hand and still have fingers left over. But in Bremloc? I couldn't even count them on both hands. Close ones too, not just casual acquaintances.

Noah nodded to me before steering his horse in the opposite direction.

We reached the stable and took care of the horses before walking toward the housing units. The long day was catching up to me and I wanted to sleep for the next one hundred years.

"Take him to your room for tonight," Briar told Maddox. "I doubt he'll make it to the clinic."

"I'm fine," I said before giving a jaw-cracking yawn. My feet moved sluggishly across the grass. "Not tired at all."

"You're a dreadful liar, love." Briar stopped and took hold of my chin. He angled my face up before softly kissing me. "Sweet dreams."

His goodbye washed away some of my drowsiness. "You're not staying?" I asked, more alert than before. Tingles of anxiety poked at my sternum.

"I'm afraid I can't," he responded. "Thane worked long hours at the clinic today so that I could spend the day with you. He needs to be relieved of his duties."

"We'll stay with you then," Maddox said before picking me up and cradling me to his chest.

I was too tired to complain about being manhandled. The complaining was an act anyway. I secretly loved when he carried me like that. I was a five foot seven twink and had accepted the fact I'd be small forever.

Briar's smile was bright, and maybe a bit surprised. "I'd like that."

We didn't say much on the way to the clinic, but I felt the warm current flowing between the three of us. The comfortable silence was a testament to how at ease I felt when around them.

I closed my eyes and burrowed closer to Maddox, inhaling his leathery scent. The summer night was humid, and by the time we reached the clinic, my shirt stuck to me. But that was okay. Maddox helped me peel it off as soon as we were upstairs in Briar's room. His mouth crashed to mine as he laid me on the bed.

I hooked my arms around his neck and returned his hard, rough kisses. Briar joined us after Thane went home, and the three of us kissed and rutted together, the bed creaking as we sent each other soaring.

Exciting things waited ahead for me. Opening my dream café. Learning more about the kingdom of Bremloc and the lands surrounding it. And falling deeper in love with the two men who'd stolen my heart.

I was about to begin a new chapter in my life, and I only had the courage to turn the page because I knew they'd be right there with me.

Chapter Two

Welcome to The Brewed Muffin

“What if no one comes?” I asked, staring out the window. Antsy, I paced in front of it, anxiety building with the racing of my thoughts. “What if this was a huge mistake?”

Bremloc didn't have a café like mine. In fact, there wasn't a place to go in and buy a cup of coffee at all. Taverns and a bakery? Sure. But not a legit coffeehouse that also served desserts, sandwiches, and provided a quiet space to get lost in the pages of a good book. So, I had thought the café was a good idea.

But as I waited for people to arrive on my grand opening, I questioned everything.

“It's still early.” Briar placed a decorative pillow on one of the chairs and fluffed it. We were in the reading parlor surrounded by bookshelves and a collection of sofas and armchairs where people could sit with a book and relax. “Give it time.”

“What if everyone hates my food? My coffee? Oh my god, I'll go bankrupt. I won't be able to pay back my loan and

will have my property seized. I'll be kicked onto the streets and forced to do questionable things for money—”

“Evan?” Maddox grabbed me by the shoulders. “Stop pacing. Breathe.”

“I'm too stressed to breathe.”

He kissed me, then, and as our lips softly met, my bubbling anxiety simmered. I surrendered to the taste of him. His warm and spicy scent made me forget about everything else.

“There,” he whispered. “Better?”

I looked up at him... and then back out the window to the path sorely lacking foot traffic. So much for forgetting my worries; his lips only gave me a temporary reprieve before those worries smacked back into me. “Is it too late to become a knight? I think I have a better shot at that than being a café owner.”

“As I've said before, you with a sword is a frightening thought.”

“So is the thought of drowning in debt and broken dreams,” I said. “Is the position as the court jester still available? Because I'm a total joke. A laughing stock.”

“Physician?” Maddox sighed. “Your turn.”

“Come here, love.” Briar grabbed my hand and turned me from the window. “Let's go to the kitchen and make sure everything's ready for when your guests arrive.”

“You mean *if* they arrive.”

“None of that.” He lightly bopped the tip of my nose with his finger. I wiggled it in response, earning one of his crinkly-eyed smiles. It softened as his hand fell to my neck. “All will be well. You’ve worked so hard to make this happen. Believe in yourself like I believe in you.”

My throat wobbled just like my heart. His confidence seeped into me too. A little anyway. Enough to quiet the negative thoughts in my head. “Have I ever said I love you? Because I do.”

Briar brought me to his chest and kissed my temple. “You may have mentioned it once or twice. I love you too.”

“I love him more,” Maddox said.

“Always a competition with you, captain,” Briar responded, though a smile filled his voice. “And here I thought us to be lovers, not rivals.”

“Depends on the day.” But that same humor reflected in Maddox’s eyes. His gaze then roamed Briar’s body. “Though, I must admit... today is leaning more toward the former. You look damn good in that outfit.”

“You really do,” I agreed. Briar wore a button-up gray vest and a black suit jacket over it. The top of his collar was undone, showing the pale skin of his throat. The material clung to his tall, slender frame, emphasizing the lightly toned muscles of his upper arms. “Like, you’re seriously hot as hell. A total snack.”

A blush flooded his cheeks, and he adjusted his round-framed glasses. “I... well, thank you. Both of you.”

“You understood that?” Maddox asked, moving a finger from me to Briar. “You’d think I’d be accustomed to his strange speech by now.”

“*You’re* strange,” I muttered under my breath. “And a bunch of other ‘s’ words. Stubborn, strict, and super sexy.” The last word spoken with an eyebrow waggle.

Maddox arched a brow. “Flattery will get you nowhere.”

“What about cuteness?” I made my eyes bigger and slowly blinked at him, adding a pouted lip for total annihilation. That annihilation being to his self-control.

He tugged me closer and planted a kiss on my mouth, biting at my bottom lip before pulling away. “You don’t play fair.”

“Do I ever?” I poked at the crease of his forehead where he was frowning. But then my insides jolted. “The cupcakes!”

I dashed toward the kitchen and removed the pans from the oven. The cupcakes were slightly darker around the edges than I preferred but not by much. Thank god.

Along with the cupcakes, I had whipped up a large batch of vanilla buttercream frosting for once they’d cooled. I’d also made a variety of cookies—chocolate chip, lemon, and sugar—and four different cakes in preparation for opening day. There were also buttery croissants with a selection of jam fillings and fruit tartlets.

Some items would be staples on the menu, but I planned to have seasonal items as well, like soups and different flavors of coffee, cakes, and cookies for autumn and winter. Yes, I

would be introducing the people of Bremloc to pumpkin spice once October hit, and I couldn't wait.

If my café even lasts that long, anyway. I groaned at the bout of negativity and dove into work to distract my mind.

The scent of brewed coffee wafted around me as the machines whirred to life. Machines that, like the ovens, were also similar to the ones from my world; powered by magical runes instead of electricity but worked exactly the same way. The two refrigeration units were the same, each with an ice rune that kept the interior contents cold.

“Are they burnt?” Briar asked from the doorway.

“Nope. I pulled them out just in time.”

“Good.” He drifted closer and took my face in both hands. His fingertips were cool against my skin. It felt nice. “Remember to breathe.”

“I'm trying.”

“The captain and I will be right here with you.”

Guilt gnawed at my insides. They had taken a lot of time off lately to help me prepare. Neither of them gave the impression it was a problem. But still. “I'm sorry for taking you away from your work.”

“Don't be,” he responded. “Thane has everything under control at the clinic. His only request was that I bring him back another bundle of cookies. He loved the ones you gave him last time.”

“And Callum is in command of my unit,” Maddox said as he approached. “Unless an emergent situation arises, nothing

can take me from your side. Not today of all days.”

“We wouldn’t miss it for the world.” Briar brought me closer.

“Y’all are going to make me cry,” I mumbled into Briar’s chest before reaching for Maddox. He closed the gap between our bodies and rested his head on mine.

“The only tears allowed are happy ones.” Briar pressed kisses into my hair. “You’ve made your dream a reality. I’m so damn proud of you.”

Dreams. Wishes. They kind of went hand in hand. I had wished for another life, one where I’d finally feel like I belonged. That’s exactly what I found in Bremloc. A place to call home and people that loved me for *me*; quirks, rambling mouth, and all.

“Hello?” a feminine voice asked from the other room. “Mister Evan?”

Maddox glared at the archway, his hand instantly going to his side where his sword normally rested.

“It’s probably Alice,” I told him. “Please don’t kill my employees.”

Alice was short and petite with blonde hair in a pixie cut. She beamed as I entered the main dining area.

“Hey,” I greeted her. “Thanks for getting here early.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” she said. “The idea of this café has everyone so intrigued. Coffee is a luxury many of us have no access to.”

She was right about one thing. Coffee was a freaking amazing luxury and should be worshipped like the god it was. But everyone should have access to it, which was why I hoped people gave my café a chance. Her statement helped ease some of my prickling anxiety.

“Feel free to help yourself to a cup before the doors open.”

Peter, the other worker I’d hired, arrived a few minutes later. He was a hefty guy with sandy blond hair and a face full of freckles.

An hour later, the bell Maddox had placed above the door sounded in a musical little jingle as the first guest arrived. The woman wore a flowy yellow dress and a white sun hat on top of her mousy brown hair.

“Welcome to The Brewed Muffin!” I greeted her before motioning to the archway. “If you’ll step through here, you can find a seat and look over our menu.”

“Thank you.” She followed me into the main dining area and sat at the bar before scanning the menu on the wall. “What’s the house blend?”

“It’s a medium brew coffee with toasted nut afternotes,” I explained. Another customer entered the room, followed by a third. I greeted them and told them about the menu. “Everything’s organized by category: hot and cold drinks, cookie and cake flavors, and a small selection of sandwiches. Please let me know if you have any questions.”

They nodded to me before finding a table and sitting. The first woman then ordered the house blend.

“Coming right up.” I turned toward the kitchen, almost colliding with Briar in my rush.

“Easy,” he said, gently grabbing my arm.

“People are here.” I buzzed with excitement. “Like real people. Oh crap. I need to get her coffee, then take the other people’s orders. I should probably grab the sample platter too and hand those out.”

“You don’t need to do everything yourself.” Briar skimmed his knuckles across my jaw. “That’s why you have help. Stop holding your breath.”

I filled my lungs with air and exhaled. “Okay. I’m breathing. See?” I exaggerated another inhale and exhale. “Gotta get to work!”

I gave him a quick peck on the cheek before going into the kitchen and pouring a cup of coffee. After placing it on a tray, along with the platter of cookies and bite-sized samples of cake, I returned to the dining room. Peter and Alice had taken the other orders.

“Here you go. One house blend.” I set the coffee in front of the woman. “If you need sugar or cream, let me know.”

“It smells wonderful.” As she lifted the cup to her lips, I held my breath—unintentionally—and waited in suspended anticipation for her reaction. She was my first official customer. Her eyes lit up. “It’s delicious.”

I could’ve cried. “Feel free to try a sample of cake or a cookie. The sugar cookie is amazing. I like to dunk it in my coffee.”

She smiled and accepted a cookie. I tried not to watch her as she took a bite—didn't want to be creepy—but I slyly did so from the corner of my eye. She took one bite and nodded in satisfaction before breaking off a piece and dunking it.

Success. I carried the platter of samples to the other patrons for them to try.

With the first order completed, my former nerves gave way to delight. More customers trickled in, and soon, the main dining area swarmed with people.

Callum must've been a prophetic wizard or something because by late afternoon, word had spread through Bremloc, and the line was out the door, just as he'd said. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that level of success, especially on opening day. I would've been toast without Peter and Alice. They might not have been experienced with baking, but they were great with customer service.

Briar and Maddox helped too by delivering some of the orders to the waiting customers. Maddox was quick to clean off a table as soon as it was vacant, allowing more customers to sit. A sexy knight captain turned busboy. And Briar managed the payments, cashing out the customers. A physician turned fuckboy accountant.

Yeah, they were both getting laid that night.

“Evan's café is busy!” a cheerful voice rang out before my demi-human bestie came into the dining area. Noah followed him, eyeing the people they passed. Kuya's gaze found mine, and he quickened his steps, rushing over and hopping up on a bar stool. “A huge slice of Kuya Berry cake, please, with extra yummy frosting.”

“You got it,” I said before heading to the back to get it. I cut him a bigger than average slice and slapped on more strawberry buttercream frosting before pouring him a glass of milk. He bounced in his seat as I placed it in front of him. “Thanks for coming today.”

“Kuya wanted to support Evan.” He forewent the fork and picked the slice up with his hand, taking a bite off the end. Frosting smeared on the edge of his lips. “Prince Sawyer wanted to come too, but he couldn’t get away from the castle.”

“The prince is meeting with a bridal candidate this afternoon,” Noah added. “A baron’s daughter from a neighboring kingdom.”

Kuya bit at his cake with more force, his tail flicking behind him. I’d learned to read his tail-flicks, knowing when it came from happiness or when, like now, it came from annoyance. He wore his emotions on his sleeve, unable to hide his frustration. But he didn’t say a word. He just ate his cake and looked like he wanted to burn the world down, preferably with the baron’s daughter in the center of the fiery carnage.

I should’ve given him a bigger piece of cake.

Eventually, the business rush died down as customers received their orders and sat to enjoy. Some settled into the reading parlor and browsed the shelves of hardbacks before choosing one and curling up in the armchairs. There was a decent selection of books. Non-fiction, like the ones Briar loved to read about types of plants and their uses, and also fictional tales of epic adventures and gallant heroes.

Some were romance novels. Smutty ones too. My eyes had nearly popped out when I flipped to a random page and

saw a passage about a knight railing a princess who had disguised herself as a commoner male to flee her palace.

How I knew so much of the plot? Well, I hadn't read it. Nope. Not at all.

The customer was about to reach a super spicy scene though. I offered her a cookie from the sample platter before continuing on.

As the sun began to drop lower in the sky, the light shifted, filtering through the tall windows in a darker hue. The day was nearing its end, marking my first official day as a café owner.

Little by little, the patrons paid for their orders and left. The dining room cleared, leaving only the people in the parlor who were engrossed in books. I topped off their coffee cups and hummed to myself as I returned to the kitchen to clean up.

"I'd say the grand opening was a success," a deep voice said from behind me before arms circled my waist. "Looks like you won't need to live on the street and do questionable things for money after all."

Smiling, I turned to Maddox. "Fingers crossed it stays this way and wasn't just a fluke." No matter how many times I'd stared into his deep blue eyes, he still took my breath away. "I appreciate all you did today. I didn't expect you to clean."

"I didn't mind," he responded. "While living in the orphanage, prior to starting my training as a knight, I worked in several taverns to make some coin. Cleaning tables and sweeping floors mostly."

"They let a kid work in a tavern?"

He seemed confused by the question. “Is that strange?”

“A little,” I said. “Kids aren’t even allowed in bars where I’m from. They can’t work until they’re at least sixteen either. Sometimes eighteen or twenty-one, depending on the job.”

“Your home seems like such an odd place.”

“It’s not my home. Not anymore.” I snuggled into his chest. “My home is here with you and Briar.”

He relaxed against me. “And ours is with you.”

“Go sit and relax. I’ll bring you out something delicious.”

“Something delicious?” Maddox dropped his face to my neck and lightly grazed his teeth along my jugular vein. Did he feel the quickening of my pulse? “I already have it right here in my arms. And once the café closes, I plan to drag you upstairs and devour every delicious inch of you.”

“You better share,” Briar said as he walked toward us. He’d removed his jacket earlier and had pushed the sleeves of his undershirt to his elbows.

Why did men look so much sexier when they did that? I wanted to nibble him. And as Briar slipped his arms around me, that’s exactly what I did. He released a low laugh and held me closer. My heart was so full it could burst.

“The dining area is clean, Mister Evan,” Alice said from the doorway, unfazed by the sight of the Evan sandwich taking place beside the kitchen counter. “The customers in the reading parlor have just left as well.”

“Awesome. Thank you. Please help yourself to any of the leftover desserts before you head home.” The pastries I had

pre-baked sold, but I'd whipped up a few more batches of cookies and cupcakes throughout the day, in between the busy rushes.

"Many thanks." She tipped her head before grabbing a few chocolate chip cookies. "I've never eaten anything quite as good as these."

"Careful, Alice," Maddox said, a smirk on his lips. "You'll give him a big head."

"Still smaller than yours," I told him.

"Everyone is smaller than him," Briar said.

Maddox's smirk widened. "In all ways that matter most."

I blinked at him. "Was that... a penis reference?"

And then, just like all the other times when discussion tumbled into the gutter, my brave and mighty captain barked out a laugh. He had the humor of a twelve-year-old boy.

Peter grabbed a small stack of cookies before saying goodbye and leaving with Alice. They'd be returning in the morning. If the café continued to do well, I'd be able to hire them full-time. Probably hire another person too. A thrilling thought.

This is really happening.

"I'm so proud of you." Briar smoothed aside my bangs, and they flopped right back into my face. That made him smile. "You worked hard today. Let's get you upstairs and ready for bed."

"Not sleepy," I said just as I yawned. "I need to wash dishes."

“The dishes can wait until tomorrow.” Maddox then did what he did best; picked me up and threw me over his shoulder.

“Put me down!” I wiggled.

He swatted my ass. “Shh.”

I laughed as he left the kitchen and went upstairs. Briar followed behind us, a small smile curving his lips. Reaching my room, Maddox set me on the bed, but I hopped right back up.

“Oh, does the mighty muffin lord want a duel?” Maddox asked.

“Only if I can fight with cuteness. Pointy things and I don’t mix well.”

“This is my shocked face,” Maddox said in a deadpan tone.

I bumped my closed fist against his chest. “Smart-ass. Another ‘s’ word to add to your list of attributes.”

Maddox grabbed my hand as I withdrew it and lifted it to his mouth, kissing my middle knuckle. He loved kissing me there for some reason, just like Briar loved kissing my temple.

Memories flooded me, then. I had only been with them for a few months, but so much had happened. So many *great* things I never thought would be possible.

“Remember when we first met?” I asked him. “You were so mean to me that day. Grumpy and rude. A block of ice was warmer than you.”

Maddox's humor transitioned to something softer. "Most of it was an act. From the first time I saw you, asleep in the grass beneath that tree, my heart thumped harder. I knew if I allowed myself even a moment to dwell on those feelings and what they could mean, I'd never come back from it." He lightly grazed his knuckles along my jaw. "And I was right."

My heart turned to mush. Just a big puddle of gooey, swoony, sweetness. "Good. Because I don't want you to come back from it." I nuzzled Briar. "You either, Doc."

"I'm not going anywhere, love."

"I love when you call me that." I breathed him in and smiled as his scent mixed with Maddox's. Seriously. How could life possibly get any better than this?

A yawn came out of nowhere, making my eyes water. I stood between them in our familiar way; them making an Evan sandwich and me basking in the feel of them around me.

"Time for you to sleep," Maddox murmured, lowering his face to my neck where he placed the gentlest of kisses. He gently picked me up and carried me over to the bed. I didn't fight him this time.

I was too damn exhausted.

"Can you stay?" My voice sounded sluggish. "Never mind. I'm being selfish. Y'all have already done so much for me. You can go home if you want to."

The bed dipped beside me before I was surrounded by the scent of fresh air and magnolia. "My home is wherever you are," Briar said.

“Sap,” Maddox muttered before laying on my other side. “He needs to create a list of words for you too. That one can be at the top.”

“Oh, come off it,” Briar countered. “You were thinking the same as me.”

“Prove it.”

“You being here is proof enough.”

Even with exhaustion taking me over and sleep so close, I smiled at their banter.

“Cease your blabbing and help me undress him.”

One of them removed my boots while the other peeled off my shirt, then my pants. Once I was stripped to my boxers, they tucked the blanket in around me and held me close. A kiss was placed to my jaw as another set of lips trailed across my temple.

I was in that place between awake and asleep, somewhat aware of my surroundings but sinking deeper into unconsciousness.

“Briar?” Maddox softly asked.

“Yes?”

“We were acquainted for years but never once felt anything for each other until Evan came into our lives. He’s extraordinary.”

“He is,” Briar said. “I can’t imagine a life without him.”

“Neither can I.” Maddox shifted his weight, pressing his big, muscled body against mine. I loved how he made me feel so small. “I love him so deeply it frightens me.”

“Another thing we have in common, Captain,” Briar responded. “But we’re not the only ones who feel this way about him.”

“The wolf.”

Was he talking about Lake? I had last seen him during the Festival of Lights. He’d stood a short distance away, partially concealed beneath a thick canopy of trees as he watched the lanterns float up into the night sky, a touch of sadness in his expression. He’d been there and gone so fast.

“Yes,” Briar answered. “I sensed him earlier. In the trees behind the cottage. He was watching Evan.”

“With your magic, you can detect energies, correct?” Maddox asked. “Sense the good and bad in people?”

“Somewhat.” Briar’s fingertips trailed to my jaw. “I can mostly sense dark energy and magic.”

Maddox’s arm tightened around me, and he released a soft, shuddering breath. “Do you think the wolf intends to hurt him?”

“No,” Briar answered. “Our Evan has captured his interest is all.”

“He’s too endearing for his own good,” Maddox muttered. “My knights are smitten with him too, though they’d never cross that line out of respect for me.”

Whatever they discussed after that, I fell asleep before I could hear.

I dreamed of a male with silver hair and purple eyes. One who peered up at a sky filled with glowing lanterns and who

looked so damn lonely my chest ached.

I awoke alone the next morning. The sheets still smelled like Briar and Maddox, as did their pillows as I rolled over to my stomach and shoved my face into them.

Something crinkled under my nose, and I puffed out a breath as I jerked back. It was a note, the handwriting elegant with long swooping letters.

Good morning, love.

We woke early to return to the castle. Maddox says a new recruitment of knights are arriving, so he needs to be there to meet them. And I need to be at the clinic, since Thane took the day off to visit his family.

Maddox tried to wake you before we left, but you swatted at him and asked for "five more minutes." Which was highly amusing and adorable all at once. So we decided to let you sleep in.

I hope you have a wonderful day. Work hard but remember to rest when needed. We'll return at sundown.

All my love, Briar

Also, make sure you eat breakfast.

“As if I need a reminder to eat.” I scooted toward the edge of the bed, the note still in my hand. I placed it face down on the nightstand and stood up, stretching my arms as I yawned. “Cookies and coffee, here I come.”

More was written on the backside of the note, and I tilted my head to read it.

A proper breakfast, love. Not just coffee and sweets.

“It’s scary how well he knows me.”

I left my room and headed down the hall. After taking a quick bath, I ventured downstairs and into the kitchen to start a pot of coffee. Having a coffee machine again was a luxury I’d never take for granted, and this one was magical, so it was even more awesome.

Leftover cookies from the previous day set on the counter. The temptation lured me over. I grabbed a lemon cookie and took a bite. I could practically feel Briar’s frown burning into the back of my head. *A proper breakfast.*

“Cookies are proper,” I said, then shoved the rest of it into my mouth.

Once my coffee was ready, I took it—and the entire platter of leftover cookies—over to the table. It sat in front of two oval windows, giving me a view of the back yard and the forest beyond it. I opened one of the windows to let in fresh air, and a warm breeze swept through, ruffling my hair.

Golden light filtered through the tree branches, and insects buzzed. The humidity was noticeable but not too bad. Summers in Bremloc weren't nearly as gross and muggy as the ones back in Arkansas, where mosquitoes attacked as soon as you stepped one foot outside your door, and the air was so thick it was like breathing through a clogged straw.

Summers here were nice. Hot but not miserably so.

Peter and Alice arrived shortly after I finished breakfast and helped me prepare for another day. By the time the first customer arrived, we had a selection of baked goods frosted and ready to go, with more coming out fresh from the oven. The intoxicating smell of brewed coffee filled the kitchen, filtering out to the main dining area as it filled with more customers.

A lot of customers.

My worries about the successful opening being a fluke was definitely wrong. People piled in all throughout the day, promising to come again tomorrow as they left with satisfied smiles and full bellies. It was busy and hectic keeping up with the orders, but as closing time came, I couldn't stop smiling.

Maddox and Briar arrived at sundown, just as promised. And they brought a horde of hungry knights with them. Callum, Duke, Baden, and Quincy rushed in and picked off the remnants of desserts that hadn't sold.

"You'll spoil your dinner," I told them. "I'm making roasted chicken and mashed potatoes."

Callum lifted the bottom of his shirt, revealing washboard abs, and rubbed his belly. "I always have room for more food."

“Cover yourself,” Maddox said with a slight snarl. “You’ll ruin my appetite.”

Callum grinned at him. “More for me then.”

“Anything exciting happen today?” I asked.

“It was quite dull honestly,” Maddox answered. “New recruits joined the Second Order, and we helped them settle in.”

“Dull is good.” I nodded. “It means you’re safe.”

Maddox ruffled the top of my hair, a soft smile on his lips. Knowing him, he wouldn’t tell me even if something bad *had* happened. He didn’t like worrying me.

“Speaking of safety, I believe I finally had a breakthrough on the infusion spell,” Briar said, becoming bashful as he withdrew something from his pocket. It was a necklace with a pale blue stone. “I successfully imbued this with protective magic.”

He got self-conscious sometimes when discussing his work. It was too cute.

For the past few months, he had been trying to perfect a spell that would ward off both physical and magical attacks by infusing protective energy into an item, like a charm, a necklace, or anything else someone could carry with them. In theory, it would act as a shield to protect them from harm. He’d had a bit of success weeks ago, but it had been weak. He was trying to improve it.

“That’s great!” I flung my arms around his neck. “I knew you could do it.”

“Thanks, love.” Briar leaned his head against mine. “I won’t know the degree of protection until I test it. Whether it shields from strong attacks or only minor ones. What level of magic it can repel.”

“I could help you test it,” Maddox said, smirking at Briar. “Put on the necklace, and we can go outside. I’ll throw daggers at you and see if it shields you from them.”

“No,” I said. “You will not do that. That’s a horrible idea.”

“Fine.” Maddox expelled a sigh. “We can give the necklace to Callum, and I’ll throw daggers at him instead.”

“No one will be throwing daggers at anyone,” I argued. “And you be nice to Callum. He’s my friend.”

“Someone say my name?” Callum looked up from the bowl of mashed potatoes, spoon in hand, where he’d been moments from stealing a bite.

“Probably only to banish you like the evil spirit you are,” Quincy said, the scar on his face twisting at the end as he flashed a shit-eating grin.

Once dinner was ready, we went into the main dining area, pushed tables together, and sat together to eat. Laughter and conversation filled the room, and I was reminded again just how fortunate I was to have all of them. A found family and a love so deep it could fill countless oceans.

Neither Maddox or Briar could stay the night. Maddox needed to return to the barracks, and Briar had documents from the magical academy he needed to read.

The academy was where people trained to become alchemists, physicians, and herbologists, all with a focus on

healing magic and enchantments. Briar assisted in their studies and sometimes traveled to do guest lectures and small training courses. Physicians from neighboring kingdoms also sent inquiries when faced with an unfamiliar sickness or medical question, and he advised them.

“Want me to draw you a bath before we go?” Briar asked. “I can make you tea too.”

“Nah, it’s okay. I’m gonna tidy up in here first. It’ll make my life easier for tomorrow.” My throat tightened as I looked between the two of them. “I miss you both already.”

Maddox’s hard expression faltered. “I can always throw you over my shoulder and take you with me. What better way to end the day than between the sheets?” His hand slid down my side. “Though, very little sleep will be had.”

“And then I’ll bake you fig bread,” Briar said. “Or lemon, if you prefer. Either a midnight snack or for breakfast.”

“Stop trying to bribe me with sex and food,” I responded with a laugh. “I promise I’ll be okay.” *Maybe*. “I’m a working man now and have my own place. All independent and shit. One night alone won’t kill me.”

They exchanged a look.

Though it took a bit more convincing, the two of them eventually accepted my decision to stay but made me swear to lock all the doors and not go outside no matter what—like I would. They kissed me good night and left with Callum and the others.

I stood at the door and watched them get on their horses that had been kept in the small clearing beside the cottage.

They glanced back at me, and I waved before shutting the door and locking it. Then checked the lock to make sure it was secure.

“No biggie.” I faced the interior of the quiet cottage. It seemed much bigger now. More places for things to hide. “There’s nothing creepy at all about being here by myself. At night. In the middle of the woods.”

The mountain of dirty dishes needed to be tackled, and despite me running out of steam after the busy day, I went into the kitchen, flipped on the water, and got to scrubbing. Keeping my hands busy helped distract my mind.

That was... until a light thud came from outside.

I flipped around to the window, heart rate skyrocketing. The golden light that had filtered through the trees earlier had darkened, creating ominous shadows; reminding me once again that, while pretty during the day, the forest was scary at night. A creepy forest that surrounded my cottage... where I was currently alone, armed only with the coffee mug in my hand.

I froze at the sink, hoping whatever horrible creature stalking the back yard would fail to see me if I didn’t move. Everything outside stayed still too, not even a breeze to ruffle the leaves. I scanned the dark trees, and the longer I stared, the more things began to take shape.

And it was then, as unsettling thoughts began to creep in, ones starring all the demonic monsters Callum had been so kind to tell me about once upon a time, that I caught a flash of silver near the glass.

Shrieking, I dropped the coffee mug into the soapy water and bolted from the kitchen. I ducked behind the bar in the main dining area, feeling like the biggest chicken in the world. But being a chicken was better than being like those dummies in horror movies that went to investigate the noise in the creepy woods.

I could've been in bed with Maddox and Briar right then, getting steamy between the sheets and having mind blowing orgasms. But no. Instead, I was hiding from a maybe-monster.

My words from earlier had tested the fates: one night alone would most *definitely* kill me.

I then thought of Ayden, the main protagonist from my favorite fantasy book series I'd read in my old world. He was a total badass who wouldn't have been caught cowering behind a bar. My legs wobbled as I forced myself to stand.

Movement from outside snagged my attention, and I glimpsed another flash of silver beyond the window. And a pale face.

I screamed and fled the room. But as I reached the stairs, I stopped.

Silver. A pale face. And purple glowing eyes.

Before I could think twice about it, I rushed toward the back door and flung it open, bolting out into the night.

"Lake?" I called out, scanning the dark trees behind the cottage. A warm breeze rustled the nearby leaves and nocturnal insects chirped as they came out for an evening of debauchery. Or whatever bugs did.

A twig snapped.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as I searched the forest. Had it been a deer? A rabbit? Maybe even Kuya. My cat-boy bestie enjoyed sneaking up on me and pouncing.

No. I'd seen purple eyes. Eyes just like Lake's.

"Lake?" I surveyed the trees again, heart knocking in my chest.

No response.

"If that's you and not a ravenous demon that wants to eat me for dinner, it's okay to come out." I stepped closer to the tree line. A pressure filled my chest—a longing. I realized then how badly I wanted to see him. Because even though I loved Maddox and Briar, a part of me was drawn to the demi-wolf.

More silence.

Deciding I'd been mistaken, I turned toward the cottage. I was farther away from the back patio than I'd thought. In my excitement, I'd rushed for the trees without thinking of the possible evil things slinking through the shadows.

"Sorry, Maddox and Briar," I muttered. I had broken my promise not to go outside. But what they didn't know wouldn't hurt them. The disappointment of not seeing Lake was crushing though. "If it is you, Lake," I weakly said. "I won't hurt you."

The air stirred at my back.

Someone stood behind me.

Chapter Three

Evan Touches a Shooting Star

Fear had me rooted in place. Every muscle froze, and my lungs did the same, refusing to work.

“I know you won’t hurt me,” a slightly raspy voice said from behind me. “I won’t hurt you either.”

The twinge of fright was then overshadowed by a pillowy warmth that moved through my rib cage. “Lake?”

“Yes.” He stood so close that I felt the heat of his body. Felt his breath on my nape. And I smelled his unmistakable scent, of sun warmed earth and spring water. “Did I frighten you?”

“Oh, not at all,” I said, trying to calm my racing heart. The fluttering beats reverberated in my belly. I hadn’t turned around yet in fear he’d run away. “After my epic battle with that thornbush the night we first met, nothing scares me. I’m invincible. Total nerves of steel.”

“And what if I was a ravenous demon that wanted you for dinner?”

When I laughed, it was more of a squeak. “Um. I don’t know. I’d probably take off my shoe and throw it at you to get away. Demons like shoes. Wait. No, that’s elves. I think. Trolls maybe?”

Lake pressed closer, and my entire body tingled from his proximity. He skimmed his fingers down the back of my arm. “Your pulse is thrumming so wildly. Are you sure you’re not afraid?”

“Yep. I’m sure.” And I wasn’t afraid. Oddly aroused? Definitely. “Kind of cool you can sense pulses. That’s like a superpower.”

“Wolves are attuned to their prey,” Lake whispered, bringing his mouth to the shell of my ear. Chills danced across my skin. “Your heartbeat. Your quickening breaths. Your sweet scent.” He ghosted his mouth down the side of my neck, not touching but somehow that only made it more arousing. “So sweet I can almost taste it on my tongue.”

“Are you saying I’m your prey? I don’t think I’d taste very good. Definitely not top-shelf meat. More like meat past its sell-by date that’s a funky color and guaranteed to make you sick.”

A rough sound came from him. A laugh?

It made me smile. So many people in the kingdom feared demi-wolves and claimed they couldn’t be trusted. But I *did* trust him. I knew he wouldn’t hurt me.

Lake gently grabbed my elbow and turned me to face him.

My breath caught. My memory of him didn’t do him justice at all. Smooth alabaster skin, sharp, androgynous

features, and purple eyes that faintly glowed as dusk fell over the kingdom. White wolf ears jutted from his silver hair.

He reminded me of moonlight. Or like a shooting star, leaving a trail of star dust as it journeyed across the night sky. Maybe that's what he was. A rare, beautiful thing that disappeared too quickly.

I lifted a hand to touch his hair.

He flinched and jerked away from me.

“Sorry!” I withdrew my hand.

Lake wasn't used to people touching him. He wasn't used to people at all. His dad had been executed simply for being spotted in the marketplace. All because of preconceived notions that all demi-wolves were traitors of Bremloc and loyal to Onyx, the demon lord. So, Lake lived deep in the forest, alone. Isolating himself from everyone.

Indecision washed across his face, and he took another step back. Toward the trees.

“Please don't leave. I promise I won't try to touch you again.” I put even more space between us.

“Wait.” Lake hesitated before walking closer. He grabbed my hand and, after wavering a moment, lifted it to his head. “I... I don't mind. If it's you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Y-Yes.”

Trying not to be too eager, I lightly touched the top of his silvery hair. Petting him. I wanted to touch his ears too but felt

that would be pushing him too far, so I resisted the temptation and behaved myself.

Lake was tense at first but slowly relaxed. His eyes closed as my fingers sank deeper into the strands.

“Your hair’s so soft,” I whispered.

When his eyes opened again, the purple irises had darkened, faintly glowing between his long, pale lashes. “Don’t stop.”

So I didn’t.

My hand swept through the silky strands as little flutters traveled through my chest. Petting him was intimate in ways I didn’t expect. The way he was looking at me didn’t help; awed and perhaps a bit desperate. Hungry too.

My gaze fell to his lips, and I remembered the night he’d kissed me. There had been a shaky hesitance to it that told of his inexperience, yet an intensity that told of something strong. Feelings no longer able to be contained. Both his and mine.

Although short, that one kiss had sparked something inside me, igniting a third flame to go with the other two that burned in my heart.

“Why are you out here?” I asked, letting my hand fall away from his hair. If I continued touching him, I didn’t know if I’d be able to stop.

“To watch over you,” Lake answered. “Your males left, and I wanted to ensure you came to no harm.”

I smiled. “In other words, you were spying on me.”

“I...” Shyness came over Lake, and his furry ears twitched before slightly drooping. The poofy white tail jutting from the back of his trousers stopped moving. “I didn’t mean to spy. I was only thinking of your safety. I apologize.”

He started to leave.

“Don’t go,” I said, wanting to grab his arm but stopping myself. I didn’t want to startle him again. He turned back to me; his ears perked up. God, it was cute. “I appreciate you looking out for me. To be honest, it’s kind of creepy being here by myself at night. I could use the company.”

“I don’t wish to impose,” Lake responded. “I intended to only watch from afar, but seeing you through the window, I...” He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Since you left, I’ve been... lonely,” Lake had said the last time I’d spoken to him. Not long after, he’d kissed me before disappearing into the night.

Whatever drew me to Lake, drew him to me too. Almost like we were bound by a force much greater than we could imagine.

“Well, you’re here now.” I nodded to the cottage. “Come inside for a bit.”

Lake glanced at the door before shifting his nervous gaze to me. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea. Your males won’t be pleased once they return and learn I was here.”

He wasn’t wrong. Maddox didn’t trust Lake and would seethe at the thought of me being alone with him. Briar was more understanding but held reservations as well. It didn’t seem to stem from jealousy of me being with another man

though; it centered around them wanting to make sure I was safe.

“They’ll understand,” I said. *Eventually*. “The knights almost ate me out of house and home, but there’s some muffins and cake left if you’re hungry. I can make you something more substantial too. It’s the least I can do after you cooked me dinner that night I stumbled upon your house.”

I had gotten lost in the woods and he’d found me, fed me, and given me a place to stay for the night.

A hint of a smile touched Lake’s lips. “And the following morning, you taught me a new way to make eggs for breakfast. I’ve tried to recreate it since then, but it never tastes as good as when you made it.”

“That was fun.” I had cooked omelets with egg, cheese, bell peppers, and sausage. He’d loved them. I still remembered how his poofy tail had wagged as he’d watched me cook.

“Fun.” He repeated the word. Then, that hint of a smile I’d caught earlier fully surfaced. “I suppose it was.” He took a breath and stepped closer, a touch of resolve in his eyes now. “I can stay for a while. At least for a cup of tea.”

“Yay.” I beamed at him. “Let’s go.”

Lake followed me into the cottage, keeping a small distance between us. As I filled a kettle with water and placed it on the stove, he hovered in front of the island counter, gaze sweeping around the kitchen.

Was he noting all the exit points like Maddox always did when we went someplace new? Checking for possible threats?

“I hope you like green tea,” I said. “Sorry, I didn’t even ask. I can make something else. Or coffee if you prefer. There’s milk and water too.”

“Green tea is fine.” Lake’s purple eyes moved to me, and the wariness in them was like a fortified wall meant to keep everyone out. “So this cottage is your home and your place of business.”

“Yep. I live upstairs.” I nodded to the table by the window. “That’s where I eat breakfast and stuff. The main dining room is for the customers during the day, but we eat dinner in there.”

Lake nodded. “Your males and the knights. I saw them earlier this evening.”

“Mhm. Kuya comes over sometimes too.”

“The demi-cat.” He touched the side of his neck. “The one with a fondness for biting.”

When Lake had snatched me from the road and carried me off into the woods months ago, Kuya had pursued us and pounced on him. “*Kuya kill*,” he had said before biting at Lake’s throat like a vicious little predator.

A laugh bubbled from me. “I’m sorry about that. I hope he didn’t hurt you too bad.”

Lake surprised me by smiling a little. “He didn’t. It’s nice you have someone who’ll come to your aid like that. A true friend.”

“Yeah. He is.” I turned back to the kettle as it whistled and removed it from the heat. My heart felt all wobbly. How had I gotten so lucky to not only have men who were crazy about

me—and me equally as head over heels for them—but also friends like Kuya, Callum, and the knights.

Thank you, Lupin, I thought as emotion balled in my chest. *For everything.*

Once the tea was ready, I filled two cups and stacked the leftover blueberry muffins on a plate before setting it on the table. I also brought over the rest of a vanilla cake that had been slathered in royal frosting and decorated with chocolate dipped cherries. “There’s sugar if you want any with your tea.”

“I appreciate your hospitality.” Lake waited for me to sit before taking the seat across from mine. He added a spoonful of sugar and stirred it in. His movements were way too stiff. When the edge of the spoon clanked against the glass, causing a few drops of tea to dribble on the tabletop, he cringed and reached for a napkin, only for his hand to knock against the cup and spill some more. “Apologies.”

He was so awkward. A trait we shared. He wasn’t used to being around anyone and didn’t know how to behave.

“It’s okay,” I said. “I spill stuff all the time. And trip while walking across flat surfaces. So don’t worry at all.”

Relief flashed in his eyes before his gaze dropped back to the table. Had he been nervous I’d be angry? God. I just wanted to hug him.

“Have a muffin.” I pushed the plate toward him. “There’s cake too.”

He looked at the plate but kept his hands in his lap. Off the table. “I should leave. The hour is getting late.”

“But you haven’t drank or eaten anything yet,” I said, hearing the disappointment in my voice.

As Lake’s eyes flickered back to mine, I wondered if he’d heard it too. He curved his hands around the cup before taking a sip. His gaze roamed to the plate of muffins before averting back to his cup. He clearly wanted one but wouldn’t take it.

“Here.” I put one on the plate beside his cup.

Lake’s ears perked up before he took a bite. Three bites later, only crumbs were left. His pale cheeks gained a bit of color as he looked at me. “Thank you for the treat.”

The treat. Why did that sound so cute coming from him? Maybe the fluffy white wolf ears jutting from his silver hair had something to do with it.

“You’re welcome.”

“Is business going well?” Lake eyed another muffin but grabbed his tea instead.

“It’s been amazing.” I set the muffin on his plate and smiled as he wasted no time biting into it. “Better than I ever expected. I just hope it stays that way.”

“It will. There’s something special about your food, Evan. It’s comforting.” Lake wiped at his mouth and, upon finding a speck of blueberry on his hand, licked it off. Catching me watching, his cheeks darkened even further. “Pardon my poor table manners.”

“Oh, you mean manners like this?” I pulled the platter with the half-eaten cake toward me and scooped up some of the frosting with my finger before licking it off. I then ate one

of the chocolate dipped cherries, speaking with my mouth full.
“So good. Want some?”

Lake smiled, and for the first time that night, his walls lowered. There were no reservations behind that smile. Only joy. “Yes, please.”

I cut him a slice—one without my germs on it—and we stuffed our faces. One cup of tea turned to two, and the desserts on the platter dwindled more and more. We didn’t talk much, but I sensed the shift in the air between us.

Each time our gazes met from across the table, flutters swarmed my chest.

“I’m gonna pop like a balloon.” I slumped in my chair and rested a hand on my full belly.

“What is a balloon?” Lake asked, slouching in his chair too.

Oh, right. They didn’t have those here.

“It’s like one of the lanterns from the Festival of Lights, but made of different material,” I explained. “There’s also huge ones that can carry you through the sky, called hot-air balloons.”

His eyes widened. “Does such a thing truly exist?”

“It does where I come from.”

I still hadn’t told anyone I was from another world. I’d need to, eventually, but fear held me back. What if Maddox and Briar didn’t believe me? Or, what if they *did* believe me but then feared me because of it? Looked at me like I was someone dangerous?

I wouldn't be able to handle it.

"I find the idea terrifying," Lake said. "Being so high in the sky. I prefer to keep my feet firmly on the ground."

When I'd first arrived in Bremloc, I'd been amazed by magic and the entire fantasy world around me. As I sat with Lake, I thought of how someone from Bremloc would feel being sent to my old world. They'd be freaked out and amazed by everything too: cars, planes, and Netflix.

"Can I ask you a question?"

Lake focused on me, the wall slowly creeping back up. He nodded.

"How long have you been watching me?" I vaguely recalled Maddox and Briar's conversation from the night before. Briar had said he'd sensed Lake in the woods. So that night wasn't the first time.

"A while," he admitted after a short pause. "I've periodically checked in on you since the Festival of Lights. Always keeping to the trees."

"Why?"

"Because since the moment I met you, Evan, you've not been far from my mind." Lake's purple irises caught the light as his gaze briefly flickered up to me before lowering again. "I busy myself with things around the house; cooking, tending to my garden, and whittling. Working on any needed repairs. Yet, my thoughts always return to you. I've been alone for most of my life. But I never felt truly lonely until you came crashing into my quiet, solitary world and left it just as quickly. You made me crave... more."

Pressure built in the base of my throat. I didn't know how to respond.

"I should leave." The legs of his chair scraped against the floor as he pushed back from the table and stood. With a touch of sorrow in his eyes, and perhaps a bit of panic as well, he turned toward the back door.

"Wait! Don't go." I scrambled out of my chair and stepped after him, but the tip of my shoe caught on the chair leg, and I tripped.

Lake was in front of me in a flash, catching me before I hit the floor. His arms were secured around me, and my body was pressed flush to his. With my face against his chest, his scent infiltrated my nostrils. He smelled like the forest.

"Are you all right?" he asked close to my ear.

"Yeah." I turned my face more into his shirt. My heart beat wildly, causing my blood to race through my veins quicker. It heated and felt electric at the same time, like all it would take was a single spark to ignite the fire deep in my core. A fire that would hopefully burn through these confusing feelings and help me make sense of them.

Lake held on tighter, as if he were struggling with those same confusing emotions.

"You don't have to leave," I said. "You can sleep in the guest room. And for breakfast, I can make omelets again since you liked them so much."

Funny that Briar had tried to bribe me with food to return to the castle with them, and there I was doing the same with Lake.

“I don’t want to make your males angry.”

What if he’s one of my males too? The thought penetrated through the fog of confusion and made things clearer. It explained the feelings I hadn’t been able to give a name to.

“You said you wanted to make sure I was safe,” I added. “I mean, what if someone breaks in while I’m sleeping and robs me or, like, tries to kill me or something?”

“I’d rip them apart,” Lake said with no hesitation. His stern tone and protectiveness reminded me of Maddox.

“Which you can’t do if you’re not here.”

Lake glanced at the window. Different expressions crossed his face; contemplation, worry, then finally, resolve. When he looked back at me, another expression greeted me: barely contained excitement. “I suppose I can stay for the night. But only to watch over you.”

My cuteness works again. It was about the only thing I had going for me. “Awesome. I feel safer already.”

When he smiled, it veered on shy.

The long day finally took its toll on me, and by the time I cleared the table and carried our dishes to the sink, I dragged my feet, too tired to lift them much higher. I yawned as I rinsed out our cups.

“Let me,” Lake said, taking the cup from me. “You can go upstairs.”

An argument was on my tongue, but another yawn came out instead. So, I nodded and shuffled from the kitchen and down the short hallway toward the stairs. I grabbed clean

sheets from the linen closet and placed them in the guest bedroom for him before brushing my teeth and stripping down.

As I crawled into bed, a creak came from the hall before Lake appeared in the open doorway. “The dishes are clean,” he said.

“Thank you. You really didn’t have to do that. I could’ve done it in the morning.”

“It was my pleasure.” He tipped his head to me, the tips of his furry ears twitching. “Good night.”

“Night,” I said. “Sweet dreams.”

“The same for you.” Lake went to close the door but hesitated. “I... I enjoyed tonight.”

“Me too.”

Looking adorably shy, he pulled the door closed. His shadow remained in place on the other side for one second, then two, before he continued toward the guest room.

As I burrowed deeper into the blanket and closed my eyes, I couldn’t help but smile. Yeah... I had enjoyed spending time with him too.

I woke sometime in the middle of the night to growling outside the window. It took my sleep-muddled brain a moment to realize it wasn’t actually a growl; it was distant thunder. The

dark room then lit up as lightning flashed, low rolling thunder not far behind.

Oh no. Just my luck that a freaking storm would decide to move in the one night Maddox and Briar weren't with me.

A drop of rain hit the window. Just one at first, then another several seconds later. The wind picked up, sweeping through the dark clusters of trees. More flickers of lightning brightened the room, and the echoing rumbles only seemed to be getting closer, like the storm was hurdling toward my cottage at full speed.

I pulled the blanket over my head, squeezing my eyes closed. There was a crescendo of raindrops, distant at first then growing louder. Rain then crashed against the windowpane so hard I feared the glass would shatter.

It's just rain. I'm safe. Logically, I knew this was true. But it didn't stop the fear from gripping my sternum. It didn't ease the hard beating of my heart or slow my quickening breaths.

As the storm intensified, the rain pelting against the window like bullets fired from a machine gun, I pushed my face into my pillow and stifled a cry. When thunder cracked through the air like a whip, sudden and so damn loud, a small cry left me anyway.

"Evan?" came a soft voice outside the closed door.

I tried to answer but was trembling too much. The heavy downpour would've drowned out any of my feeble attempts to speak anyway.

"I'm coming in."

Under the covers, I couldn't see the door open, but I sensed him enter the room. There was another crash of thunder, and I made myself smaller on the bed, stifling another cry. The mattress dipped beside me.

"Evan?" Lake placed a hand on my side.

Lowering the blanket, I peeked up at him. His silver hair stood out in the dark room, as did the faint glowing of his purple eyes. "H-Hey."

There was another flash, this one brighter and followed by smaller flashes. It highlighted his features for a moment before casting him back into shadow.

"You're shaking," Lake whispered.

"It's kinda embarrassing to admit, but I'm not a fan of storms. I've been afraid of them ever since I was little." I shakily exhaled and tried to steady my breathing. "I'll be okay though."

He frowned. "Will you?"

Not trusting my voice, I nodded once. Of course, that's when the storm proved I was full of shit. A loud crack of thunder filled the air, causing the hairs on my arms and legs to stand on end. A whimper crawled up my throat as I flung upward and grabbed onto him, shoving my face into the hollow of his neck.

He wasn't wearing a shirt. And god, his skin was so warm.

Lake tensed, becoming so still it felt like he'd stopped breathing. The close proximity was undoubtedly making him anxious. I thought he was about to push me away. Instead, he

cupped the back of my head with one hand and wound the other around my midsection, holding me closer.

“It’s all right,” he said. “You’re safe.”

The backs of my eyes burned. Here was a male who had been cast out and forced to live in isolation just for being a demi-wolf. He’d been mistreated and hated. Yet, despite how cruel and unforgiving the world had been to him, he was comforting me and being so damn gentle.

“Sorry,” I said, unable to stop the trembles racking my body. “Didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Don’t apologize.” He petted the back of my hair. It was soothing. “I wasn’t asleep yet anyway.”

“You have superhuman hearing.”

“My inner wolf is to thank for that. All of my senses are heightened.” He weaved his fingers through my hair, playing with the ends of the strands. “Is this helping?”

“Y-Yeah.” I burrowed more against him, seeking more of his warmth. His chest was mostly smooth with only a light dusting of hair. Not too much though. Definitely nothing like the Wolf Man or any depictions of werewolves I’d seen before. Why my mind went there, who knew? Maybe to distract myself from the chaotic storm outside.

The loud boom of thunder came without warning. A yelp escaped my lips.

“It’s all right,” Lake repeated as he gently shifted me to my back and tucked the blanket more around me. He lay on top of it and settled beside me, one arm pushed under my head and the other secured around my waist.

Something heavier mixed with the rain and hit the roof. Hail? The wind intensified, the gusts slamming against the side of the cottage, causing the trees to bow—the little I could see of them anyway through the torrential downpour. I squeezed my eyes closed so I couldn't see them anymore.

And it was then, as my breathing kicked up a few notches and another wave of fear cinched in my chest, that Lake began to sing.

The words were in an unfamiliar language, but it reminded me of a Celtic lullaby. The gentle tone of his voice was sweeter than anything I'd ever heard, pleasing and light. Haunting too. He returned his fingers to my hair, soothing me with touch as he soothed me with his song.

My erratic heartbeat returned to normal, and my breaths evened out. Sleepiness then began to creep back in, sinking into my muscles and making me feel heavy.

Lake sang me to sleep, his lullaby chasing away my fear of the storm.

Chapter Four

War and Peace-Muffins

A clamor from downstairs woke me early in the morning. So early the sun hadn't even had a chance to rise. It was still dark outside with only a faint hue in the distance.

“Answer the question, wolf!” a deep voice boomed. A voice that could only belong to my grumpy knight. “Why are you here?”

Oh shit. The previous night flooded back to me. Lake had slept over. And now he faced the wrath of my overprotective captain who saw threats everywhere he looked, especially when my safety was put into question.

I flung up out of bed and scurried around, tugging on pants. I didn't want to go downstairs in my underwear. The situation was bound to be uncomfortable enough without adding my humiliation on top of it. Voices rose as I descended the stairs two at a time and nearly tripped on the last one, misjudging the distance to the floor. I caught myself on the railing and continued toward the commotion.

“Calm down, Maddox,” Briar said just as I reached the entryway into the main dining room. Wall sconces and

decorative lanterns lit the space, while darkness showed through the set of windows behind them.

They turned to look at me. Maddox and Briar stood side by side in front of the bar while Lake was several feet away from them. Lake's muscles were coiled tight, his defensive walls sky high. Maddox's hard glare softened, if only a little, as it moved to me.

"Everything okay in here?" I asked. Silly question. Everything was *not* okay. Not when Maddox and Lake appeared to be moments from attacking each other. And Briar, bless him, looked ready to jump between them if necessary.

"Go back upstairs," Maddox told me.

"So you can kill each other down here? No." I stepped farther into the dining room. "Let's all be civil."

"Tell that to him," Lake snarled, his stare burning into Maddox. "He came barging in and drew his sword on me without even giving me the chance to speak."

"Because I don't trust you, wolf," Maddox retorted. The sword in question was still in one hand, though it was lowered at his side. "I know you've been hovering around lately. I shouldn't have left him alone."

"Yet you did so anyway." Lake stood the closest to me, his eyes a bright, glowing purple. "Your loyalty and devotion to the knights comes first. It always will. Someone has to watch over him."

"Don't *ever* question my devotion to Evan. He is what I cherish most in this life." Maddox strode forward.

A menacing growl rumbled in Lake's chest, and he took more of a defensive stance. When I shifted in place, he snarled at me.

I froze, the top of my scalp tingling.

"Evan?" Maddox stopped his advance but didn't take his eyes off Lake. "Step away from him."

"I won't hurt him," Lake snapped. His teeth elongated. Sharpened.

"I suggest you calm the fuck down while my male is standing so close to you." Maddox's gaze shifted back to me. He looked scared. "Evan. Sweetheart. Come here."

Sweetheart. He'd never called me that before. I moved toward him. The movement was sudden.

Too sudden.

Lake grabbed my bicep, a snarl tearing through his throat. In his defensive, animal-like state, his nails had turned to claws. They dug into my skin.

"Lake?" I whimpered.

My small cry of pain snapped him out of it. He released me, losing some of his ire. "I... I didn't mean to..." He glanced at my arm. Blood had beaded to the surface from his clawed nails. Agony laced in his purple eyes. "I'm so sorry, Evan." The words came out rough and broken.

Maddox lunged forward and caught me around the waist, pulling me out of Lake's reach.

"I'm okay," I said as he crushed me to his chest. My heart thumped heavy and fast, the beats sounding in my ears. "It's

just a scratch. Doesn't even h-hurt."

Briar rushed over, and Maddox passed me over to him.

"Let me see, love." Briar quickly examined my bicep and nodded to himself before using a minor healing spell to stop the bleeding. The tiny puncture marks sealed. He then lowered his face and kissed the area. "There. All better."

Maddox faced off with Lake, standing between him and us. "Leave, wolf, before I drive my sword through your heart."

"There will be no killing in my café," I said, then lifted my arm. "I'm all healed. See? So can we stop this and talk like adults?"

Lake bared his teeth at Maddox, though his ears drooped when he glanced at me. That agonized look resurfaced in his eyes. He then took a step back, toward the archway.

"Don't leave," I said in a rush. "Please."

"Stay out of this, Evan," Maddox said. "If you would've obeyed my order to stay inside last night and not open the door, he wouldn't even be here."

"Obey your order?" I said with a snap. "I'm not one of your knights, Maddox. You can't control me."

His irritation died down. "I don't wish to control you, sweetheart." His voice was raspy, filled with the emotion he tried so hard to hold at bay. "I just want you to be safe."

"He was safe with me," Lake growled.

"Safe?" Maddox laughed without humor. "Is that what you call what you did to his arm?"

I looked between the two of them and blurted out the first thing that came to mind. “Since I’m awake so early, I might as well get a start on baking before the café opens. But I can’t do anything on an empty stomach, as all of you know. My hangry rambles are legendary. So, let’s go to the kitchen, and I’ll make us coffee and breakfast. Or tea, if you want. We can call it peace tea.”

“Peace tea?” Lake asked, the glow of his eyes dimming. His elongated teeth retracted.

“Yep. And you know what goes best with peace tea? Amity muffins. They’re eaten when a truce is called.”

“A truce?” Maddox’s lips twitched. “I wasn’t aware we were at war.”

“Says the one whose first instinct this morning was to draw your sword on Lake.”

“Because he took me by surprise,” Maddox responded. “My first instinct was to protect *you*.”

“Misunderstandings all around.” I dismissively flicked my hand. “It’s why we need peace muffins.”

“I thought they were amity muffins,” Lake said, his voice quiet.

Maddox made a rough sound.

I stepped closer to him. “You just laughed.”

“I did not. It was a cough.”

“Know what helps a cough?” I looped my arm through his. “If you answered peace tea, you’re correct. Your prize is waiting for you in the kitchen. Well, after I bake them. But

still.” I looked at Lake. “You’re coming too. I’m not taking no for an answer.”

Lake hesitated in place. “I’m not sure I—”

“Just do what he says,” Maddox interjected. “If you leave, I’ll have to endure his whining about it for the rest of the day.” His tone softened as he added, “And it will give me the chance to apologize.”

Briar’s brows shot upward. “You? Apologize? Is the world ending?”

Maddox sneered at him.

“I…” Lake quietly cleared his throat, and his tail wagged once. “I can stay for breakfast. If you’ll have me.”

I beamed. “To the kitchen, we go.”

“So.” I sipped my coffee. “This is nice.”

And by *nice*, I meant tense and awkward as fuck. The three of them stared at each other as we sat at the kitchen table. Well, two stared. Briar only glanced at them before focusing on his cup of tea.

Please god. Someone start talking. I didn’t do well with awkward silences. I got nervous and usually rambled. And once I got going, it was hard to shut me up.

Maddox grabbed a banana muffin from the plate in the center of the table and tore off a big chunk, popping it into his

mouth. His hard gaze remained on Lake as he chewed.

I kicked his leg beneath the table.

He paused in his chewing and cut his eyes at me.

“Behave,” I whispered.

Ever so slowly, the corner of his mouth hitched up. He continued eating, returning his blue eyes to Lake.

Lake, however, focused on Briar. “You have my gratitude. For healing Evan’s arm.”

“I assure you, I didn’t do it for you,” Briar responded.

“You have my gratitude all the same.”

Maddox’s gaze darkened. “For your sake, wolf, it better not happen again. That’s the second time you’ve hurt him.”

Lake frowned at his half-drunk cup of tea. He and Briar had wanted tea. Maddox was like me and preferred coffee. “I’ll never forgive myself for it.”

“Well, *I* forgive you,” I said. “You didn’t do it to hurt me. You just didn’t want me to leave, right? And since you were in defense mode, you acted on impulse.”

“Yes,” Lake said, his voice barely above a whisper. “It’s still no excuse.”

I sipped my coffee and eyed Maddox over the rim. “Maybe I’m wrong, but didn’t someone mention an apology?”

The muscle in Maddox’s jaw jumped before he breathed out, his gaze trailing from me to Lake. “If it weren’t for me threatening you, you wouldn’t have been in that mindset to begin with. And for that, I’m sorry. I suppose I wasn’t in my

right mind either. When the storm hit early this morning, Evan was all I thought about. I knew he'd be scared, and I was sick about it, knowing he was alone. But because of the high wind and hail, I couldn't risk hurting the horse by traveling in it."

Briar reached over and placed his hand on top of Maddox's before looking at me. "We were both beside ourselves, counting down the minutes until we could return to you."

"He wasn't alone during the storm," Lake said. "I was with him."

Maddox glowered at that. I thought he was about to spout off something rude, but he bit it back and exhaled—again. "Thank you for being here for him when I couldn't be."

Lake nodded, not meeting his stare.

Progress.

"The amity muffins are working," I said, motioning to the platter. "There are plenty left. Y'all should eat another."

Lake grabbed a strawberry one. I'd baked two types that morning; the tried-and-true banana nut, and I'd tested out a recipe for strawberry with a lemon glaze.

"I was about to eat that," Maddox said.

"You already have one." I nodded to his hand. "Quit being stingy."

He ate the rest of it in one bite before washing it down with coffee.

Briar pressed his lips into a thin line. His body then jolted, and he shot Maddox a look, who arched one brow, as if to

feign innocence. I hadn't seen it, but I knew Maddox had kicked Briar's leg beneath the table just like I'd done to him earlier.

Silly boys.

But I loved them more than life itself.

The scent of brewed coffee and baked goods drifted through the kitchen to the small table by the oval windows where we enjoyed our breakfast. Earlier, I had put a batch of chocolate chip cookies in the oven. As a timer went off, I jumped up and took out the cookies before putting in another batch.

"Those look delicious," Lake said from behind me.

"Good lord, you're so quiet." I spun around to him. "I need to put a bell around your neck."

Albeit small, Lake smiled. "Would you like any help?"

"Sure."

He placed more cookie dough on the cooking sheets as I whisked egg whites for the lemon meringue pie. When I caught his eye, he softly smiled and averted his gaze.

Hard to think the horribly intense morning would turn out so nice.

"I must be on my way, I'm afraid," Briar said, pulling me into his arms. He kissed my temple. "The clinic received a large order yesterday afternoon that must be completed by tomorrow. But I'll see you later this evening."

"Work hard but not *too* hard." Not ready to let him go just yet, I hugged him tighter. "Remember to take breaks. And eat."

You forget to do that when you're absorbed in your work. Take some cookies with you."

Briar lightly chuckled. "All right."

"My turn." Maddox scooted Briar aside, tossing him a smirk. He then wrapped his arms around me. Something tender shone in his dark blue eyes. "Behave while I'm gone."

"I always do." I poked his chest. "And *you* be careful." I always worried when Maddox left. As captain of the Second Order, he was put in harm's way much too often. They were the primary combat unit, the ones sent on the more dangerous expeditions.

"I always am." He took my face in both his hands before kissing me. "If the wolf becomes a nuisance, throw him outside."

"Be nice," I hissed.

Maddox rewarded me with a cocky grin that did crazy things to my heart. Damn him. He kissed me again but deeper this time, dipping his tongue into my mouth and gripping my hips, pulling me so close I could feel the hard ridge of his cock through his trousers.

I emitted a moan and clung on tighter.

"We'll continue this later," he then said in a low voice that gave me shivers.

My mind was in a fog as he pulled away and left the kitchen. Double damn him. How dare he get me all worked up and then leave me hanging.

“I should leave as well,” Lake said, keeping his distance. The lightheartedness from when we baked together earlier was absent. He was back to being closed off. “I don’t want to chase your customers away once the café opens.”

“Chase them away?”

“Because I’m...” Lake shook his head and dropped his gaze to the floor. “Me.”

A demi-wolf.

“My café is open to everyone,” I said. “You included. If anyone has an issue with that, they can kiss my ass.”

But Lake left as soon as he heard the bell above the entrance that signaled someone walking in. He dashed for the back door and was concealed in the trees seconds later.

“I hope we’re not too early,” Peter said as he and Alice came into the kitchen.

“Not at all.” I forced a smile, trying to ignore the wonky achiness in my chest. “There’s coffee and muffins if you want some.”

Lake and I had made a decent amount of desserts, so by the time the café opened, things flowed easily. The three of us developed a nice system. Peter took orders and I prepared the dishes, gathering the desserts and cups of coffee. Alice served the dishes and cashed out the customers once they were done, and then Peter cleared the tables.

Once the café closed, they helped me wipe the tables and clean the kitchen.

“See you tomorrow,” Alice said, giving me a short bow before grabbing her satchel—that I’d shoved bundles of cookies into for her and her wife to share—and leaving the café.

Peter clapped me on the back, grabbed one of the unsold chocolate cupcakes, and followed her out the door.

I smiled after them before returning to the kitchen to start dinner. I was too tired to make something too extravagant, so I decided on rabbit stew. I chopped the vegetables and added them to a pot on the stove, then prepared the rabbit and tossed it in too.

As it cooked, I washed the few dirty dishes left in the sink. The sun sank lower, and the clouds painted the sky in shades of dark-orange and purple. The forest darkened as dusk fell over the kingdom, but the inky blackness didn’t scare me like it had yesterday.

Was Lake out there, watching me from the trees?

The thought made me happy. Comforted me too.

“Evan!” a loud voice came from behind me.

I nearly shit myself. The cup slipped from my hand and fell back into the sink, splashing water all over the front of my shirt.

Kuya bounced up next to me, his reddish-brown ears twitching as he looked at my wet shirt. “Evan spilled water.”

“Because you scared me! You can’t do that to me. My heart can’t take it. Knock next time, why don’t ya?”

“Apologies,” Sir Noah said as he entered the kitchen. “He was very insistent on seeing you as soon as possible.”

“Kuya has news! But first, Evan needs to be dry or he will get sick.” He grabbed my arm and led me over to the opposite counter. He picked up a rag and slapped it against my shirt a few times, his brow marring with a frown and his sharp canines jutting down from his upper lip. “It refuses to dry. It must be destroyed instead.”

“It’ll dry,” I said, taking the rag from him and wiping at it myself. “What’s your news?”

He grinned. “Prince Sawyer wants to eat lunch with Evan in two days’ time. Can Evan come to the castle?”

“Of course I can,” I responded, excited by the thought of seeing Sawyer. It had been too long, and I wanted to catch up with him.

“This is very important,” Kuya whispered, leaning in closer. “Evan needs to bring cake with him.”

“For you or for the prince?”

He flashed another grin before planting his hands on my chest, kicking his leg up behind him, and kissing me on the cheek. The sneaky cat-boy then snatched two cupcakes from behind me and scampered away. Yeah, that had been the real motivation behind his affectionate peck—a chance to grab sweets.

Typical Kuya. But it’s why I loved him. I looked at Noah. “Do you want anything? I made extra today, so there’s plenty left.”

The knight eyed the trays of desserts with interest but shook his head. “No, thank you. I’m on duty.”

“Your loss,” one of my favorite voices in the whole world said from the other room. “It leaves more for the rest of us.” Maddox stepped through the archway, his blue eyes instantly finding mine and not leaving me as he approached. Once in front of me, his arms came around my waist and he lifted me off the floor with a hug.

“Hey, you.” I closed my eyes as I pressed against him. The world was right once again. Well, almost. It was half-right. “Is Briar with you?”

“Unfortunately,” Maddox mumbled, placing me back down. “I tried to leave him at the castle, but he insisted on following.”

“Be nice.” I shoved his shoulder, and he breathed out a laugh. The sound thrilled me, just as it always did in the rare instances when he let it loose.

Maddox slowly pulled back and touched the bottom of my shirt. “Why are you wet?”

“I was washing dishes.”

“And you fell in?” Maddox smirked as I shot him a glare. “You *are* awfully small. Even the sink is too big for you.”

I shoved him again. “Butthole.”

“A ‘b’ word to add to all the ‘s’ ones? I’ve leveled up.”

“I’m gonna level my fist into your ridiculously perfect and sexy jaw if you keep making fun of me.”

“Can I watch?” my other favorite voice in the whole world said.

I whirled around and smiled as Briar approached. He wrapped me in his arms and placed a kiss beneath my ear. His glasses lightly scraped my cheek as he lifted his head from my neck and peered at me.

“Watching is kind of your thing,” I said, my body heating at the memory of our last steamy encounter: Briar touching himself as Maddox railed me into oblivion.

“Yes, it is.” It made him remember too, if the sudden bulge in the front of his trousers was any indication. “You’re exquisite when uninhibited and lost to our touch.”

“Um. Kuya is still here.”

I looked over at him, my face hot. Kuya sat on the edge of the counter, feet slowly kicking as they dangled down. He had one strawberry cupcake devoured and the chocolate one not far behind. The ganache frosting coated his lips as he took another bite, his tail happily flicking behind him.

“We should return,” Sir Noah told him. “The prince will be expecting you.”

Kuya shoved the rest of the cupcake into his mouth before hopping down. He stole another one from the platter and waved at me. “Don’t forget about lunch in two days.”

“And bring cake,” I said with a nod. “Got it.”

After tossing me a snaggle-toothed grin, Kuya left the kitchen. Noah bowed his head to me before trailing after him, and it looked like something was in his hand. I glanced at the

counter and grinned like a fool when realizing there were fewer sugar cookies.

So that was his favorite, huh? I made a mental note to bring some of those with me to the castle in two days.

“I tested the protective charm today,” Briar said, and judging by his smile, I assumed it was good news. “It successfully repelled small-scale attacks and minor magic, holding up well enough. It’s not quite where I want it to be, but I’m confident with more time, I’ll manage to craft something that can withstand stronger attacks.”

“I’m so proud of you.” I snuggled in close to him, smiling when he dropped a kiss to my head. “Go relax while I finish dinner.”

Briar sat at the table and rubbed the back of his neck. He looked exhausted.

Steps sounded from the bar area, the boots heavy on the floorboards.

“What’s for dinner?” Callum asked as he came around the corner, the dimple in his cheek giving him an endearing boyishness. Quincy walked in behind him.

“Rabbit stew,” I said. “It should be ready in about fifteen more minutes.”

“Rabbit stew?” Callum groaned under his breath. “My favorite.” He then snatched a banana nut muffin from the platter and took a bite.

“Any muffins left?” Maddox sat at the table, placing his arm on the back of Briar’s chair. I adored the small touches they gave each other. Proof that their bond had deepened.

Little zaps of happiness exploded in my chest for another reason too. My sexy captain had developed a love for muffins. All flavors of them. Me being his favorite, of course.

“Um.” I glanced at the empty platter on the counter, then to the bite-riddled muffin in Callum’s hand. “That was the last one.”

“I’ll kill him.” Maddox jumped up from his chair.

Callum ran over and grabbed Quincy, using him as a shield.

“You think that can stop me?” Maddox neared them. And something about his deep tone and the slightly sadistic look in his eyes turned me the fuck on.

“The cavalry has arrived,” another voice said before Baden entered the kitchen with Duke at his side.

“And we brought this,” Duke said, holding a wicker basket in his hand. A red cloth covered the top.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“I’m not sure.” Duke placed it on the counter. “We did a quick perimeter check of the cottage before coming in, as usual, and it was sitting on the back patio. I thought you may have forgotten it outside.”

“Nope. It’s not mine.” I stepped closer. “What’s in it?”

Maddox placed his hand on my chest to stop me. “Let me look first.”

My protective captain.

“Okay, but maybe you should take Briar’s protective charm with you,” I said, watching as he approached it. “What

if a demon is inside?”

“A demon?” Briar asked. “In a wicker basket?”

“Could be an imp,” Callum said, his brown eyes alight with humor. “It may jump out and try to devour your soul.”

“Thanks, Cal,” I muttered. “That’s just another thing I’ll have nightmares about.”

“Evan could fight it off,” Duke said, stepping around Quincy. He flexed his biceps, then did a pose that reminded me of a body builder. “He is small but brave.”

“Yes. So brave,” I said. “I scream at my own shadow.”

“Because your shadow is mighty as well.”

Maddox yanked back the red cloth, and I grabbed Briar’s arm with a small gasp, expecting a creepy little soul-sucking creature to jump out and kill all of us.

“What is it?” I squeaked, fingertips digging into Briar’s arm. The guy was a saint. He patted my hand and didn’t complain as I grabbed on to him for dear life.

Maddox tilted his head and moved his hand around inside the basket. “Apples.”

“Apples?” I relaxed. “Well, that’s not scary.”

“Unless they’re poisoned,” Callum said. “One bite, and you’re dead.”

I closed my eyes. “Callum? I swear to all that’s holy, I’m gonna take off my shoe and hit you with it.”

Maddox examined the contents further. “Peaches too. And pears.”

“A fruit basket?” I released my death hold on Briar and inched closer to Maddox. Once beside him, I peeked into the basket. The fruit didn’t only look delicious but it smelled just as great. Green apples with a few red ones. Peaches and pears that were perfectly ripe, not too hard or mushy. The perfect ripeness for baking into pies or cobbler. “Who sent it? Is there a note?”

“Not that I can see,” Maddox said, but then stopped. “Wait.” He shifted a peach out of the way, revealing a small piece of parchment.

Please use these for your next dessert was written in slightly messy handwriting, the writing smeared in some places and drops of ink following the word, as if whoever wrote it struggled with what to say. *And thank you. For everything.*

It wasn’t signed.

“Lookie here,” Duke said, pulling a rose from the basket. It had been with the note. “The Thorn Prince has a secret admirer. A love letter and a red rose.”

“Every male in this room admires him,” Quincy added. “Some greater than others.”

Maddox glared. “As long as every male in this room, apart from me and the physician, keep their hands off him, we won’t have a problem.”

“Yes, sir,” Quincy said.

Duke looked like he was about to laugh but coughed instead. “Understood, Captain.”

As if they'd try to make a move on me. I almost rolled my eyes at the thought. They might've liked to tease me, but it was more like how an older brother picked on a younger one. Nothing romantic at all. Maddox was just slightly overprotective and possessive.

A little bit.

Okay, a lot.

Duke handed me the rose, and I pressed it to my nose. The petals were so soft. I then took the basket over to the opposite counter and unloaded the fruit, mulling over the note. My gaze returned to the basket. Intricately woven wicker. It reminded me of...

Lake.

Similar baskets had been placed throughout his cottage, one in the living room holding knitted lap blankets and another he'd used when picking vegetables from his garden.

"It's not a secret admirer," I said, chest warming. "Lake sent it."

Maddox growled under his breath. "That wolf needs to keep his distance." He stepped up behind me and rested his arms on each side of me, lowering his face to the back of my neck. "I don't trust him."

"Because he's a wolf? That's not fair."

"No, because every time he comes around, you end up hurt."

"He doesn't mean to," I said, recalling the pained look in Lake's eyes as he saw the blood on my arm. Despite his

impulsiveness, he had a gentle soul. “He’s just not used to being around people.”

Talking about Lake in front of Callum and the others didn’t worry me. They had been in the ‘rescue Evan party’ months ago when I’d gotten myself lost in the woods. They’d come with Maddox and Briar to find me, meeting Lake for the first time.

“This looks so good.” I grabbed a peach and turned it from side to side, deciding the best place to bite it.

Maddox put his hand over the peach. “If you plan on eating that, allow me to take the first bite.”

“Just in case it’s poisoned?” I pulled my hand away from him. “Lake wouldn’t do that.”

“Then you won’t mind me testing it just to be certain.” Maddox snatched the peach from me and bit into it. Juice seeped from the fruit, shining on his lips as he chewed.

My mouth watered. He looked more delicious than the peach. On impulse, I rose up to my tiptoes and licked at his juicy lips, tasting both him and the fruit. “Yummy.”

Maddox’s hungry gaze fanned my own flames of arousal. Without a doubt, I knew he’d be throwing me down and fucking me the moment we were alone.

I couldn’t wait.

“I don’t fancy being left out,” Briar said before grabbing Maddox’s wrist and angling the peach closer, taking a bite while it was still in our captain’s grip.

Maddox's hungry gaze didn't waiver in the slightest as it shifted to Briar. "Leave you out? Never. You're stuck with us until the end of your days, physician." He then snatched hold of Briar's chin and brought their mouths together.

Butterflies swarmed my belly. I loved seeing them being so intimate.

After dinner, Maddox put Callum and the knights on dish duty, and they tackled the stack without complaint, occasionally splashing water at each other and giggling like kids. Once the counters and sink were spotless, they each ruffled the top of my hair and left the cottage.

"Welp," I said once it was just the three of us, putting my hands on my hips. "What should we do now?"

Maddox and Briar exchanged a smile before coming toward me.

"Uh oh."

"Come here, you." Maddox picked me up.

The three of us went upstairs and fell into bed together, kissing and groping. Maddox took his time prepping me before pinning me down and lining himself at my entrance.

"I love watching you take him." Briar touched himself as he watched Maddox sink into me, slow at first but quickly gaining momentum. They shared a kiss before focusing on me.

Maddox fucked me while Briar captured my lips and drank down my moans. I shifted higher on the bed so that I could suck Briar's cock. His lids weighed heavily as his hazel eyes lingered on my mouth, then moved over to where Maddox drilled into me.

“Do you want to switch?” Maddox asked him, breaths short. “Our male feels incredible. Tight and warm.”

Briar softly groaned. “Y-Yes.”

The two then switched positions; Maddox settling beside my head while Briar positioned his tip at my entrance and eased forward. I whimpered as he gripped my hips and sent a magical wave through me, using it to ease any discomfort. He only ever thought of my pleasure and comfort. Both of them did.

Maddox brushed my bangs from my eyes as I sucked him. He was too big for me to fit all the way, so I focused on his swollen tip and used my hand on his shaft. The three of us came like that, with me sucking Maddox and Briar deep inside of me. It was explosive and intense, the crashing waves of pleasure going beyond the physical. Their scent. The feel of them. I couldn't get enough.

I never would.

Afterward, Maddox cleaned me with a wet cloth before returning to bed and tugging me to his chest. Briar spooned me from behind, draping his arm across my side and resting his hand on Maddox's bicep.

“Can I talk to you guys about something?” I asked.

Briar pushed his face into the back of my hair. “You can tell us anything.”

“It's about Lake.”

Maddox huffed.

Normally, I'd tell him to behave or make light of the situation... but I couldn't right then. My sternum ached as if enclosed in barbed wire, the spikes scraping against it with my every breath.

"Evan?" Maddox tipped my face up to his. His dark brows were pulled together in a frown.

"I..." God, it was hard to get words past the tightness in my throat. "I think I may have feelings for him. My head's a freaking mess." My heart was too. "I love both of you so much, and I don't want to do anything to ruin what we have."

"Nothing can ruin this." Maddox smoothed his thumb over my lips. "I don't doubt your love for us. That won't change whether you fall for one more male or twenty."

"Twenty would be pushing it, I think."

He softly smiled before kissing me just as softly. Then, against my lips, he whispered, "Do I fancy the idea of sharing you? Gods, no. But as you recall, I once felt the same about Briar. Look at us now. I wouldn't want my life any other way."

"Neither would I," Briar said. "However, I'm concerned about Lake. I can sense his wild, restless spirit. He's impulsive and easily startled, lashing out at anyone close by."

"And that person is usually you," Maddox added, rubbing our noses together before pulling back so I could see his face. "When I saw him grab you and draw your blood..." An achy tenderness spread through Maddox's eyes, like fractures forming in glass. "My entire heart was at his mercy, and I could barely breathe, Evan."

“It was an accident,” I said. “He didn’t mean to hurt me. Maybe if he was around people more, he’d learn how to control those impulses.”

“You have such a kind heart,” Briar murmured into my hair. “It’s what I love about you. You see the good in people when they can’t even see it themselves.”

“You’re also too trusting because of that kind heart,” Maddox said. “And it worries me.”

Nothing I said would ease his worries, so I kissed him instead. Maddox made the softest of sounds as he returned it, pressing his mouth firmer to mine. Seconds passed as our lips moved together, and then he grabbed my chin and turned my face so Briar could kiss me. Briar’s mouth crashed against mine as Maddox moved to my neck, nipping at my pulse point.

The way I felt when kissing them? Like sparks traveling through my bloodstream. It held no comparison. The only other man who’d ever made me feel the same way... was Lake.

Lupin had said I was destined to have five lovers in this world. Fated mates. And I knew without a doubt Lake was one of them.

Chapter Five

A Royal Invitation

“Are you sure this is okay?” I asked as Sawyer led me up the front steps of the castle. “I’m not exactly dressed for royalty.”

“You look great.” Sawyer nodded to the guards stationed outside the entry doors. “Normally we’d eat lunch in the garden, but it’s much too hot today.”

True. The summer afternoon was sweltering hot. Sweat dampened my hair and coated my back, making my shirt stick to me. I was like a sweat-drowned rat and probably smelled like one too. Definitely not the way I’d imagined my first trip inside the castle to go down.

“Am I even allowed to go in?” I smiled at the guards as we passed them, paranoid they’d stop me. I debated on offering them one of the sweets I’d brought with me as a bribe.

“Of course. You’re my guest.”

“What about your brother?”

Sawyer’s smile became tight at the edges. “If luck is in our favor, we won’t encounter him.”

“That makes me feel so much better. Truly.” Cedric was the crown prince and a class A asshole who got off on intimidating people. He was also mean to Kuya, which made me dislike the blond-haired bastard even more.

My reservations fled as soon as I stepped into the entrance hall. The grandeur of it far surpassed my expectations. Marble floors, gold lined columns, jeweled chandeliers, and a grand staircase that stretched up and split into two.

“Allow me, sir,” a woman said as she stepped toward me.

“Huh? Oh.” I handed her the basket of sweets. “Thank you.”

“Please follow me.” She bowed to Sawyer before walking toward a doorway to the left.

“This place is massive,” I said as we followed her down a long corridor. “Do you ever get lost?”

He laughed. “I have once or twice. Not so much anymore. As a boy, I used to run these halls and hide from the servants, usually before bath time.”

One of the older men we passed smiled at that.

“That changed when my illness worsened,” Sawyer said. “No more running down the corridors or climbing trees.”

“Can I ask what kind of sickness?”

“The court physician at the time said I was born weak,” Sawyer responded. “I caught colds easily, became fatigued quickly, and sometimes if I overexerted myself, I wouldn’t be able to breathe. There were some mornings when I couldn’t leave my bed. I’d be fevered for a few days before regaining

my energy. Then one day, I never recovered. That bed became my prison.”

Sounded like he might’ve had some kind of sickness that attacked his immune system, but my specialty was in desserts and coffee, not medicine.

“My memory from that time is somewhat of a blur,” he continued. “I remember feeling weak and unable to hold down solid food. I coughed a lot and suffered bouts of nausea, headaches, and chills that came from fever. There was a tree I used to stare at from my bed, one that bloomed in early spring. I remember seeing it bloom once and wondering if it was the last time I’d ever see it.”

My heart ached. “Then Briar healed you?”

That was how Briar had been given the position as the court physician, a highly sought after and coveted title. Bremloc wasn’t just a kingdom; it was the capital.

“Yes,” Sawyer answered. “When our physician failed to find a remedy, my father summoned every healer from this kingdom and all the surrounding ones, promising their weight in gold and anything else they desired if they could heal me. They tried everything, every known medicine and cure, to no avail. So Briar dove deeper, researching ancient texts and even those believed to be mere myths. I’m told he didn’t sleep or eat until he found a solution.”

“That sounds like him,” I said, fondness for Briar swarming in my chest. “He puts others needs before his own. I’m always having to remind him to eat and take care of himself too.”

“The two of you make for a fine couple.” Sawyer’s smile returned to its former warmth, lacking the tightness that had formed when speaking of his past illness. “Or should I say, the three of you. Many women are heartsick that you’ve stolen the dashing handsome Captain Maddox from them.”

“I didn’t steal him. He wasn’t theirs to begin with.” Did I sound too salty at that? *Oh well.* “So after Briar healed you, what happened? You said something about the king offering the person’s weight in gold.”

“Briar refused it,” Sawyer said. “Once I was on the mend, my father tried to reward him, but Briar said he didn’t do it for gold or other riches. He only wished to save a life.”

I didn’t think I could love Briar any more than I already did, but the warm flutters in my heart said otherwise. “That also sounds like him.”

“That’s when my father offered him the position as the court physician. Earning a king’s trust is no easy feat, but my father trusts him with not only my life and Cedric’s, but with his life as well.”

And I trusted Briar with mine.

My life and my heart.

The woman led us to a room with an entire wall of windows that overlooked a courtyard filled with vibrant flowers, beds of green grass, and trees of varying shapes and sizes. The sky was so blue it looked fake.

Sawyer thanked the servant before taking a seat.

I joined him at the table, taking in the platters of food in front of us; fresh salmon with lemon slices, crab cakes, and a

flaky tart that reminded me of a quiche, filled with a savory egg custard, cheese, meat, and vegetables. There was also a selection of fruit and buttery bread.

I was starving, not having eaten anything since early that morning when I'd cooked breakfast for the café staff and my boys—Callum and the knights included. Maddox had sneered as Callum ate the last of the muffins—again—and swore he'd murder him for it.

It was past noon now. I wondered if the cinnamon roll had succumbed to that promised death, or if he was still alive and kicking, being his ooey-gooey, sweet self.

“Thank you for inviting me to lunch,” I said.

“It's my pleasure,” Sawyer responded. “I hope it wasn't an inconvenience.”

“Not at all.” Peter and Alice were taking care of the café, and I had full faith in them. “It's nice to see you. It's been way too long.”

“I agree,” he said. “I have very few friends. Acquaintances? Yes. But very few I can trust. As a prince, I never know the intentions of those around me. They always want something or have some agenda for wanting to get close to me. But not you, Evan. You expect nothing of our friendship.”

“I consider you a friend too,” I told him, touched by his words.

“Is that from your café?” Sawyer nodded to the basket.

“Yep.” I lifted the lid to reveal vanilla cupcakes, different flavors of cookies, a miniature strawberry cake, and banana

nut muffins. I hadn't brought anything with too much chocolate since it would've melted on the trip there. "I wasn't sure which one you'd like best, so I grabbed a few different ones. And sugar cookies for Sir Noah."

Sawyer looked toward the doorway where the knight in question had just walked in with a hyper cat-boy at his side.

"Evan is here!" Kuya sprang forward, headed straight for the basket. "And he brought Kuya's cake!"

"Kuya," Sawyer said, then pointed to the seat beside him. "Lunch first, then dessert."

Kuya paused right before pouncing on the basket, the cake reflecting in his rainbow eyes. His ears twitched. He then sighed and sat beside Sawyer. "Kuya will behave."

Sawyer patted the top of his head, earning a chorus of adorable cat purrs. "Rose made crab cakes for you."

"Crab cakes?" He perked up. "Kuya's other favorite type of cake!"

As Kuya loaded his plate, I grabbed one of the salmon fillets. Sawyer chose a quiche and some fruit. We ate in a comfortable silence for several minutes before Kuya started talking about a butterfly he'd found earlier.

Sawyer smiled as he listened and returned his hand to Kuya's head. His fingers sank into the reddish-brown strands of his hair, and Kuya closed his eyes, purring happily as he chewed his food.

After lunch, Kuya cut off a small piece of the strawberry cake and scooted it toward Sawyer before pouncing on the rest, eating with his hands.

“An honorable slice,” Sawyer said, amused as he looked at his plate. He then took a bite and paused.

“Oh no. Do you hate it?” I asked. “Too sweet? Not sweet enough? Dry?”

“On the contrary. It’s wonderful.” Sawyer dabbed at his mouth with a folded napkin. Damn, he even made *that* look princely and elegant. “I’ve tasted the finest desserts from all across the kingdom, but this is truly on a different level, Evan.”

“Now Prince Sawyer sees why Kuya loves it.” Kuya picked at the crumbs on the cake platter—all that was left of his attack on it. “Evan’s cake makes Kuya’s tummy happy.”

“May I try one of the cookies next?” Sawyer asked.

“You’re welcome to anything you want. I brought them for you.”

The prince smiled and grabbed a lemon cookie. “Sir Noah?”

“Yes, Your Highness?” Noah stepped forward.

“Evan tells me sugar cookies are your favorite. Please help yourself to one.”

Noah hesitated for only a moment before bowing his head and grabbing one from the platter. As he returned to his position against the wall and took a bite, his eyes softened.

“Absolutely delicious,” Sawyer said after finishing the lemon cookie.

“I’m glad you think so.” I fidgeted in my seat. Compliments made me awkward. “Anytime you want more,

just let me know. I can ask Briar to deliver some to you when he comes to work in the morning. I'd say Maddox could too, but Callum and the knights would have the platter plucked clean in seconds, like a swarm of hungry piranhas, before he even reached the castle."

Sawyer laughed. "The knights are all that stand between us and the demons of the dark wood. They risk their lives for this kingdom. If they wish to eat all the cookies, I have no problem letting them."

When I thought about Callum, Quincy, Duke, and all the knights I adored risking their lives, waves of worry and dread rolled through me. I wanted them safe. I couldn't imagine something bad happening to any of them.

Especially not to my captain.

"I suppose we should discuss business now," Sawyer then said.

"Business?"

"I invited you to lunch partly because I missed you," he responded. "It's been too long since we've visited. However, that's not the only reason. I'm not sure if you recall, but when you first told me of your plan to open the café, I spoke to my father about it. He was very excited and believed your café would be an asset to Bremloc."

"I remember." How could I forget? Being praised by the king, even a little, was a huge freaking deal. "You also mentioned he wanted to meet with me." Also, memorable. My anxiety amped up each time I recalled that not so insignificant detail.

Sawyer nodded. “Certain matters have kept him busy and unable to schedule that meeting, but I feel it will happen soon. In the days since the grand opening, your café has generated quite the buzz around the kingdom. Word has even spread as far as Exalos.” The city south of Bremloc.

“Really?”

“Yes. The king requested that I meet with you to discuss a proposal.”

“What kind of proposal?”

“Every autumn, a ball is held here at the capital,” he explained. “Royals and nobles from all across the land attend. Although it’s not for another month or so, arrangements are already being made in preparation. Much goes into one of these events. Invitations, décor, costume planning, music, and food.”

“Wow.” Visions of a lavish ball played through my mind. I imagined women in beautiful gowns and men in flashy outfits, handsome and elegant. “An autumn ball. That sounds so freaking cool. I wish I could go to one someday.”

Sawyer stared at me, a ghost of a smile on his lips.

“What?” I asked.

“Silly Evan.” Kuya pulled his legs up into his chair and sat crisscross. “Oblivious and so, so silly.”

“Why am I silly and oblivious?” I looked between him and Sawyer. “What did I miss?”

Sawyer’s smile fully formed. “As I said, people are praising your coffee and baked goods from here to Exalos.

After hearing the buzz surrounding your café, my father recommended I meet with you and sample some of your sweets for myself. If satisfied, he asked that I arrange for you to provide desserts and refreshments for the ball.”

I stared at him, unable to respond.

His smile slipped. “You can refuse, of course. I would never force you to.”

“No!” The word came out louder than intended, startling Kuya just as he was reaching across the table for a cupcake. He snatched his hand back and flashed Sawyer a sheepish grin. “I mean, no, you misunderstood. I think I’m in shock. You want *me* to cater the ball?”

“We have chefs who will be in charge of the main course,” Sawyer said. “But I’d love for you to attend and showcase your desserts and specialty coffees. Not only will you be paid, but it’s also a good opportunity to build your café’s reputation even more. I can give you time to think it over.”

Nervous energy buzzed through me. But so did excitement. When would I ever get another chance like this?

“I don’t need any time to think. I’d be honored to do it. I should have enough time to plan a menu. I’ll need to hire someone else too, probably.”

“Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help,” Sawyer said.

“You’ve done plenty for me already.”

Sawyer picked up a grape from his bowl and tossed it at me. “Accept my help or brace yourself for my wrath.”

It bounced off my forehead and rolled across my empty plate. I popped it into my mouth. “Wrath of grapes? There’s a book with a similar title. I fell asleep reading it.”

“Kuya could work for Evan.” He slumped in his chair, placing a hand over his tanned belly and closing his eyes. “After he naps.”

Tenderness shone in Sawyer’s eyes. “No, you’re perfect right where you are.”

With his eyes still shut, Kuya smiled and flicked his tail, brushing Sawyer’s leg. Sawyer had said Briar, Maddox, and I made a good couple. But he and Kuya were cute together too. Even if they weren’t *officially* together.

Maybe they could never be.

“How’s the...” I shook my head. “Um, never mind. I don’t want to ruin the mood.”

“Tell me anyway,” Sawyer said.

“I was just wondering how your search for a bride is going. I heard you recently met with a baron’s daughter.”

“Oh. That.” Just as I feared, Sawyer’s face fell. Then, as if realizing it, he forced a small smile. “The search has come to an end. Lady Alina will make for a fine wife. Beautiful, poised, and from a well-respected family who has always shown loyalty to the crown. My mother believes it’s a perfect match.”

It was the first time he’d ever mentioned his mother. Other than him and Cedric, I hadn’t met any other members of the royal family.

“My father approves of the match as well,” he continued. “Alina and I aren’t yet officially engaged, but I’m supposed to meet with her again in the coming weeks. It’s only a matter of time before the engagement is announced.”

Kuya opened his eyes and stared at the table, a slight wobble in his chin.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It’s fucked up that you can’t choose who you want to marry.” It was also fucked up that I, a nobody, had more freedom than a damn prince. I was free to love and marry whoever I wanted, while he was chained to tradition and forced to throw away his chance at love in order to strengthen political alliances.

“Marriage is merely a tool for power. No matter how much I wish it were something greater.” Sawyer laughed under his breath. “I suppose that makes me sound just like my uncle.”

“Your uncle?”

“I was very young when he died,” Sawyer said. “Too young to remember him. But he shared the same views of marriage. He felt it should be for love, not duty. And he caused quite the scandal because of it.”

“What kind of scandal?” I asked, well-aware that I was digging for gossip like a bored housewife. But come on. It wasn’t every day you got to talk to a prince and hear about his scandalous uncle.

“He broke off his engagement to one woman to run away with another.”

“Oh damn.” I grabbed a roll of bread and took a huge bite. It wasn’t warm anymore, but I didn’t care. Bread was bread. And it was heavenly. “What happened next?”

“Well, his actions deepened the conflict with the kingdom of Haran. Because the woman he abandoned was the crown princess. His marriage to her was intended to finally unite our kingdoms, but he divided us further.”

“Wow.”

“Indeed. There are rumors that he took something from King Silas, the king of Haran, before running away with the other woman.”

“What did he take?”

Sawyer shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

A memory stirred in the back of my mind. My second day in Bremloc, Maddox had taken me to the barracks, and I’d sat with some of the knights. It was when I’d first met Duke and Quincy. I had asked why Bremloc was at war with the kingdom of Haran.

“The king’s youngest brother worsened the conflict,” Quincy had said. *“Or so the stories say.”*

“What stories?”

“The one about the lost treasure of Haran,” he’d responded.

“Lost treasure?”

Quincy had smirked. *“Stolen.”*

“Some kind of royal treasure, maybe?” I asked. “Like a magical amulet or a ring. Hmm.”

Sawyer seemed amused. “Perhaps. No one knows for certain. And it could only be rumors.”

I pondered the idea as I ate more bread. “So your uncle broke off his engagement with the princess of Haran, possibly stole something, and then ran away with another woman. What happened to him after that? You said he died. How?”

“I regret to say I don’t know much more.” Sawyer stood from his chair and patted the top of Kuya’s head as he passed him to go to the window. “My father will tell me very little about my uncle. Some of it comes from anger and shame. But I think it also comes from sadness. Elias was his younger brother, and I’m told my father doted on him when they were growing up.”

“That’s sad.”

“Yes. Quite.” Sawyer turned to me with a kind smile. “Would you like to go for a walk? I’m suddenly feeling too restless to stay inside.”

Kuya hopped out of his chair, his earlier sleepiness gone. “Kuya wants to go too.”

“As if I’d ever go anywhere without you.” Sawyer took his wrist in a gentle hold. He didn’t pull him closer, but I got the impression he wanted to. “Wrap up a few crab cakes and bring them with you. You always get hungry during walks.”

Purrs filled the air as Kuya held the prince’s gaze. “Kuya will bring some for his prince too.”

“It’s an honor to be one of the rare few you’ll share food with.”

“Kuya will always give Prince Sawyer his food.” His purrs intensified.

I looked away from them, an ache settling in my chest.

Noah stood in place along the wall, so quiet I’d almost forgotten he was still in the room. He didn’t look at them either, but I noticed the slight crease of his brow as he carefully watched the only doorway in the room.

“As much as I’d love to stay longer, I should probably head back to the café. But I hope you enjoy your walk.”

“Oh, of course.” Sawyer nodded to me. “I apologize for keeping you so long. You’re a working man now.”

“Yep. Finally found a job I can keep,” I said, then gave an exaggerated sigh. “Couldn’t cut it as a knight and was banned from wielding anything sharp by my hot boyfriend. Got fired from the clinic by my other hot boyfriend. I nearly caved and became the court jester. Thank god for muffins and coffee, right?”

Sawyer laughed. “It’s always a pleasure to see you, Evan. You make me forget about things for a while.”

“It’s always good to see you too.”

Did I need to get back to my café? Yeah. But I also wanted to give them some time alone. After the heavy discussion about Sawyer’s future arranged marriage, I knew their time was limited. Once Sawyer married Alina, would Kuya be allowed to stay by his side? Or would he be sent away?

By the sad gleam in Sawyer’s eyes as he returned his gaze to Kuya, his thumb smoothing along the top of Kuya’s hand as

he held him just a bit tighter, I doubt he knew the answer either.

“Allow me to walk you out,” Noah said as I reached the doorway.

“Oh. Thanks. Probably a good idea. I’d end up getting lost and wandering some place I shouldn’t.”

He didn’t smile, but a hint of one touched his eyes. Without a word, he slipped from the room and waited outside it before leading me down the corridor. With him as my escort, the palace guards paid us little mind.

“God, it’s so hot out here,” I said as we stepped beneath the blazing sun. There were no clouds. Just hot grossness. The blue sky, green grass, trees swaying in the warm breeze, and colorful flowers decorating the landscape were pretty though.

“Shall I escort you home?” Noah asked.

“Nah, I can take it from here.” I glanced back at Sawyer and Kuya, who had walked a short distance behind us, lost in their own little world as they quietly spoke. Hands still joined. “Watch over them, okay?”

“I always do.” Noah tipped his head to me. As he lifted it back up, that softness returned to his eyes. “You have my thanks for the cookies. I don’t often indulge in treats. I never had the chance when I was a boy. The orphanage gave them to us on special occasions, like when celebrating Yule or during the Festival of Lights. But they were rare.”

“You grew up in an orphanage?” I asked. Maddox had a similar story. His mother had died after he was born, and his father had fallen during the war.

“Yes,” Noah answered. “The battle that took Captain Maddox’s father also took mine.”

“Against the kingdom of Haran,” I said, remembering.

“Yes.” His whiskey-colored eyes appeared lighter as the sun hit them, shining on his irises like pools of dark honey. “Be safe heading home.”

“I will.” With the exception of a few scrapes I’d no doubt get along the way, since I couldn’t go anywhere without falling at least once.

Peter and Alice could handle things for a bit longer though.

I had two men to see first.

The clinic was just as I remembered. Shelves of books, potted plants, and herbs hanging from a rack along the wall as they dried.

Briar stood at his crafting station, tinkering with a white stone, completely absorbed in his work. His brown hair fell forward, and he pushed his fingers through it before flipping to the next page of the big book beside him.

“Afternoon,” Thane greeted me from the table where he sat eating lunch. His shaggy blond hair had highlights now, a natural transition from his time beneath the summer sun. When he wasn’t inside working, he loved being outside. He

liked insect hunting—but Thane only studied the bugs for a while, then set them free.

“Hey,” I said before looking at Briar. “How long has he been like that?”

“Too long,” Thane answered. “I tried getting him to take a break and eat something, but he just *mhm*’d me and kept working.”

“The protection spell again?”

Thane nodded. “The man is a perfectionist.”

Briar glanced up from the book, and the deep lines of concentration smoothed. “Evan?”

“The one and only.” With another step, I closed the gap between us and held onto his side. “How’s the spell going?”

“Better,” he answered with a thin, tired smile. “Yet, it’s still not strong enough.”

“Don’t give up. You’ll get there. I know you will. Remember what you told me before my café opened? Believe in yourself like I believe in you.”

Briar slipped both arms around me. “Seeing you is just what I needed.”

“Thane says you haven’t had lunch yet. Come on. Take a break. You need to eat.”

“I’m not hungry.” Briar lifted his hand to my cheek. “Did you have a nice visit with the prince?”

“Yep.” I then told him about Sawyer’s offer for me to attend the ball.

“That’s excellent news!” Briar beamed with a smile. He took off his glasses and rubbed at his tired eyes. “We’ll celebrate this evening. Perhaps go to that tavern Maddox enjoys and have a drink. Such a wretched place, but the food is good. The ale is too.”

The only thing Briar needed to do that evening was sleep. It had been a while since I’d visited him at his clinic. He hid his exhaustion well when he came to the cottage after work, but I saw it so clearly right then. “You’re overworking yourself.”

“I’m fine,” Briar said. “I’ll brew an energy tonic soon for an afternoon boost.”

“That’s a temporary fix. You can’t run on fumes forever.” I snuggled closer, my heart heavy in my chest. “I’m worried about you.”

He kissed the top of my hair. “No need to worry.”

“Then take a break. I’ll make you lunch.”

Not taking no for an answer, I hunted around in the kitchen, pleased to see the pantry was nicely stocked. Thanks to Thane, no doubt. My sexy physician couldn’t even remember to feed himself, let alone go to the market for groceries. I cooked a chicken breast and threw together a salad with spinach leaf, thinly sliced carrots, hard-boiled eggs, and then a raspberry vinaigrette to go on top.

“Thanks, love,” Briar said as I gave him the bowl. “A certain captain of ours may get jealous when he hears you made me lunch.”

“Guess I need to pay him a visit then too.” My chest warmed at the thought of visiting Maddox and the knights. “I also need to make sure he didn’t murder my cinnamon roll.”

Briar laughed. “I’m certain Sir Callum still lives.”

“Cinnamon roll?” Thane softly groaned. “I swear I’ll kiss you if you make them for me.”

“Best not make them for him then,” Briar said, eyes narrowing at his apprentice.

Thane grinned.

After kissing Briar and saying goodbye to him and Thane, I left the clinic and ventured toward the knights’ quarters. The way was ingrained in my memory. I knew every turn and swerve in the path, having walked it too many times to count.

As the stable appeared up ahead, I picked up pace but was careful not to trip over anything—like my own two feet. In the courtyard, knights sat around an unlit firepit sharing a meal. Others trained in the nearby field, swords clashing. Some practiced archery in a separate arena, shooting arrows into straw dummies.

A hand clamped around my bicep. “State your name and purpose for being here.”

I jumped and looked up into the face of a man I didn’t know. He was young, maybe around Callum’s age, with cropped blond hair and pale blue eyes. “Um. Can you let go of my arm?”

He gripped me harder. Too hard. “I won’t ask you again. Who are you?”

“Ow, you’re hurting me.” Scaring me a little too.

“Hudson,” a deep voice growled from behind us. A voice that delighted me and gave me chills at the same time. “Remove your hand from him before I remove it for you.”

“Captain Maddox.” The man released my arm and spun around to him. “You know this boy?”

“Boy,” I muttered, rubbing at my bicep. He’d held me so tight he’d left pink marks. “I’m twenty-three dammit.”

“I do know him.” Maddox gently took my face in his hands. “He’s my beloved.”

His beloved? Oh my god. He didn’t often say things like that, especially around other people, so when he did, I melted.

“My deepest apologies, sir.” Hudson quickly lowered his head. “I... I didn’t know. I thought he was an intruder.”

“You thought wrong.” Maddox dropped his hands from my face and aimed an icy glare at him. “If you ever lay a hand on Evan again, it will be the last thing you ever do in this life. Do I make myself clear?”

“Y-Yes, sir.”

“Leave my sight.”

Hudson bowed his head before rushing off, gaze on the grass.

“Let me see,” Maddox softly said, his voice the complete opposite of what it’d been seconds ago. He examined my arm, and that murderous look returned to his eyes.

“I’m okay. My skin just whelps up easily.” I rose up and nuzzled his neck. It took a moment or two before he, finally,

registered my touch and returned it, his strong arms coming around me. “I’m your beloved, huh?”

Maddox held me tighter. Didn’t say anything.

“I really am okay.” I pressed a kiss to the base of his throat. “Is he one of the new recruits?”

“Yes. Hudson quickly worked his way up the ranks in the Third Order and came highly recommended to join my unit. I have no doubt as to his combat skills. His common sense needs work though.”

“He didn’t know who I was. He was just doing his job.”

Maddox sneered. “I have half a mind to send him back to the Third Order.”

“No. Don’t do that.”

Another sneer.

God, he was so grumpy. I loved it.

“Guess what? Prince Sawyer asked me to help with the autumn ball. Have you ever been? It sounds awesome. I’m nervous though. People seem to like my desserts and stuff, but are they fancy enough for a big, lavish ball? Maybe I should practice my decorating skills, just to—”

Maddox silenced me with a kiss. As his mouth claimed mine, every thought left my head. Well, every thought except for him and how amazing he felt. How amazing he tasted. His tongue traced the seam of my lips before dipping inside my mouth.

I welcomed the kiss and linked my arms behind his neck. He was so tall that even standing on my tiptoes, I barely

reached unless he bent to meet me, which he did.

“Is that why you’re here?” Maddox asked against my lips.
“To share your good news?”

“Part of the reason.” I grinned as he brushed our noses together. “I just came from the clinic. Damn near had to chain Briar to a chair to get him to stop working long enough to eat lunch.”

“That stubborn male. He’s the one who should be given that ‘s’ word, not me.”

I laughed. “*Both* of you are stubborn. Just in different ways.” As he lifted me from the grass, I hooked my legs around his waist and voiced no complaints as he carried me like I weighed nothing. “I thought I’d make you lunch too. If you haven’t eaten yet anyway.”

“I haven’t,” he answered, one arm under my ass and the other at my back, fingers skating beneath the hem of my shirt to touch my bare skin. “I was on my way to the mess hall before I saw you.”

The mess hall was a building in the center of their encampment where they all came together to eat their meals and wind down after a long day. When not training or on duty, many of the knights gathered there to play cards and relax too.

Callum walked around the corner of the nearest building and instantly broke into a smile. “Afternoon, Ev.”

“He lives!” I exclaimed.

“For now,” Maddox mumbled. “That may change the next time he dares lay a finger on my muffin.”

“It wasn’t yours.” Callum crossed his arms, smile growing. “It was in the basket. Fair game.”

Maddox sneered. It had a playful edge to it. “I’ll put *you* in a basket and send you out to sea.”

Callum put a hand to his chest. “You wound me, Captain.”

“We must away, fair knight,” I said, pointing forward. “The kitchen awaits.”

“Is that so?” Maddox’s cheek twitched. “Are we on a mission, my muffin lord?”

“Yep. A mission to feed a bunch of ravenous beasts.” I nodded to Duke and Baden, who’d stood from the firepit as they saw me. Quincy bounded up behind them and mirrored their grins once spotting me too. “Or else, I fear they’ll begin to resort to cannibalism.”

“We wouldn’t want that. To the kitchen, we go.”

I released an excited yelp as Maddox took off running, his arms secured around me. Callum laughed and followed us, the promise of food a temptation no doubt.

Being in the mess hall making lunch for the knights made me happy. I had missed cooking for them. Missed their pestering, too, as they called me “small and cute.” Some stole pieces of food when my head was turned and others offered to help. I then sat at one of the long tables with Maddox, Callum, and the others as they ate.

“I should get back,” I said after they’d finished lunch. “Peter and Alice will start to think I got Evan-napped. Or lost.”

“Not an unwarranted assumption.” Maddox stood from the bench and offered me his hand, which I accepted. “I’ll walk you home.”

“You’re going to no matter what I say, aren’t you?”

He lightly bopped my chin. “I have business in town, so it’s on the way. Come on.”

“Oh?” I walked with him from the mess hall and toward the stable. “What kind of business?”

“Knightly business.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re such a pain in the butt.”

Sir Pain-in-the-Butt ignored me as he readied his horse. He helped me into the saddle and settled in behind me. The size of him still got me all hot and bothered, as did the impressive package pressed to my ass. Months with Maddox and I still wasn’t used to just how fucking sexy he was.

How had a dork like me snatched him up?

“Prince Sawyer said all the women are mad that I stole you from them.”

“Is that so?” Maddox guided the stallion along the stone path toward the castle gates. “Well, I never belonged to any of them in the first place.”

I smiled. A smile that grew bigger when he wrapped one arm around my waist, holding the reins with the other.

“I am yours, Evan,” he murmured in my ear before skimming his lips across my earlobe. “Never doubt that. Never doubt *me*.”

“I don’t.” I leaned my head back against him. “I trust you with my life. And my heart.”

“Both of which I’ll defend and cherish to my dying breath,” he said. My captain was such a romantic beneath that hard exterior and snarl. An ooey-gooey marshmallow.

Leaving the castle grounds, the rolling hills of green grass and the glistening caerulean sea beyond it came into view. The clear blue sky and golden sunshine made everything look so vibrant. We reached the marketplace minutes later and passed several people on the way to the café, all of which were heading in the same direction.

“Looks like another busy day for The Brewed Muffin,” I said, excited. “You want to come in for some dessert before taking care of your *knightly business*?”

I felt him smile against my ear. “Perhaps after.”

“And you still won’t tell me what that business is?”

“No.” Maddox led the stallion to the fenced-in grassy field beside the cottage. We’d set up an area for guests to leave their horses, either tied to a post or allowing them to stretch their legs in the field. There were water troughs too, and I offered the customers carrots and apples to give their horses a treat, free of charge.

“Are you meeting a shady-looking dude in the local tavern who knows some big secret?” I asked as Maddox dismounted and then helped me down. “Oh! Maybe a sorcerer who can, like, shoot lightning from his fingers. You’ll ask him for magical weapons to help defeat the demons in the dark

wood, maybe the demon lord himself, and in exchange, he'll send you on an epic quest to slay a dragon.”

“Why would he need us to slay a dragon if he had magical weapons strong enough to defeat Onyx? The dragon would be child’s play in comparison.”

I loved that he was playing along.

“Speaking of Onyx...” Nerves flip-flopped in my gut. “Any news on that front?”

The knights had patrolled the dark wood several times in the past few months. Some patrols had resulted in small-scale attacks with demons but nothing severe. Not like when Maddox and his unit had all been injured and sent to the medical ward in Briar’s clinic. It made me feel sick when I remembered them lying in their cots, bloody and groaning in pain.

“Onyx remains in the Shadow Realm where he belongs,” Maddox said. “As for his demons, they’re nothing we can’t handle.”

“But—”

“Stop worrying.” He leaned in to kiss me. “You have muffins to bake. Preferably blueberry, but I wouldn’t be opposed to the strawberry ones with lemon glaze either.”

I snorted. “Is that a hint, Captain?”

“More like a request.”

“What makes you so special?”

“Because you love me.” Maddox turned the smolder on full blast, his mouth skewing into a half-smile. Curse him and

his devilishly good looks. Those pretty blue eyes were my kryptonite.

“Okay. But you owe me, like, a billion gold coins. Or to tell me where you’re going today. Either will suffice as payment.”

“The Adventurer’s Guild,” Maddox said. “That’s where I’m going.”

“Oh.” I blinked in surprise. I hadn’t actually expected him to tell me. “Why are you going to the Guild? Interested in throwing away the life of a knight and becoming an adventurer instead?”

“Telling you the reason wasn’t part of the payment.” Maddox nipped at the tip of my nose before swatting my ass. “Now go. You have work to do.”

“Yes, sir.” I rubbed at my butt cheek. “Blueberry muffins will be waiting for you later. As agreed.”

He smirked and watched me until I went inside the café.

The rest of the day passed in the blink of an eye. Being so busy helped. After Peter and Alice helped me close the café, I baked a special batch of blueberry muffins for my captain, as well as some banana nut because Briar loved those. Then, I settled into the reading parlor and cuddled up in an armchair with a book while I waited for my men to come home.

A while later, steps came up the front porch.

Smiling, I marked the place in my book and hopped up right as the door swung open. Maddox pulled me into his arms, a greeting that never got old. I pressed my face into him,

breathing in leather, spice, and a bit of muskiness from being in the sun all day.

“Hey, you,” I murmured against his chest armor.

“Evening, muffin.”

Another set of arms came around me, and Briar’s scent surrounded me too. “Did you have a good afternoon, love?”

“Mhm. But it’s even better now,” I answered. “This is my favorite part of the day. When you two come home to me.”

“We’re not the only ones here.” Briar glanced toward the window. “Lake’s outside.”

I hadn’t seen Lake in two days, not since the morning we’d baked together. Knowing he was there caused little sparks of excitement in my belly.

“Go talk to him.” Briar kissed my temple. “We’ll stay here.”

“Speak for yourself, physician.” Maddox sneered. “I still don’t trust the wolf to be alone with Evan.”

Briar quirked a brow. “Maddox...”

“What?” That sneer transitioned to a deep scowl.

“I don’t have to,” I said as a pressure filled my chest. Regardless of how I felt for Lake, I never wanted to upset them.

“See what you’ve done now, you big brute?” Briar told Maddox. “You’ve made him sad.”

“I only worry for his safety. The wolf is... unpredictable.” Maddox cupped my cheek. “You’ve told us how you feel for

Lake. And while I fail to see the appeal for him, it doesn't bother me. I only wish for your happiness. Besides, I know I'll always be your number one."

I snorted a laugh. "My number one pain in the ass." The pressure enclosing my heart lifted though.

"What *does* bother me?" Maddox's smile slipped, and hardness touched his blue eyes. "His short fuse and recklessness. He's impulsive and lashes out without thought."

"Lake won't hurt me."

The muscle in his jaw tightened before he brought me to his chest, dropping his face into my hair. "If he does, I can make no promises that he'll make it through the night with his head intact. You are more precious to me than you'll ever know, Evan."

The backs of my eyes stung. "You're precious to me too." I looked at Briar. "Both of you are."

"I know, love." Briar softly smiled. He then looped his arm through our captain's. "Now that we have that settled, I smell something amazing coming from the kitchen. Come with me." He then led Maddox from the parlor, tossing me a wink over his shoulder before rounding the corner.

Maddox's grumbles faded, but I heard him say something about muffins.

I took a deep breath and stepped outside.

Chapter Six

Welcome to the Muffin Club

Lake stood beneath the nearest tree, his silver hair in stark contrast to the surrounding darkness.

“Hey, you,” I said as I approached him.

He stepped out from the tree and into the pale light. “Good evening.” His voice was just as soft as the moonbeams kissing his fair skin. “I hope I’m not disturbing you.”

“Not at all. I like when you visit.” I wanted to venture closer but willed my feet to keep still. I got the impression he wanted the space between us.

“You do?”

“Yep.”

He averted his gaze, and I thought I caught a hint of a smile before it faded.

“Oh! Thanks for the basket of fruit,” I said as I remembered. “I made cobbler with the peaches and plan to use the apples for a breakfast strudel tomorrow. The ones I haven’t devoured yet anyway. I got the munchies last night and kinda ate one... or three.”

“I can bring you more.”

“Maybe you can come in *with* the basket next time,” I responded. “Not just leave it outside the door.”

“It’s easier if I keep my distance,” he said, averting his eyes again. “Less complicated.”

“It doesn’t have to be complicated.” I inched closer.

A sad smile touched his lips. “Doesn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

Lake took a small step forward. The gap between us was still too much, but it was progress. “Everything became so clear the night I held you during the storm.”

My heart did little somersaults at the memory. “I liked when you sang to me.”

“It’s a song my father would sing when I couldn’t sleep. Before he...” Lake shook his head, leaving the sentence unfinished. “I only hope it brought you comfort.”

“It did.” My throat was suddenly dry. “You said something became clear that night. What?”

“It awoke something in me,” he whispered. “Something devastating. The more I’m around you, Evan, the harder it is to stay away. The more we speak, the deeper I feel. You’re the first person who’s ever made my pulse quicken like this. And I don’t know what to do with these feelings. That’s why it’s complicated. Because I *can’t* feel this way. Not for you.” His gaze moved to the cottage before returning to me, sadder now. “You’re already spoken for.”

“So it’s not one-sided?” I asked, hopeful. “You like me too?”

“Too?”

Releasing a nervous laugh, I scratched the back of my head. “Yeah... I’ve kinda had a thing for you ever since you kissed me. I guess it’s been complicated for me too.”

“I often think about that kiss.” Lake moved his gaze to the sky, the silvery moonlight highlighting the sharp angles of his face. There was softness there too. “The feel of your lips, your warmth, your taste, it’s all seared into my memory.”

Twinges of heat attacked my chest. “Mine too.”

Another sad smile. “For the past two days, I’ve wanted to see you but forced myself to stay away. I thought distance would clear my head and rid me of these feelings.”

“And did it?” I asked, drawing closer to him. We stood only inches apart now. “Make them go away?”

Lake swallowed hard, his purple eyes flickering to my lips. “No.”

I had talked to Maddox and Briar about my feelings for Lake, and the only reservations they’d held had been about whether they could trust him—not about sharing me with a third man. The only question was: would Lake be willing to share me with them too.

“Well, I’m happy you’re here tonight.” Slowly, I reached for his hand. “As for the rest, what do you want to do about it?”

Lake tensed as my fingers made contact with his skin. He then released that tension in a shaky breath. "I'm unsure." He dropped his gaze to my hand before ever so lightly threading our fingers together. "But this feels... nice."

The touch was innocent, just a simple holding of hands, but my heart knocked against my ribs. My breaths passed between my lips in uneven exhales, heavy, and then shorter.

"It feels *right*," I said.

"But impossible." Lake started to pull away.

I held his hand tighter to stop him. "I used to think my dream of opening a café was impossible. Turns out, I just wasn't in the right place. Coming to Bremloc changed that."

It had changed everything. Lifted me from a dark place and opened my eyes to how beautiful life could be. I now lived my life instead of merely existing.

Lake swallowed hard. "I've never wanted to get close to anyone before, Evan. Not until you."

"I don't see what's so special about me. I'm just a clumsy bookworm who loves coffee and sweets."

"And I'm just a lone wolf with poor impulse control and an aversion to physical contact. Yet, for whatever reason, you seem to like me too." He traced my left eyebrow, then trailed his finger to my cheekbone. A caress to my jaw. Those small touches probably took a lot of courage for him, so I stayed still and let him explore.

"I do like you," I said, enjoying his soft caresses. "A lot."

"Even though I've lashed out at you?"

“You didn’t mean to.” I knew that in my heart. “You were just scared. It was my fault for being too close.”

“Don’t blame yourself,” Lake said, his voice tight. “Please. You aren’t responsible for my actions. Perhaps one day I won’t be so... reckless.”

“Hey, give yourself some credit.” I rested my hand on his hip, careful not to move too suddenly. “Look. You’re letting me touch you. You’re even initiating touches too. I’d say you’re making great progress.”

Lake showed his teeth as he smiled, not closed-mouth like it had been up until that point. Fuck, it was beautiful.

He was beautiful.

A thought occurred to me, then. Lake had said once that he had no relationship experience.

“You’ve never been with anyone before?” I asked. “Romantically?”

“Never,” Lake answered.

“What about the other stuff?”

He cocked his head to the side, and when his wolf ears perked up with the action, I could’ve died from the cuteness. “Other stuff?”

“Yeah. Like kissing. Sex. Physical stuff.”

“You were my first kiss.”

“What? Seriously? Does that mean you’re also a virgin?”

“Yes.”

“No fucking way.”

“This is a surprise to you?”

“Well... yeah. Sort of.” I breathed out a laugh. “I guess it shouldn’t be, huh? You said you avoid people and are always alone. But I guess I just...” My cheeks heated. “Never mind.”

Lake released a soft laugh. “Is it because I’m a wolf? You assumed my sexual urges would’ve driven me to surrender to my animal instincts and find a warm body to sink into by now?”

The heat in my cheeks? Yeah, it shot straight to my dick. “I wouldn’t say it quite like that. But. Um. Maybe?”

“I suppose it’s the one impulse I *can* control,” he responded. “The thought of baring myself to anyone has always made my stomach turn. That is, until recently. You’re the exception once again.”

“Are you saying you’ve thought about me naked?” Could he hear the heavy pounding of my heart? It felt like the damn thing was about to burst out of my chest and join a drumline.

“Would it bother you if I said yes?”

“Um.” God, it was so hot outside. Cool summer nights? What a load of bullshit. The ground beneath me was bound to go up in flames any second. “No. It wouldn’t bother me. I just... uh...”

“You’re blushing.” Lake stepped closer, pressing his warm, hard body to mine. He slid his hand up my neck and to my cheek, the pressure so light it felt more like a whisper of air. “And it’s still just as lovely as it was that night in the woods.”

“When you kissed me.”

“Yes.” As his gaze fell to my lips, his purple eyes glowed. He definitely wasn’t angry right then. So did it happen with any strong emotion? “Is it wrong for me to want to do so again? Because you, Evan, are so beautiful you make my chest ache.”

I felt breathless. Weightless too, like my blood had evaporated, and my veins had filled with helium. If he wasn’t holding on to me, I might’ve floated away.

“You’re beautiful too,” I said.

A shadow then passed over his face, taking the burning desire from his eyes and replacing it with something fragile. “Coming here tonight was a mistake.”

“Why?” I caught his hand as he withdrew it from my cheek.

“Because it’s painful, Evan,” Lake said in a hard whisper, his voice cracking on my name. “Finally finding someone I crave, only for him to be out of my reach.”

Steps sounded in the grass behind us.

“What if he wasn’t?” a deeper voice then said.

I turned to see Maddox. He stood with his arms crossed and his chin tipped up, eyes narrowed and jaw tight. He would’ve been the picture of sexy, raw masculinity and intimidation if not for the dusting of crumbs on his shirt. Crumbs from the muffins he’d conned me into making for him.

“Were you eavesdropping?” I asked.

His lips twitched. “I have excellent hearing. It’s no fault of my own if I happened to overhear your conversation.”

“So... eavesdropping.”

Maddox glanced at me, forcing away another smile. The hardness returned to his expression as he focused on Lake. “Answer the question, wolf. Let’s assume for a moment Evan wasn’t out of your reach. What then?”

“If he wasn’t out of my reach?” Lake asked. Although he had tensed at Maddox’s arrival, he wasn’t running away. Or baring his teeth. “I’d hold on to him and never let go.”

“Then come with me.” Maddox tipped his head toward the cottage. “We need to have a chat.”

“Do you think they’re killing each other?” I bounced my knee as I sat in one of the armchairs in the reading parlor. “Or maybe one is already dead, and the victor is bathing in their blood.”

Briar sipped his tea before lowering the cup to the saucer. “Your imagination is frightening at times, love. Points for creativity though.”

As soon as we’d come into the cottage, Maddox had banished me to the parlor and led Lake toward the kitchen. The one time I’d crept over to try to listen, Maddox had poked his head through the doorway and said he’d tie me to the bed upstairs if I didn’t behave. And while being tied to a bed

wasn't such a bad thought—hot and heavy teasing before being fucked to within an inch of my life—Maddox had clarified he'd leave me up there alone before tickling me until I pissed myself afterward.

So there I was now, in the parlor, behaving like the good boy I was. Not even thinking about standing up and tiptoeing down the short hallway and to the kitchen to listen—

“Evan?” Briar said in the kind of tone a parent used on a naughty child about to stick their hand in the cookie jar.

“I wasn't leaving.” I plopped back in the chair. “I was just shifting position to get comfy.”

“You're a horrible liar, love.”

“I know.” Sighing, I slumped back. Kicked my leg up and down a few times. “You don't seem worried.”

“I'm not.” Briar set his tea on the side table and came over to sit with me. The cushion was a one-seater, so he shifted me onto his lap and put his arms around me from behind. “Maddox and I spoke a great deal before he joined you outside. I know exactly what's being discussed.”

Briar always knew how to comfort me. His presence calmed me like nothing else did. Much like how Maddox always made me feel safe and cherished.

“What are they talking about?” I asked. He arched a brow as I peeked back at him. “Oh, come on. You can at least tell me that much.”

“You told us you have feelings for Lake,” Briar said. “Seeing as to how he shares those feelings for you, Maddox

and I came to a decision. So Maddox is... relaying that decision and discussing terms.”

Guilt wound through my gut, like rusty wires scraping as they twisted together. Rusted because guilt was an old, dear friend who never fucking left me alone for long. I had fallen for three men, each of whom was unique in their own way. Impossible to choose between.

“I’m sorry I’m so selfish,” I whispered, sounding just as pathetic as I felt. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“Nothing’s wrong with you, Evan.” Briar rested his cheek on the side of my arm, skewing his glasses. “The heart wants what it wants. And sometimes, it wants different people for different reasons. There is no one right way to love. Relationships come in all varieties. This is ours.”

“Doesn’t it upset you? Me wanting Lake?”

“No. I expected it.”

I turned on his lap to look at him. “You did?”

Briar’s hazel eyes softened. “The morning we found you at Lake’s house, I saw his expression as he watched you leave. I knew right then we’d see him again. I was perhaps a bit jealous at first. It’s only human, after all. But then I saw how your face lit up when you talked about Lake. That’s all I needed to be okay with the idea. Maddox was more stubborn in accepting it, but he eventually came around. He just wants you to be safe. As do I.”

“Maddox? Stubborn? Say it isn’t so.” The tightness in my stomach unwound as Briar chuckled. “I love you, Doc. Me caring about Lake doesn’t change that.”

“I know. And I love you too.” Briar brought my face down to his for a short kiss. Short, but so damn soft. It made my heart all wobbly. “More than life itself.”

Footsteps came down the hallway, the boots heavy on the wood floor. I only heard one set and immediately concluded that they had, indeed, fought to the death. But when Maddox rounded the corner, Lake was a short step behind him, so light on his feet I hadn't heard him.

That stealthy, gorgeous wolf.

“So?” I patted Briar's thigh before standing up. “What's the verdict? What did you talk about? Did either of you draw blood? Is my kitchen still in one piece? I worked hard getting it ready, you know, and will cry if you broke my coffee machine.”

Lake's ears twitched.

Maddox sighed. “Your precious coffee device is safe. We chatted, nothing more.” He took a step closer. “The topic? You.”

“Are you going to sacrifice me?”

Briar laughed.

“Sacrifice?” Maddox caressed my jaw in his familiar way. “An intriguing thought. Do you happen to know any muffin gods that would bless us for such an offering?”

I punched his chest.

He expelled a raspy laugh and grabbed my wrist, tugging me against his body. “What's another 's' word? Think hard,

muffin. They're your favorite, after all. You toss them at me enough."

"Don't make me punch you again."

"That was a punch? How adorable." Maddox smirked, but it bloomed into a full smile as I lightly banged my fists against his muscled chest. He caught one and kissed my knuckles. "So feisty."

"Hang on." I stopped pummeling him. "Another 's' word?"

Maddox glanced at Lake, then at Briar, before returning those deep blue eyes to me. They still made me weak in the knees. "Sharing."

"Sharing?" I repeated, my brain struggling to compute. I imagined the wires in my head sparking and a hundred Evans running around frantically, papers and muffins flying everywhere. One spilled coffee while another dropped to the floor and started crying. Total chaos. "As in... sharing *me*?"

"Well, it won't be without its challenges," Maddox said. "I still don't fully trust the wolf."

"The feeling is mutual, knight," Lake responded. "I won't be letting my guard down anytime soon."

"Trust me or don't. I couldn't care less." Maddox tightened the arm at my back but kept his gaze on Lake. "My only concern is for Evan."

"I won't hurt him," Lake said through clenched teeth.

"Hurt him *again*, you mean. Because you've—"

“All right,” Briar interjected. “That’s enough for one night.”

Surprisingly, both backed down. Briar was the levelheaded, mild-tempered one who helped combat their aggressive and abrasive personalities.

“Did you enjoy your muffins?” I asked Maddox. He held me tight, almost possessively. “I see that your shirt did.”

Maddox frowned at his shirt before breaking into a grin, flicking off the crumbs. He was so snarly with other people but showed me a soft side that gave me butterflies. He then placed his mouth near my ear, whispering low, “Keep being sassy and I’ll have to teach you a lesson later.”

Heat moved through my veins. “What kind of lesson? Does it involve you and your big... heart?”

“Keep giving me lip, and you’ll find out.”

“I’m not scared of you. I eat beefcakes like you for breakfast.”

He picked me up and threw me over his shoulder.

I exaggerated a sigh but couldn’t help but laugh when he spanked me. My gaze then found Lake. He stared with wide eyes, fists clenched at his sides, as if he wasn’t sure what Maddox planned to do with me.

Briar stepped over to him. “If you plan to be a part of this chaotic household, you should familiarize yourself with this.”

“Will he hurt Evan?”

“Definitely not. Though, Evan will whine and say he’s being tortured. Unfortunately for him, we love when he

whines. It's too cute."

Maddox started to leave the parlor with me in tow but paused when we reached them beside the archway. "Say goodnight before I drag you upstairs for punishment."

"Punishment?" I wiggled. "But I was a good muffin. I promise."

"A rotten muffin, more like it." Maddox swatted my ass again.

I reached for Briar, and he grabbed my hand. I then looked at Lake. "Are you sleeping over tonight?"

Maddox huffed at that.

Although nearly imperceptible, Lake's ears fell at the sound. "I should probably go home."

"Are you sure? I'm gonna make apple strudels for breakfast. Golden flaky pastry and apples with cinnamon and butter. Coffee too. Can't forget the coffee."

Lake looked at Maddox, who stared at him with his signature icy glare. "I appreciate the offer, but perhaps another time." He then walked toward the front door.

"Wait," I called after him, and he looked back at me. "The café will be closed tomorrow. The first day off I've had since opening. So there won't be customers or anyone other than us. Will you come back over?"

He hesitated. "Perhaps."

"Be here by sunup," Maddox told him. "That's not a request, wolf."

Lake's expression hardened. "I don't take orders from you."

Briar barked out a short laugh. "Dear gods, it's like me and the captain all over again. Well, how we were in the beginning."

"Please?" I was sure I looked pretty damn pitiful thrown over Maddox's shoulder, so a simple pouting of my bottom lip would hammer the nail into the Evan-is-pitiful-can't-say-no-to-him coffin. "I really want to see you."

"You do?" Lake's tail wagged twice before he forced it to still. Was it weird that I really wanted to touch it? I bet it was soft and fluffy, just like his ears. He cleared his throat and averted his gaze. "I'll be here at dawn."

He left the cottage without another word, closing the door behind him.

"Up the stairs we go," Maddox said before charging down the hall.

"Have mercy!" I tried to wiggle free as he ascended the steps to the second floor.

Maddox held on tighter, probably to prevent me from falling off with all my wiggling. "Face your punishment like the fearsome muffin lord you are."

He threw me on the bed. Briar entered the room with an amused skew of his mouth.

"You're the nice one," I told Briar. "The one who can stop his evil ways. Save me."

Briar chuckled. "You brought this on yourself, love."

As Maddox lunged at me, I shrieked, the squeal blending into a laugh. He tickled my sides before pinning me down and dropping a soft kiss to my neck. Then another. His body hardened on top of me, and fuck, mine did too.

“Don’t have too much fun without me,” Briar said, taking off his glasses. He unbuttoned his shirt as he neared the bed.

The two of them then teamed up to torture me in the best way, taking turns sucking my cock and fingering me. Bringing me to the brink of release before denying me. Again and again.

An eternity passed as I lay between them, at their mercy, sweating and quivering as I lost my goddamn mind with the need to come. Maddox then mounted me, kissing my neck as his thick cock breached me. His hips snapped forward, then back, slow at first. But I didn’t want nice and slow. Not that night.

“Harder,” I whined, clawing his muscled back. I needed more of him.

All of him.

“You’re the only one I take orders from,” Maddox murmured against my jaw. “My Evan.”

Those two words choked me up for some reason. They added softness to the hard fucking he gave me. Briar stroked himself as he watched us, his lips parting.

“Briar,” I said on a moan.

“What do you need, love?”

“You.”

Briar settled beside me on the mattress, one hand still around his shaft as his lips brushed my temple. “You’ve got me.”

When they finally let me come, I was sure all of Bremloc heard my pleased cries. They held me afterward, Maddox spooning me while my head rested on Briar’s chest. Maddox softly kissed my nape as Briar threaded his fingers through my hair.

It was so familiar. Safe.

“About Lake...” I said, my earlier guilt flaring up and settling in the center of my chest like a ton of bricks. “Are you sure you’re both okay with it?”

The question I nearly asked but couldn’t? Was I worth all the trouble? In my previous world, I had no interest in real men and spent my time with fictional ones. But in *this* world, I had three men I wanted to be with.

“Yes.” Briar twirled a strand of my hair around his finger. “I am.”

I glanced back at Maddox. His expression gave nothing away—cool, collected, and hiding all the thoughts he kept inside his head, the feelings he often locked away in his heart. “What about you, Captain? Are you happy? Tell me the truth.”

“The truth?” Maddox shifted to where he leaned over me, his black hair falling forward. It had grown longer over the weeks, and I loved it. Just like I loved him. So much it hurt. “The truth is my life was simpler before you came here. Easier.”

My sternum squeezed.

“Easier... but not better.” Maddox cupped the back of my head in his big hand and lowered his face to my collarbone. A small tremor went through his large body. “I love you so much it frightens me, Evan. Bringing the wolf into our lives, one who’s harmed your delicate, soft skin, shakes me to my core. You ask if I’m happy? I’m terrified. But only because with you, I’ve finally found a home. And I can’t bear the thought of anything or anyone taking you from me.”

A tear rolled down my cheek. Emotion clogged my throat, squeezing it tight. And then I felt it. Something wet dropped onto my neck. “M-Maddox?”

He lifted his head, revealing his misty blue eyes and the furrow in his brow. The quiver in his chin. Silently, he moved his hand to my cheek, and the flat band of his ring brushed over my skin. The ring he hadn’t taken off since the night I’d given it to him, with a green stone in the center he said reminded him of my eyes. He stared at me like he was mapping my face, storing every detail to memory.

Maddox had joked earlier and claimed he was my favorite. And while I didn’t exactly have a favorite, because I loved him and Briar for different reasons and choosing the best was like comparing apples and oranges, Maddox had been my first. My first crush in this fantasy world. The first one I’d kissed and felt that soul-deep connection to.

“You’re my knight in shining armor,” I said, voice shaking. Maybe it was corny, but I didn’t care. Because he was. He had saved me in all the ways that mattered.

“And you’re my handsome damsel in distress,” Maddox responded, a touch of humor back in his eyes. He grabbed my

hand and pressed my knuckles to his lips. “My heart. My life. My everything belongs to you.”

“That almost sounds like a marriage proposal.”

He smiled. And damn if it didn’t give me butterflies. “There would be no greater honor than binding myself to you in marriage.”

“Kuya could be the flower boy.” My heart swelled. “But he’d probably eat them.”

“What would my role be in this wedding?” Briar asked.

“Easy.” I nuzzled his hand. “You’d be right beside us at the altar as I marry both of you. Wait. Is that even allowed here? Being married to multiple people?”

“It’s not where you come from?” Briar asked. “It’s a fairly common practice here, but mainly with royalty. Most commonfolk see no need for it.”

“Well I do,” I said. It was way too soon to seriously talk about marriage, but it was a relief to know that someday, if we wanted to, all of us could be wed. “I want both of you beside me and won’t accept anything else.”

Maddox smirked at Briar. “Our muffin lord has spoken.”

“That he has.” Briar returned his smile before aiming it at me. “It’s late, love. You should sleep. We have a fun day planned for tomorrow.”

Maddox threw his big arm around my middle and snuggled in closer. He pushed his face into my hair and heavily exhaled. He could be such a cuddly bear sometimes.

Briar kissed my forehead before laying on my other side and pulling the blanket over the three of us. He rested a hand on Maddox's forearm, and Maddox adjusted his position to link their fingers.

I was almost too excited to sleep. The café would be closed, and they had taken the day off work so we could spend time together. Maddox mentioned a section of the beach he wanted to take us where we could swim and picnic for lunch.

I would also see Lake again. Hopefully.

I'd find out come morning.

Chapter Seven

Fun in the Sun—And Sand in Places it Should Never Go

An afternoon at the beach was the best way to spend my day off.

The sun heated my skin as I lay in the soft sand, arms tucked behind my head. I had just taken a dip in the water and was drying off.

Lake had been right on time that morning, arriving at the cottage just as I'd started cooking breakfast. He had been quiet, as usual, but just him being there had been a huge step. And Maddox had only sneered at him once, so that was progress too. The four of us had then sat around the table, eating apple strudels and drinking coffee—tea for Briar and Lake.

Before leaving for the beach, Lake had darted back into the woods. The daylight made it harder for him to hide on our way through town, so I understood his reluctance. But I hated how he felt the need to hide. All because of humans not trusting demi-wolves and being cruel to them.

“Come here, love.” Briar moved his fingers through my hair. “I need to reapply the salve, so you don’t burn.”

The salve was this world’s version of sunscreen but way more effective because Briar crafted it with a combination of herbs and magic. I stayed still as he dabbed it on my nose and cheeks and smoothed it across my chest and shoulders.

“You missed a spot,” Maddox said before scooping up some on his index finger and splattering it on Briar’s forehead.

“You ass,” Briar muttered, rubbing at the cream. He had taken off his glasses earlier since we were swimming and he didn’t want to lose them in the ocean.

“Would you love me otherwise?” Maddox asked.

“Who said I loved you now?” But Briar smiled as he turned away.

Maddox smiled too. It was soft and filled with all the unspoken things he kept inside.

“I’m glad y’all were able to take time off today,” I said. Sand stuck to my back since my skin had been wet when I’d plopped down in it. Oh well. I’d swim again after lunch to wash off. It wouldn’t help the sand in my ass crack though. I squirmed.

How did it always find every crevice of your body?

“As am I.” Briar smoothed the salve across Maddox’s broad shoulders, and his hands lingered at our captain’s upper arms before slowly moving to his triceps. “Work is important, but so is rest.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that, Mr. Workaholic.” I placed my hand on Briar’s thigh, loving the prickle of his leg hairs beneath my fingers. Maddox was as smooth as marble, like a sculpted Adonis, not much hair anywhere except for his head and the occasional chin stubble when he missed a day or two of shaving. I loved the contrast between them. “I worry about you.”

Briar lifted a hand to his nose, as if to push his glasses back. He caught himself before doing it though, seeing as to how his glasses were currently tucked away in his satchel.

“I’m hungry,” I mumbled, eyeing the basket. “Time for lunch.”

We had packed turkey and tomato sandwiches on wheat bread, dried vegetable chips, and apples. I had also brought banana nut muffins. They didn’t last long. Once Maddox spotted them, it was game over.

“What?” he asked with his mouth full, crumbs on his cheek. He’d devoured one already and was making quick work of a second. “Why do you stare?”

“I just love you,” I told him, my heart warming with the confession. “So damn much. When we first met, little did I know how much of a muffin thief you were. I should’ve named my café The Gluttonous Muffin in your honor. Has a nice ring to it, don’t ya think?”

Maddox choked on a laugh. With his black hair wet and falling into his face and the hard lines of his usual stern expression smoothing as he smiled, he looked younger. Carefree. Like the weight of the world wasn’t on his shoulders

as we sat together in that cove, eating, swimming, and basking in the warm summer day.

Briar seemed lighter too, his hazel eyes shining with new vigor. He still looked tired—he'd need more than one day off to make up for his tendency to forgo sleep and meals in order to further his studies—but he was better. More relaxed.

Movement from the trees behind us caught my eye, and I saw a flash of silver before it vanished. Shortly after we'd arrived at the beach and settled in, Lake had found us. But he stayed in the coverage of trees, unwilling to venture out.

It hurt my heart. I wanted him to have fun too.

“I wish he'd join us,” I said.

Maddox followed my gaze. “The wolf's fine right where he is.”

“Oh, stop being a grump. I'm going to take him some food.” I grabbed the picnic basket, ignoring Maddox's heavy sigh, and walked toward the trees. “Lake?”

He stepped out from the nearest tree, his white ears perked up. His green shirt fell open at the top, revealing his collarbone and a peak of his toned chest. “Apologies for intruding on your day. I can leave.”

Was that why he thought I'd come over? Because he thought I was mad about him being there? God. I just wanted to hug him.

“You're not intruding,” I said. “I'm glad you're here. I'd be even happier if you came over and sat with us.”

Lake glanced at the section of beach where Maddox watched us with a scowl. “I... I shouldn’t. Someone could see.”

Maddox had taken us to a cove with white powdery sand, trees, and a formation of rocks off to one side. It was mostly secluded, but ships could be seen from the harbor a short distance away.

“At least eat something.” I handed him a turkey sandwich from the basket and an apple.

Softness touched his eyes as he accepted the food. “Thank you, Evan.”

“Will you come back to the café later?”

He hesitated. “Maybe.”

It was better than an outright no.

“Just think about it, okay?” Slowly, I stepped toward him. As I wrapped my arms around his waist, he tensed but quickly relaxed. “I’ll make us an awesome dinner, and we can talk more. Get to know each other better.”

Lake leaned his head against mine. “If you want me to, I can stop by for a little while at least. I...” He reached for my hand but didn’t take it, only brushing our fingers together. “I’d like to learn more about you too.”

He trusted me, but it would take more time for him to be comfortable around Maddox and Briar too. After tossing him another smile, I returned to the beach and plopped back down beside them.

“We should head back.” Maddox stood from the sand.

“Already?” I whined. “But I just sat down. Like, literally.”

“I agree with the captain.” Briar stood and offered me his hand, which I took with a sigh and allowed him to pull me to my feet. “We’ve been here for over two hours. Too much exposure to the sun isn’t healthy.”

“Can we swim for just a little longer?” I asked, batting my eyes at him, then at Maddox. “Pretty please?”

Briar visibly faltered but Maddox held firm. For a moment anyway. As I made my eyes even bigger—and way more pitiful—his deep blue eyes narrowed.

“Very well,” Maddox said, a tic in his jaw. He then ducked low and crashed into me, hoisting me up onto his shoulder.

I squealed as he walked toward the water. And since he was a damn giant, the ground looked so far away from up high. “You love me, remember? I’m your precious and adorable muffin lord. You wouldn’t throw me into the—”

He threw me into the sea.

After having been mostly dried off from the hot sun, the water was a shock to my senses at first. It wasn’t too deep. I found my footing and broke the surface, slinging water from my hair. I was about to spout off to him when something brushed my calf beneath the water.

Something with scales... and a fin.

Of course, my mind chose that moment to remember all the shark movies I’d watched. Ones with megalodons and great whites with a taste for human flesh. Images of gruesome attacks and blood darkening the water replayed in my head.

“Shark!” I screamed and lunged toward Maddox. “Oh my god, it almost bit me!”

Alarm flashed in his eyes as he caught me against his chest. That alarm then transitioned to amusement. “Take a look at your shark.”

I turned, expecting to see a huge dorsal fin charging at me and big black eyes set into a white face full of sharp teeth.

I saw a man instead. A shirtless man with golden skin and teal blue hair. Shades of cyan wound through the medium length strands, and his eyes sparkled like sapphires. He wiggled his fingers at me in a small wave.

“But I felt—”

The man dove under the water, and a massive blue tail breached the surface before slapping back down.

“—a fin,” I said, voice higher in pitch. “Holy shit, is that a merman?” I flipped around to Maddox. “They’re real? Seriously?”

“Real? Of course they are.” He cocked his head to the side.

“Are you feeling all right, love?” Briar asked, stepping into the water behind us with a worried scrunch to his brow. “The sun may be getting to him, Maddox. We should get him to the shade to cool off.”

Crap. I still hadn’t told them the truth; that I wasn’t from their world. I was afraid of how they would react. What if it was the one thing about me they couldn’t accept?

Lake stepped from the tree line, worry on his face too.

“I’m okay,” I said, inwardly cursing the slight increase in my pitch. “I only meant I’ve never met one before.” Hopefully they bought it. I turned to look at the merman. He had swum farther out and floated on his back, tail slowly flipping as he stretched out in the water. “He’s amazing.”

“They can be quite mischievous.” Maddox rested a hand on my hip, his gaze on the merman. “I’ve seen that one before. He’s friendly.”

“Some of them can be wicked,” Briar said, knee deep in the water. “They’ve been known to lure sailors to their deaths.”

“Like sirens?” I asked. “They sing and lure in unsuspecting men, then drag them to the depths of the sea and drown them.”

“Precisely,” Briar said. “But not all merfolk are like the sirens. Many are gentle.”

I stared in awe as the merman continued to float around the cove, the tanned skin of his stomach and chest glistening.

What if the fairy tales from my world were true? Maybe other people had been transported from one world to another. I had been sent to Bremloc. It wasn’t unreasonable to believe someone from this world could’ve been sent to my old one too.

I thought of the ovens and coffee machines from my café—how they were so similar to the ones I knew but powered differently. Inventions given to one world from another by travelers like myself. Stories too.

It was a cool thought.

“That’s enough sun for one day.” Maddox grabbed my hand and led us out of the water.

Those worry bugs. Not just the two of them but Lake too. He had retreated to the covering of trees but kept his eyes on me.

“I’m thinking about making stuffed peppers for dinner,” I said, loud enough for Lake to hear. “Maybe honey glazed carrots and cornbread muffins for the sides. I’ll need to stop by the market for groceries first though.”

“All I heard was the word muffins,” Maddox said.

Briar snorted. “You best save one for me, since you stole mine at lunch. You fiend.”

“What will you give me for it, physician?”

“Hasn’t anyone ever told you it’s not wise to taunt one knowledgeable with herbs and poisons? All it takes is one drop of a special elixir into your morning coffee, and you’ll be on the shitter for three days.”

I laughed so hard I lost my footing. Maddox caught me, visibly fighting a laugh of his own.

God. I wanted more days like this one. One where we laughed and fell deeper in love. The only thing that would’ve made it better was if Lake had felt comfortable to spend it with us. Well, in the open. Not from a distance.

After drying off, we dressed and started back toward the harbor. Lake had vanished, staying out of sight as he left the beach, but I had faith he’d come to the café later.

Ships made port at the dock, and men unloaded large crates. Merchant vessels brought in goods to be sold or traded in the marketplace, and some were supply ships for the castle and surrounding businesses.

“Captain,” a uniformed man said to Maddox, tipping his head. He stood beside the dock with another uniformed man.

Maddox returned the nod and guided me away from the harbor.

“Who were they?” I asked. My hand found Briar’s on my other side, and he linked our fingers.

“Guards,” Maddox answered. “With the rise of bandit attacks across the neighboring kingdoms, we’ve added security to prevent the looting of vessels. You’ll find guards stationed in the market as well.”

“So the bandits are still causing trouble?” I asked. He hadn’t spoken of them much over the past few months.

“Yes.”

“How many are there? Don’t bandits usually travel alone or in small groups, attacking travelers on the road to steal their shit? They’re not an organized force.” At least from all the books I’d read. Fictional, but still. “Right?”

Maddox surveyed the market, gaze darting along alleyways and side streets. Watching everyone we passed. “Normally, yes.”

“Normally. But not now?” When he didn’t answer, I asked another question. “Have they come any closer to Bremloc?”

Maddox’s jaw tightened.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

“It’s nothing for you to concern yourself with,” he said. “No harm will come to you while I still breathe.”

“I’m not worried about me.” I slipped my other hand into his. “I just want the ones I love to be okay.”

Up ahead, the Adventurer’s Guild came into view. People walked in and out, dressed in various styles of armor; some leather, some chain mail. Others didn’t wear any. Many had weapons holstered to their sides; daggers, long swords, and short swords. A woman had a bow and quiver of arrows strapped to her back. She tucked a small bag of coin into her side pouch as she exited the Guild and met with another woman. She must’ve just completed a job and had been given her reward.

The Guild reminded me of something from a video game—or fantasy anime. Adventurers accepted quests and were ranked according to their skill set. The higher their rank, the greater their reward. Upper-level adventurers also had access to the more dangerous quests, like monster slaying and clearing caves to obtain the loot.

There were noncombat quests too, like herb gathering or collecting other materials. Briar sometimes sent in requests for ingredients if he was running low, since he was busy and couldn’t always keep them stocked.

“That’s where you went yesterday?” I asked Maddox. “The Guild?”

“It is,” he answered.

“Why?”

“That wasn’t part of our arrangement, remember?”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re so freaking stubborn. Why can’t you—”

A loud crash sounded from beside us.

Maddox’s arms wrapped around me, and he spun on the spot, placing himself between me and the commotion. Briar took position at his side.

“There is no place for your kind here!” a man shouted. “If I see you near my store again, I’ll have ya dragged away in chains like the beast you are.”

A man was on the ground, having been thrown into a wooden cart along the street. Apples were spilled everywhere. We stood in front of the bakery, the same one Kuya and I had visited during our day out months ago. The baker disliked demi-humans and discriminated against them. He’d refused to serve Kuya a slice of cake, the bastard.

And by the look of it, he was still a bigoted old bastard.

“Forgive me,” the man on the ground said. Brown, rounded ears jutted from his chestnut colored hair, and he had a large, bulky frame with broad shoulders and biceps bigger than my head. A demi-bear maybe? As he got to his feet, he was taller than Maddox. “I didn’t mean to offend you. I only —”

“I don’t care what you wanted,” the baker snapped. “Get away from my bakery before you scare off my customers.”

“Is there a problem here?” Maddox asked, stepping forward. He had brought clothes to swim in but wore his armor now, sword and all. He rested his hand on the hilt.

The baker glared at Maddox before recognizing him and changing his tune. He forced a smile. “No problem at all, Captain. The beast was just leaving.”

The demi-bear dusted off his pants, his gaze lowered. He frowned at the spilled apples and started picking them up, placing them back on the cart. A cart that was broken now after he’d smashed into it. Poor guy.

“Don’t call him that,” I said, unable to hold my tongue. “He’s a person, just like you and me.”

The demi-bear looked up at me, surprise flickering across his face. As if no one had ever stood up for him before.

“You.” The baker’s cheeks got all puffy and red as he pointed a fat finger at me. “You’re the golden-haired brat who’s been stealing all my customers! You and that miserable excuse for a business.” He came at me. “I have half a mind to —”

Maddox’s gaze turned lethal as he took a single step forward. “I suggest you stop where you are, lest you wish to be the one dragged away in chains. Though, if you lay a hand on my male, I can’t guarantee your arms would still be attached before that happens.”

The baker froze, cheeks reddening even further. His mouth opened and closed, like he was struggling for something to say that wouldn’t get his tongue sliced off.

“What crime did the demi-bear commit against you?” Briar asked him.

“Crime?” The baker spat on the ground. “He’s breathing in my presence. That’s crime enough.”

I approached the demi-bear. “Hey. Are you all right?”

He startled once seeing I was so close. His face had an adorable roundness, with rosy cheeks and gentle brown eyes. “Y-Yes, sir. I am well. I regret to say the same can’t be said for the cart and apples.”

“That wasn’t your fault.” I held out my hand. “My name’s Evan.”

His round ears wiggled as his gaze fell to my palm. He then clasped my hand, and despite his massive size and obvious strength, the handshake was delicate. “I’m Miles.”

Maddox was speaking to the baker, up close and personal now. By the hard set of his brow and the baker’s nervous demeanor, I knew my captain had everything under control. Briar looked at me before walking over.

“I’m Briar,” he told Miles. “The court physician. Are you hurt at all?”

Miles glanced at the back of his arm where a thin line of blood streaked his bronzed skin. He winced a little when he tried to stand taller too. His side was probably bruised from slamming into the cart. “I’ll be okay. It will heal.”

“Here. Allow me to help.” Briar neared him. “I can alleviate the pain with a spell and stop the bleeding.”

“I don’t wish to be a bother.”

“You’re not.” Briar offered him a kind smile. And Miles looked like he could really use some kindness right then. He placed his hand over the wound on Miles’ arm, and golden light emanated from his palm. “Your side too?”

“Y-Yes.” Miles lifted his shirt, his cheeks reddening. The skin along his rib cage and around to his back was already darkening with an angry bruise.

Briar healed him before stepping back to give him space. Miles didn't seem as wary as Lake around other people, but there was something so freaking sad about him. Like he was used to enduring the cruelty of others and had accepted it as a way of life.

“Why did you come to the bakery?” I asked. “My café is closed today, but if you wanted a pastry or anything, I can serve you. That baker is an asshole.”

“You're the owner of The Brewed Muffin?” Miles asked.

“Yep. And everyone is allowed there.” I glared at the baker, who now had two armed guards in front of him. Maddox had called them over. They were forcing him to pay for the damage to the apple cart, which was owned by the farmer selling her fruit at a nearby market stand.

“I came here to inquire about a job,” Miles said with a sad smile. “I love making cakes and decorating them.”

“Seriously?” I grinned. “You have baking experience?”

He nodded. “No experience working in an actual bakery, but I've helped my Ma in the kitchen since I was a cub. Baking brings me joy. It's all I've ever wanted to do.”

“It makes me happy too,” I responded. “If you're looking for a job, come see me tomorrow at my café. I could use another baker to help out.” Miles would be a lot of help since business had been booming lately. Another set of hands would help with the autumn ball too.

“You’re offering me a job?” he asked. “What if my skills aren’t to your standards?”

“I can tell you have a lot of passion for it, and that’s the most important thing. Anything else can be learned through practice.”

“Thank you for the opportunity.” Miles bowed his head. “I’ll stop by tomorrow.”

“Great! I’m looking forward to it.”

He smiled.

Maddox approached us. “Would you like to press charges against the baker for assaulting you? He’s paying for the damage to the cart since he’s the one who threw you into it.”

“Oh no, that’s all right.” Miles waved a hand around. “I just want to put this incident behind me and move on.”

“Very well.” Maddox nodded to the guards, and they returned the gesture before taking their leave. The baker went back into his shop and closed the door—very quickly, the freaking bigoted asswipe.

“Miles is coming to the café tomorrow,” I told Maddox. “I’ve been meaning to hire someone to help me in the kitchen, and he loves to bake. That’s why he was here. For a job.”

Maddox regarded the demi-bear. Scrutinized him, really. My overprotective captain sized everyone up when it involved me. “We’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

“We?” Miles asked. “You work there as well?”

“No.” Maddox smirked. “But it’s the place to get the most delicious muffins in Bremloc.”

After buying groceries from the market, we returned to the cottage. I was excited we'd met Miles, even if *how* we'd met made me sad. Demi-humans were treated so harshly in the kingdom. It was something Prince Sawyer hoped to change one day. I did too. I wanted everyone to feel welcome and safe in my café.

"I think there's sand in my ass crack," I said after setting the bags in the kitchen. "How does that even happen? I need a bath."

Big hands landed on my hips, and Maddox's lips grazed the back of my neck. "Do you need help undressing for this bath?"

"I believe he does," Briar said, tossing me a smile.

I glanced at Maddox. "Is this where you—"

Maddox swept me off my feet, but instead of throwing me over his shoulder like usual, he held me like we'd just gotten married and he was carrying me across the threshold of our hotel room where we'd fuck like rabbits and then eat chocolate covered strawberries in bed or whatever.

Briar followed us up the stairs and to the bathroom. "Time for these to come off." He unfastened my trousers, while Maddox peeled off my shirt.

Sand fell to the floor, and my skin felt sticky and gross.

The tub was too small to fit all three of us, but that didn't deter them from their mission. Maddox undressed and got in first and held me from behind while Briar sat on the edge. They washed me and pecked kisses on my skin, caressing every inch of me before meeting each other for a kiss.

I relaxed against Maddox, my heart full as I watched their lips press together.

It was still too early for dinner, so after we bathed, Briar and I read together in the parlor while Maddox laid his head on my lap and napped. As he slept, I glided my fingers through his silky black hair and dropped a kiss to his forehead.

Briar softly smiled at us.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course," Briar said, marking the page in his book.

"Do you love him too?"

That smile softened even more. "He's sleeping, right? I don't want to inflate his ego."

Happiness stirred in my heart. That was all the answer I needed. "He loves you too, you know. I can tell."

The smile at the corner of his lips faded. "Does it bother you?"

"What?"

"Me loving him."

"Not at all," I answered. "I prefer it that way actually. I want all of us to be happy."

"I am," he said. "More than I can express."

“Even with Lake now in the picture?”

“Even with the wolf.” Briar smoothed his hand over the cover of his book. Did he take comfort in books in the same way I did? “His energy is different now.”

“What do you mean?”

“His aura is lighter,” Briar responded. “Still unpredictable. Wild. But when you were with him earlier on the beach; light radiated from him. Like you took away some of that chaotic darkness.”

I continued playing with our captain’s hair and looked out the window. Rays of golden light streamed through the dark tree branches as the sun began to set.

Clomps coming up to the front porch stirred Maddox, and he woke with a deep groan. Poor guy had been sleeping hard. The sun had drained all of us. I shifted out from under him and got up to answer the door.

A cinnamon roll greeted me on the other side.

“Evening,” Callum said. Heads bobbed behind him. Quincy, Baden, and Duke.

“Hey.” I opened the door wider to let them in, then closed it. “Y’all somehow sensed I was about to cook dinner, didn’t you?”

Duke grinned. “Music to my ears.”

“What are we having?” Callum asked.

“You aren’t having anything.” Maddox sat up on the small couch. He was so big that half his body hung off it. “You can starve.”

“He just woke up from a nap,” I told the knights. “So he’s cranky.”

Baden laughed, then snapped his mouth closed as Maddox shot him a glare.

“Y’all behave while I start dinner,” I said before going into the kitchen, smiling as their voices sounded from behind me. The cottage was so warm and lively with all of them in it.

A true home.

I busied myself with dinner as their bantering filtered in from the parlor. More jabs at cranky Maddox. Duke said something about Hudson, the new recruit, and Callum chimed in to say he’d bested him in a one-on-one training match. That made Maddox laugh. He still had a grudge against the knight for threatening me.

My gaze periodically swept to the trees out back as I cooked, hoping I’d see a certain wolf. But Lake never showed.

Despite my disappointment, it was a great night; a rowdy home filled with lots of laughs as we sat around the table together. After dinner, I brought out peach cobbler for dessert and watched as grown-ass men scarfed it down and bickered over who got the last slice.

“Thane should,” I told them. “I promised to bake for him again.”

Briar smiled. “He’d love that.”

“I’ll take it to him when we leave,” Duke said.

“You lie.” Baden shoved him. “You’ll have the cobbler shoved into that ugly face before we even reach the castle

gates.”

“I’ll take it to him,” Callum said.

Quincy snorted. “Says the one who eats everything in sight. Not a chance.”

Callum smirked.

Briar brought out bottles of wine, and we drank. Well, they drank. I sipped to pace myself. It was a white wine this time instead of red.

“Is this one of your new recipes?” Maddox asked him.

My handsome physician became bashful. “It is.”

“I like it.” Maddox took another drink, a soft gleam in his blue eyes.

“I’m glad,” Briar said, mirroring that softness.

“How about a game of cards?” Callum asked before winking at me. “Winner gets to sleep with Evan.”

“Over my dead body,” Maddox growled.

Laughs erupted again around the table. Maddox might’ve been their captain, but it was clear how close they all were. More so now than when I’d first arrived in Bremloc.

“Your presence will touch many lives here for the better,” Lupin had once told me.

They had touched mine too.

My gaze then trailed to the large window and to the dark forest beyond it. Was Lake out there right now, watching from the trees?

“You in, Ev?” Callum asked after whipping out a deck of cards.

“Sure,” I responded, trying to push Lake from my head. “But don’t whine when I kick your ass and take all your money.”

“Spoken like a true Thorn Prince,” Duke said. “Stabbing foes left and right.”

“I assure you, I’m usually the one being stabbed.”

Maddox had just taken a drink and nearly spewed it.

“What’s wrong, Captain?” I grinned. “Can’t hold your liquor?”

“I’m not the one who’s already flushed.” Maddox grazed his knuckles along my cheek, a smirk playing at his lips. “How many sips have you had? Two?”

“I’m a lightweight but I’m not *that* bad. Jerk.”

“A ‘j’ word now? It seems I’ve leveled up.”

“Oh yeah?” I poked his arm. “I’ll give you a word for each letter in the alphabet. Starting with ‘a’, for asshole.”

Callum choked on his wine.

After the knights left—Thane’s slice of peach cobbler with Baden, who assured me it would make it to the apprentice in one piece—Maddox and Briar helped me clean the kitchen before we returned to the reading parlor and settled into the comfy chairs.

Maddox sprawled out on my lap like he’d done earlier. “What are you reading?” he asked Briar. “Another book about plants?”

“Rare plants,” Briar answered. “Some that can only be found in certain climates. There’s also a variety of flowers with powerful medicinal properties that only bloom beneath a full moon or in caves. Some are quite toxic and deadly, as well, if not used properly. It’s fascinating.”

“Fascinating, he says.” Maddox glanced up at me from his place on my lap. “And what about you?”

“Oh, this is smut,” I said. “Like hard-core smut. There’s romance too though.” I had been surprised to find books like that in Bremloc. Raunchy romance novels with devilishly handsome heroes and princesses who rode them hard. There were even a few gay ones—which graced the shelves in a place of honor. “Want me to read the spicy parts out loud to you?”

A light thud came from the front porch.

Maddox shot upward and faced the door, instantly going from the swoon-worthy man I loved to the equally swoon-worthy protective knight. One as big as a mountain, with ridges of mouthwatering muscle and skilled hands that knew all the places on my body to drive me wild.

Yep, I’ve been reading too much smut.

Briar set his book aside and stared at the door, one hand held toward me. Like he was preparing to grab me and run or throw himself in front of me if necessary.

“Do you think it’s a bandit?” I whispered. “Prince Sawyer said word about the café has spread all the way to Exalos, so one of them could’ve heard about it too. Maybe they want to rob the place for a nice payday.”

“They’d have to go through me first,” Maddox said.

“I could always throw muffins at them.”

“Evan?” a soft voice came from the other side of the door.

Lake.

Maddox yanked the door open, his icy expression like a blast of winter. “Quit skulking around outside and get in here.”

Lake’s shoulders tensed, and his upper lip snarled enough to show a peek of his canines—sharper now.

“Maddox.” I stood from the chair. “Be nice.”

“I *am* being nice. He still has his head, doesn’t he?”

“Stubborn knight,” I mumbled before smiling at Lake. “Hey, you. I was starting to think you weren’t going to show.”

“Apologies for the late hour.” Lake stepped across the threshold, his gaze darting around the parlor before settling on me. “I would’ve come inside earlier, but...”

“But Callum and the knights were here,” I said.

He nodded. “Dinner smelled lovely.”

He’d been outside the entire time. Watching us eat together, laugh, and have fun while he’d stood in the woods, alone. Fuck. It was like a punch to the chest.

“There aren’t any leftovers,” I said, that ache in my chest spreading. The knights had gorged themselves, leaving nothing but crumbs. “If you’re hungry, I can cook though.”

Lake’s tail wagged once before he caught himself. “No, thank you. It’s late, and you must be tired.”

“He is.” Maddox crossed his arms. When I sighed, his lips twitched. The asshole.

“You’re not the boss of me.” I forced myself not to smile when his blue eyes narrowed, a playfulness dancing in them. He could be so cute and maddening at the same time. “Come with me,” I told Lake. “I’ll make you something.”

Chapter Eight

Shooting Stars are Scorching Hot

Lake wanted a cheese omelet for dinner. He stood beside me at the stove, ears perked as he watched me make it. I plated it and added a few slices of the lemon loaf Briar had baked earlier before sitting with him at the table.

“You should know I don’t give my precious bread to just anyone,” I said. “I had to do some major pouting to get that loaf. Big, puppy dog eyes and everything before Briar caved.”

“It didn’t take much convincing.” Briar stood at the counter steeping green tea. He preferred it in the evenings and liked a darker, rich brew in the morning. “I’m incapable of denying you anything, love.”

“You spoil him,” Maddox said as he came into the kitchen, no shirt and pants riding low on his hips, giving a nice view of his V muscles and rippling abs. Dear freaking lord, could he be any hotter?

“*I* spoil him?” Briar spun around, light-brown bangs falling over the top of his glasses. “You’re even worse than I am.”

“They do this all the time,” I told Lake. “I’ve learned to just let them go at it. They’ll stop eventually.”

Lake dropped his gaze to his now-empty plate. Different expressions crossed his face: confusion and maybe a touch of amusement too. “Thank you for the meal.”

“You’re welcome. Help yourself to anything else you want.”

“Everything, except for what’s mine,” Maddox said.

“He means the muffins. But if you want one, take it. I’ll make him more.”

When Maddox scoffed, Lake almost smiled. There was a hint of one anyway; a cute little twitch at the corner of his mouth. He rose from his chair and carried his plate over to the sink to wash it.

I eyed the lemon bread left in the center of the table. Lake had eaten a small slice, but the rest sat there in all of its citrusy and sweet glory, just begging to be eaten. I slid my hand across and tore off a piece from the loaf. Then stole another piece.

Briar laughed. “Gods, I adore him.”

I looked over to see all three of them staring at me. “What?”

Lake averted his gaze, cheeks taking some color.

“Nothing.” Briar smiled and sipped his tea. “Eat more of your bread.”

“Don’t gotta tell me twice.” I helped myself to more.

Maddox drifted closer, his eyes alight with humor and a hint of something far more tender. “Come here, muffin.” Right as I stood, he drew me to his chest. “I doubt I’ll see you in the morning. I have to leave at first light.”

“Where are you going?” Fear prickled at my chest, just like it did every other time he set off on a mission or other *knightly business*.

“Nowhere for you to worry about.”

“This is me we’re talking about. Worrying is what I do best.” I hugged him close and rested my head over his heart as mine wobbled. “Especially when it involves you and your job.”

There were three orders of knights. The Second Order, Maddox’s regiment, specialized in combat missions. When he left for an expedition, it was usually to fight demons or other enemies of Bremloc. Shit that put him in harm’s way.

“I always come home to you, do I not?” Maddox kissed my hair.

“Not always in one piece,” I muttered, remembering when he was attacked in the dark wood. I held him tighter. “Will it be dangerous?”

He pulled back just enough to trace the line of my jaw and give me the type of heart-stopping smile that made my knees weak. “Not any more dangerous than being around you in the morning before you’ve had your coffee.”

“You asshole.” I lightly slapped his chest, then rubbed the area. And then rubbed it again. His pecs were incredible.

“A ‘b’ word now.” Maddox lifted my hand to his lips in that familiar way. “Don’t worry your cute head over it. I’ll return to you by nightfall without a scratch on me. This, I swear.”

“You’re just saying that to make me feel better. You’re probably running off to fight the demon lord himself. That’s it. You’re staying here. Tell them you’re sick and can’t go.”

“The king won’t appreciate that very much.”

“The king?” I asked. “That’s where you’re going?”

Maddox nodded. “He’s expecting me at the castle first thing in the morning. So stop fretting. There will be no fighting involved.”

“Does this meeting with the king have anything to do with your business at the Guild yesterday?”

His smile remained in place, but his eyes tightened at the corners. “You’re determined to figure this out, aren’t you?”

“Yep.”

Maddox expelled a sigh. “I met with someone at the Guild who had valuable intel. No, I won’t tell you what was discussed, so get that adorably inquisitive look off your face. I then requested an audience with the king to relay this information. Depending on his decision, I’ll need to meet with Captain Vander of the Royal Order to make arrangements.”

The Royal Order, also called the First Order, was the highest tier of knights. They guarded the royal family, like Sir Noah did with Prince Sawyer.

“Arrangements you won’t tell me about?” I slid a finger over his pec. “What if there’s a nice little treat in it for you? Let’s say... *two* batches of yummy blueberry muffins? I’ll even throw in those strawberry ones you like.”

Maddox leaned in and brushed our lips together. “No amount of muffins in this world could persuade me to tell you. But how endearing of you to try.” He nipped at my nose before pulling back. His gaze shifted to Lake. “I assume you’re sleeping here tonight?”

“I made no plans to,” Lake responded. “I only wished to see Evan. Didn’t consider anything beyond that.”

“You should stay,” Briar said, setting his cup of tea aside. “I’ll prepare the guest room for you.”

Lake glanced at me, then at Maddox. “Only if it’s not an imposition.”

“It is,” Maddox said and breathed out a low laugh when I bumped his arm. “Really, it’s no trouble. We have the room, so you might as well use it.” Hardness touched his eyes. “Just remember what I told you last night.”

“What did you tell him?” I asked, looking between them.

Maddox took hold of my chin and angled my face up, meeting me for a kiss. Kissing me to stop me from demanding an answer, probably. He glided his lips across mine once more before pulling away. “Good night, muffin.”

“You don’t play fair,” I said.

He smirked and joined Briar by the doorway before the two of them left, leaving me and Lake alone.

“Did you get full?” I asked.

Lake nodded. “Thank you again for cooking.”

“You’re welcome.” I shifted my weight to my other foot, then back. “So. What did Maddox tell you last night?”

Yes, it was bugging me. My nosiness knew no bounds.

His purple-eyed gaze darted away. “The knight reminded me many times how special you are, which I needed no reminder. We discussed my feelings for you and came to an agreement that, if you wanted, we could explore these feelings. I’m still trying to process that bit of news. I never expected it.”

“Neither did I.” I reached for his hand. “But I’m happy about it.”

Lake studied our joined hands with a crease in his brow. “I am too.”

“Did you talk about anything else?”

“He gave me a warning. If I ever hurt you in any way, *again* he specified, he swore to rip my heart out.”

I cringed. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. He loves you deeply and only has your well-being in mind. Both of them do.” Albeit subtly, Lake smiled. “I believe the knights who were here earlier feel the same. All of them will come for my head if I step out of line.”

A yawn came out of nowhere, so big that my eyes watered.

“You should get some sleep,” Lake said.

“But I’m not ready to say goodnight to you.” We were finally getting a chance to talk.

“Then don’t.” His ears gave a little flick at the ends, and shyness touched his expression. Something else did too, and his purple eyes faintly glowed, like an ember burning with some unspoken desire. “Come to my bed tonight.”

Briar grabbed his glasses from the nightstand and put them on, sitting up higher in bed. “Lake asked you to sleep with him, but you’re in here instead. Do you not want to?”

After walking Lake to his room, I’d told him I’d be right back and hightailed it to mine. Finding Briar and Maddox cuddled together when I got there had made me ridiculously happy. My sweet men.

“That’s not it.” I crawled on the bed and flopped between them. “I *want* to spend more time with him. And he’s really snuggly to sleep with.” Said from experience. And god, he smelled good. “But what if something more than sleep happens?”

Maddox grumbled and turned to face me, throwing his big arm across my belly. “Are you asking us for permission to fuck the wolf?”

My cheeks heated. “Um. No.” A pause. “Maybe? I don’t know!” I shoved my face against his chest and groaned. “How did I go from a guy who couldn’t get a boyfriend to one who

now has two amazing boyfriends and a possible third? How do I even do this? I don't want to upset either of you."

"You won't." Briar rubbed my back. "Maddox and I have discussed this a lot. We wouldn't have suggested it if we didn't approve."

"You've discussed it a lot, huh?" I mumbled into our captain's muscled chest.

"Ever since the first night Lake kissed you," Briar said. "So you see, we've had quite a while to consider everything. Our decision wasn't impulsive. Neither of us doubt your love for us."

"I hope not," I said, voice shaking. "Me liking Lake doesn't mean I love either of you any less."

Maddox palmed my cheek. "I know you could love a hundred men and still light up like the sun when you see me. Just as you always do." He pressed our mouths together, letting his lips linger on mine a moment before trailing them to my earlobe. "I own a place in your heart no other man will ever touch. That's all I need, Evan."

Tears stung my eyes. "You do. It's a place that will only ever belong to you." I entwined our fingers, smiling at the feel of his ring. "I'd be lost without you."

"I know. And my days would be unbearably dark without you."

Briar kissed my temple. "You have a big heart, love. Big enough for more than two of us. Possibly even big enough to include a certain wolf." Another kiss, this one to the edge of my brow. "If you give him the chance."

After cuddling with the two of them a while longer, I said goodnight and left the room. My heart weighed heavily as I closed the door behind me and stepped into the hall. Heavy but not necessarily sad. It was a complicated feeling, all sorts of emotions mingling together.

Open communication was important in a relationship like ours. I refused to be like the main protagonist in every harem anime I'd ever watched who didn't talk to the girls at all; he just cozied up to each of them and let them fight over him. I hated that shit.

My men deserved better than that.

Reaching the door, I lightly rapped my knuckles against it. "It's me. Can I come in?"

"Yes," Lake answered.

As I entered the room, the breath left my lungs in a rush.

Lake lounged on the bed on top of the blanket, one leg stretched out and the other bent up, his arm resting on his knee. He had removed his shirt. Toned muscle stretched beneath his alabaster skin, and there was a dusting of silver hair on his chest. Hair that also trailed from his navel and disappeared into the waistband of his pants.

I wanted to follow that trail. With my tongue.

"I see you've made yourself comfortable." I neared the bed.

"Would you like for me to put my shirt back on?" he asked.

“No. Definitely not.” Had I said that too quickly? “Shirts are dumb. Who needs them anyway?” I sat on the bed and brought both legs up, crisscrossing them. I bounced in place once, satisfied by the fluffiness. “I’m glad the bed’s comfy. Briar picked it out. I told him we didn’t need another bed, but he insisted that a guest must always have a place to sleep. Which makes sense. I guess I’m still not used to guests. Not that I consider you a guest. You’re more than that. But anyway. Briar also said this room would be a good place to banish Maddox when he was a jerk. Still not sure if he was joking or not.”

When Lake smiled, I caught a flash of his left canine. “I enjoy that.”

“Enjoy what?”

“The way you talk when you’re excited or nervous. A string of sentences running together as one.”

“Rambles, you mean.” I scooted more toward the center of the bed. Wiggled, really, like an excited little worm inching toward some rich soil. “When my brain freezes up, my mouth’s like, ‘no worries, bud, I got this.’ And then the next thing you know, you’ve heard my entire life story, as well as the life story of old lady Ethel who likes to gossip about her husband-stealing friend Janice.”

Lake barked out a laugh. It was so sudden and robust it even seemed to take *him* by surprise. Color flooded his cheeks as he dropped his gaze to his lap.

“I like your laugh,” I said, feeling a bit shy too.

“And I like your rambles.” Lake shifted, and the side of his leg lightly knocked against my knee. I thought it was an accident, but he lightly bumped me a second time, a smile so close to forming on his lips.

“Are you flirting with me, Mr. Wolf?”

When that smile fully formed, it was crooked and showed his teeth. “Mr. Wolf?”

“Sorry. It was the first thing that popped into my head. Don’t worry. We’ll work on a pet name.” The wording then registered, and I balked. “Wait. Not that I think you’re a pet. Oh god. It means like a cutesy name or nickname you give to someone you’re close to. Not an *actual* pet. I wasn’t implying that you, as a demi-wolf, were a—”

A rough noise left him. Another laugh, this one more controlled than earlier but still just as warm. “No offense taken. I knew your meaning.” Lake slid his hand across the bed toward my knee but stilled his advance before reaching it. His expression slipped into a deep concentration, evident in the crinkle of his brow. “This is so strange for me.”

“What is?”

“Wanting to touch someone,” he said. “Wanting them to touch me. And unsure how to go about either. There’s a pressure in my chest and a burning in my core, like a fire waiting to be set free. I fear what will happen when it builds and builds, with nowhere else to go but out.”

“Easy.” I uncrossed my legs and crawled closer, stopping with my face only inches from his. The heat coming off his

body made my skin tingle in anticipation. “Let the flames soar. Let that fire consume us both.”

Lake swallowed hard. “I have no experience with this, Evan. What if I hurt you?”

“You won’t.” My voice remained steady despite my own nerves. But not because I was afraid of him hurting me. It was the fear of the unknown, the nervousness that came when you laid yourself bare to another person for the first time. And not just *any* person, but one you were slowly, but surely, falling for. “Do you trust me?”

Tension pulled the skin tighter at the corners of his eyes. “I want to. More than anything.”

“Do you at least trust I won’t intentionally do anything to hurt you?”

“Y-Yes.” The glow in his purple irises intensified as his lids fell, giving him an outrageously sexy pair of bedroom eyes, heavy with desire.

“Can I kiss you?” I whispered.

Lake stared at my lips, his parting in response. His breaths deepened. “Please.”

With a small push forward of my head, I kissed him. It was soft; a light pressing of our mouths. Just like the first time we’d kissed, little explosions popped in my chest—in my heart.

Heat spread through my veins, and I thought of the fire he’d mentioned that burned in his core. The touching of our lips had passed it to me, and now, it spread through both of us. An inferno of newly awakened desire. And of something much

stronger than desire. Something I'd only ever felt with two other men.

Lake made a sound deep in his throat before increasing the pressure of his lips on mine and lifting a hand to the back of my hair. His fingers sank into the strands as his tongue traced the seam of my lips. He explored my mouth, as if familiarizing himself with the feel and taste of me.

"Evan," he said with a sigh, pumping his hips upward. "I... I need..."

"What do you need?" I straddled him but didn't sit all the way down.

Desperation burned in his eyes. "You. Skin on skin." He pushed his face to the base of my throat, releasing a shuddering breath. "Heart to heart."

"Yeah?" I lowered my body on his, loving his sharp intake of air as my ass pressed against his bulge. He was rock hard. I slid my hands down his bare chest, admiring the valleys of lean muscle. Lake had a runner's body, toned but not bulky. When my fingers smoothed across his waistband, he froze. "Can I take these off?"

"I..." Lake shook. With nerves? With eagerness? Maybe both. "No one's ever seen me like that before."

"If you aren't ready for beneath the clothes stuff, we can stop," I said. "I never want you to be uncomfortable with me."

The wariness in his eyes retreated, revealing something soft. "I'm not uncomfortable with you, Evan. Quite the opposite. I just... I'm not as experienced as your men. And I fear I'll disappoint you."

“You won’t.” There was no way he could. My feelings for him were quickly blossoming into a deep affection that went far beyond the physical. If he came after two or three thrusts, I didn’t care. “The first time is never perfect, so try not to put too much pressure on yourself.” I rolled my body, grinding against his hard shaft. “And what better way to improve than with lots and lots of practice?”

A small sound tore from Lake’s throat, and he gripped my sides as he rocked his hips into me. He slid his hands beneath the hem of my shirt. His calloused fingertips against my skin left tingles in their wake as they made small circles at the base of my spine. “You’re so warm. Like the sun.”

“You can take off my shirt, if you want,” I said.

I wanted more of his touch. Needed it.

He worked my shirt up and over my head, then tossed it to the floor. The glow in his purple eyes brightened as they roamed over my naked torso. His smile fell when he touched my sternum and glided his finger to my rib cage.

Was he disappointed? It had always been hard for me to put on weight no matter how much I ate. As for muscles? Yeah, forget it. When he didn’t say anything, insecurity reared its ugly head. And with it... more rambles.

“I know. I’m so amazingly buff it’s left you speechless. I’m a total beefcake.” I forced a laugh, and my nerves bled through it. “Now you see why that thorn bush had no chance. I —”

Lake silenced me with a kiss. He smiled against my lips. “You’re beautiful.”

“So are you,” I whispered. “I guess we’re both a little nervous, huh?”

“Only because this means something.” Lake drew back to meet my gaze. His eyes had darkened further. “Do you feel it too?”

“Yes.” I felt my connection to him in every fiber of my body, as though my cells had knitted together with his. Like my soul had recognized him and embraced his in turn.

Five soulmates, Lupin had said. Each one owning a piece of me. But as I straddled Lake, our mouths pressing together over and over, it felt less like a possession and more like a fragment had returned home.

Lake then placed my hand on the top of his pants. An unspoken request I was more than ready to oblige.

Still kissing him, I pulled the string that fastened them together and loosened it. The hard bulge straining against the fabric told me there was quiet the package waiting to be unwrapped. And I wanted to take my time opening it.

I kissed from his lips and to his jaw, then his neck. I grazed my teeth along his collarbone before making my way down his chest, adorning his skin in soft kisses. I gave a teasing lick to one of his nipples.

He sucked in a breath and arched his spine, his hand falling to the back of my head. I licked him again before latching on to his nipple. He whimpered.

Damn. If he liked that, he’d completely lose his mind once I reached his dick. The thought spurred me on, and I moved farther down his body, licking the dusting of hair

leading from his belly button. I peered up at him, finding him watching me. I didn't see fear in his expression though.

I saw excitement. Trust.

When I tugged his pants down, releasing his erection, he shuddered, and that desperate gleam returned to his eyes. As for my eagerly awaited package? Fucking perfect. Silver hair surrounded the base of his cock, and I was powerless to resist the urge to press my face into it, breathing in his unique musk. His shaft twitched as I ever so lightly grazed my finger up the underside of it.

“Evan.” Lake’s voice sounded strained, and he gripped the blanket beneath him.

“I love when you say my name like that.” He was so worked up from a single caress. What I was about to do next would tip him over the edge, but I didn't care. I wanted him to tumble off that cliff and crash into the silky waters of ecstasy waiting for him at the bottom.

Gripping his base, I brought his thick cock head to my lips and sank down, taking him into my mouth. The cry that filled the room was sharp, and his hips jolted as his head dropped back. I pulled off his cock with a wet pop and swirled my tongue around his slit.

“Dear gods.” Lake’s eyes rolled back. “That feels... there aren't words to describe it.”

“Then don't use words,” I said against his tip before giving it another lick. “Tell me with your moans.”

Was I surprised by the smoothness of my voice and cool confidence? Definitely. But Lake brought out that side of me. I

wanted to make him soar, just like a shooting star leaving a fiery blaze across the sky.

As I took him back into my mouth, Lake groaned and pumped his hips up to go deeper. He came seconds later, his cock spasming and oozing so much cum it drizzled from the corners of my lips. I swallowed some and tried not to choke as more filled my mouth. 'Tried' being the key word. I pulled off with a short cough.

So much for my two seconds of being suave and cool.

"I'm sorry," he panted. His hand shook as he smoothed my bangs from my eyes. His were clouded with guilt. "Look what I've done to you."

I laughed and wiped at my mouth. "Don't be sorry. I take it as a compliment."

Something shifted in his expression, then. Something that gave me chills. Not the bad kind though. He silently devoured me with his gaze, different shades of purple swirling in his irises, tendrils of light and dark. But it wasn't just his deep, penetrating stare that had my body tingling and heart thumping harder.

It was his aura. His very presence commanded attention, like something powerful moved beneath his skin, begging to be set free.

"Lake?"

He lurched forward, wrapped his arms around me, and flipped me to my back. He then planted a hand on each side of my head and hovered over me, still silent. Still radiating that

same quiver-inducing aura. He lowered his face to my neck and breathed me in, his lips parting on the exhale.

The fan of his breath against my skin gave me goose bumps. “Is this where you eat me, Mr. Wolf?”

A low growl rumbled in his chest as he skimmed his teeth down my jugular vein. Despite the animalistic nature of his actions, I wasn’t afraid. Far from it. He reached between our bodies and tugged my pants down, keeping his mouth at my neck. And as he took my dick in his palm, he found the spot at the bottom of my throat and sucked.

Whimpering, I rocked up into his palm. The weight of him thrilled me. So did the way he was practically devouring me; touching, stroking, and nipping at my sensitive areas.

“My Evan.” Lake bit at my neck harder, then kissed the spot and quickened the pace of his hand on my shaft. “Beautiful and warm. *Delectable*.”

The shy, introverted Lake was gone. He’d torn down his barriers and surrendered to instinct. Raw, sexual energy rolled off him, amping up my own arousal until my mind was clouded with it. Consumed.

He nipped at my skin as he moved down my body, giving me little love bites. Reaching my belly button, he dipped his tongue inside before licking over to my hip bone. Then lower to the area that craved his tongue the most. When he took my cock into his mouth, he slid down until his nose pressed into my pubic hair.

I gasped at the explosion of wet heat and nearly shot off the bed. The tips of his wolf ears flicked as his head bobbed,

taking my entire cock with each descent. I was going to lose my goddamn mind. Just as a tingling pressure moved down my spine, my orgasm creeping closer, he pulled off.

“Your taste.” Lake licked his lips. “I want more.”

Oh, fuck me.

He shoved his arms beneath me and lifted my ass off the mattress. I brought my legs up, and he licked from my balls to my crack, then back up. I trembled as he applied pressure to my perineum, probing the area with his lips and tongue.

My voice broke on a groan.

Lake showed no mercy as he rimmed me so good my toes curled. Beads of pre-cum dripped onto my belly as he kept me propped up, legs to the heavens and his face crammed between my cheeks. His tongue flicked and dove inside, swirling in circles. He added a finger to the mix, using spit to ease it in.

Seconds, minutes, years. It felt like an eternity as I hovered right on the edge of orgasm, being yanked back before reaching it. Each time he denied me, Lake peered up at me, a smile alight in his eyes.

“Lake! Please,” I begged when I couldn’t take it anymore. Sweat covered my chest, and my muscles ached from all the straining and quaking.

Was it possible to die like this? It felt like it. I was desperate, my mind devoid of every thought except for the need to come. Then again, it wasn’t the first time I’d been in such a frenzied state. Maddox and Briar loved working me up like this too.

Now, it seemed, I not only had a third male to warm my bed—and my heart—but one who would also join the other two in torturing me.

Luckily, Lake wasn't interested in dragging out said torture. By the hard set to his brow, I gathered he was just as worked up as me. He lowered me back to the mattress and slid between my legs.

“We need lube,” I said, my body tingling as I felt the silky head of his cock glide across my hole, not penetrating.

“Lube?” he asked. Movement from behind him drew my attention to his tail. It was kind of a strange sight to see his smooth skin transition to a poofy white wolf tail at his tailbone. But there was something endearing about it too, especially when he cocked his head at me, ears perked up and tail flicking. “Is it the small bottle I found earlier in the bedside table?”

Lake reached over and grabbed it from the drawer.

“Yep,” I said, throat tightening. “That’s it.”

Had that been one of the reasons Briar had come up to prepare the guest room? So he could ensure lubricant was there in case we needed it?

“How do we use it?” Lake uncorked the vial and sniffed. “I hope we don’t drink it. It doesn’t smell too appetizing.”

No amount of arousal and sexual frustration in the world could’ve kept me from laughing right then. “Oh my god, you’re so cute I can’t even deal. We don’t drink it. Here. Gimme.”

With a curious expression—and tail wagging, damn him and his cuteness—he watched as I dribbled some into my palm and slid my hand to his shaft, stroking him once.

“You use it here,” I said. “It’s to make the glide easier so it doesn’t hurt.”

His curiosity was forgotten as that raw hunger from earlier resurfaced. He took the vial from me and used more to slick his cock before settling between my legs.

I stared up at him as he guided himself into place. His brow crinkled as his tip touched my entrance. His lips parted. Silver hair fell into his face as he braced an arm beside me and dropped a kiss to my nose. And then, he eased forward.

Lake groaned low, and his hips jerked once. “Evan. You feel...” He pushed deeper before slowly pulling out. When he thrust back in, he went deeper, emitting a soft whine. “I...” Another thrust, followed by him dropping his face to my neck and shuddering.

“I know.” I wrapped my arms around him. “There’s nothing else like it, right?”

“Nothing else.” His voice took on a deep rasp. “Need more of it.”

“Me too.”

That was all the encouragement he needed before he let instinct take over. He rocked his hips, plunging in deep before pulling nearly all the way out and shoving back in. Over and over. Slow and fast. Deep and shallow. For someone who had come after only a few seconds of me sucking his cock, Lake fucked like he’d done it a hundred times.

My hands slid down his spine as he railed me, delicious tingles shooting throughout my body. When my fingers reached his lower back, where soft skin met fur, I rubbed the base of his tail.

Lake faltered in his rhythm and released a drawn-out groan.

“Do you want me to stop?” I asked, worried I’d made things weird. Me and my wandering hand. But his tail was fluffy, and after resisting for so long, I’d wanted to touch it.

“No. I like it.” Lake pumped his hips faster and nuzzled my neck. “Feels good.”

So, I kept rubbing the base of his tail. It must’ve been an erogenous zone. When his cock slammed against my prostate, the pleasure that had been building during the amazing foreplay finally surged forward. I slapped my hands to his ass cheeks and yanked him harder against me, head tipping back as I shook with my approaching release.

“Oh my god. Don’t s-stop. Please, Lake.”

“I’m not stopping,” he rasped, locking his hips in place as he fucked me harder, faster.

“Fuck!” I cried out as my body convulsed, my orgasm crashing into me like a tidal wave.

Lake exhaled against my neck, a soft moan blending with the breath. And then he was coming too, filling me to the brim with warm cum that, like it had done earlier when I’d sucked him, was so much it dribbled out of me. How he still had that much after blowing his load not even an hour ago, I had no idea. But I wasn’t complaining.

“That’s it,” I said, turning my face into his hair. “You’re such a good boy.”

What the fuck? Why did I say that?

However, Lake reacted to the words. A low whine escaped his parted lips, and his pulsating cock throbbed even more. His teeth clamped down on my neck, not too hard but enough to cause a slight sting, and he groaned, the sound causing vibrations against my skin.

Briefly—okay, not so brief, because I might’ve thought of it a few times before this moment—I remembered the omegaverse stories I’d read. The ones where an alpha knotted, tying him and his omega together as he climaxed. They stayed like that for a while afterward, until the swollen knot went down enough to release them.

Lake being a demi-wolf made me curious if he did that too. But it would be a cold day in hell before I ever admitted it aloud.

As the waves of our release receded—and no knots anywhere to be found—Lake pulled out but stayed on top of me, panting with his labored breaths. I smoothed my hand over the dip in his spine and up to his shoulder blades. Petting his back.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked, touching the place on my neck where he’d bit me during orgasm.

“No.” I smiled up at him. Did it look as goofy as it felt? I was on cloud nine, high off the pleasure. High off *him*.

“It left a mark.” Lake frowned.

“A mark I’ll wear with pride.” I cupped his cheek. “A love bite.”

“The knight will remove my head because of it.”

I snorted. “Maddox has left plenty of marks on me before. He has no room to talk.”

“Do you regret it?” Lake asked, voice soft. “Being with me?”

“What?” When he tried to avert his gaze, I grabbed his jaw and forced it right back to me. “I don’t regret it at all. I wanted to do this. Why would you think that?”

Sorrow filled his eyes. “Because you have two men who treasure you, and I know you love them just as much. You’re so kind to me, but I’m not sure where I fit in. Am I a passing fancy for you? Are you still interested now that you’ve had a taste of me, or will I be discarded? I—”

“Stop,” I said with a quiver in my voice that shook all the way to my core. “You’re not just a fun time, Lake. This meant something to me. It still does.” I rose up to brush our lips together. “You’re mine now, Mr. Wolf. And I’m not letting you go.”

He shakily smiled and rested his forehead on mine. “That’s all I needed to hear. I’m sorry for doubting you.”

“I understand why you did,” I said, my arms still snug around his back. “This is new for you.”

“It is.”

Lake had been alone for most of his life. It would take more than a few days for him to fully trust that my feelings for

him were real and not fading.

“Can I sleep in here with you?” I asked as my body relaxed more; my muscles suddenly heavy.

“I’d like that.” Lake rolled off me and lay at my side. He brought my head to his chest and kissed my hair. “You’re precious to me, Evan.”

“You are to me too.” I yawned and snuggled closer. “Do you believe it?”

“I want to. Maybe I will someday.”

“Well, I guess I’ll just have to spend every day from now on proving it. Starting with breakfast tomorrow.”

“Another omelet?” he asked, hope filling his tone. And fuck me, his tail wagged. I felt it moving beneath the sheet.

“Mhm.” I kissed his chest, loving the prickle of hair on my lips. Who would’ve thought I’d love chest hair so much? “I’ll add sausage, peppers, and anything else you want in it.” I yawned again.

“Time for bed.” Lake lightly bumped my head with his, and I smiled when I felt his furry ears. The action was playful. “My human is sleepy.”

“Your human?” My heart almost exploded.

“I…” He tensed. “I’m sorry. I said it without thinking.”

“No, I like it. I’m your human, and you’re my wolf.”

Lake relaxed. “Would you like me to sing for you again?”

I smiled. “Yes please.”

As his melodic voice filled the air, my eyes closed. Like last time, I didn't understand the words, but his song soothed me and lulled me right to sleep.

Chapter Nine

A Muffin Rises at Dawn

When I woke the next morning, it was still dark, the sun not yet risen.

Lake slept beside me, his expression smooth. He looked like a porcelain doll, so fucking perfect it was hard to believe he was real. When I kissed his cheek, his wolf ears twitched, but he didn't wake.

I slid out of bed and gathered my discarded clothes from the floor before creeping from the room. I needed a soak in the tub since Lake and I hadn't cleaned up after having sex last night. I also hoped it wasn't too late to see a certain captain before he left for the day.

"Good morning," a deep, sexy voice said as I closed the door to the guest room. Maddox's large body was cast in shadow, and I clamped my mouth shut to quiet my yell. It came out more like a squeak. "I should start calling you *mouse* instead of muffin."

"Oh stop." I stepped into his embrace. "I'm glad I was able to see you before you left."

"Is that why you're out of bed so early?"

I nodded against his chest. He was fully dressed, sword sheathed at his side and armor fastened. I'd caught him just in time.

Maddox kissed the top of my head. "You smell like him."

Something tugged in the center of my chest. "I'm sorry." I stepped from his arms to put more distance between us. The narrow hallway prevented me from going too far. "I'm gonna take a bath."

"Evan."

I couldn't look at him. "Be careful today." I started to walk past him toward the bathroom.

He grabbed my arm and spun me back to face him. "I'm not angry."

My sternum wobbled. "Upset? Disgusted? Wishing you would've left me in that field by the dark wood the morning we first met instead of waking me up? I'd probably be demon food by now."

"Sweetheart, look at me."

There was that endearment again. One that had me obeying him even though I felt like a fragile little thing about to break. My eyes had adjusted to the darkness enough for me to make out his features. His rugged handsomeness still took my breath away. A sharp jawline perfect for pecking kisses against, a heavy brow, and a smoldering gaze that made me weak in the knees no matter how many times I'd looked at him.

"The only thing that upsets me about last night is you not being in my arms while I slept," he said. "I allowed the wolf to

have you to himself, for I knew it was his first time and he didn't need an audience. But I'm not upset that you bedded him."

"Really?"

"Have I ever lied to you?"

"No. Well, I don't think so." I burrowed closer, the need to hold him outweighing everything else. "Unless you actually hate my muffins and only say you do to make me happy."

He softly chuckled and pushed his face into my hair. "I have to head out. But I'm not leaving until I see you smile."

"Hard to see that in the dark."

"I can see you just fine." Maddox drew back and smoothed his thumb over my lips. "Will you deny my request, muffin lord?"

I smiled, unable to resist him. I felt lighter now too. As Briar had said, every relationship was different. Ours was new for all four of us. It would take time to find our groove and figure everything out. That's why communication was so important.

"The demi-bear will be here today, yes?"

"Yep," I answered. "Miles said he'd be here first thing. Hopefully not *too* early. I need a bath."

Maddox groaned under his breath. It was such a sexy sound. "If I didn't need to be at the castle, I'd strip off this armor and bathe with you."

"We can always do that later when you get home," I said, my heart flip-flopping in my chest. "I don't know if you're

aware or not, but I'm kind of clumsy. I'm sure to spill something on myself or fall in the mud. Maybe even topple into a bowl of cupcake batter. I'll most definitely need another bath."

Maddox touched my lips again. "If not, I know a way to dirty you up." He brought me flush to his chest and placed his mouth at my ear. "Take care of my heart today. I'm leaving it with you."

I melted at the words. "And you take care of mine."

He took my face in his hands and kissed me so good my head spun. Then, I watched him continue down the hall, butterflies swarming my belly. They fluttered faster as he reached the stairs and turned to look at me over his shoulder. He didn't say a word, but his expression said it all: he loved me.

I loved him too. More and more with each passing day.

After bathing, I wrapped a towel around my hips and crept into my room for some clothes. I tried to be quiet, but I was... well, me. My foot caught on the desk chair, and I faceplanted on the floor.

"Evan?" Briar sat up in bed and snatched his glasses from the nightstand, putting them on. "Are you hurt?"

"Nope. I'm good." Shaking my head at myself, I peeled myself off the floor and readjusted my towel. "Sorry for waking you."

"Come here. Let me take a look." Briar slipped out of bed and took me in his arms, his gaze raking over me. It was lighter outside the window now, so I could see him fairly well.

He knelt in front of me and examined my knee. “You scraped it. But it’s nothing I can’t fix.”

Golden light came from his palm as he placed it over my kneecap. The scrape hadn’t hurt too bad, but the slight sting eased as he healed it.

“Thanks, Doc.” I entwined our fingers as he stood. The bedroom door opened wider, and I turned to look.

“I heard a thump and smelled your blood,” Lake said, stepping across the threshold. His pants weren’t fastened, like he’d tugged them on in a hurry. “Are you okay?”

“You smelled that little drop of blood?” I asked, amazed. “All the way from the other room?”

“Yes.”

“Wow. Well, I’m okay.” I held out my leg and wiggled it. “Briar healed me. It was just a scrape.”

“Good morning,” Briar greeted him.

Lake became more reserved, his walls creeping back up as he nodded. “Morning.”

They stared at each other in silence before both averted their eyes. Both were kind of introverted and socially awkward.

“So.” I clapped my hands together once. “Who wants breakfast?”

Lake’s ears shot up. No doubt thinking about omelets. God. He was too cute.

“Breakfast would be lovely.” Briar kissed my temple before going over to the wardrobe in the corner. He picked me

out a shirt and pants for the day, which made my heart swell. It was his love language, I think. Doing small acts of kindness for those he cared about.

“Thank you,” I said before removing the towel. Both of them had seen me naked, so I didn’t think twice about changing in front of them.

“Don’t thank me just yet,” Briar then said.

The shift in his tone gave me pause.

His lips curved into a half-smile. “Maddox will be sad he missed this.”

“Missed what?” I asked, not following.

Briar glanced at Lake, then back at me. “The two of you had sex.”

Still clueless, I stood there staring at him, one leg in my underwear. But then it clicked together in my head. “Oh god. No.”

“Yes,” Briar said.

“But Lake was a virgin,” I responded. “And I’ve only been with you and Maddox since taking it last time. Do we really need it?”

“Need what?” Lake asked, looking between us.

“While that may be true, we can’t be too careful.” Briar adjusted his glasses. “Both of you should drink the tonic just in case.”

He was right. I *knew* he was. It didn’t stop me from whining about it though. Sighing, I faced Lake. “I hope you don’t mind the taste of flowers.”

“I can still taste it on my tongue.” I shuddered. “I need more coffee to wash it down. I may die.”

“You drank it over an hour ago.” Briar laughed as he stirred sugar into his second cup of tea.

“It’s a taste you never forget. It never goes away. The herpes of medicine.”

Lake stood at the kitchen window, expression calm. “I liked the taste. Reminded me of when I was a boy and used to pull up flowers and eat them. Unfortunately, they were the flowers in my father’s garden. They tasted the best.” He softly smiled. It had a sad edge to it. “He could never bring himself to whip me for misbehaving though. His heart was too gentle for it.”

Too gentle to spank his son, and yet, the people of Bremloc had marked him as a criminal and watched as he was dragged to the town square and beheaded. Simply for being a demi-wolf.

“He sounds like a great guy,” I said, walking over to Lake. “I wish I could’ve met him.”

“I wish the same.” Lake’s gaze moved to me, softness touching his purple eyes. There was a hint of sadness too. “He would’ve liked you.” His palm slid against mine before he linked our fingers. “I believe you’re the type of person he hoped I’d find someday. Someone with a compassionate and joyful heart. Someone who pushes me to come out of my shell

and who makes me want to be better.” He dropped his gaze to our joined hands. “You called me yours last night and said you wouldn’t let me go. I don’t want to let you go either.”

A lump wedged in my throat.

“You won’t have to let him go,” Briar said, stepping up on my other side. He handed me a fresh cup of coffee and kissed my temple. His favorite spot. “Evan belongs to all three of us now. And we belong to him.”

My eyes misted over. I was so happy. In love. All that was missing in that moment was a grumpy captain.

A sudden knock came at the front door.

Lake snarled under his breath and flipped around to the archway, panic in his eyes.

“It’s okay.” I gently squeezed his hand. He didn’t lash out at me from the touch, even in his current state. Instead, he visibly calmed. “It’s probably Miles.”

It was.

Miles stood on the other side of the front door, a nervous, but eager, smile on his lips. The sun gleamed off his chestnut colored hair and brought out the lighter shades of brown in his eyes. “Good morning, mister Evan. I’ve come about the job?”

“Come in.” I opened the door wider for him. “Cupcakes are almost ready to come out of the oven, and I was about to make a pie.”

“Oh, I love pie.” Miles stepped into the cottage, keeping his hands clasped in front of him, fidgeting with them. He looked around, smiling at the shelves of books.

“It will be your assessment for the job,” I said as I led him toward the kitchen. Assessment, my ass. I was, like, ninety-nine percent sure he had it already. “I want to see what you can do.”

“I appreciate the opportunity, sir.”

“You don’t have to call me sir. Calling me Evan is more than okay.”

“All right. Evan.”

“Hello, again,” Briar greeted Miles as we reached the kitchen. He stood beside the counter. Alone.

Lake was gone. Had he dashed toward the woods like last time? Without saying goodbye? I glanced at the trees through the window. Maybe he had gone home, back to his own cottage nestled in the woods.

“Hello.” Miles nodded to Briar. He was so tall he’d nearly had to lower his head to fit through the archway. “Briar, the court physician.”

“Good memory.” Briar smiled before approaching me and placing a soft kiss to my lips. “Lake didn’t leave. He’s upstairs.”

Relief prickled at my chest. “You always seem to know what I’m thinking.”

“Because I know you.” He glided his fingertips along my jaw, and his hazel eyes twinkled with the affection I felt in his every touch. “I need to leave for the clinic, but I’ll return at nightfall with our captain.”

Our captain. It still gave me butterflies.

“Wait!” I bounced over to the counter and grabbed a basket. “Take this with you. It’s your lunch. I also threw in some goodies for you and Thane to share.”

“What would I do without you, love?” Briar accepted the basket but tugged me to him with his other arm.

“Forget to eat, as usual. You’d have a lighter work load though. Me faceplanting on the bedroom floor and scuffing my knee this morning is a good example.”

“Each time you fall, I’ll be here to make it better,” Briar said before kissing me. He then left the kitchen.

Miles’ cheeks darkened with a blush. “The two of you make for a sweet couple.”

“Thanks. There are four of us, actually,” I said before breathing out a laugh. “My other two men aren’t here right now.”

“The knight captain.” Miles nodded. “I don’t believe I’ve met the other.”

A small creak came from the floor above me, and I smiled at the sign of Lake. Even if he wasn’t in sight, knowing he was still in the cottage made me happy.

“Are you ready to get started?” I asked Miles.

Turned out, Miles was more than qualified for the job.

“That looks amazing,” I said, watching as he braided dough in a lattice-style for the top of an apple pie. His fingers were like big sausages but were so delicate.

“I’m glad you approve,” Miles said, the rounded ears jutting from his dark hair wiggling. “It’s always been my

dream to work in a kitchen like this. Thank you for giving me the chance.”

“No need to thank me. I’m lucky to have you.” I nodded as he finished the lattice work. “I think it’s ready to bake now. Wanna do the honors?”

“Of course.” Miles put the pie in the oven.

The wide width of his shoulders and bulky frame took up a lot of space in the kitchen, but I was super tiny so it worked out well as we moved around each other, putting trays of cookies into the other oven and taking them out, making batches of cupcake batter and the different frostings and icings for the variety of pastries and cakes.

A short while later, Peter and Alice arrived. They were shocked to find Miles in the kitchen, but thankfully, they had nothing against demi-humans and welcomed him to The Brewed Muffin family. He looked like he felt welcome too, which meant a lot.

Business boomed once the doors opened for the day. Even more so than usual. Word had spread like wildfire, and people from the towns outside the capital had traveled to eat here.

Alice walked into the kitchen and placed several tickets on the counter. “Big crowd in the dining room. The orders just keep coming in. Do you need any help back here?”

“If you don’t mind starting on the drinks, that’d be awesome,” I responded as Miles frosted a platter of strawberry cupcakes. I had my hands busy filling buttery croissants with raspberry jam. “After I finish with these, I’m going to put another batch of cookies in the oven.”

“Chocolate chip, I hope.” Alice stepped over to the coffee machine and added freshly ground beans. “They’re popular today. Lemon too.”

“The lemon is my favorite,” Miles said, his voice on the quieter side. Again, a contradiction to his ginormous size. He was soft-spoken and shy. A total gentle giant.

Noted. I’d make sure I sent a bundle home with him later.

At closing time, once the last customer left, Peter cleared the tables in the main dining room while Alice did a sweep of the reading parlor, clearing any dishes left behind and straightening up the cushions, placing books back where they were supposed to go. Miles helped me clean the kitchen.

“How was your first day?” I asked.

“Better than I could’ve dreamed.” Miles placed the last dish on the drying rack. “Not many people will hire someone like me. Even those who accept demi-humans fear me because of my size. But you saw beyond that and gave me a chance anyway.”

“You’re gonna make me cry.” I cleared my throat. Damn emotions. “Oh! This is for you.” I handed him a bundle of lemon cookies. “As a way to say thanks for all your hard work today. You’ll get real money too, of course, not just sweets. I pay at the end of every week.”

Miles accepted the cookies. “I’ll continue to work hard.”

“I expect you back here bright and early tomorrow morning.”

He beamed. “I’ll be here.”

Once Miles left, I grabbed the muffins I'd baked earlier and situated them on a platter for Maddox. The air stirred at my back before Lake appeared. The now empty café had lured him downstairs.

"I'm glad you're still here," I said. "I bet you're hungry."

"A little." Although hesitant at first, Lake took my hand in his. "I'm sorry for disappearing this morning. Being around other people is still... difficult for me." He looked away. "I didn't want to leave you. So I waited upstairs until everyone left."

The front door opened, followed by heavy steps on the floorboards, growing closer. Footsteps, as well as familiar voices. Lake tensed as Briar and Maddox appeared in the doorway, but he didn't flee. A big step forward for him.

Maddox locked gazes with me and reached me in a few strides, bringing me close to his body. His scent slammed into me, like leather and warm spice, and I pushed my face against his armor, eyes stinging.

"I told you I'd make it back in once piece," he said.

"Yeah." My throat quivered. "You did."

Briar appeared at my other side and greeted me with a temple kiss. "Thane thanks you for the treats. He ate three of the four scones and devoured the stack of sugar cookies."

I hadn't realized I'd been so tense until being in their arms again allowed me to breathe a little easier. My men were home. They were safe.

All three of them.

I looked at Lake over Briar's shoulder. He had released my hand and given us space. But he was part of this too. Part of this unconventional family. Maybe it was too soon to see all of us that way, but I did. With my free hand, I reached for him.

He stared at my palm, ears adorably perked. And then, he placed his hand in mine, allowing me to pull him closer.

"Go wash up," I told Maddox and Briar. "I'll make you something to eat."

Maddox eyed the muffins on the counter.

"Something more substantial than those," I said with a snort. "You can have them after."

He smirked, nuzzled my cheek with his nose, then stepped away. Briar kissed the side of my head before following him from the kitchen.

"What are you craving?" I asked Lake as I walked over to the pantry to browse the shelves. "Oh, maybe pork chops and brown rice? Does that sound good?"

"I should return to my cottage," Lake answered.

"You're not staying for dinner?" I asked, turning to him.

Lake looked at the stove, and his tail swished a few times. Funny how, like with Kuya, I'd started to learn to read his tail movements too. It wasn't an excited wag this time; the little swishes came from him thinking. "As delicious as your cooking is, I've been away from home for too long."

"Oh." It would be selfish of me to ask him to stay. He had his own home, a place where he could unwind and let his guard down. My cottage wasn't a place he could truly feel at

ease yet. I forced a smile and pretended like it was no big deal.
“I understand.”

“Do you?” Uncertainty flashed in his eyes. “I don’t want to upset—” A sudden growl cut off his words, and he snapped his head toward the archway. In the blink of an eye, he was in front of me, one arm around my waist and a snarl on his lips.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, heartrate skyrocketing.

“The café closed, didn’t it?”

“Yeah. Why?”

Lake regarded me. “Someone’s in the dining room.”

Chapter Ten

An Unexpected Visitor

“Good evening,” Lupin greeted me as I stepped into the bar area. He sat on a barstool. Pale blond bangs brushed the top of his brow, and his lips curved in a smile. “Lovely to see you again.”

My response snagged in my throat. Why was he here? Just to check on me, or was something wrong? Lake was out of sight but still close by. Watching. Listening. Making sure I was okay.

“You look awfully pale,” Lupin said. “Perhaps you should sit for a moment.”

“Why are you here?”

Lupin motioned to the room. “I heard this is the best place in Bremloc to grab a cup of coffee. Unfortunately, I seem to be too late. You’re closed for the day.” He tilted his head to the side. “Unless you can make an exception just this once?”

“S-Sure. What would you like?”

“A cup of coffee. Black. And perhaps a blueberry muffin?”

In a sort of daze, I nodded and returned to the kitchen. Lake waited for me, concern crinkling his brow.

“He was right,” Lake said, his gaze flickering across my face. “You’re very pale. Who is he?”

“An... acquaintance. I didn’t expect to see him again.” I exhaled and went over to the coffee machine. My hand shook as I prepared a cup, my mind spinning with reasons why Lupin could be there. None of them good.

Maybe the magic that had brought me to that world wasn’t permanent after all, and he’d come to tell me I had to leave.

My heart dropped into my stomach. Just like the cup I’d grabbed for the coffee dropped to the counter, the handle breaking off. I stared at the chips of glass as dread washed over me, enclosing my sternum in a tight squeeze.

“Evan?” Maddox asked, entering the kitchen from the doorway leading in from the hall. His black hair was damp from his bath, and he wore loose-fitting pants that reminded me of cotton pj’s. No shirt. His gaze fell to the broken cup, and he grabbed my hands to check them. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m okay.” The shake in my voice sounded anything but. “I’m just...” Tears welled in my eyes. “Clumsy, as usual.”

As he stared at me, holding my hands so gently in his, my tears spilled over. Subconsciously, I had worried everything was too good to be true, that the overwhelming happiness I’d found would be ripped away from me. Lupin’s presence drove all of those feelings home, slamming into every vulnerable place inside my chest and tearing it apart.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” Maddox said, taking hold of my chin. “If someone upset you, I’ll kill them.”

“No one upset me. I think I’m just tired. It’s been a long day.”

“Stop lying to me. You’re not any good at it.” He then looked at Lake. “Do you know what’s wrong with him?”

“The man in the dining room.”

“What man?” Maddox asked.

“A powerful one,” Briar said as he rounded the corner from the same doorway Maddox had entered from. “I can sense his life force. His magic is strong.”

“Who is he?” Maddox asked me.

“A customer who’s waiting for his coffee.” I tried to step past him.

He yanked me right back. “Goddammit, Evan. *Talk to me.*”

“I promise I’ll tell you everything,” I responded, my tone weaker than before. I sounded as defeated as I felt. “Later.”

“Like hell you will. You’ll tell me now.”

“Remember during the Festival of Lights when I went into the woods and asked you and Briar to stay in the park? To let me go alone?”

Maddox’s eyes narrowed. “Yes.”

“It was to speak with him.”

“Why?”

“I...” My chest cinched. “I can’t tell you. Not yet.”

I didn't know how to. But I was out of time trying to figure it out. Keeping it from them had slowly been eating me alive. Finally telling them the truth would be a relief.

Unless, they reacted horribly.

"Then I'll go out there and ask him myself." Maddox released his hold on me.

"Wait." I grabbed his bicep to stop him. It was so big my hand barely even fit around half of it. "Look. I'll tell you everything. I swear. But I need to talk to him first. Alone."

"Why? Why must you do it alone?"

"Because I don't know why he's here yet. Please, Maddox."

"Come on, Captain." Briar stepped up on Maddox's other side. He then looked at Lake. "You too. We're going upstairs to give them privacy."

"Speak for yourself, physician," Maddox snapped. "If that man intends to harm Evan in any way, I will rip out his throat. I don't care how powerful you say he is."

"He won't hurt me," I said. Physically, anyway. If he was at the café to send me back to my old world, it would shatter my fucking heart. "It's hard to explain, but I need you to trust me."

Maddox's nostrils flared. "Fine. You can speak to him alone." He closed the small gap between our bodies and gripped the side of my neck, bending his head down to mine. "But I'll be waiting for an explanation once you're finished."

The three of them then walked toward the doorway leading into the hall near the stairs. Lake seemed hesitant—either from following them or from leaving me alone, I wasn't sure. Once they were out of sight, I grabbed another cup and filled it with coffee before plating a muffin and returning to the main dining room.

“Sorry for the delay.” I placed the dishes in front of Lupin at the bar. My hands shook. “Had an accident in the kitchen.”

“I heard,” Lupin said before lifting his cup and taking a sip. His brows shot up. “You really do have a talent for this line of work. This is delicious. Perfectly balanced and rich.”

“Stop with the small talk.” Was my voice a bit snappy? Strained? “Put me out of my misery and just tell me why you're here, Lupin.”

“Causing you misery wasn't my intention, and for that, I apologize.” Lupin's gaze reflected that remorse. “I hear you've been invited to the autumn ball.”

I blinked in surprise. “How did you hear about that?” I had only told Maddox, Briar, and Lake... as well as Callum and the other knights. And Kuya knew. Which pretty much guaranteed that every person he spoke to would also know. “It doesn't matter how you know, I guess. It's not really a secret.”

“You accepted Prince Sawyer's invitation to attend?”

“Yeah.”

“Interesting.” Lupin pinched off the edge of the muffin and ate it. “I see it's already been set into motion, then.”

“What has?”

His gray eyes reminded me of rain as they lifted to mine.
“Your fate.”

My gut coiled. “You gotta be more specific.”

“I’m afraid I can’t. At least, not so directly. Normally, once the Emporium grants a wish, I check on the person at least once to ensure everything went smoothly, but I never interfere with them again.” Softness touched his expression. “But you’re different, Evan. I’ve taken quite the liking to you.”

“Great. I’m so honored. I’ll be sure to tell your husband if I ever see him again. I’m sure he’d love to know.”

“Ah, yes. There’s that sassy mouth of yours.” Lupin took another drink of coffee. “But you misunderstand. My interest in you is neither romantic nor sexual. I feel... responsible over you, like a guardian would.”

“Why? We barely know each other.”

He didn’t answer. He just stared at me, gray eyes alight with the knowledge he refused to reveal.

“What will happen at the ball? Will I, like, die or something? Be captured by Prince Cedric, chained up, and forced to do tricks like a performing monkey?”

Lupin laughed. “That, I can assure you, is *not* one of fate’s plans for you. The ball itself holds no misfortune for you. It’s merely a... stepping stone, so to speak. Please continue to make arrangements to attend.”

“Okay. Good. Because I really want to go.”

“And you shall.”

“Sorry if I seem on edge.” I braced my hands on the bar top and breathed deep. “I’m just terrified you’re going to send me back.”

“You’ll be pleased to know, then, that you’re stuck here forever.” Lupin offered me a small smile. “This is your home now.”

“Oh thank god.” Relieved, I tried to return his smile, but the tight muscles in my face probably made me look constipated. I suspected something dreadful was still on the horizon. “So if you’re not here to reverse the wish, what’s the reason for your visit?”

He leaned forward in his seat. “I’m afraid I wasn’t completely honest with you in the past.”

“Well, that’s not ominous at all.” Anxiety prickled at my chest. “Does this have anything to do with what you told me during the Festival of Lights? About me possibly being murdered by one of my love interests?”

I’d tried to put that lovely detail out of my head over the past two months, but you didn’t forget something like that.

“No,” he responded. “This is... something else.”

“Okay. What then?”

“The Emporium didn’t send you to Bremloc on a whim,” he said. “Your wish was to find the place where you belonged. Now, one might argue that you belong here because of the love you’ve found and the love you’re still destined to find.”

“My harem, you mean.”

He snorted. “Yes, Harem King. Three males have fallen for you and two more are still on the way.”

I suppressed a groan. “Right. And a possible doom ending with one of them when he kills me. Maybe. But anyway. Harem talk aside. If not for love, why was I sent here?”

“Because it’s where you belong.”

I waited for him to say more. When he didn’t, I shifted in place, moving my weight to my other foot. “Um. That’s not really an answer.”

“It’s the only one I can give at the moment, I’m afraid. Thank you for the coffee.” Lupin slid off the barstool and pulled a few coins from his pocket, placing them beside his cup. “I must be on my way.”

“Nope. I don’t think so. Sit your wizard ass back down.” I pointed to the stool. “You can’t just pop in, say cryptic shit, and then flutter away like nothing happened.”

“Did you just call me a wizard?”

“Lupin. I’m serious.” Desperation laced my voice. “Please. Tell me why you’re really here.”

“I see why your men can deny you nothing. Those sad eyes are a true weapon of mass destruction.” He expelled a sigh. “Coming here tonight was a bit impulsive of me. As I’ve said before, nothing is set in stone. There are no certainties, only possibilities. Our decisions can alter our future, sending us down different paths. When you opened this café, a path to one of those futures was revealed. Now, it’s set in motion.”

“Something bad?”

“Perhaps.” His gray eyes tightened at the edges. “It’s neither the time nor the place for me to reveal more. But I’ll return soon to tell you more. As much as I can, anyway.”

“You’re already here. Just tell me now.” My anxiety couldn’t handle waiting. My head would pop off.

“I can’t. For those, like myself, who possess certain magical gifts, there are rules that must be followed in order to maintain the balance of the universe. Me being here is already teetering on that edge. You set things into motion, and if I interfered now, it could impose upon your free will and result in total chaos in the magical community.”

“You say you can’t interfere, but that’s exactly what you do with the Emporium. You alter people’s futures. Their lives.”

He was shaking his head before I even finished my sentence. “No. I don’t do anything of the sort. The people who visit the Emporium forge their own paths. I only provide the tools to help them do so. It’s called a magical loophole.”

“Your face is a magical loophole.”

“Now, now. Be nice.” Lupin grabbed the barely touched blueberry muffin and wrapped it in a napkin, tucking it into his inner jacket pocket. “Saving this for later. Do me a favor and try not to dwell on this. Enjoy the success of your café and fall deeper in love with the three males waiting for you upstairs. Live your life. I’ll return at a later date. In the meantime, I believe you have a discussion to have of your own.”

I cringed at the reminder. Maddox would more than likely pounce on me as soon as I went upstairs. “Any advice on how

to explain it to them?”

“Tell them the truth. That’s all you can do. Let the cards fall where they may.” Lupin withdrew a silver pocket watch and glanced at the clock face. “Until next time, Evan.”

A light tap on the window drew my attention. Just a bug. When I turned back, Lupin was gone.

Freaking mysterious asshole wizard. He showed up just to throw my life into chaos, then vanished in the blink of an eye. Now, I’d be obsessing over whatever it was he needed to tell me. Something that could be really bad.

But what?

Nerves zoomed through me like a swarm of angry wasps as I neared the staircase. I felt sick to my stomach as I climbed them. By the end of the night, the three men who owned my heart would finally know the truth about me.

And I was terrified of losing them.

Maddox sat on the edge of the bed, leaning forward with his hands clasped in front of him. He fidgeted with the silver ring on his finger. “Start talking.”

“Don’t use such a harsh tone with him.” Briar stood with his arms crossed, resting his hip against the desk.

“Don’t give me orders, physician,” Maddox snapped. “I’m not in the mood.”

“Are you ever?”

“Please don’t fight,” I said, surprised by how meek I sounded. Okay, maybe not too surprised. I felt really pathetic. And anxious. Maybe on the verge of throwing up. “This is already hard enough.”

Something flickered across Maddox’s face but was gone too quick for me to make sense of it. He was skilled at hiding his emotions behind a mask of stoicism. “Hard how?”

Lake stood near the window, keeping his distance from all of us. His gaze landed on me as he waited for a response.

“Because...” I waved my hands around, searching for the right words and only finding more anxiety. “It just is. I’m not good at this stuff. Important conversations. I need a glass, or ten, of liquid courage first.”

“I’d advise against that,” Briar said, the amused glint in his hazel eyes mingling with the threads of worry. “You can’t hold your alcohol well. Though, you’re quite endearing when drunk.”

I tried to smile but couldn’t find the energy.

“I see.” Maddox slowly breathed out before rising from the bed. His mask had cracks now, revealing the slivers of vulnerability underneath. “That man is a past lover from your former kingdom, and he wants you to return with him.”

“Huh?” I asked.

The muscle in his jaw ticked. “I suppose he’s handsome in his own way. Or is it his power you’re attracted to?”

Briar regarded Maddox, his expression slowly sinking. When his hazel eyes shifted to me, questions swam in them, as did an ache I felt deep in my chest. “Is this true? Is that man ___”

“Okay, both of you have the wrong idea,” I interjected. “Lupin isn’t my lover, past or otherwise. He’s married to a smoking hot guy named Saint, and honestly, he’s not my type anyway.”

Maddox returned his gaze to me, guarded once more. “Then who is he?”

“And why the secrecy?” Briar asked, the worry in his expression deepening.

Lake didn’t chime in to the conversation, but he stayed alert, listening.

I hated the distance between us. Not only physical but the emotional one too. Like a wall keeping me out, especially with Maddox. I reached for him.

Maddox’s attention shifted to my hand before he knocked it aside and pulled me into his arms instead. He held me tighter than usual. Almost painfully so. “Tell me this... are you leaving us?”

“No,” I said, fighting the tight ball of emotion in my throat. “I’m not going anywhere. I promise.”

As Maddox pushed his face into my hair, a tremor passed through his large body—like he’d been holding his breath and could finally empty his lungs again.

Briar walked over and kissed our captain’s shoulder before caressing my temple. “Losing either of you is the only

thing I couldn't survive. Everything else pales in comparison to that.”

Losing either of us.

I smiled. My gaze shifted to Lake. He had stepped away from the window and come toward us, as if on impulse. But he stopped before closing the gap. I wished he'd join our little love huddle.

“I'm not sure what to call Lupin,” I said. “Wizard? Magician? Let's just say he's a mysterious and magical pain in the butt, but he means well. I think. I met him before coming to Bremloc. He helped me when I was in a low place.”

“During your travels?” Maddox asked.

Guilt stirred in my chest. That was what I'd told him in the beginning, that I was a traveler who had gotten tired while passing through Bremloc and fallen asleep.

Here goes nothing.

“Me being a traveler was kind of a lie. I mean, I *did* travel —” *Across time and space* “—but it wasn't through the lands you're familiar with. It was from somewhere farther away.”

Maddox lifted a brow, a touch of humor back in those deep blue eyes I loved so much. “Are you saying you *aren't* Evan, Lord of the Muffins, who hails from the land of Arkansas?”

“Er, well, I *am* from a place called Arkansas, but it's not exactly a kingdom. And the muffin lord thing was a lie.”

“No more lies, Evan. No more secrets.” Maddox looked at Briar, then at Lake, before returning his eyes to me. “The three

of us deserve the truth.”

“You do.” Before I could talk myself out of it, I blurted out, “I’m from a different world.”

Silence.

Maddox stared at me with indifference though I saw the wheels turning in his head.

Briar frowned. “A different world?”

I nodded. “A place where magic doesn’t exist. Well, I guess it *does* exist, but it’s not as widely known or accepted as it is here. There aren’t demi-humans, dark woods filled with demons, or monsters. The magical runes that power everything here doesn’t exist in my old world. Instead, we have something called electricity, no magic required.”

Understanding lit Briar’s eyes. “This is why you fainted when seeing me use magic for the first time.”

“An embarrassing part of my past that you’re so kind to remind me of, but yes.”

He pressed his lips together. With the humor, there was a spark of fascination. “Tell me more about this world. The people. The way of life. How you managed to travel from that world to this one.”

Of course, his pursuit of knowledge would cause him to focus on those details. My handsome scholar. “Well. The people are ordinary, I guess. As I said, magic isn’t really a thing. The people who claim to possess magical gifts, like fortune tellers and psychics, are often mocked by the general public.”

Maddox rubbed at his jaw. “This must also be the reason for your strange way of speaking.”

“And your clothing,” Briar added.

“The undergarments with the strange illustrations,” Lake said. “I’ve seen them too.”

“Exactly.” I smiled. It was the first time Lake had spoken up. Maybe he was feeling more comfortable.

He averted his gaze. “People like me don’t exist in this world you come from?”

“No,” I answered, my smile slipping. “That’s one reason why this world is so much better. Because you’re in it.”

His gaze shot back up to mine, and his ears did that cute wiggling thing.

“As for how I was transported here,” I continued, “Lupin has a shop. Apparently, it moves around and appears to people who need help. Like lost souls or whatever. Anyway. I came across the shop on my birthday. Lupin gave me a stone and told me to make a wish from the heart. It being my birthday was supposed to increase the magic power or something. So I made a wish, not expecting it to be real. Next thing I knew, I woke up here to your cheerful face.” I aimed the last sentence at Maddox.

“A wish brought you here?” he asked.

“Y-Yeah. That’s why I’ve been so weird and secretive. Lupin’s the only one who knows about it.”

“Why did he come to you during the Festival of Lights?” Briar pushed his glasses up his nose. Either a nervous tic or

one derived from the eagerness to learn more.

“Because he needed my final answer. After I came to Bremloc, Lupin said he could reverse the wish but would need the power of the summer equinox to do it. So he gave me until the festival to make my decision.” I looked between the three of them. “And I chose to stay.”

Maddox exhaled and sat back on the bed. “You nearly left us? Left me?”

Damn if that didn’t cause a deep ache in my heart. I sat beside him. “The answer was right in front of me the whole time. It just took me a while to see it. But I promise I’m not going anywhere, Captain. I love you too much to even think about going somewhere else.” I linked our fingers, laying my head on his shoulder. “This is my home. With all of you.”

He exhaled again, this one shakier. He lightly squeezed my fingers.

“Why was Lupin here tonight?” Briar asked.

“To make my head explode.” I sighed. “I didn’t expect to see him again and panicked because I thought he came to send me back to my old world. Honestly, I still don’t know why he was here. He mentioned something about my fate and how I’d set a path into motion by opening my café. I just don’t know what, and he wouldn’t tell me more.”

More silence. They seemed to be trying to process the information, so I gave them a moment to do so. Doing my best to keep my mouth shut.

It was difficult.

“So,” I said after five whole seconds. “Any questions? Concerns? Speak now or forever hold your peace. Well, not really. You can ask questions later if you want. I know this is a lot to wrap your head around.”

“It makes a lot of sense actually,” Briar said. “I knew you were different from the first moment we met. Your aura, your light, was like a balm to my weary soul.”

Maddox huffed. “He was my light first.”

Briar rolled his eyes.

“That’s all you guys have to say? I’m from another world. Aren’t you... I don’t know, freaked out? Confused or afraid? Worried I’m some evil, time-jumping warlord or something?”

“An evil, time-jumping warlord?” Maddox’s lips twitched. “You’re much too clumsy for that.”

“Hey, I’m being serious.” I thumped him on the chest.

He snatched hold of my hand, turning to face me on the bed. “As am I.” He kissed my knuckle. “I don’t fear you, sweetheart. No matter where you’re from. Whether it’s from this world or one beyond my reach, that won’t change. You make me feel more alive than I’ve ever been. The only thing I fear is living in a world where you don’t exist.”

My body felt all wobbly as I held his blue-eyed gaze, his confession hanging in the air between us. “So you guys believe me?”

“Of course.” Briar stepped over to the bed and brushed his fingers over the side of my hair, tucking the strands behind my ear. “During my research, I’ve come across all sorts of magic. The type you describe is rare but very real. Powerful too.

There are stories, legends really, that speak of people who've traveled across the cosmos, going from one dimension to another."

"Aliens," I said with a dramatic flutter of my hand. None of them understood the reference. Another word they didn't know. I sighed. A loud grumble then filled the air, and all eyes moved to my belly. I patted it once. "Oops. We never ate dinner."

And now that the worst was over—me telling them the truth and them not screaming and running for the hills—I no longer felt like I was going to puke. My appetite had returned with a vengeance.

"Come here, muffin." Maddox pulled me into his arms before standing from the bed. I faced him instead of his usual throw-Evan-over-his-shoulder routine. "We'll get you some food."

"This is new." I hooked my legs around his waist and locked my wrists at his nape. "You carrying me *down* the stairs instead of up them."

"I'll carry you anywhere." He bumped his nose to mine. "Even if you are a... what did you call it? An alien."

A giggle escaped my lips. Damn him.

The four of us went to the kitchen. Maddox placed me on top of the counter and stepped over to the stove.

"Oh, what's this?" I asked, staring at the wide expanse of his back muscles as he grabbed a skillet.

"I'm making dinner." Maddox winked at me over his shoulder. "Now sit there and hush."

“Hush? Do you know who you’re talking to?”

Briar laughed before nearing the pantry and grabbing a few things. He carried them over to the counter. “*We* are cooking you dinner.”

Maddox eyed him, expression serious. But he couldn’t hide the joy in his blue eyes even if his mouth stayed firm.

Lake settled at the table near the window, tossing me a soft smile when our stares met. He had been so close to leaving before Lupin popped in. I was happy he’d decided to stay. Even if it was only for dinner.

After Maddox and Briar cooked—working together to make pan-fried potatoes with onions and blackened cod—we sat together to eat. Although I wouldn’t call them friends, or even *friendly*, the tension that had lingered between Lake and Maddox had faded a little. Enough that neither of them snarled or glared at the other through the duration of the meal.

“Since it’s late, you can stay in the guest room again,” Maddox told Lake as I washed dishes from dinner. I had refused to let them cook *and* clean up. “But Evan sleeps with me tonight.”

“I understand,” Lake said. “I’ll be sure to leave early in the morning.”

“Not too early, I hope.” I set the last plate aside and dried my hands on a rag. I walked over and slid my arms around him. “I want to see you before you go.”

Lake gave a subtle nod. “Very well.”

“Yay.” I hugged him tighter.

He pressed his face into my hair as he returned my embrace. His chest rose and fell, and a soft noise rumbled in his throat.

Briar smiled at Maddox. “We’re not the only ones who fall victim to his charm. Whatever he wants, he gets.”

Maddox made a sound, almost a scoff but not quite. His eyes then found me, and the softness in them skyrocketed my heart rate.

I walked Lake to his room, and once outside the door, he grabbed my shirt to pull me closer. Our lips met, soft at first, before he deepened it. The scent of the forest surrounded me, like evergreen trees, spring water, and leaves in early morning just as the sun hit them, shining on the dew.

Just like with my other two men, I wanted to bottle up the scent and keep it with me.

“Good night, Evan,” Lake whispered against my lips. His hand slid through the back of my hair. “If you need me, say my name. No matter where I am, no matter how far away, I’ll find you.”

Why did that make me feel like crying?

“You better still be here when I wake up,” I said.

I felt him smile. “I will be.”

After kissing him one last time, I made a quick stop in the bathroom to brush my teeth and then walked to my room, finding Briar and Maddox in bed waiting for me. Both were shirtless. Both equally delicious, just in different ways.

“Get over here,” Maddox said, patting the empty spot between them.

The blood heated in my veins. I recognized that look. The moment I crawled into bed, he was going to rip off my clothes, pin me down, and devour every inch of me. And fuck, I wanted to be devoured. By both of them.

They didn’t disappoint.

Afterward, I lay in a sweaty heap between their equally sweaty bodies, the three of us fighting hard to catch our breaths.

“I think you killed me,” I panted.

“Then how is it possible I’m still being blessed by that mouth of yours?” Maddox responded, poking the corner of my lips.

“I’m a ghost. An alien ghost. And I don’t think I come in peace. I come loudly and usually with a few curse words thrown in.”

Briar’s body shook with a laugh as he snuggled against my other side.

My eyes closed as the seconds passed, our breaths slowly evening out. Briar smoothed his fingertips up and down my arm while Maddox pressed his lips to my brow. I was almost asleep when they started talking.

“Briar?” Maddox’s voice was soft.

“Yes?”

“I struggle to wrap my head around what he told us. I believe him, of course.” Maddox petted my hair. “But it’s

difficult to imagine the kind of world he described. One without magic, demi-humans, or any of the things we see every day here.”

“I agree it was quite the shock,” Briar responded. “In the beginning, anyway. Perhaps it’s easier for me to understand since I’m more familiar with magic.”

“One of the only areas you best me in.”

Briar snorted. “Must you always be competing against me?”

“Only in jest,” Maddox said, and then his voice took on a serious edge. “Why do you think he chose to leave his world?”

“I’m unsure.” Briar held me tighter. “Yet, I’m thankful, whatever the reason. Now that he’s with us, I can’t imagine a life without him.”

“Neither can I.” Maddox pressed his muscled body against mine. I loved how he made me feel so small. “The magic that brought him to us... it can’t be reversed, can it?”

There was a pause. “Nothing is impossible when dealing with magic. Lupin needed the power of the summer equinox to potentially reverse the spell. But Evan chose to stay with us. I don’t foresee that changing. Do you?”

“No.” Maddox’s big arm curved around my stomach. “He loves us as deeply as we love him. I believe that with my entire being.”

“As do I,” Briar said. A brief silence followed. “You met with the king today.”

“I did.”

“Tell me something, Maddox. This conflict with the bandits. How serious is the threat?”

The breath stilled in my lungs. I wanted to know the answer too. But I was supposed to be asleep. Before either of them could suspect I was being a little eavesdropper, I faked a sleepy sigh and snuggled more into Maddox’s chest. It would be awkward for them to know I’d been awake the whole time.

“You know I’m not at liberty to give details,” Maddox answered, caressing my cheek. “All you need to know is it’s nothing my knights and I can’t handle.”

“Fair enough,” Briar said softly. “If you need anything, please don’t hesitate to ask me. I may not be strong in terms of physical strength, but I’m knowledgeable in many areas of magic. And today, I finally managed to craft a strong protection charm. Or, at least, I believe it’s strong. I’ll need to fully test it to be certain.”

So badly I wanted to throw my arms around Briar and congratulate him. He’d been working so hard on that spell. But I was still supposed to be asleep, so I fought the urge. Barely.

“I knew you could do it,” Maddox said in a lighter tone. One that reflected the pride he felt for our physician’s success.

“It’s strange, really,” Briar said with a lilt to his voice. “For the past few months, I’ve only managed to craft a basic charm. I couldn’t figure out why I wasn’t getting the results I expected.”

“But you did.”

“I did,” Briar agreed. “And I believe Evan is the reason.”

“How so?”

“Well.” Briar pushed his face into my hair. “As I was working on the spell earlier, I thought of Evan and how I wanted nothing more than to protect him. That’s when I felt the power radiate from the charm.”

“Your desire to keep him safe strengthened your magic?”

“Yes. I think so. That’s the key I was missing. Any magic wielder can follow steps to cast a spell, but it’s what’s inside the mage that matters. That inner light, the motivation behind the magic, is where the true power lies.”

Throat tight and my eyes stinging, I stayed as still as possible.

“I feel the same,” Maddox said. “I possess no magic, yet when I’m away on missions, the thought of returning home to Evan is what gives me strength. When I’m facing a foe, recalling his face calms my mind and ensures I never falter in step.”

Briar exhaled a short laugh. “It seems we’re both hopeless romantics. He holds our hearts in his hands.”

“That he does,” Maddox said. “To test your protection charm, we can give it to the wolf and throw daggers at him.”

Okay, I nearly blew my cover to tell him to be nice. It was so freaking hard to keep my mouth shut.

“Lake is making progress,” Briar responded, taking the words right out of my head. “And in only a short amount of time too. It’s a testament to how strongly he feels for Evan. You have to admit it brings you some relief to know there’s one more person who will fight to keep our male safe.”

“You make a fair point,” Maddox mumbled. “It does reassure me. When we’re gone, I know Lake will be here watching over Evan. But I still say we should throw daggers at him for good measure.”

I dozed off after that, the long day finally catching up to me despite my eagerness to keep listening. I didn’t even have time to obsess over Lupin and what bad thing may or may not happen to me.

I just slept. Happy and sated. My men knew the truth about me and wanted me anyway. That was all I could ask for.

Chapter Eleven

A Royal Meeting

“Midday greetings, mister Evan,” the castle guard said as I reached the main courtyard. Such a drastic change compared to the first time I’d met him. He’d nearly sliced me into a million little pieces, thinking I was a trespasser.

“Good afternoon.” I held up the basket of goodies I’d brought. “Do you want a cookie?”

The guard’s serious expression bloomed into an eager smile before falling just as quickly. “I shouldn’t. I’m on duty.”

An excuse I’d heard before. Those poor men, thinking they had to deny themselves a treat just because they were on the job.

“Consider it an energy boost then.” I opened the lid. “I have sugar and lemon. Take your pick. Or grab one of each.” I leaned in closer and whispered, “I promise your secret is safe with me.”

With a shy smile, he grabbed a lemon cookie and took a bite. A bite he nearly choked on as another man then rounded the corner.

“I’ll take it from here, Beau,” Sir Noah said as he approached, dressed in all black. His raven hair had been trimmed since I’d last seen him, shorter on the sides now and a bit longer on top.

“I forced him to eat it,” I quickly said.

Noah’s gaze fell to the crumbs on the front of the guard’s uniform before his whiskey eyes shifted back to me. “Prince Sawyer sent me to retrieve you while he finishes his lessons. Please follow me.”

“Okay.” I gave a thumbs-up to Beau, a sign he was in the clear, before following Noah. The knight wasn’t much of a talker, but I tended to talk enough for the both of us. “How’s it going? How have you been?”

“I’ve been well.”

“Want a cookie? I brought sugar just for you.”

Noah’s strict demeanor faltered, if only for a moment. He then focused back ahead, saying nothing further as he led me to the gazebo in the royal garden. Once there, he nodded to me. “They will join you shortly.”

He then took his leave.

I stepped beneath the shaded roof of the gazebo and set the basket on the round table. A three-tiered platter held an assortment of fruit and cheese on one level and pastries and tarts on the others. Plates were stacked beside it, along with silverware and cloth napkins. Alone, I admired the surrounding greenery and flowers and listened to the trickle of water from the fountain.

Work had kept me busy as of late, but with Miles settling in at the café and helping in the kitchen, I had been able to step away that afternoon to meet Prince Sawyer and Kuya for lunch. It had been too long since I'd seen them.

“Kuya missed Evan so much!” a voice came from behind me before a pressure landed on my back. He then hopped off and rushed over to the basket to peek under the lid. “Kuya missed Evan’s cakes too.”

“You missed my cakes the *most*, you mean,” I said.

My cat-boy bestie flashed his canines, his rainbow eyes crinkling at the edges. “Evan is Kuya’s friend and makes him happy. He also bakes yummy treats that make Kuya’s tummy happy too.” He grabbed a strawberry cupcake and shoved it into his face, smearing frosting around his lips and on the tip of his nose.

“Apologies for the wait,” Prince Sawyer said as he approached the gazebo and took the two steps up. “My lessons ran longer than expected.”

“No problem at all.” I nodded to the basket. “I know the castle chefs make an awesome lunch, but I brought croissant sandwiches with ham and cheese if you want one. There’s cupcakes and cookies too.”

“That sounds divine.” Sawyer clasped my forearm in greeting before taking a seat at the table.

“Eh, I wouldn’t say it’s divine. Definitely not fancy enough for a classy prince like yourself.” I grinned as I sat across from him. I was teasing, of course. He enjoyed the

simpler things in life, not possessing even an ounce of the spoiled rich boy behavior his older brother had.

“You made it, so it’s perfect.”

“Perfect and yummy.” Kuya hopped into the seat to Sawyer’s right, bringing his legs up into the chair as he devoured his third cupcake.

Prince Sawyer softly laughed as he spotted the frosting. “What am I going to do with you, you precious kitten?” He unfolded a napkin and wiped Kuya’s lips and nose. “There. All clean.”

Kuya’s reddish-brown ears wiggled as their gazes met, another smile not far behind.

Servants carried out platters of food, a selection of white fish, vegetables, and bread still warm from the oven. They filled our goblets with ice-cold water before placing the pitchers on a cart-like table several feet from us.

Sawyer thanked them before grabbing one of the croissants I’d brought. That made me smile. He then placed a piece of fish on Kuya’s plate. “Eat this before you have any more sweets.”

Kuya had no trouble obliging. He dove into the fish with his bare hands, bouncing happily in his chair as he chewed.

We caught up as we ate lunch. Sawyer asked me about my café, and I asked about his studies and if he’d read any good books lately—a pastime we shared.

Neither of us mentioned the baron’s daughter, Alina. I was sure in the almost two weeks since we’d last spoken, he’d

more than likely visited with her again, or at least, received news about his anticipated engagement.

“How are the arrangements coming along for the ball?” Sawyer asked as we left the shade of the gazebo to stroll through the royal garden.

A much-needed stroll to help me walk off my lunch. I had stuffed myself like a Thanksgiving turkey and felt like I’d explode any second.

“Great,” I answered. “I’ve planned most of the menu. Since it’ll be in the autumn, my flavor profile will lean toward pumpkin, cinnamon, and apple desserts. I know some great drink recipes too, like apple cider and pumpkin spice lattes.”

“Pumpkin spice?” Sawyer asked. “I’ve heard of pumpkin being used in bread, but we don’t have many desserts with it. I’m excited to try your creations.”

“I hope it goes over well. I’m kinda nervous about it.” Nervous about introducing the new recipes *and* about the ball.

“Kuya will eat Evan’s pumpkin desserts and tell him if they’re gross and need to be thrown away.” He walked on Sawyer’s other side. Instead of keeping to the path, however, he went through the grass barefooted, stopping every so often to admire a flower or bug.

“Thanks for the confidence, Kuya. Means a lot.”

“Evan is welcome.”

Sawyer laughed. “I have no doubts they will be delicious. Isn’t that right, Kuya?”

Kuya had knelt down to a patch of dandelions and gave me a toothy grin.

The hot summer day wasn't too uncomfortable. Puffy white clouds floated across the sky, occasionally passing in front of the massive orange death ray trying to kill us. The breeze, though warm, helped too.

"This is nice," Sawyer said, pausing beside a tall oak tree and closing his eyes. The wind swept through his golden hair as he stayed that way. When his eyes opened again, there was a pained gleam in them. "A date has been set."

"A date for what?"

He looked at me. "My engagement to Lady Alina."

Kuya had been swinging from a low-hanging branch of the tree and dropped to the grass. His playfulness vanished.

"Our engagement will be announced during the autumn ball," Sawyer continued. "A suitable time, I suppose, since all the nobles and important families from across the realm will be in attendance."

"Wow." I blew out a breath. "That's... um. Unfortunate."

"Unfortunate? Most would congratulate me upon hearing the news."

I rubbed at the back of my neck. "Well, if you were happy about it, I'd congratulate you. But you're not."

"Your honesty is one thing I admire about you, Evan. You always say how you feel."

"Even when I shouldn't. I should work on getting a filter."

“No. I value your honesty. Just as I value our friendship.” Sawyer’s chin wobbled. “And you’re right. I... I’m not happy about the engagement.” His face crumpled before quickly smoothing back out. All except for the slight tremble of his bottom lip. He was trying so hard to hold himself together. “I wish I could disappear, Evan. I don’t want this life.” Tears welled in his eyes. “I don’t want to marry her.”

“I’m sorry.” Nothing I said could change anything. “It’s not fair.”

Sawyer turned away to wipe at his eyes. He cleared his throat and faced me again, forcing back the grief trying to spill out of him. “Please pay me no mind. Protesting like a child is unbecoming of a prince.”

“I don’t see it that way,” I said. “You have every right to be upset.”

“Marriage is expected of me. And Lady Alina is a good match. She’s compassionate and beautiful. She’s also nice to Kuya, which means the absolute world to me.”

Kuya snarled his upper lip and picked at loose bark on the tree trunk.

“My father had an arranged marriage to my mother.” The more Sawyer spoke, the less like himself he sounded. He sounded... mechanical. Emotionless. Not like the kindhearted prince I knew. “They were little more than strangers before their wedding day too. Mutual respect eventually formed between them.”

“Respect isn’t love,” I said.

“Not all of us can be so fortunate as to find love *and* hold on to it. I was foolish for thinking I could.” Sawyer deeply inhaled, held the breath, then expelled it. When he smiled at me, it was too rigid and didn’t reach his eyes. “I’m afraid I must apologize to you yet again. I’m the worst sort of company in this state.”

“Don’t be sorry. That’s what friends are for. To listen when you need someone to talk to. When you need someone to lean on. So don’t ever hesitate to lean on me, okay?”

“I appreciate that more than you know,” Sawyer responded, his stoic mask chipping away a little. “How are you and your men?”

“We’re good,” I said, not wanting to say much more. Telling him about my happy love life seemed shitty considering his situation.

“You can speak of them, you know,” Sawyer said in a softer tone, as if reading my mind. “It pleases me to hear of your happiness.”

My men’s faces appeared in my head. Maddox with his scowl that never failed to transition to a smile when I wrapped my arms around him. Briar’s gentle hazel eyes. Lake’s perked up ears and wagging tail when he was excited. Each of them had burrowed into my heart.

“I have a third now,” I said. “He’s been with me, with us I should say, for a little over a week.”

Officially, anyway.

“Oh?” Sawyer’s interest was piqued. I got the feeling he needed the distraction from his own thoughts. “Is it anyone I

know? Sir Callum, perhaps? Or one of the others... Baden, Quincy, or Duke?"

"You learned the names of the knights?" I asked, impressed.

"Of course," Sawyer answered. "They risk their lives for Bremloc and every person in it. Our kingdom would've been overrun by Lord Onyx and his demonic army long ago if not for the knights. The least I can do is learn their names to properly address them."

Yeah, he would make an amazing king. Way better than Cedric. If only Sawyer had been born first.

"It's not one of the knights," I responded, although being with Callum was an interesting thought. He was a cinnamon roll I wouldn't mind snuggling to death. "You haven't met him. But... you've heard of him."

Worry briefly cinched in my chest. Worry for Lake rather than for myself. If the wrong person knew of him, he'd be put in danger. But I trusted Sawyer.

Kuya stepped closer to me and sniffed. His rainbow eyes then widened a fraction. "Kuya smells that Evan-thieving wolf. Must Kuya bite him again?"

A laugh bubbled from me. "Please don't bite him."

Before I'd left the cottage, Lake had pulled me into the hallway outside the kitchen and kissed me, his lips trailing from my mouth and down my neck where he'd lightly nipped at my skin. Placing his scent on me, no doubt, given Kuya's reaction.

“Wolf? The one from the forest?” Sawyer asked. When I nodded, still too nervous to say anything, he placed a hand on my shoulder and patted it once. “Your secret is safe with me. After all, you know one of mine as well.” His gaze flickered to Kuya, who had dropped back to the grass, smiling at the ladybug crawling on his finger.

“I wish it didn’t have to be a secret,” I said. “For me or for you.”

He offered me a thin smile. “As do I. How grand life would be if wishes were so easily granted.”

“If you could wish for anything, what would it be?” I asked.

Sawyer considered the question. “Equality for my people. *All* of them. It pains my heart to see demi-humans mistreated simply for existing. They deserve the same quality of life and opportunities as everyone else.”

“You wouldn’t wish for your own happiness?”

He watched Kuya continue to play with the ladybug. “A world where he’s safe and cared for, where he can walk through the kingdom without facing the contempt of small-minded fools, is all I want, Evan.”

The thump of boots and the clank of armor came from the path behind us. I turned to see a group of armed guards. Three of them appeared to be knights. I recognized Sir Anton amongst them, a knight of the Royal Order with dark skin and amber eyes. I had briefly met him months ago while having lunch with Sawyer in the garden.

A man then stepped from the center of the cluster of knights. He stood at maybe six feet, with a stocky frame and short blond hair. A thin beard covered his jaw and he walked with a slight limp on his left side.

“Father,” Sawyer said in surprise.

Well, he certainly wasn't the only one surprised. Father? As in the freaking *king*? Not for the first time, I was then smacked with the panic that came from meeting royalty. Should I bow? Fall to my knees in front of him, keeping my gaze on the ground?

Kuya leapt up from the grass and grabbed the branch he'd been swinging from earlier, easing himself up into the tree. To hide?

I feel ya, bestie. I wanted to hide right then too.

Sir Noah, who had been quietly following us from a short distance, bowed his head.

“Sawyer,” the king said in a smooth cadence. I'd expected him to sound gruffer, matching his sturdy build. As he stopped in front of us, I noticed light scars on his neck, peeking above his collar. One disappeared into his hairline. From his time in battle, no doubt. “Enjoying the warm day, are you?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Sawyer bowed his head to him.

Following his lead, I mirrored the action. I wasn't foolish enough to say anything unless spoken to directly. Prince Buttwad, or Prince Cedric as everyone else knew him as, had taught me that little lesson not so long ago. Commoners like myself had no business speaking to someone of royal blood.

“Ah,” the king said. “This must be the man who owns the café. Evan, I presume?”

I lifted my head. “Yes, Your Majesty.” I wondered if Sawyer had used that title on purpose so I wouldn’t blather like an idiot trying to decide how to address him. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

The king’s face paled as our eyes met. “You...” His jaw loosened, and his lips parted. The furrow of his brow caused deep grooves in his forehead. “How are you...”

When he stepped toward me, every muscle in my body tensed, and my heartbeat came to a screeching halt. My lungs stopped working too. The army of tiny Evans that kept my body running must’ve all chose that moment to take a coffee break.

“Father? What’s wrong?” Sawyer’s confusion was evident in his voice.

Another emotion we shared because I was confused too. And slightly mortified by the intensity of the king’s gaze on me. Did I have something on my face? Jam from the fruit tart? Crumbs? A deadly venomous spider?

King Eidolon reached me and lifted a hand to my face, his stunned expression morphing into something almost agonizing. He brushed his fingertips along my jaw before withdrawing his hand and regaining his composure. “Forgive me. You just remind me of someone.”

“Who?” I asked before I could stop myself. Then, remembering who the hell I was addressing, I quickly added, “Um, Your Majesty.”

Not sure what I expected, but it sure as hell wasn't to see him smile. There was something sad about it. "Someone I knew long ago." He touched his chest and tipped his head to me. "I regret that our meeting didn't come sooner, Evan. My son speaks highly of you and your pastries."

Sawyer clearly took after his father. Both had a gentleness to them that most wouldn't expect from someone of their status.

"Prince Sawyer flatters me," I responded, feeling oddly at ease in his presence. Well, more so than earlier anyway, when my whole body had been on the verge of shutting down, all the tiny Evans abandoning ship. Thankfully, they had returned.

"I'm told you accepted the invitation to the autumn ball," the king said.

"Yes, Your Majesty. To say I'm honored is an understatement."

"Bremloc is honored to count you among the fine establishments that help it flourish," he said. "Since the opening of your café, we've seen a rise in profits all across the kingdom as people travel here to visit your business. Inns, taverns, and sellers in the marketplace have all been prosperous. For that, I thank you."

"Oh. Well. You're welcome." My cheeks heated with the praise. I had never been able to accept it well. "I'm happy to be of service, Your Majesty."

"King Eidolon," one of the knights said. His uniform was more lavish than the rest, the insignias on his shoulder and chest more ornate. Gray streaked through his dark hair,

showing a bit in his close-shaven beard as well. “I apologize for the interruption, but you’ll be late for your afternoon meeting if we don’t leave now.”

“Ah, Captain Vander.” The king smiled at him. “Don’t you know a king is never late?”

Captain Vander? Damn. He was the captain of the Royal Order. And if I remembered right, he was the king’s personal knight. His bodyguard, sworn to protect him above all else.

The knight’s cheek twitched, though he kept a straight face. It reminded me of my own captain. “I’m sure the archduke of Exalos would disagree with that assertion.”

“Bah.” King Eidolon waved his hand. “Let him disagree all he wants. However, seeing as to how I’m in no mood for his sharp tongue and the way his face reddens like a tomato when angry, I suppose we should leave to spare ourselves his wrath.”

“Be well, Father.” Sawyer bowed his head.

I did the same.

“And you, my boy.” The king turned and joined the armed men on the path. His gaze wandered back over to me, and that haunted look in his eyes reemerged. He then continued on his way.

“That was terrifying,” I whispered. “Is my head still attached? Am I in one piece? I can’t feel anything from the neck down. I think I’m in shock.” A sharp sting then dug into my forearm, and I jerked back. “Ow!”

Kuya wiped at his mouth and rose to his full height. The little brat had bitten me. “Evan can feel his arm now. The

shock is gone.”

Sawyer threw his head with a laugh before trying to stifle it. “Now, Kuya. It’s not polite to bite people.”

“But Kuya helped,” he said with big, innocent eyes. “Kuya has earned more cake now.”

“You know,” I said, rubbing at my arm. “In his own way, he probably did think he was helping.” He hadn’t bitten me hard anyway. No teeth marks. There was only a slight pink blot. And slobber.

Beaming with a smile, Kuya grabbed Sawyer’s hand and pulled him along as he continued through the grass. I caught up and walked beside them.

More clouds had rolled in, blocking the worst of the sun’s sweltering rays. The added shade was a nice reprieve from the heat.

“My father’s behavior was... odd when he met you.”

“I feel like if I agree with you, my head really will be chopped off.”

He snickered. “Your head is safe, I promise.”

Sir Noah followed several paces behind us as we left the garden and entered a small courtyard, taking a narrow path that cut through a grove of trees and led to a pond. The same pond I’d caught sight of the time we’d eaten lunch inside the castle. Lily pads and flowers decorated the surface, and the trees had sweeping branches that brushed the top of the water.

“Who do you think King Eidolon mistook me for?” I asked.

“I’m not sure, to be honest,” Sawyer answered. “Perhaps it was someone he knew in his youth, from when he was our age.”

A strange sensation sank into my gut. I felt like I was on the cusp of something huge, some knowledge that would turn my world upside down. Or maybe it was only indigestion.

“I hope I’m not taking too much of your time,” Sawyer said, staring at a frog as it leapt off a pad and into the water with a little *blip*.

“You’re not,” I answered. “I hired a new guy who knows his way around the kitchen, so I’m confident he has everything under control for now. His name’s Miles, and he’s a demi-bear.”

“You hired a demi-human?” Sawyer asked with a touch of awe.

“Yep. When I first met him, he was being tossed out of the bakery in the marketplace. All he’d wanted was a job. So I gave him one. He actually made the lemon cookies I brought today.”

Sawyer smiled. “Please tell Miles the cookies were delicious.”

“I will.”

A short silence followed. Kuya knelt by the edge of the pond, knees drawn to his chest, and glided his hand over the top of the water. When a fish swam past, his ears shot up, as did his tail.

“I’m so torn, Evan.”

“About what?”

“Lady Alina will be arriving at the castle in three days’ time,” Sawyer said, watching as Kuya hunkered low, his tail swirling in the air behind him. “We’ll spend time together. A prelude to the announcement of our engagement, I’m sure. Kuya... he...” His chin trembled. “He won’t handle it well. Frankly, neither will I. How cruel to have exactly what you want right before you but be forbidden from having it.”

Kuya batted at the water with his palm, a snaggle tooth flashing as he grinned. More fish circled below him, as if they knew he wouldn’t hurt them; he only wanted to play.

“He can come to my café while you’re busy,” I said, understanding his unspoken request. “And I’ll feed him lots of cake.”

“Cake?” Kuya snapped his head toward us.

When Sawyer laughed, it sounded a bit broken. Much like his heart, I’d wager. “Thank you, Evan. Truly.” That brokenness then reflected in his grass-green eyes. “What pains me more than anything? Knowing how upset he is about the engagement. I’d rather take a hundred daggers to the chest than see him shed a single tear because of me.”

A few minutes later, an older man approached. “It’s time for your afternoon fencing lesson, my prince.”

Sawyer sighed and clasped my forearm. “Thank you for joining me for lunch. It’s been lovely.”

“Don’t poke your eye out,” I teased, before imitating one of the fencing moves I’d seen on a TV show.

“I’m not clumsy like you,” Sawyer said, amused. Good. I hadn’t wanted our visit to end on such a sad note, with him looking so fragile.

“Oh. That cut deep.” I put a hand to my chest. “I thought we were friends.”

“We are. And I don’t take it for granted. Until next time.” He gave me another smile and guided Kuya away from the pond, following behind the older man.

Sir Noah bowed at their departure before turning to me. “I’ll take you home.”

“You don’t have to,” I said as we walked along the path to leave the area. “I know I don’t have the best track record when it comes to finding my way around, but I’m pretty sure I can make it there without getting lost.”

Noah kept his gaze forward.

Silence hung in the air, nothing but the sound of our steps filling the space between us. As that silence drew on, I sighed. “This is going to be a long trip back if we don’t talk.”

Again, he didn’t respond.

“Where are we going?” I asked as we passed the trail I always took when leaving the castle grounds.

“To the stable,” Noah answered. “The day is too hot for us to walk to town, so I’m taking you on horseback.”

“Oh. Cool.”

He gave a curt nod and said nothing further.

“I’ve never been to the Royal Order’s encampment,” I said after ten-whole seconds. It was probably a new record.

“Now, the Second Order? Definitely. I basically lived there for a while. They’re my boys. Hungry boys too. I swear, every time I cook, they gobble it up like ravenous lions. I love it though. It makes me happy when people enjoy my food.”

Noah exhaled.

“Am I annoying you? I tend to talk a lot.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“Sorry,” I said weakly, then pressed my lips together.

Noah’s whiskey eyes shifted to me. “No reason to apologize. I agreed that you talked a lot, but I never said anything about you annoying me.”

My smile returned.

Buildings came into view, and a horse whinnied from nearby. A few steps later, we arrived at their encampment. It mostly looked like the one for the Second Order, apart from a slightly bigger stable. The barracks appeared smaller though. Probably because some of the knights, like Noah, lived in the castle. Their unit wasn’t as large as the other two orders either, since they were the elite among the knights.

Glorified bodyguards, really. But they wouldn’t be so revered if they weren’t the best of the best.

Once we reached the stable, a boy no older than sixteen exited with a saddled horse. A page boy maybe? Or squire. He seemed sweet, though, as he smiled at me and went on his way.

Noah helped me into the saddle and swung his leg over to sit behind me. Maddox would’ve been irritated if he’d seen us.

He didn't like me riding with anyone but him.

As Noah the Silent escorted me home, I took in the scenery of rolling green hills and the dense forest of trees. The sun heated the top of my head, and for a brief moment, I missed air conditioning. But the love and friendships I'd found in Bremloc was worth giving up those modern conveniences for. Once passing through a section of town, the cobblestone street transitioned to dirt as we turned down the narrow path that led to the cottage

A flicker of silver from the tree line caught my eye.

Lake.

I smiled. He'd probably sensed me as soon as we'd reached the path and came out to see me the rest of the way home. My stealthy protector.

Noah dismounted from the horse and then helped me down. "May I speak freely?"

"Sure." It was a miracle he was even speaking at all.

He glanced toward the trees. "Be careful who you tell about him."

I froze.

"Don't worry," Noah said, looking back at me. "I share the same views as my prince. However, there are many who would strike him down on sight and without provocation. Many knights among them."

"I'll be careful," I said.

"See to it that he's careful as well. He followed us all the way from the castle."

“He did?”

And in the daylight? What was my wolf thinking? He could've been spotted!

“Yes,” Noah answered. “He’s light-footed and can mask his presence well, but I’m trained to detect even the smallest movement. Captain Maddox has had that same training, as have many other knights from the First and Second Orders. My advice is to tell him to stay behind next time.”

A weird ache gripped my sternum.

Noah stepped into the stirrup and swung his leg over the saddle, taking the reins. “Take care. I’m sure I’ll see you again soon.”

As Noah guided the horse back down the path, I dashed toward the trees. Right as I became enclosed in them, Lake appeared in front of me, smelling like evergreen and a hint of something delicately sweet, like peaches. Hair silver like the moon and eyes like amethyst, he was beautiful and gentle. A shooting star people feared. A star they would shatter into dust if given the chance.

Heaviness pressed on my chest. “You followed me to the castle?”

“To make sure you were safe,” Lake said.

“You could’ve been seen by someone, Lake.” That weird ache dug in deeper. “Sir Noah sensed you.”

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take to keep you safe. Always.” Lake ghosted his fingers over my cheek before finally making contact. His skin was so warm. “Besides, the knight may have

sensed my presence, but he wouldn't have been able to catch me even if he'd wanted to."

"Let's not test that theory, okay?" I leaned into his touch, seeking more of that warmth. "I'd be devastated if something ever happened to you."

"Don't worry about me. I can take care of myself." Lake pressed our lips together. "Your café awaits. It's busy today."

I wrapped my arms around him. "It can wait a while longer."

Chapter Twelve

Bandits are Assholes

“Holy crap, Miles, this is unbelievable.” I squatted at eye level with the counter to admire the dessert in all its glory.

The fifteen layers of sponge cake had chocolate ganache and raspberry jam alternating between them. He had also tempered milk chocolate to perfection—the kind you could see your reflection in it was so damn shiny—and created a design on top of the cake.

“T-Thank you,” Miles said, a blush darkening his full cheeks. “I appreciate you letting me try out the recipe.”

He had asked to come in early that morning before the café opened to use the oven. He lived in the lower district of Bremloc. The buildings were crammed together, each room like a studio apartment. He didn’t have a big enough kitchen, or the equipment, to bake some of the things he wanted to.

“Anytime you want to bake something, just let me know and we’ll make it happen,” I said, then gushed over the cake again. “Look at that delicate detail work. It’s a freaking masterpiece. You should make this for the autumn ball.”

The reminder of the ball jostled the nervous jitters in my stomach. I kept having visions of me tripping and falling on my face in front of all the fancy nobles and royals. Probably while holding a cake, and that cake would then fly out of my hand and land on the king. Or, god forbid, Prince Cedric.

Miles became shy again, his cheeks still with that endearing redness. “I’ll be allowed to attend the ball with you?”

“Of course,” I said, baffled he’d think otherwise. “This café only runs so smoothly because I have you, Peter, and Alice. There’s no way I’d leave any of you behind. We’re a team.”

He smiled before nodding to the cake. “Would you like to taste it?”

“Um, yes. One thousand percent. I need it in my belly.”

Joy radiated from him as he grabbed silverware and a plate. He cut a slice for me and averted his gaze as I took that first bite.

“Oh my god.” I moaned as chocolatey-goodness and raspberry burst across my taste buds. “It tastes just as good as it looks.”

His rounded ears wiggled with the praise. “Please eat as much as you like.”

“Cake!” a voice exclaimed before something slammed into me from behind. “Kuya wants some.”

I had been in the process of taking a second bite and nearly stabbed myself with the fork. As I fought for my life, choking, Kuya snatched my plate and ran away with it.

Miles patted the center of my back. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I choked out. “He tried to kill me, then stole from me.”

Kuya sat at the table, his feet up in the chair as he bent over the plate, shoving cake into his mouth. “Evan is speaking, so Evan will live. Kuya didn’t kill him.”

“Do you like it?” Miles asked, wringing his hands in front of him.

“Miles made this?” Kuya stooped lower to examine it, his reddish-orange tail shooting in the air behind him, the tip curled up and under. “It makes Kuya’s tummy happy. The best cake Kuya’s had all day.”

“Traitor,” I mumbled.

Miles laughed. It had a rich fullness that somehow made him even more wholesome.

I looked toward the archway, expecting to see Noah come in like he normally did when Kuya stopped by unexpectedly. Seconds ticked by with no sign of him. “Did you come alone?”

Kuya had devoured the slice and was slumped in his chair, licking chocolate off his fingers. His expression seemed off, lacking his usual playfulness. His rainbow eyes had lost their shine.

“Kuya?”

He hopped off the chair and rushed from the kitchen.

“Hey! Come back.” I chased after him and stopped in the main dining room. He squatted in a chair at a far table, staring

at me with his ears skyward. When I inched forward, he wiggled a bit, preparing to take off again. “Now’s not the time to play, Kuya. What’s going on? Does Prince Sawyer know you’re here?”

“Prince Sawyer doesn’t care about Kuya anymore.” He jumped from the chair and landed on the balls of his bare feet. “So Kuya ran away.”

“I know that’s not true,” I said. “He loves you.”

“Then why is he with her?”

Her.

“Lady Alina?” I asked.

Kuya bared his teeth, a slight hiss passing between them. Tears glistened in his eyes. “Kuya saw her arrive in a carriage this morning. She was shown to a room in the castle. When Kuya went to find Prince Sawyer, he was on his way to meet her for breakfast. She is stealing Kuya’s prince, and Kuya wants to bite her! But Kuya can’t.”

The heartache in his voice stabbed at my chest.

“I bet he’s worried sick about you. Come on.” I walked closer and held out my hand to him. “I’m gonna take you home.”

“No!” He batted at my fingers. “Kuya will live here with Evan now.” He then shot off toward the reading parlor.

“Stop running away from me dammit.”

Lake stepped in his path and grabbed his shoulders to keep him in place. Probably the only person in the kingdom who could catch him.

“Release Kuya at once!” Kuya thrashed around, biting and scratching at him. “Mean wolf!”

I reached them and exchanged a grateful look with Lake. He nodded once before releasing Kuya and taking several steps back. I then put my arms around Kuya. Instantly, my friend stopped thrashing around.

A strangled little sound tore from Kuya’s throat before he turned to me and pushed his face against my neck. “Evan,” he whimpered as tears wet my shirt. “Kuya’s heart is sad.”

“I know, and I’m so damn sorry.” I petted the back of his hair and let him cry for as long as he needed to. The situation was complicated as hell. Sawyer didn’t want to marry Alina any more than Kuya wanted him to, but there wasn’t much either of them could do about it.

“Mister Kuya?” Miles said a while later. “You can have more cake if you want. I sliced strawberries for you as well.”

Kuya’s ears twitched. “Strawberry?” His voice was muffled against my neck. “Kuya likes strawberries.”

“I’ll give you as many as you like.” Miles held out his hand, a warm smile on his face. Kuya hesitated before grabbing it. The two then returned to the kitchen.

I went over to Lake, wrapping my arms around him. “Thanks for your help.”

“Anytime,” he said, petting my hair in much the same way I had petted Kuya’s. Soothing and making me feel loved at the same time.

“I’ll let him stay for a while, then take him back this afternoon.”

The café opened within the hour, and as customers began filling the dining room, Kuya was back to his usual cheerful and mischievous self. He fluttered around the kitchen and watched Miles and I prepare orders and make more batches of sweets, stealing cupcakes and anything he could get his cute hands on in the process.

Each time Alice walked in after taking a customer's order, Kuya dashed over and snatched the order slip from her hand. One time, he'd tried to eat it. The world's most adorable menace. But at least he wasn't sad any more. That's all that mattered.

Around lunchtime, I made grilled chicken sandwiches for Lake and my staff, using croissants for the bread and loading it with tomato, lettuce, and melted cheese. Kuya had stuffed himself with too many sweets and didn't want to eat. I then packed several sandwiches into a basket, along with an assortment of muffins, before approaching Lake.

"I'm going to take him back to the castle now," I said. "Will you stay here and keep an eye on things?"

Lake's gaze narrowed. "Is this your way of telling me not to follow you?"

"No." A short pause. "Maybe." I sighed before slumping forward and shoving my face against his chest, mumbling, "I just want you to be safe."

"And I want the same for you. So, it seems we're at an impasse."

"I'll be fine. Have you seen Kuya? He can bite and claw better than anyone. Bandits and any other bad guys who might

pop out and try to attack us don't stand a chance against him."

Lake kissed the top of my head. "Are you taking lunch to Maddox and Briar?"

"Yep" I pulled back and situated the basket higher up my forearm. "Thought I'd stop in and see them since I'll be there. I packed extra for Callum and the others too."

Although Lake didn't look happy about it, he agreed to stay at the cottage while I took Kuya to the castle. I didn't have my own horse—not that I could ride it anyway—so we traveled on foot. Kuya didn't seem to mind the long walk, since that was how he'd gotten there in the first place.

"Evan is so slow," he said as we left the busier part of town and strolled along the main road leading to the castle. "Kuya could've been there by now."

"You're so nice to me, Kuya. Makes me feel special."

He tossed me a toothy grin. One that smoothed a bit. "Evan *is* special to Kuya. He's Kuya's most cherished friend."

I smiled. He was mine too.

The guards at the front gate allowed us to pass with no trouble. Not only did they know Kuya, but Sawyer had ordered them to give me free reign of the castle grounds too. It helped that I'd started giving them cookies when our paths crossed.

We were nearly to the castle courtyard when I spotted Sawyer.

He stood in front of the large fountain, one arm resting behind his back like a picture-perfect gentleman. The other

was offered to the pretty brunette at his side. She pointed with glee as a blue bird with a vibrant purple tail landed on the fountain basin and splashed water on itself. The two of them then kept walking, her hand cupping his bicep. Sir Noah trailed behind them.

Kuya stopped, and his tail sagged to the ground. Tears pooled in his rainbow eyes. “He didn’t even realize Kuya was gone.”

But that proved to be untrue as Sawyer’s gaze flickered over to us. His expression had been smooth as he chatted with the woman. Cool and composed. Yet, one look at Kuya, and that mask shattered. He quickly said something to her before leaving her side, walking slow at first but then picking up speed until he was outright running.

“Kuya!”

Kuya made a little sound before springing forward. Toward him. Sawyer’s arm came around Kuya as they met beside a bed of colorful flowers.

“Where have you been?” Sawyer asked, crushing Kuya to his chest. “Dear gods, you gave me quite the fright. I was so worried.”

“Kuya’s sorry.” He nuzzled Sawyer’s chest, purrs rumbling in his throat. “He went to see Evan and ate cake.”

Sawyer nodded to me. “Thank you for bringing him home.”

“Ah, it was no bother. He livened up the café this morning. Besides, I needed the exercise.” I looked at the woman. She stared at us, hand over her eyes to help block the

sun. Noah then said something to her, and the two approached a shaded awning. “Is that Lady Alina?”

“It is,” Sawyer answered, squeezing Kuya once more before, reluctantly, letting him go. We were in public, and he had an image to uphold. “She arrived this morning and will be staying at the castle for several days while I show her around the kingdom. Show her *off* to the kingdom, I should say.”

“Oh, right. You mentioned that last time.”

“Would you like me to introduce you?” he asked.

Kuya hissed low. “She is stealing Kuya’s prince. She won’t steal Kuya’s Evan too.”

Sawyer touched Kuya’s hand. He didn’t grab it; merely pressed their fingers together before pulling away. “No one can steal me from you. My marriage to her won’t change what I feel in my heart.”

Kuya’s purrs intensified.

“Well, I should get going.” I nodded to the basket on my arm. “I have men to feed.”

“How fortunate for your men,” Sawyer said with a smile.

I opened the basket and pulled out a muffin. “I think this has your name on it.”

Kuya snatched the muffin from my hand and ran away with it.

“It appears to have had his name instead.” Sawyer chuckled and nodded to me. “Until next time, my friend.”

I visited Briar and Thane first. They ate their sandwiches while I brewed tea in the small kitchen.

“While I appreciate this, love, I don’t want to take you away from your own work,” Briar said from his seat at the table. He had eaten half his sandwich already. Scarfed it, really.

When I’d arrived, he had been reading through a huge stack of documents from the magical academy. Mages-in-training had submitted research papers about subjects Briar specialized in, and he’d been asked to read them over and provide an assessment of their findings. On top of his own research and heavy workload.

“Be quiet and let me take care of you,” I said.

Thane snorted.

Once the tea was ready, I poured them a cup and carried it over.

“Thank you,” Briar said, then grabbed me before I could walk away. He rested his head on my belly as I stood beside his chair.

“You’re welcome, Doc.” I wove my fingers through the light-brown strands of his hair. “I better get these muffins to Maddox.”

He lightly laughed. “Yes, you should. It will brighten his day.”

“Well, being able to see both of you has brightened mine.” I bent and pecked a kiss on Briar’s lips. “See you this evening.”

The little stirrings of happiness in my chest swirled even more as I left the clinic and headed toward the knights’ barracks. The clang of swords against shields and grunts reached my ears as I neared the enclosure of buildings. Knights trained in the field to the right, some of the newer recruits by the look of it since I didn’t recognize them.

A pressure landed on my shoulder.

Shrieking, I flipped around and lost my balance as I did.

Maddox caught me against his chest. “Still so clumsy. What am I going to do with you?”

“It’s your fault.” I bumped my fist against his pec. “You almost made me drop your muffins.”

“My muffins?” His blue eyes dropped to the basket.

“Well, I don’t think you deserve them now.” I stepped back from his large body and held the basket away from him.

It was then snatched from my hand.

“What do we have here?” Callum asked before opening the lid. “Oh, gods, yes. Banana muffins. Just what I was craving.”

“You keep your grubby hands off them,” Maddox said. “Those are mine.”

“Says who?”

“Says your goddamn captain. Now hand them over.”

I laughed so hard I snorted.

Unfortunately, that's the moment when all hell broke loose.

"Captain Maddox!" a man shouted as he rode up on horseback. He wore armor from the Third Order, and his breastplate was banged up and bloody. His sleeves were tattered, and blood trickled down his face, covering one eye. As the horse came to a sharp stop in the yard, the man slumped forward in the saddle, nearly falling off.

An arrow protruded from his back.

Knights who stood close by dropped everything and rushed over to help him from the saddle and onto the grass, keeping him propped up. One of them shouted for a healer, and another knight jumped on the horse and took off toward the clinic.

"What happened?" Maddox knelt beside the injured man.

"B-Bandits," he responded. "My party was escorting a merchant caravan from the n-next town over when they attacked us."

"How many?"

"Too many, sir. Fifty. Maybe m-more. M-my commanding officer ordered me t-to leave and get reinforcements. But there's s-so many, sir. Too many." The man's eyes blew wide as he grabbed the front of Maddox's shirt with a shaking hand. "It's a s-slaughter. I can still hear their screams."

Maddox grabbed the knight's hand. "Tell me your name."

"Neville, s-sir."

“You bring honor to Bremloc, Neville,” Maddox said, the edges of his eyes tight. A look I knew well. He was upset but trying not to show it.

I knelt beside them, my eyes stinging.

“I d-don’t want to die,” Neville said, tears mixing with the blood staining his cheeks. “I-I’m scared.”

“Do not fear death,” Maddox gently said. “A warrior’s paradise waits for you on the other side.”

The knight’s eyes then glazed over, and a final exhale left his lips. I hadn’t known a thing about Neville, but my heart hurt at his loss. He meant something to someone. A son, maybe a father. Someone’s sweetheart.

And now he was dead.

“The physician is on his way,” a man said.

“Tell him to return to his clinic. There is no need for him now,” Maddox calmly responded before releasing Neville’s hand. “But I suspect we’ll have need for him by the end of this day.” He turned to Baden. “Prepare to move out.”

“Yes, sir.” Baden rushed toward the mess hall where other knights were eating lunch, not yet aware of the situation.

“Maddox.” His name broke on my lips. It was suddenly hard to breathe. I took air into my lungs, but they wouldn’t work. “I... I don’t...”

“Breathe, Evan.” Maddox took my face in both his hands. They were steady. Too steady. “There. That’s better.”

“Are you going to fight the bandits?”

Maddox only stared at me before capturing my lips in the softest of kisses. It was the first time I'd hated a kiss. It felt... different.

It felt like a goodbye.

He then rose from the grass. "Ready the horses, men! Prepare to set out at once!"

"Yes, sir!" came the immediate replies, all in unison.

As Maddox relayed more orders, his words began to run together. There was a loud ringing in my ears. He, Callum, and the rest of the knights I loved would be marching out to confront dangerous bandits.

What if one of them didn't make it home?

I watched as a younger man—a knight in training, maybe—brought over Maddox's armor and helped him into it. Strapping the chest piece in place before tying the forearms grips.

"Maddox," I whispered. Too low for him to hear.

Another boy then rushed over with Maddox's stallion. Maddox took the reins and said something to Quincy. Everything was happening so fast. They were about to leave.

"Maddox!" I exclaimed, finally finding my voice.

His gaze shot to mine. And though it was nearly imperceptible, some of his hard edges softened. As Callum and the others readied their weapons and horses, Maddox neared me. "Duke will take you home."

"I don't want to go home," I said as fear wound through me. "I want to go with you."

“With me? To fight the bandits.”

“Yes.”

“I’m afraid this is an enemy you can’t defeat with cuteness.”

“Don’t do that.” My voice shook just like the rest of me. “Don’t turn this into a joke. This is serious. A man just died.” The dam broke inside me, releasing the tears I’d kept at bay. “I’ve never seen someone die before. I... I....”

Maddox enveloped me in his arms and cradled the back of my head. “I’m so sorry you had to see that, sweetheart. I wish I could take it from your mind.”

“Captain,” Callum said from atop his horse. “The knights are ready to move out.”

Maddox nodded to him before kissing my hair. “I have to leave.”

“N-No.” More tears streamed down my cheeks. There was no use wiping at them. More would just take their place. “Don’t go.”

“Remember what I told you before?” Maddox slid his palm across my wet cheeks. “Whenever I leave, my heart stays with you. Take care of it for me.”

And then, he stepped out of my reach and swung up into the saddle of the white stallion. He didn’t look at me again before he left. He just shouted orders for his men to follow and took off down the path.

My knees wobbled, and I slumped to the grass. The knights who hadn’t been ordered to ride with them had carried

Neville inside the main building. I stared at the blood-stained grass where he'd died.

“Come with me, little prince,” Duke said, squatting beside me. He rubbed my shoulder. “I’ll take you home.”

“Little prince?” I rasped. “I’m not the Thorn Prince anymore?”

Duke smiled, though it didn’t reach his eyes. “Not today.”

I barely recalled the ride home. Everything blurred together. The cottage then came into view, and people exited through the front, talking and laughing.

Duke dismounted from the horse and helped me down before letting it loose in the field. I tried to walk but lost my footing and gripped one of the fence posts. He then picked me up and carried me into the cottage, using the back entrance.

“Mister Evan?” Miles asked, dropping the ladle back into the pot with a clank.

Lake rushed into the kitchen, his purple eyes wide. “Evan?” His voice sounded different than usual. Unsteady. “Are you hurt?”

“He’s fine,” Duke answered. He was one of the few who knew about Lake. Callum, Quincy, and Baden did as well. “He’s in shock, I believe. He saw a man die today.”

“Where’s Maddox?” Lake asked.

I was passed from one set of arms to another. Trees and peaches then tickled my nose. I burrowed closer to the scent and squeezed my eyes shut.

“On a mission,” Duke answered. “A party of knights from the Third Order were attacked while escorting a merchant caravan. The captain and knights from our unit went to reinforce them.”

“Miles?” Lake said. I wasn’t used to him speaking to people with such conviction in his tone, lacking the wariness. “Evan is in no state to work. Are you capable of handling things on your own for the rest of the day?”

“Yes, of course,” Miles responded. “I only want mister Evan to be all right.”

What they said next, I had no clue. I zoned out. Dissociated.

Maddox had told me to take care of his heart because each time he marched out for a mission, he left it with me. And as he fought alongside his men in that very moment, somewhere I couldn’t reach him, he had mine.

Lake carried me upstairs and put me in bed. He then laid beside me and pressed kisses into my hair. When I started to cry, he snuggled closer and hugged me with his entire body; arms secured around me and legs hooked over mine. He was holding me together when I was so close to breaking into a million pieces.

All we could do was wait. Wait for news about the knights returning. Wait for news about whether some of them even *would* return.

And then, Lake started singing.

The melodic sound of his voice calmed the anxiety twisting in my gut. My cries quietened as I listened. I fell

asleep sometime later, soothed by his warmth and voice.

I dreamed of Maddox. Dreamed of when I'd looked into his deep blue eyes for the first time. When I'd seen that first glimmer of a smile on his lips. I prayed he came home to me.

To all of us.

Chapter Thirteen

Please Come Home

Lake stood against the wall, watching as I paced across the floor in the reading parlor. “You should sleep.”

“I can’t,” I said, voice fragile like glass. “Not until I know they’re safe.”

It was late, probably well past midnight. The café had long since closed, and Miles, Peter, and Alice had already left. The three of them had kept the café running while I’d been a total mess upstairs. I had woken sometime in the early evening and had been pacing and fretting ever since.

“You should at least eat something,” Lake said softly. “You never had supper.”

“I’m not hungry.” I was too nervous to think about food.

“Maddox will be all right.”

“Do you really believe that?”

His purple-eyed gaze lowered.

“Briar isn’t here either.” My breaths hitched. I felt like I was on the verge of a panic attack; tightness at the base of my

throat and electric tingles in the tips of my fingers. “Why isn’t he here? I should go look for him.”

Lake stepped in my way before I reached the door. “With bandits on the rise, it’s not safe to be wandering through the kingdom at nighttime.”

“But what if Briar needs my help in the clinic? I’ve helped him in the past when the knights were attacked in the dark wood. When Maddox was...”

Images flitted through my head of my captain lying in a cot, covered in bruises and his torso wrapped, concealing the deep gashes along his ribs from the demon attack. He had been so weak and close to death.

What if he...

My knees wobbled.

“Evan?” Lake threw his arms around me as I lost the strength to stand. He held me as close as possible, a small whimper escaping his lips. “I don’t like seeing you this way. I don’t know how to make it better.”

“You being here helps,” I rasped, turning my face into his silver hair. The soft strands smelled like evergreen trees mixed with peaches. A scent unique to him. All three of my men had one and each soothed my soul in different ways. The peach scent from him was new though. I’d first noticed it after we’d had sex for the first time. “I’d be even more of a mess without you.”

“I’ll be here as long as you want me to be.” Lake smoothed a hand up and down my back. “Until you send me away.”

My fingers tangled in the back of his shirt. “That won’t happen, so I guess you’re stuck with me forever.”

He smiled against my cheek. “Forever is a long time.”

“Too long?”

Lake nuzzled my neck. “Not long enough.”

If I hadn’t been so damn worried about Maddox and Briar, I would’ve melted at his words and turned into Evan goo. Which would’ve probably been a puddle of coffee—my life blood.

In the week or so since he’d officially become part of our family—or joined my harem as a certain asshole wizard would say—Lake had gone to his cottage some mornings while I worked, but he’d always returned at nightfall. And some days, he hadn’t left at all.

“Thank you for earlier,” I whispered. “For singing to me.”

“Did it help?”

I nodded.

“Your captain will be all right. Have faith in his abilities. He’s strong.”

I weakly smiled. “That’s high praise coming from you.”

“I may not see eye to eye with him, but I can admit he’s a skilled warrior. His determination to make it home to you will make him even stronger.”

And then, I heard it.

Footsteps on the front porch, followed by a key working the lock.

With my heart stilling and lungs constricting, I looked at the door just as it opened. And as Maddox stepped across the threshold, a sound tore from my throat, and I lunged at him.

He caught me against his hard chest. “I’m home.”

I started crying, expelling the gut-twisting fear I’d felt since he’d left the barracks on horseback. I could finally breathe again.

“I’m home,” Maddox repeated, cupping the back of my head—cradling it in his large palm. “I’m safe.” Musk, sweat, and the scent of dried blood masked his usual warm spice, but in that moment, nothing in the world could smell better.

“What happened out there?” I asked.

He drew back and wiped at my tears with his thumbs. “Nothing for you to—”

“Stop saying that!” My sudden burst of irritation came unexpectedly. But I was tired of him treating me like a child. “You can’t keep me in the dark forever, Maddox. I was there when Neville died.”

“I know.”

Briar closed the door and locked it. He looked so drained, the dark circles under his eyes worse than ever. “In short, several knights from the Third Order were lost today. As were some from the Second.”

“Some from the Second?” I felt sick. “Callum? Quincy and the others? Are they—”

“They’re alive,” Maddox said gently. “Baden took an arrow to the chest, but it thankfully missed his heart. Briar

healed him. He's resting in the medical ward now with Duke, who insisted on staying with him through the night. Callum is bruised and scraped but is otherwise unharmed. Quincy dislocated his shoulder while tackling one of the bandits from horseback."

"I popped it back in place and gave him a tonic to help him sleep," Briar said. "He'll be good as new by morning."

"He tackled one of the bandits?" Damn. Quincy was a total badass.

Maddox nodded. "We killed many of them before they started to retreat. I gave the order to capture one for questioning, and Quincy didn't hesitate before taking action. Upon our return, the bandit was handed over to the knights of the First Order and taken to the castle dungeon."

"Do you think the bandit will talk?" I asked.

"If he knows what's good for him, he will." Maddox winced.

"You're hurt," I said, forgetting about everything else.

"I'm just sore. While I was locked into combat with two of the bandits, a third threw a dagger that lodged beneath my armor. Nothing too serious, so get that worried look off your face. The physician patched up my wound at the clinic."

"And now you need to rest so it can properly heal," Briar said with a snap to his voice. "Just as I've told you a hundred times."

Maddox's lips twitched, and he rubbed at his left shoulder. "A hundred and two, if memory serves me well."

Briar rolled his eyes. “Yet, you still insist on being a pain in my rear.”

Maddox’s smile turned cheeky. He then regarded Lake. “Thank you for staying here with Evan.”

“You don’t need to thank me for that,” Lake responded, standing several feet away. He had stepped aside once they’d come in. “I care for his well-being just as much as you do.”

“I highly doubt that, wolf.” His tone was on the softer side, though, instead of the derisive one he often used with Lake. Looked like my captain was making progress too. “But I suppose having you around isn’t all bad.”

“Maddox,” Briar said, eyes narrowed. “You need to—”

Maddox cut him off with a sharp exhale. “Rest, I know. By the gods, physician, you’re worse than a mother hen.”

I grinned at their banter. Happy for it.

“Well, on top of disregarding my medical advice to rest, you also refused to let me give you a salve to ease your other discomforts.”

“What?” I asked Maddox. “Why?”

His jaw tightened. “Because my men need the medicine more than I. The healing elixir that closed my wound will suffice. The other discomforts, as you call them, are nothing more than slight aches and bruises. I’ve had much worse and healed fine on my own.”

“You really are stubborn,” Briar said. “You’re lucky I didn’t tie you down and treat you anyway.”

A challenge sparked in Maddox's blue eyes. "I would've enjoyed seeing you try."

Before Briar could lose his shit—aka, drag Maddox upstairs and throw him in bed, forcing him to rest—the four of us made our way upstairs.

Maddox turned to me in the hall and cupped my cheek. "Will you sleep beside me tonight?"

I nodded. There wasn't anywhere else I wanted to be than in his arms.

He glanced at something over my shoulder. "I believe someone wishes to say goodnight to you first."

I followed his gaze, seeing the flash of a white tail as Lake went into the guest room. He left the door open for me. I patted Maddox's chest before walking that way, poking my head into the room.

"Hey," I said. "Can I come in?"

"Of course. You never need to ask." Lake sat on the bed and removed his boots. More bashfully, he turned away from me as he took off his tunic and then crawled under the covers.

I plopped down on the edge of the bed and tucked the top sheet in around his body. "There. Snug as a bug."

"A bug?" Lake's ears did that adorable perking thing in his awed curiosity. That earned him a kiss, and when he smiled against my lips, my soul stirred, as though with each kiss we shared, the fateful ties that bound us together strengthened.

"You know you can sleep with us if you want," I murmured, hoping he'd say yes but suspecting he wasn't quite

ready for that. While he seemed more comfortable in many aspects, intimacy with me for one, he was still guarded around everyone else.

Lake froze. “I... I’m not sure I—”

“It’s okay.” I rubbed our noses together once and pulled back. “Just know the offer is always open if you change your mind.”

He tenderly smiled. “See you in the morning.”

“See you in the morning,” I echoed before kissing him one final time—because how could I not when he was so fucking cute?

I left the room and closed the door. He didn’t like to sleep with it open.

Light spilled out into the hall through the cracked bathroom door. I padded that way and slowly pushed it open. Maddox was in the process of removing his armor, discomfort etched into his face as he tried to unfasten his chest piece.

“Let me help,” I said before going over and replacing his hands with mine.

He watched me as I worked off one piece of armor, then another. Surprisingly, I didn’t fumble with the clasps and strings like I usually did when trying to get him naked. This was a different type of intimacy, not one derived from lust and the urgency to be fucked hard. It was more tender.

My hands shook as I unfastened his shirt and helped him maneuver it up and over his head—which he had to bend down to make possible.

Deep bruising spanned across his upper torso and there was a mark from where the dagger plunged into him. The elixir had closed the wound, thankfully, but the evidence was still there, in the form of an angry looking scar that would fade over time but only reminded me right then of how close I'd been to losing him.

“Don't cry,” Maddox whispered.

“I'm not.” I wiped at my eyes.

He took my wrist in a gentle hold. I didn't know why but it made more tears spring forward. He pressed his lips to my knuckles, locking our gazes. Long black lashes and blue eyes deeper than the ocean. The heat of his stare slammed into my heart and enclosed it in an iron fist.

“My life is yours, Evan,” he softly said. “How could I ever surrender it to anyone else? Nothing can take me from you.”

That iron fist around my heart? It lifted to my throat and squeezed tight. “I can't lose you. Ever.”

“You won't.” Maddox brought me closer, flattening his palm against my lower back. His hand dipped beneath the hem of my shirt, and the graze of his calloused fingertips on my skin elicited shivers throughout my body.

I rose up on my tiptoes and threw my arms around his neck, tugging his head down for a hard kiss. It was driven by the desperate need to feel him. To taste him. To know he was really with me and that he was safe.

He returned the kiss just as heavily, sliding his hand farther up my spine while gripping the back of my head with

the other, fusing our mouths together in a way that had my head spinning.

But as much as my body craved his, sex wasn't my goal.

I broke the kiss. "Let me take care of you."

"You already are," he responded before licking the seam of my mouth. "With your lips."

Stay strong, Evan. Don't give in to his charms. I was a man on a mission, after all, and wouldn't be swayed; no matter how deeply he kissed me, the hard line of his cock straining against the front of his trousers as he ground his hips into me.

Although incredibly hard, I tore myself from him and stepped over to the claw-foot tub. The burning hunger in his stare simmered as curiosity took its place. I flipped on the long faucet, and the magical runes on the side faintly glowed orange as the cold water heated. I added bath salts that had a woody smell and then checked the water to make sure it was hot enough but not *too* hot.

It was perfect.

"Hop in," I told him.

"Will you be joining me?" Maddox undid the front of his trousers and pushed them down. His thick cock sprang free and bobbed between his muscled thighs, the glistening tip making me groan under my breath. I wanted to take him in my mouth and suck him like there was no tomorrow.

"Nope," I said. "This is for you."

"Well, that's no fun."

I grinned. “Just get in the bath, Maddox. Or I’ll withhold muffins from you for a week.”

“That was a low blow.” With a smirk in place, he approached the tub and stepped in. A rough groan left him as he sank into the water and tipped his head back. “This feels good.”

Yeah, that didn’t help tame my wild sexual fantasies. I most definitely imagined him doing—and saying—that exact thing while I rode his cock.

“Muffin Lord at your service.” I grabbed a wash cloth. “So sit back and enjoy some pampering.”

“Pampering?” Amusement rang in his voice. “Why do I get the impression this is a bribe of some sort?”

I exaggerated a gasp. “How dare you insinuate I have ulterior motives.”

He smiled at that and closed his eyes. They opened as I started washing him, and he watched me with a tender expression

My desire to crawl into the tub and ride him nine ways to Sunday diminished as I washed his chest. Just like when I was helping him remove his armor earlier, there was something incredibly intimate about bathing him like this.

“You know, ever since I came to Bremloc, I’ve always had someone taking care of me in some way.” I lathered more soap into the cloth and ran it across his broad shoulders and down his arms. “You’ve protected me. Briar has healed me several times. Lake watches over me. Callum and the knights have watched over me too. Prince Sawyer has gone out of his

way to help me. But I don't feel like I've really done anything to earn any of it."

"You don't need to earn it, Evan," Maddox said. "We don't do those things to receive anything in return. We do it because we treasure you."

"I treasure you too. All of you."

"Some of us more than others, I hope." That smirk touched his lips again.

I flicked soapy water at him.

"Is that why you're doing this?" he asked, growing serious. "Because you feel as though you owe me?"

"No." I dipped the cloth into the water to wet it before gliding it up his neck. "I'm doing it because I love you. And even though you put on a brave face and say you're okay, even though you say there's nothing for me to worry about, I know you're shaken by what happened today."

He was quiet for a moment. When he finally spoke, there was a tremor in his voice. "I am." Expelling a breath, he tilted his face to the ceiling. "However, I'm not afraid for myself. I fear for my knights. I fear what will become of Bremloc if we fail to stop the attacks. The man I met with at the Guild... his intel gave us the person behind them. But something still doesn't add up. My gut tells me it's more than meets the eye. It's all building to something bigger."

His sudden openness—his vulnerability—made me forget what I was doing. My hand froze on his shoulder, soapy water dripping from the rag.

“Most of all.” Maddox squeezed his eyes closed. His chin held a slight quiver. “I worry for you and Briar. The thought of anyone hurting you makes me feel ill. Like spikes churning in my stomach, cutting away at my insides. If I lost you... if I lost either of you...” His composure slipped as his face crumpled, that quiver in his chin worsening. “I wouldn’t survive it, Evan. Gods, I wouldn’t—” His sentence broke off into a sharp intake of air, and his body shook.

I dropped the rag and shuffled closer, wrapping my arms around him.

Maddox hid his face in the crease of my neck. He didn’t make a sound, but a tear landed on my shirt. Just one.

He was a man who rarely showed his emotions, but he couldn’t keep them bottled anymore. They bubbled up like a shaken can of soda with its tab popped open before the fizz had time to settle.

“I’ve got you,” I whispered, petting the back of his hair. He had said those words to me so many times over the past few months. I needed him to know he could lean on me too.

His mouth crashed to mine. Taken off guard, I made a sound against his lips before kissing him back. He grabbed the bottom of my shirt and broke the kiss long enough to rip it over my head and throw it to the floor, and then his lips were back on mine.

This didn’t feel like the lust-driven Maddox I knew so well. This was a side of him I hadn’t seen before. Intensely passionate but fragile too. His heavy kisses and the desperate way he grabbed at me went deeper than a mere sexual urge.

I understood the feeling. I had felt the same earlier as I lay in bed, sick with worry, hoping and praying he'd be okay. The need to feel him against me, to breathe in his scent, had overpowered everything else.

And now, he needed that too.

I loosened the string on my pants and worked them off, discarding my underwear too, before stepping into the tub. The water rocked around us as he tugged me onto his lap and pushed his face to my collarbone.

“Evan.” His gruff voice sounded brittle.

“I’m here.” I ground my ass along the length of his stiff cock, and he released a breathy groan.

The time for talking was over. Words couldn’t console him the way a warm body could. He needed to feel. Fuck, so did I.

Our kisses were sloppy in our urgency, teeth clanking. Though it was kind of awkward given the limited space in the tub, Maddox stretched me with his fingers. I rode them at one point, slamming down on his hand as the need for more became my driving force. When his fingers weren’t enough, I reached between us and grabbed his cock, guiding it into place.

As I took him into my body, he tipped his head back, eyes briefly shutting. “Gods, Evan.”

I locked my wrists at his nape and started a slow grind, the water sloshing with my movements. The fullness of him was exactly what I’d needed, that slight sting as he stretched me wide. A sting that transitioned to a toe-curling pleasure.

Maddox gripped my waist with both hands, lids heavy as he watched me ride him. My body clung to him, each glide fucking shiver inducing. There wasn't a place we didn't touch. Physically or emotionally. The piece of my heart that solely belonged to him warmed. I felt that warmth down to my core.

We took our time, reveling in the feel of each other. I slowly rode him and lowered my face to his. He joined our mouths, and soon, his lips began to tremble against mine. Only then did I quicken my pace. His fingertips dug into my hips, and his breaths shortened. He was so close to that edge.

And as his hand found my cock beneath the water, I joined him on that edge. We toppled over it together, our groans mixing with the sound of the sloshing bath water.

"I love you," he murmured once our bodies started to calm.

I slumped against his shoulder. "I love you too." My eyes stung as I felt the indentation of his new scar beneath my hand.

"I'm okay," he said.

"Are you a mind reader now?"

A raspy chuckle followed. "No." Maddox trailed his lips along my jaw. "I just know you."

After we got out of the bath and dried off, we went down the hall and entered our room. Briar lay on top of the covers, chest rising and falling as he slept. His legs hung over the edge of the bed.

"He didn't even take his clothes off first," I whispered, creeping closer to Briar.

“Or his glasses,” Maddox said, following me. Reaching the bed, he carefully removed Briar’s glasses and placed them on the nightstand. Our physician didn’t even stir. “He exhausted himself today, going far beyond his limit. Unlike Thane, he wasn’t born with magic, so he burns through mana faster. It’s one reason I didn’t accept any further medicine after he gave me the healing elixir. Because he would’ve had to use more magical energy.”

“Both of you are so selfless. He takes care of everyone, often forgetting to take care of himself in the process. While you go charging headfirst into combat to protect the kingdom and everyone in it.”

And what did I do? Baked desserts and brewed coffee.

Maddox rested his hand on top of my head. “You may not realize it, but you help people as well. Your food comforts anyone who eats it, as though you infuse calming magic into every meal and every cup of coffee.” He smiled. “Every muffin.”

“I don’t have any magic. I’m just an ordinary guy who loves to cook.” Feeding people made me happy.

“All I know?” Maddox gently tipped my face up. “After a long, draining day, coming home to you and eating something you made soothes me like nothing else can. So perhaps, there’s a touch of magic in you after all.”

I swallowed the tightness in my throat and looked at Briar, who was still fast asleep, completely unaware of us in the room.

“Let’s get him ready for bed,” I said before kneeling down and untying Briar’s shoes.

Maddox helped me take them off before removing Briar’s pants and shirt. He then slid his arms beneath Briar and picked him up with ease. “Would you turn down that blanket?”

I nodded and pulled back the cover. Maddox placed him in bed, and my heart fluttered when he brushed aside a strand of Briar’s hair; his expression tender. That tenderness was then aimed at me, though there was a hint of humor in his eyes now.

“Your turn. Get in before I throw you.”

“You’d throw me? After the amazing orgasm I just gave you? How rude.” I slid between the sheets and snuggled against Briar’s side, tossing Maddox a look. “I’m in bed like a good boy. Happy?”

“Yes.” The corners of Maddox’s eyes crinkled. “I am.”

I knew he wasn’t just referring to me doing as he’d said. “Me too.”

Happy he was home safe and sound.

The mattress dipped as he settled in beside me, pushing one arm beneath my pillow as he spooned me. I loved when he did that. “He’s sleeping like a rock.”

“Yeah, he is,” I said before kissing the top of Briar’s shoulder. He was normally a light sleeper, so him not waking with us moving about was just further proof he’d been pushing himself too hard.

“Good night, muffin,” Maddox whispered at my nape.

“Good night, Captain Smolder.”

He breathed out a rough laugh. “Captain Smolder? What happened to Captain Ice?”

“You’ve graduated from that name. You need a different one.”

“So I went from ice to fire? Interesting. Well, the name isn’t horrible, I suppose.” Maddox grazed his lips along the back of my neck. “But the title I like the most? Being your lover.”

“You’re much more than my lover. So much more.”

All three of them were.

“You mean more to me too,” he said softly. “I may not understand the magic that made it possible, but I thank the gods for bringing you to this world. To me.”

I reached under my pillow for his hand and linked our fingers, loving how much bigger his was compared to mine. “There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

Chapter Fourteen

Evan Gets Something Shiny

“I should fall off my horse more often,” Quincy said before taking another bite of the breakfast rice I’d made for him and the other knights in the medical ward. It was creamy and sweet with milk, butter, and honey. “I could eat this all day, every day.”

“And then you’d get fat,” Duke countered, sitting in a chair beside Baden’s cot. His orange-red hair fell freely and nearly touched his shoulders. “Forget falling off your horse. You wouldn’t even be able to pull yourself up into the saddle.”

Quincy sneered at him before eating more sweetened rice.

I had woken early that morning to get a head start on my baking for the day. After preparing several batches of cupcakes, cookies, and buttery croissants filled with jam, I’d left a note for Miles that said I’d be back that afternoon. It felt great to be able to rely on him, Peter, and Alice to handle things in my absence. I couldn’t have asked for a better team.

After kissing Lake goodbye—a kiss that had turned into me pecking kisses all over his face and neck, making his tail

wag and a warm smile cross his handsome face—I had then traveled with Briar and Maddox to the castle.

I had needed to see my boys. To see for myself they were okay. And they were. For the most part.

Baden, who had been struck in the chest, was still asleep. His once buzzed hair had grown longer, the blond strands a mix of pale and darker shades.

Duke placed his hand on Baden's forearm, his teasing mood gone. Lines of worry marred his brow. The two of them bickered constantly but seemed so close. As far as I knew, Baden was straight as an arrow. Duke was bisexual. Did he care deeper for Baden?

Did Baden feel the same in return but hadn't realized it yet?

Or maybe I was reading too much into it.

"No need to fuss over me," my favorite cinnamon roll said from a nearby cot as Briar checked his wounds. "It's just scrapes and bruises."

"Then this will go quickly. Now sit still," Briar responded. He had asked Callum to come into the clinic that morning for a follow-up. He examined the cuts before nodding. "A salve will heal these. Give me a moment."

Callum sighed. "Really, Briar, I'm fine. Save the medicine for those who need it."

"You sound just like your captain," Briar mumbled as he exited the ward. Seconds later, he returned with a small, round dish. He must've already had a batch of the salve ready to go.

He applied the green cream to Callum's wounds. "There. Let it sit for a few minutes, and then you can leave."

"Thank you." Callum's gaze landed on Baden. "Will he be all right?"

The question drew Duke's attention.

"Yes, he'll make a full recovery." Briar went over to Baden's cot, touching his forehead and then checking the wrapping across his chest.

"Why hasn't he woken?" Duke asked.

"The elixir put him into a deep sleep so his body could use all of its energy for healing," Briar explained. His hazel eyes warmed behind his round framed glasses as they moved to me. "I'm sure he'll be quite hungry when he wakes."

I smiled. "Leave that to me."

As the other injured knights began to wake, I hopped up and went into the kitchen where I'd cooked breakfast. After filling more bowls with sweetened rice and sorting them onto a large tray, I grabbed the banana nut muffins I'd brought from my cottage—fewer in number than when I'd left because Maddox had gotten hold of them—and placed them on the tray too. I returned to the medical ward and passed them out.

"I want a muffin." Quincy eyed the bowl I'd just handed to a knight named Ollie.

"Remember my warning," Duke said with a sigh. "I feel sorry for your horse."

Quincy's gaze was pinned to the plate of muffins on my tray. "You know? I think it would be worth it. I could retire, fat

and happy.”

Ollie took a bite and grinned at him. “It’s so good, Q.”

Quincy pouted at me.

I laughed and gave him two of them.

“I appreciate your kindness,” Hudson said, staring at his bowl of rice. He was the knight who’d threatened me the first time we’d met. A bandage was wrapped around his head, and one of his eyes was covered. “Even if I don’t deserve it.”

“Don’t say that,” I said. “It was a misunderstanding. You were just looking out for your men. I’d be suspicious too if I saw a stranger walking around the camp.”

He offered me a small smile before digging into his food.

Baden finally woke an hour later. I was in the other part of the clinic watching Briar craft more tonics when I heard Duke’s voice filter in from the ward. Briar and I walked in just as Duke drew back from the hug he’d given him.

“Don’t scare me like that ever again, you ass,” he said, plopping down in his chair.

“Worried about me?” Baden rasped.

“No.” Duke huffed.

“Then why tell me not to scare you again?”

“Shut that hole in your face before I shove my fist inside it,” Duke said before spotting me. “Our Thorn Prince made muffins and sweet rice. You should eat something.”

Baden grinned. “It’s amusing how you threaten me and show concern for me in the same breath.”

After I warmed the rice back up and added fruit and three muffins on top, I offered him the bowl. “Order up.”

“Three muffins?” Quincy asked from his cot. “Why does he get three?”

“Because I took an arrow to the chest,” Baden said. “You just fell off your horse.”

“Hey, I tackled a bandit and captured him,” Quincy responded, turning his nose up. “That bandit is now being questioned. I’m a goddamn hero.”

“A hero who fell on his ass.” Baden smirked. “It’s the same ass that was hit by an arrow in the past, if memory serves me well. You had to sit on a little cushion for a week.”

Hudson nearly spewed his drink of water.

More knights, after eating and regaining some of their strength, joined in on the discussion. Soon, their boisterous voices filled the ward. I helped Briar pass out a round of tonics—best taken on a full stomach—before walking with him from the medical ward.

Thane was at his work station grinding herbs and tossed me a smile. “Hope you don’t mind, but I ate one of your muffins.”

“Eat as much as you like. I brought them for everyone.”

“I fed a crumb to Herbert.”

“Um.” I blinked in confusion. “Who?”

“Herbert.” Thane grabbed a glass jar off his station and padded over to me, his shaggy blond hair holding more of a

curl that day. He held out the jar to me. “I caught him two days ago. Isn’t he pretty?”

Herbert was a giant beetle-looking thing with a midnight blue body covered in red and yellow specks. When he skittered from the far edge of the jar toward me, I barely repressed a shudder. “Yeah. He’s, uh, a handsome little guy. Not creepy at all.”

“He excretes a toxin that can be used in many medicines,” Thane said, reminding me of how excited Briar got when discussing plants. “Collecting the toxin doesn’t hurt him though. I wouldn’t do it if it did. I just have to be careful.”

“Did he, uh, like the muffin?” I asked, staring at the toxic little horrifying delight as he crawled around.

“Yep!” Thane brought the jar closer to his face and beamed at the beetle like a proud father. “He eagerly gobbled it up.”

“I didn’t know bugs could eat people food.”

“Herbert eats anything. Even flesh. If he’s hungry enough.”

“Oh god.”

I’d have nightmares about Herbert.

“All right, back to work,” Briar told him.

“Yes, sir.” Thane snatched the last muffin from the basket and rushed back over to his station, luckily with Herbert the Terror in tow.

“Thanks for letting me tag along today,” I said, keeping close to Briar’s side as he neared his desk. “Seeing the knights

made me feel better.”

“You made them feel better too.” Briar faced me and slowly ran his hands down my upper arms. He still looked so tired. “Are you about to leave for the café?”

“Yep.” I zeroed in on the dark circles beneath his eyes. “Come with me. You can take a long nap upstairs and come down for tea and something sweet when you wake up. Then, you can curl up somewhere and read. Just take the day to catch up on sleep and relax.”

“As tempting as that sounds, I need to stay here.” Briar blew out a breath. “I have more work that needs to be done. Not to mention, the ward full of wounded knights. However, I’d love a cup of tea when I come home.”

“Home,” I said, heart swelling. “I love when you say that.”

“It’s exactly what the cottage has become to me. To us.” Briar’s fingertips skated across my jaw. “Before you leave, I have something for you.”

“Oh? Like what? Is it a book?”

“No, it’s not a book.” He smiled and adjusted his glasses. *So freaking adorable.* “It’s... well, on second thought, I should probably wait until later to give it to you.”

“What? No. That’s just cruel. I’m gonna be obsessing over what it could be.”

“Patience is a virtue, love.”

“Patience? Have you met me?”

Briar chuckled before pressing a soft kiss to my lips. “Think of it as something to look forward to this evening. When we’re all with you.”

I understood it, then. “It’s a present from the three of you?”

“Yes.”

They had worked together to do something nice for me. Briar and Maddox spending time together without me around wasn’t a surprise anymore, but Lake? Not only had they included him, but he’d gone along with it. Whatever it was.

“Can I ask you a very important medical question, Doc?” I wound my arms around Briar’s lean waist, catching a hint of magnolia wafting from him. Why he smelled like the blossoms, I’d never quite figured out. Maybe because he spent so much time around plants and herbs. But I loved it. “Is it possible for a heart to have wings? ‘Cause I’m pretty sure mine is about to fly from my chest.”

He gave me a crinkly-eyed smile and swept his fingers through my hair. “Well, it better not fly too far from home. I know three males who’d be lost without it.” He kissed me again, then rested his forehead on mine. “Because our hearts are entwined with yours.”

I got the feeling our souls were entwined too, brought together by fate. My harem, as Lupin called it, wasn’t just an excuse for me to fuck a bunch of guys. It was because we belonged together. Sexually and romantically. As lovers and best friends.

Soulmates that stretched beyond worlds.

Warm, golden light filled the parlor as Briar lit the lamps on the side tables. A stone hearth sat centered in one wall, unlit because it was still summer and too hot. I couldn't wait for cooler weather when we could relax in front of a crackling fire.

All four of us.

"Someone looks excited," Maddox said, leaning against the mantel. Amusement shown in his eyes as he watched me. "Perhaps we should make him wait until morning."

Briar smiled. "The sooner we give this to him, the easier we'll all sleep at night."

Maddox's expression smoothed. "True."

Lake stood behind an armchair, resting his hands on the back. His purple-eyed stare met mine before quickly darting away.

"What do you mean by it'll help you sleep better at night?" I fidgeted on the cushion. "Is it something to gag me with?"

Maddox threw his head back with a laugh.

"No." Briar withdrew a folded cloth from his inner vest pocket and walked closer to kneel in front of my chair.

"You got me a handkerchief?" I asked, head cocked. "So it *is* something to gag me with."

Maddox barked out another laugh. Lake even smiled.

“We’d never silence that precious, rambling mouth of yours.” Golden light reflected in the frames of Briar’s glasses and brought out the shades of green weaving through his hazel eyes. “Your gift is inside the cloth, you beautiful boy.”

“Oh.”

“Look at that blush.” Briar brushed a knuckle over my cheek. He then grabbed my hand, turned it palm-up, and placed the bundle on top. “Open it when you’re ready.”

“But don’t take too long,” Maddox said with a huff. Always a ray of goddamn sunshine.

Lake had moved closer, his steps light as always. He seemed in equal parts eager and nervous.

I pulled back the cloth and stilled. A white stone was set into a rounded piece of dark wood dangling from a leather band. Other colors swirled inside the stone that caught the light when turned from side to side, like a glass prism. “A necklace?”

“It’s a protection charm,” Briar said. “One we all put a part of ourselves into. My magic powers the stone.”

“I sculpted the wood,” Lake added softly.

“And the leather strap was taken from a piece of my armor,” Maddox said. He had moved closer too.

“Now, you’ll have a piece of all three of us protecting you wherever you go,” Briar said.

My vision blurred as I stared at the necklace. They had clearly put a lot of time and care into making it. Maddox knelt

beside Briar, and Lake stood behind them. I shifted forward and pushed my face against Maddox's shoulder before nuzzling Briar's cheek. I then peered up at Lake. As if knowing what I wanted, he bent down and let me nuzzle his cheek too.

I wanted to speak, to thank them, but I couldn't say a word. Emotion was tight in my throat. One word and I'd probably start crying.

"I suppose it silenced him after all," Maddox said with his trademark smirk. "No gag required."

A gruff sound left Lake, and when Maddox looked at him, Lake turned his face away. Trying to hide the fact he'd laughed. Maddox's smirk then slipped into a genuine smile.

"Let's see how it fits." Briar grabbed the necklace. "The length can be adjusted if need be."

I lowered my head and let him put it on me. As it settled into place, resting over my heart, I felt... something. Small vibrations in my chest, right beneath where the stone sat. Those vibrations then traveled through the rest of me, creating little pulses of warmth. Whether real or just in my head, I had no idea, but I felt as though the love they put into the gift seeped into me, intensifying the protective magic.

"Looks like an excellent fit to me." Maddox touched the stone, and it faintly glowed beneath his fingertip. "You did well, physician."

"A compliment? From you?" Briar asked. "I must be dreaming."

“Yes, well, don’t get used to it.” Maddox placed his hand on my thigh. Rubbed it once. “You being so quiet is worrisome. I already miss your rambles.”

Lake’s ears twitched. “Is it not to your liking?”

“That’s not it.” My voice cracked. “I love it. A lot. Thank you all so much. I...” Words failed me as I dropped my gaze back to the necklace.

The wood had been carved to fit the stone perfectly. Engravings ran along the outside too that looked like writing, but the language was unfamiliar.

Lake neared my other side and crouched, placing his hand over mine as I smoothed the pad of my thumb across the inscription. “Words from my homeland,” he said. “Well, from the land demi-humans originated from. A place long since lost to time. My father taught me the language, though, just as his father taught it to him.”

“What does it mean?” I asked.

“Eternal sun,” Lake answered as he guided my finger across the words. “That’s how I see you, Evan. As the sun. You came into my lonely world and led me out of the dark. And as long as your heart beats, that sun will continue to burn bright.”

Fresh tears sprang to my eyes and rolled down my cheeks. I looked at each of their faces, my affection for them deepening. “This is the best gift you could’ve ever given me, apart from yourselves.”

“Be sure to never take it off,” Maddox said.

“I won’t.” Me wearing the protection charm would hopefully give him some peace of mind. “You’re the one who really needs one though. You’re always running into dangerous situations.”

“I can take care of myself,” he said. “And I don’t need a charm to do it.”

“But it couldn’t hurt,” Briar whispered, looking at him. “Evan is precious to all of us. His safety comes before anything. But you’re precious too, Maddox.”

Softness touched Maddox’s eyes. A trace of shock did too. Had he not realized Briar loved him as well? “I suppose wearing one couldn’t hurt. However, I’m not fond of jewelry.” He slowly turned the silver band on his finger. “Apart from this ring, anyway.”

“It doesn’t have to be a ring or necklace,” Briar said, pushing his glasses farther up his nose. He went from bashful, lovesick cutie to sexy scholar eager to share his knowledge in the blink of an eye. “The charm can be a pendant that clips to your chest armor or cloak. It can also be placed into a wrist cuff or anything really, as long as it’s worn on your person. My goal is to eventually craft enough charms to hand out to all the knights, so they can wear them on patrols and missions in the dark wood. Maybe not as strong as that one, but even a basic protection charm will be beneficial.”

“The charms require a particular type of stone, yes?” Lake asked.

“Depending on your intention,” Briar answered. “A protection charm can be crafted to repel magical attacks, physical ones, and also to protect a person from psychological

attacks, such as possession or mind control. The one used for Evan's charm is a selenite crystal that I infused with the essence of other powerful gems."

"I love when you talk smart," I said. "Gets me all hot and bothered."

Briar tilted his head. "Hot and bothered is a good thing, I hope?"

I answered Briar by tugging him closer and crushing our mouths together. He smiled against my lips. After breaking the kiss, I laid my head on his shoulder

"Come with me, wolf," Maddox said as he rose from the floor.

Lake's guard went up. "Where are we going?"

"To the kitchen for a snack and then outside. It's a nice night, and I could use the fresh air."

"You're more than capable of doing that without me," Lake responded.

"And yet, I'm asking you to join me anyway. Stop being stubborn and just do it." Maddox lowered his gaze to me, and I saw the tenderness in his eyes. "The two of you should go upstairs."

"Why? What's up there?" I asked, instantly suspicious. "Is it Herbert?"

Briar choked on a laugh. "Herbert is Thane's beetle," he then told a confused Maddox. "Evan met him earlier today."

"He ate one of my muffins," I said. "Well, a crumb."

“Herbert ate a muffin?” Maddox asked. “It seems I have yet another rival that must be defeated.”

“The beetle would win in that fight, I believe,” Lake said, the corner of his mouth lifting.

Oh my god. Lake was joining in on their banter.

“You’re crying again,” Maddox told me.

“No, I’m not!” I wiped at my eyes. “It’s leftover tears from earlier.”

He arched a brow. “Liars don’t get orgasms.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” Briar got to his feet and offered me his hand, pulling me off the love seat. His lips brushed my temple before trailing to my ear. “Will you join me upstairs? Just the two of us?”

Being kind of oblivious, it took me a moment to realize what was going on. Last night, Maddox and I had made love in the bathtub. And the first time I’d had sex with Lake, it had been only me and him. Briar was the only one I hadn’t shared a private moment with in that way.

“Yeah,” I answered, butterflies fluttering in my belly. “I’d love to.”

I caressed Maddox’s bicep and then squeezed Lake’s hand. The two of them veered toward the kitchen as Briar led me from the parlor and toward the stairs.

During threesomes, Briar liked to watch Maddox fuck me. He enjoyed touching me too, but would he enjoy sex as much with only the two of us? I hoped so.

Turned out, I’d had nothing to worry about.

Briar's lips crashed to mine as we entered the bedroom, and he undid the buttons on my shirt with skilled fingers. The backs of my knees bumped the bed, and he guided me backward, kissing down my neck and to my belly button, where he dipped his tongue inside and softly blew against it, creating delicious tingles all over my body.

The fingers that gripped my cock, stroking me up and down, had flipped through countless books to further his research. He used his hands to brew elixirs and tonics that healed people. He used them to stitch together wounds and perform surgeries. He'd done so much good in the world, using his hands to save lives.

And now, he used them to make me soar.

The foreplay was slow and gentle. Unrushed. We took turns sucking and stroking each other before the need to be closer overpowered us both. Briar sat against the headboard as I straddled his lap and sank down on his cock. Warmth emitted from his palms as he placed them on my backside, soothing the initial ache with his magic, taking away the sting.

Without that discomfort, pleasure consumed me. I rode him like we had all the time in the world, reveling in every ridge in his hard cock as he filled me.

"That's it, love." Briar enclosed me in his arms and lowered his face to my shoulder. "Take what you want. Everything I have is yours."

I came down on him faster, our groans and the slick sound of our sweat damp bodies slapping together filling the room. Sparks of pleasure shot through me as he pumped his hips up

at the perfect angle and locked them in place, bumping my prostate over and over.

My orgasm slammed into me with little warning, and my voice broke on a cry, the release so fucking intense it felt like I'd blown apart and was slowly being sewn back together.

Soon, I wasn't the only one.

"Evan." Briar shuddered, his cock swelling. "I... I'm... *gods.*"

"Let go." I brought him in for a kiss. The waves of my release started to recede while his built higher.

Briar's hips jerked as he came, shaft pulsing and moans vibrating against my neck. I kissed his temple, his cheek, then his jaw. Hoping he could feel the deep love I had for him in each one, because although my emotions were ocean deep, I didn't always have the right words to express them.

Afterward, I slumped against his damp chest, trying to catch my breath.

Briar cradled the back of my head. "I'm not strong like Maddox or Lake," he quietly said. "They're fierce in their protection of you, and that same intensity is reflected in how they show you their love. Maddox is like a burning inferno, whereas Lake is more like a river after heavy rainfall. Both are strong but in different ways."

I listened to him, unsure where he was going with it. But the frailness of his voice told me it was something he'd been keeping inside for a while.

His fingers slid through my hair. Slow and featherlight. "Which is why I've worked so hard over the past several

months on that protection charm. That's *my* strength. Not with swords or muscle, but with my magic. It's my way of keeping you safe."

I pulled back to meet his gaze, noting the different colors swirling around his pupils; green, brown, and specks of dark orange. I touched the edge of his brow and traced down to his jaw. "I love you, you know."

His eyes glistened. "I know you do."

"Really?" I asked. "Because I do. More than you probably realize."

"I don't doubt you, love." Briar pressed my hand to his cheek. "Your heart is big enough to love all three of us."

"And you know I don't have a favorite, right? It's like dessert."

"Dessert?" Albeit small, humor touched his glistening eyes. He was sensitive and honest in his affection, wearing his emotions on his sleeve.

"Yeah," I said. "Cupcakes, cookies, muffins, and pies. I love them all. Pies for their buttery and flaky crust. Cupcakes for being sweet and pillowy, especially with the right frosting. Biting into a decadent chocolate chip cookie hits the spot too, depending on the intensity of my sweet tooth. I love them for different reasons but wouldn't call any of them my favorite. The same goes for the three of you."

"What do you love about me, then?" Briar asked, his voice softer than before. "My frosting, buttery crust, or pillowy texture?"

“Your compassion.” I played with the hair at his nape; twirled a strand around my finger. “Your gentle nature. How deeply you care about people. I feel so relaxed around you, Briar. No one makes me feel more at peace than you do. You’re also, like, super fucking hot. I have a thing for the scholarly types.”

“And the muscled, grouchy types like a certain captain?” he asked with a smile.

“Yep. Both are equally delicious. Like dessert.” I slid off his lap and cuddled beside him. “I guess Lake would be the strong and silent type. I have such eclectic tastes.”

“That you do.” Briar pulled the blanket up and tucked me in before kissing my temple—his favorite spot. “Sleep now, love.”

“Only if you sleep too.”

“I’m staying right here beside you. I promise.”

“Good.” I yawned and closed my eyes.

My muscles got heavy, and I drifted off to sleep within minutes. Sometime during the night, Maddox came to bed. I stirred as he slid in beside me but didn’t open my eyes.

“Thank you,” Briar whispered.

“No need to thank me,” Maddox responded, just as softly. “We’re in love with the same man and all deserve time alone with him every once in a while.”

“Is Lake still alive?”

“Unfortunately.”

Briar's body slightly shook, but he refrained from laughing out loud.

"We actually had an interesting chat," Maddox said. "I refuse to say we bonded. We are nothing like you and I are. But I believe we understand each other better now. He truly loves Evan, just as we do."

"Did you seriously doubt him?"

"I doubt everyone at first," Maddox said. "It's dangerous to place trust in people."

"But you trust him now?"

"More than I did before."

"I'm glad to hear it," Briar responded. "I've enjoyed my talks with Lake, the little he's allowed for anyway. I feel we have much in common. Books. Cooking."

"A muffin."

When Briar laughed again, he couldn't fully hold it back. The sound was light and melodic, warming my insides. His lips brushed my brow. "A man who owns us, heart and soul."

Chapter Fifteen

Whisked Away

“Shiny,” Kuya said, his rainbow eyes wide and sparkling as he admired my necklace. “Kuya wants to touch it.”

“You want to steal it, you mean,” I responded. “Just like you always steal my cake.”

He grinned before hopping up on the counter, legs crossing, and sipping more milk from the giant mug I’d given him.

Sawyer was spending the day with Lady Alina, so Sir Noah had dropped Kuya off at the cottage early that morning. In the few days since I’d last seen him, Kuya still seemed upset about the whole Alina situation, but he was mostly back to his old self. That self being an adorably mischievous cat-boy who pounce-attacked me as I moved around the kitchen, cooking breakfast for me and my boys.

The café was closed for the day, giving us a rare morning to sit and share a meal together without me baking like a madman to prepare for the surge of hungry customers. Maddox and Briar would have to leave soon but had said they could stay for breakfast.

“It smells wonderful in here,” Briar said, leaning against the counter.

Kuya flicked him with his tail.

“Thanks,” I said. “I made cinnamon rolls, scrambled eggs, and I’m about to slice fruit.”

“Let me.” Briar cut up strawberries and bananas and rinsed off blueberries before mixing it all in individual bowls for each of us.

Lake and Maddox helped carry the dishes into the main dining area where we then sat to eat, taking advantage of the spacious room. The only thing that would’ve made it better was if Callum and the knights could’ve joined us too, but Baden was still healing, and the others were on duty.

Security in the kingdom had been increased after the caravan was attacked.

Kuya devoured his cinnamon roll but picked at his bowl of fruit, only eating the strawberries—as well as everyone else’s. No one seemed to mind. Lake pushed his bowl closer, allowing Kuya to pick out what he wanted.

“Any plans for the day?” Briar asked after helping me clear the table after breakfast. He and Maddox were about to leave for the castle.

“Getting out of the house sounds nice,” I responded. “Maybe go for a walk. Visit the bookstore.”

“As long as you stay in town,” Maddox said, eyeing the tray of muffins I’d taken out of the oven before we’d sat to eat. They had needed to cool. “What flavor are these?”

“Pumpkin.” I bounced over to him like a ball of nervous energy. “That’s a test batch so I could try out the recipe. I plan to put them on the menu as a seasonal thing for autumn. If they don’t suck anyway. Do you want one?”

“You’re honestly asking if I want to eat one of your muffins?”

“Well, once upon a time, you thought my food was poisoned,” I said, remembering the morning in the clinic after he was attacked in the dark wood. I had made him breakfast, and he’d teased me before eating it.

That felt like a lifetime ago.

“What a fool I was to ever think they were poisoned. Clearly, they were laced with something else instead.” Maddox caressed my jaw. “A magic only you possess, for I’ve been under your spell ever since.”

Briar snorted under his breath. “Who knew the great and mighty Captain Maddox could be such a sap?”

“No one asked you, physician. Go play with your plants.” Maddox turned his face away as he said the words, though, in an attempt to hide his smile. My big softie. He then picked up a muffin and held eye contact with me as he took a bite.

I searched his face, trying to get a read on him, but his expression gave nothing away as he chewed.

“Oh, come on.” I huffed. “Give it to me straight. How does it taste?”

“Hmm.” Maddox examined the rest of the muffin before shoving more into his mouth.

I smiled. “So it’s good?”

He swallowed the bite and took me in his arms. “Good enough that I’ll fight anyone who dares take one off that tray.”

“You can’t eat them all,” I said with a snort.

“Watch me,” he countered as a challenge gleamed in his eyes. I loved it.

I also loved the crumbs at the edge of his mouth. I rose up on my tiptoes and licked them off, my blood heating as his scent of leather and spice surrounded me. He hadn’t shaved that morning, so his jaw had a bit of stubble. I loved that too.

“You would fight them?” Lake grabbed a muffin and stared at Maddox as he bit into it.

“Careful, wolf,” Maddox said. “There’s only one muffin glutton in this cottage, and it isn’t you.” His playfulness was too freaking cute. He’d allowed it to show more and more over the past few weeks.

“All right, that’s enough, you two,” Briar said, a light laugh adding a musical lilt to his voice. He looked at Maddox. “We should leave. Captain Vander is expecting us.”

That sobered my playful knight. A sudden graveness replaced his smirk. “Aye. He is. We shouldn’t keep him waiting.”

Apparently, the bandit had been tight-lipped since his capture days before. Captain Vander of the First Order had requested Briar’s assistance in getting him to talk. Briar’s expertise in herbology, along with his aptitude for spell work, gave him a wide range of abilities that went beyond medicine. One of them being the knowledge of which plant could be

used as a truth serum to force someone to tell you whatever you wanted to know. Maddox was accompanying him to the castle.

I'd try to get one of them to spill the details once they returned later.

I should bake more muffins in preparation.

Each of them kissed me before leaving. I always hated the sight of them walking away. Especially when Maddox could be called away to combat any second of any day. Briar could easily be pulled into dangerous situations as well. Both sacrificed so much to keep others safe.

"I need to tend to my garden and take care of a few things at my cottage," Lake said. "Will you and Kuya be fine on your own for a while?"

"Kuya will protect Evan," Kuya told him. "He'll bite anyone who comes close."

Lake smiled before placing a hand on my lower back and drawing me closer. "I won't be gone long."

"Don't worry about me," I said. "We'll browse the market for a while, and once I get to the bookstore, I'll probably be in there for a hundred years. We may go to the beach and swim a little too. Just go wherever the day takes us."

All things Lake couldn't do with us without being threatened by the townsfolk or, god forbid, seized by the guards patrolling the square because they believed him to be a spy for the demon lord. The reminder was like an anchor plummeting to my gut, the chain catching on my heart on the way down.

“Kuya will catch fish at the beach!” His ears shot up in his eagerness, and his tail swished from side to side. “And Evan can cook it for Kuya’s lunch.”

“See?” I told Lake. “Take care of whatever you need to. We’ll be fine.”

“Very well.” Lake touched my necklace, and the stone emitted a soft glow beneath the pad of his finger. “I’ll return this afternoon and bring back vegetables from my garden for our supper.”

“Apples and peaches too?” I asked, hopeful. “I don’t know what you do to them, but they’re the best I’ve ever had. Sweet and so juicy.”

“You may think it silly, but I speak to them,” Lake said. “My father taught me that all living things have a soul. Trees. Plants. A kind word goes a long way. Be kind to the earth, and the earth will in turn return that kindness.”

“I don’t think that’s silly at all. It’s really sweet actually.” His words made me sort of sad too. Lake was a gentle soul, yet he was cast out by society simply for being a demi-wolf.

“Enjoy your day,” he then said before leaning in to nuzzle my hair. Nuzzling had become his thing. Just like Briar’s temple kisses and Maddox kissing my knuckles.

“You too. Take some muffins with you.”

When Lake smiled, I caught a flash of his canines. “I’ll be sure to tell the captain all about it.”

I laughed.

It was going to be a great day.

Kuya stood knee-deep in the water, every muscle still as he focused on something below. With lightning quick reflexes, he snatched a fish from the water. “Look what Kuya caught!”

“That’s a big one,” I said, impressed. I was shoulder-deep in the ocean, my feet grazing the bottom. The current kept trying to push me farther out. “Good job.”

The section of beach was like a little slice of paradise. Powdery white sand, lush trees, tropical plants, and small rock formations that reminded me of fingertips broke the surface. Kuya had taken me there, saying it was where he and Sawyer often went to swim. When the prince wasn’t busy anyway.

Before coming to the beach, we’d strolled through town. I’d found a few hardbacks at the bookstore—okay, seven, but whatever—and then we’d purchased roasted pecans that had been glazed with a sweet caramel.

“Do you think we’ll see Prince Sawyer today?” I asked, floating on my back. I stared up at the blue sky. Tall, puffy clouds stretched into the distance.

“Possibly,” Kuya responded with a small growl in his voice. “But Kuya’s prince will be with *her*. So best that we not see him.”

Understandable. If I was in Kuya’s position, I would’ve been devastated to see Lake, Briar, or Maddox with someone else too. I didn’t believe for one moment Sawyer had done

anything with Alina—romantic or sexual—but once they were married, it would be expected of him.

The caw of a seagull drew Kuya's attention, and he crept toward it, the fish still clutched in his hands. "Come, come, little birdie."

I snorted at him and continued floating around, enjoying the relaxation. The water rippled about three feet in front of me before teal-blue hair jutted up, followed by the glow of sapphire eyes.

"Hey, you," I greeted the merman. He was the same one I'd seen a few weeks ago. "Nice to see you again. I'm still glad you're not a shark."

He sat up higher in the water and grinned. That close, I saw more of his features. A toned chest, sharp jawline, and bronze skin that had a rippling texture in some areas, like faint scales. "Not shark," he said in a heavy accent that I couldn't place. He touched his chest. "Storm."

"Your name is Storm?"

He nodded.

"I'm Evan."

"Evan," he repeated, tilting his head to the side. "The water likes you."

"It, um, does?" I glanced down at it. "That's good to know, I guess. As long as it doesn't like me enough to drag me to the depths and keep me forever." When I looked back up, Storm was inches from my face. "Whoa!"

“This stone.” Storm regarded my necklace, completely oblivious to the fact he’d nearly given me a damn heart attack. “It shines like treasure.”

“It’s meant to protect me.”

Storm smiled. “Then wear it always.”

“That’s the plan,” I responded, amazed I was actually talking to a freaking merman. How cool was that? “So, do you come here often? Wait. Dumb question. You live in the ocean. Of course you do. Ignore me. I ramble when I’m nervous.”

“Why nervous?” Storm asked. “I won’t harm you.”

Maybe it was my trusting and sometimes gullible nature, but I believed him.

Everything was suddenly quiet. No splashing of water or the little chitters Kuya made when excited or playing. I looked toward the last area I’d seen him, finding nothing but my satchel, the bag of books I’d bought at the market, and our bundles of clothes and shoes. Well, *my* shoes. He didn’t wear any.

“Kuya?” Worry filled my voice.

A shadow passed beneath the water, and something soft brushed my thigh. That something then broke the surface and lunged at Storm. “Kuya bite!”

Storm caught him in midair and kept him at arm’s length, his expression a mix of curiosity and amusement.

My friend wiggled around. “Big fish will be Kuya’s lunch.”

“You will not be eating Storm,” I said. “He’s nice.”

“Nice and tasty.”

“No.”

Storm released Kuya with a rumbling laugh. He then shot backward in the water and dove under, his large tail coming up and slapping the surface. It splashed water in Kuya’s face, and he hissed before springing after Storm.

I watched the two of them chase and splash each other for a while before the hot day started getting to me. Feeling light-headed, I returned to the shore and plopped down in the sun-heated sand. I needed water and a snack pronto. Thankfully, I’d thought to bring both. I found the bottle I’d filled with water and took a deep drink, then searched the satchel for an apple.

The first one I grabbed had bites taken out of it. With the interior exposed, it had started to brown a little. It was also speckled from having been inside the satchel. Dirty and covered in my bestie’s slobber? No thanks.

“Kuya, you little gremlin,” I muttered before setting that one aside and grabbing another. It had even more bites taken out of it, as though he’d wanted to taste each one but not fully eat them.

So much for my snack. Sighing, I shoved it back in the bag and looked around. A section of trees stood behind us, and I put on my shoes before heading that way. If I didn’t find any fruit trees, I could at least enjoy the shade for a while.

Once enclosed in the trees, one in particular caught my eye.

Figs.

It made me miss Briar. I couldn't wait for him and Maddox to return home later. Lake too. Happiness swirled in my chest. We'd had a great morning together. My day with Kuya had been fun. And I looked forward to the evening when we'd all be together again. Hopefully with Callum, Duke, and Quincy too. Baden was still on bed rest, but I would take him a treat tomorrow.

As I approached the fig tree, lost in my head, a creak came from above me.

I looked up just as a dark shape leapt from the branch. Suddenly, a bright light burst from my chest and knocked it away before it made contact.

The protection stone.

Too bad it couldn't protect me from my own clumsiness.

Startled by the attack, I shuffled backward and collided with a rock jutting from the grass. I lost my balance and fell. My back smashed against the tree trunk, knocking the wind out of me. There was a sharp pain at the back of my skull too.

The dark shape rose from the ground.

It was a man.

He had a slim build and wore a black hooded cloak over a brown tunic and fitted black pants. Boots laced up his legs, hitting mid-calf. A dark-green cloth covered half his face, showing only a glimpse of tanned skin and his topaz eyes. Strands of dark-auburn hair could be seen beneath the hood. A holstered dagger rested at his hip, and another was strapped to his left thigh.

Oh my god. He was a bandit.

I tried to call for help, tried to say anything at all, but I was still struggling to suck in a breath. And holy shit, my head ached something fierce.

“Greetings, little prince.” The man neared me, his steps slow, like a predator who had his prey exactly where he wanted. His voice was on the lighter side and rang of a cool confidence, even when slightly muffled by the face covering. “Such an honor to finally meet you.”

When I tried again to speak, it came out as a throaty rasp.

He squatted in front of me, his gaze falling to my necklace. “What do we have here? Powerful little thing, isn’t it? Knocked me right on my ass.”

“P-Please,” I managed to wheeze.

“Pleading for your life already?” I couldn’t see his mouth, but a smile glinted in his eyes. “Don’t worry your little head over that. I’ll only hurt you if you force my hand. So be a good boy and do as I say and no harm will come to that pretty face of yours.”

Why had he addressed me as a prince? Just to be a smart-ass? And what did he want with me? To rob me? Other than the protection stone, I had nothing valuable. I was barely even clothed, apart from my boxers and shoes. I’d taken off everything else before swimming.

Slowly, he reached for my necklace, as though testing to see if he would be repelled again. When nothing happened, his eyes crinkled with another smile, and he lifted it up and over my head.

I felt the loss in my core, like a cold wind sweeping through my body. Taking away the warm, protective energy of the men I loved.

“No,” I said on a whine. “G-Give it... back.”

The bandit tucked my necklace into the pouch attached to his belt before lifting his hand to my jaw. Dark-brown strips of cloth wound around his palm and up to his wrist where it was tied off. I tried to jerk from his grip but didn't have the strength.

“Hair like gold and eyes like emeralds,” he said, his fingers warm where they trailed over my skin. “You *are* a little treasure, aren't you?”

He then stuck his hand back inside the pouch and blew something into my face. The edges of my vision went wonky. My head felt heavy, and it lolled to the side, my neck muscles not able to support it anymore. I couldn't keep my eyes open.

“Sleep now,” he murmured, gathering me in his arms before standing and throwing me over his shoulder. “We have a long trip ahead of us.”

Chapter Sixteen

The Muffin Thief

The ground moved beneath me, a constant rocking.

I cracked open my eyelids and regretted it instantly as a shooting pain stabbed behind both eyes, followed by a similar sharp ache in my temple. As if it couldn't get any worse, I also felt like I was going to throw up. The rocking wasn't helping.

“If you're going to be sick, please do it over there.”

I focused on the man. His long, dark-auburn hair was pulled to one side and held in place by a small golden cuff. His warm topaz eyes popped against his dark complexion. He appeared to be in his early twenties, with a toned build but still on the lean side.

“Who are you?” I croaked before the ground moved again, making me bounce a little. “And when will this earthquake stop?”

That's when I noticed the tussle of hair in front of me. A mane. It wasn't an earthquake at all, but rather, me on a horse. On impulse, I reached forward and pet its neck. I could never resist the urge to pet animals. Insects, like Herbert the Terror, not included.

“You don’t remember me?” the man asked, holding the reins as he walked beside the horse. “I’m hurt. And here I thought we had something special.”

My confusion lifted as my foggy mind cleared and everything came back to me. I remembered being in the trees along the beach and a dark shape attacking from above.

“You’re the bandit!” I said. He’d removed the face covering and had lowered his hood, but it was definitely the same guy. I then slapped a hand to my chest, finding nothing but a scratchy shirt. A shirt that wasn’t mine. “You took my clothes and my necklace.”

“Two wrongs and one right,” he responded, cool as a cucumber. “First of all, I’m not a bandit. I’m merely a... how should I say it, a man of limited means who does what he has to in order to get by. As for your clothes, you weren’t wearing much when I found you. I dressed you in my spares for now. You’re welcome for that, by the way. But I *did* take your necklace. I’m sure it will fetch me a nice bit of coin with the right buyer.”

“You can’t sell it. Give it back.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Come down here and make me give it back,” he said, a smirk curving his lips. It was different than the one Maddox gave me. This one was cocky as hell with an underlying threat. He might not have been a bandit—according to him—but he was dangerous. When I didn’t respond, that smirk fell. “Pity. I was looking forward to your attempt.”

“I’m a lover, not a fighter,” I said. “Unless you count thorn bushes. They don’t stand a chance against me.”

He moved his gaze to the dirt trail ahead of us. Tough crowd. We weren’t on the king’s road, so we must’ve been traveling down a different route.

“Where are we going?” I asked as I scanned the area. The sun had started to set, the last traces of light fading. In the far distance, a mountain range stretched toward the sky. There was no sign of the sea or the castle. No buildings or homes in sight.

“Wherever I say we’re going,” he answered.

“That’s not a real answer.”

“It’s the only one you’re getting.”

“Are we still in Bremloc? What do you want with me?”

The not-bandit sharply exhaled. “Right now? I want you to stop asking so many goddamn questions.”

“Sorry, no can do. You can’t kidnap someone and expect them to be like, ‘Oh, how fun, we’re going on an adventure.’”

“Why not?” He smirked. “I, for one, think this is quite the fun adventure already.”

“Who the hell are you?” I asked, my earlier confusion now a cold panic that had my pulse racing faster. “You say you’re not a bandit, fine, but why kidnap me? As you saw, I don’t have anything of value other than the necklace, which you’ve already freaking stolen. So why are you—”

“By the gods, I should’ve strengthened that sleeping dust to ensure you stayed asleep for the entire trip.”

“If you want to escape my mouth, let me go.”

“Sorry, no can do,” he said, mocking my words from earlier. “You and I are travel buddies for the foreseeable future. Do us both a favor and be quiet.”

“Let me go or I’ll start screaming.”

A dangerous gleam shone in his topaz eyes. “Try it and see what happens. But take my word. You won’t like it.”

“Will you gag me?”

“Why gag you when I can just cut out your tongue?” The man patted the dagger at his hip.

I cringed. “Seems like a lot of extra work. Gagging me is faster and not nearly as messy.”

“Maybe I like things a little messy.”

Okay, this guy was a damn psychopath. Not wanting to test his patience more than I already had, I pressed my lips together and considered my situation.

First, I had been kidnapped with no clear reason why. Secondly, he seemed to know me, so said kidnapping wasn’t a random opportunity he’d taken advantage of. But why me of all people? Sure, The Brewed Muffin had gained a decent reputation, but I wasn’t exactly rolling in money. After paying my employees, suppliers, and the loan from the bank, I used the rest for things we needed around the cottage. Any extra was put toward books or small treats for me and my men. I wasn’t exactly the prime candidate for a hostage negotiation.

What did he expect to get in return for me? Some coffee? Maybe a cupcake or two?

Another thought occurred to me. Was this what Lupin had warned me about? He'd said opening my café had set things into motion. Was me being kidnapped and held for ransom one of those things? Maybe that's why he'd seemed so worried.

"That's not suspicious at all," the man said, his eyes narrowing. "You being quiet."

"Well, you threatened to cut out my tongue if I didn't." I shifted on the saddle. "My butt's numb. How much farther are we going to go?"

"As far as we need to."

"You never told me your name."

"I don't do names," he said. "It's easier that way."

"Easier for who? You or your victim?"

"Victim?" He released a sharp laugh. "As I said earlier, I do what I need to do in order to survive. I've been alone my whole life. Had no one to take care of me but myself. Something you'll never understand."

"Don't assume shit you don't know. I know what it's like to feel like it's me against the world."

Growing up in foster care and being shuffled from family to family, never putting down roots anywhere, and struggling to put food on my table as I aged out of the system and tried to navigate the outside world? Yeah, I could definitely relate.

He glared at me before focusing back on the road.

I shifted in the saddle before sighing and resting my hands on the saddle's horn. Hands that weren't bound. He hadn't tied

me up? A tiny sliver of hope blossomed in my chest. My gaze darted around as a plan started to form.

“Don’t even think about it,” he said.

“Think about what?”

He gave me a droll look. “You’re thinking of jumping from the horse and running. While it would give me a much-needed laugh to see you flailing around and tripping over yourself in your attempt to escape, I’m much too tired for it.”

“Who said I’d trip and flail? I could be an amazing athlete, you know. Graceful and nimble on my feet.”

“You tripped over a rock earlier,” he said. “You’re about as graceful as a newborn boar.”

“Rude.”

So much for my escape plan. Because he was right. I’d most definitely trip and fall flat on my face. Probably twist my ankle in the process. And if I somehow managed not to fall, I had no idea where we were. I’d end up roaming all over the unfamiliar terrain and become some monster’s dinner.

Dinner.

My throat squeezed as it fully sank in that I wouldn’t be returning home that night. My men must’ve realized I was gone by now. They wouldn’t think twice before setting out to look for me. But with the bandit situation, that would be dangerous.

“Tears won’t work on me, so save them.”

“Huh?” I glanced down at him. Noticing my cheeks were wet, I wiped at them.

Although subtle, his expression changed. Softened a little. “I said I wouldn’t hurt you unless you gave me reason to. So relax. You’re more useful to me in one piece anyway.”

He thought I was crying because I was scared. And instead of mocking me for it, he’d tried to reassure me. How many coldhearted kidnappers would be like that?

“I don’t know why you’re doing this,” I said, voice frail. “I wanna go home.”

“It’s nothing against you, kid.” He led the horse from the narrow dirt path and over to the grass. “This is just a job.”

“What type of job?”

“One that can change my entire life for the better if I play my cards right.” The man approached me and held out a hand. “Come on. I’ll help you down. We continue on foot from here.”

“On foot? Why?”

“Faster to travel through the forest that way,” he answered, helping me from the horse. “Easier to go unnoticed too.”

Back on my feet, I wobbled. I had been sitting for too long, and my legs were stiff. He grabbed my arm to steady me before quickly letting go. He then removed the two satchels fastened to the saddle before swatting the horse on the rear. It whinnied and trotted down the path.

“Not even a kiss goodbye?” I asked.

He snorted. “It wasn’t my horse. I stole it before leaving the capital. You weigh basically nothing, but carrying you over

my shoulder with you drooling and unconscious would've drawn unwanted attention."

"I don't drool."

Several things registered in my head at once. He freaking stole a horse, the auburn-haired criminal. A horse he just released, leaving us stranded god knows where. And lastly...

"We left the capital?" I asked, heart sinking. "So that answers my earlier question. We're not in Bremloc anymore."

It was the first time I'd left the kingdom since being sent to that world. The thought of traveling had excited me once, but I'd imagined doing so with those I loved. Not with a cocky, probably sadistic stranger who still hadn't told me what the hell was going on.

"Don't look so sad about leaving," he said dismissively. "Once you visit one kingdom, you've visited them all. There's nothing special about yours. Come on. We still have a ways to go before we can make camp for the night."

My legs were fairly back to normal now, no longer stiff, and my butt wasn't numb. Running wasn't impossible—accident prone tendencies aside. But I stood a better chance with him than on my own, especially with darkness encroaching on the land. So when he walked toward the trees, I followed.

"Wait." I slowed in step as an unsettling feeling seeped into my bones. "Why are we going through the forest?"

"To reach our destination."

"Which is... where?"

“You know very little, don’t you?” He tossed me a baffled eyebrow raise. “Spent too much time with that silver spoon in your mouth and not enough time familiarizing yourself with the land around you.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” The tip of my shoe caught on a raised tree root, and I stumbled.

He stared at me as I dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes. “What were you saying earlier about being graceful?”

My palms stung where I’d caught myself, and frustrated tears burned in my eyes. Frustrated... and maybe some sad ones too.

I missed Maddox. And Briar. And my gentle Lake. They were all waiting for me at the cottage, while I was being dragged through the forest; hungry, muscles aching, and anxious about what this jerk had in store for me.

“Stop crying.” Sighing, he grabbed my arm and pulled me to my feet. “Tears solve nothing. They only make you look weak to your enemies.”

“Is that what you are?” I asked through my dumb sniffles. I couldn’t stop them. “My enemy?”

“I’m not your anything. I’m simply guiding you from one place to another.”

“Guiding me,” I said with a sneer. “Yeah. Right. You abducted me and now you’re taking me out to the freaking middle of nowhere where I’ll probably be torn apart and eaten as some sacrifice to a forest god or something. You should know I’m not a virgin. So if it *is* a human sacrifice or

something that requires that, you're shit out of luck. I have three men who fuck me good and hard on a nightly basis. No virgin in this blood."

"Three men?" he asked. "I suppose I shouldn't expect anything less. Your title certainly appeals to most. Men and women alike."

"My title? I've been called a Muffin Lord once or twice." My attempt at humor fell short. It only reminded me of Maddox. I knew all three of my men loved me, just as I loved them, but Maddox was the protector of our family. My knight in shining armor who often hid his emotions behind a carefully constructed wall.

"If I lost you... I wouldn't survive it, Evan. Gods, I wouldn't."

The memory of his words made me freeze in place. I should've been more careful. I should've stayed with Kuya at the beach instead of wandering off on my own. So many 'should haves' I saw in hindsight.

"Why did you stop walking?" the thief asked, then pushed against my back. "Move."

But I couldn't. My knees had started to shake. "I want to go home."

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but that won't be happening. Now walk. Night will be upon us soon."

It felt like I was on autopilot. My body moved, but there was no one running the show. In the shroud of the forest, it got dark fast. I caught peeks of the darkening sky through gaps in the thick branches, spotting a dusting of stars.

One then shot across the sky. A shooting star.

My chin quivered.

“If you need me, say my name. No matter where I am, no matter how far away, I’ll find you,” Lake had once told me.

“Lake,” I whispered, my chest so tight it hurt.

“What?” The thief looked at me.

“N-Nothing.” I kept walking, even though I felt like I was about to fall apart. Something settled over me then. A determination that gave me strength.

I couldn’t fall apart. Not now. Not ever. I had to make it home.

Somehow.

“You need to eat,” the thief said, offering me a sliver of dried meat. “You’re good to no one if you starve.”

“Not hungry.” My stomach chose that moment to prove I was full of shit as it growled. I drew up my knees and wrapped my arms around them, staring at the fire.

We had made camp once it got too dark to see in front of us. If you could even call it a camp. It was a spot we’d found between some trees that provided decent shelter. He had then made quick work starting a fire, as though he’d done it a thousand times. He probably had.

“It’s not poisoned.” He took a bite to prove it. “See?”

There was something familiar about his statement, but I was too sad to think on it. I hugged my knees tighter and made myself as small as possible.

“You’re not what I expected,” he said.

I looked at him. Firelight flickered across his face and made areas of his dark-auburn hair pop, bringing out the lighter strands. He was like an ember, tame at the moment but with the potential to set everything ablaze. “How do you even know who I am?”

“Everyone knows who you are.” He bit off another piece of the meat. It looked to have the consistency of beef jerky. My mouth watered, but I refused to eat anything he gave me. I didn’t want to give him that satisfaction. “The stories about you say you’re softhearted, yet refined. Well-spoken. Blah, blah.”

“People say I’m well-spoken? They clearly have never met me then.”

“Clearly,” he agreed.

“Are you always such an asshole?”

“I simply tell it like it is.”

“Then tell me the truth,” I snapped. “Starting with your name.”

The fire reflected in his topaz eyes as he stared at me. I’d be blind not to notice how attractive he was. For a sadistic thief, anyway. “My name’s Rowan.”

I blinked. “I didn’t expect you to actually answer me.”

“Well, I’m full of surprises.” He reached into the satchel beside his boot and tossed me something. It smacked my chest, and I flailed around to catch it before it hit the ground. “Eat before I shove it down your throat.”

A bright-red apple.

My stomach growled again, and my willpower started to slip. On top of being abducted and walking for, like, a million years through the woods, I had missed lunch and dinner. I was starving. Putting my pride aside, I bit into the crisp apple and groaned as the flavor exploded on my tongue, both tart and sweet. Juices ran down my chin, and I wiped at it before diving back in for another bite.

When I looked back up, Rowan’s gaze was pinned to mine, the strip of meat in his hand forgotten.

I stopped chewing. “Oh god. This *was* poisoned, wasn’t it?”

I should’ve known better than to trust a bright-red apple. Did Snow White not teach me anything? Obviously not because there I was gobbling up that apple like it was the sweet nectar of life.

“Don’t be an idiot. I already said you’re no good to me dead.” Rowan averted his eyes and took a rather forceful bite of dried meat. “So... you like apples.”

He’d said it so casually.

“I like fruit in general,” I answered. “Apples, peaches, and bananas. I like vegetables too, especially zucchini and yellow squash.”

Rowan nodded once before shoving the rest of the meat in his mouth and reclining backward, one knee jutting up and both arms going behind his head. He used the satchel with my necklace inside as a pillow. Probably to prevent me from snatching it once he fell asleep.

If he even slept. I got the feeling he'd be keeping a close eye on me throughout the night so I wouldn't run off. Not that there was anywhere for me *to* run. Nocturnal creatures stirred all around us, and I could've sworn I'd seen red eyes earlier. I mean, it could've been my overactive imagination, but did I really want to take that chance? Definitely not.

"That necklace you're so attached to... who gave it to you?"

"How did you know I was thinking of my necklace?"

"I noticed you staring at the satchel and pieced it together. You're easy to read. Like an open book."

"It was a gift," I answered.

"From someone special?"

"Yeah." My voice cracked. If I started talking about Maddox, Briar, and Lake, I'd start bawling. Again. So, I ate more of the apple. "Are you really not a bandit?"

"I see myself more as an adventurer."

"Oh yeah? Like from the Adventurer's Guild?" For a moment, I forgot he was a jerk who'd kidnapped me. Since the day I'd learned of the Guild, I had been intrigued. It was just like all the video games I loved.

"Sometimes."

“You’re sometimes an adventurer?”

“No, I sometimes go through the Guild,” he answered. “Other times, I do my own thing. I prefer it that way. I don’t really like rules.”

“Clearly,” I said, echoing the same tone he’d used with me earlier.

The edge of his mouth hitched up. “It’s late. Get some sleep.”

Some nearby creature made a weird croaking sound, like a toad but way scarier. “You expect me to sleep out here like this? What if I get eaten?”

“Nothing will eat you. Relax.” He closed his eyes. “The fire will keep them away.”

“Them? Who’s *them*?”

Rowan peered over at me. “You really don’t know where we are, do you?”

“Should I?” Hearing another sound, I snapped my head toward the left where several trees grew closer together. Maybe my eyes were playing tricks on me, but it looked like a dark shape passed behind the trunks.

“If you knew a thing about your kingdom, you wouldn’t need me to tell you. I’m surprised you’re so... ignorant. Not what I imagined you to be at all.”

“Gee, thanks. Adding insult to injury. Now, tell me where we are before I get mad.”

Rowan sat up, one brow curved. “I’d like to see you mad. Like an angry bunny rabbit.” I tossed the apple core at him,

and he laughed. I didn't think about how the sound caused flutters in my belly. "Fine. Allow me to enlighten His Highness. I'm taking you through the dark forest."

"The dark forest?" I asked, confused, but then a light bulb blinked on in my head. "Wait. When you say the dark forest, do you mean... like... *the* dark forest? Aka, the place where demons and all sorts of horribly grotesque monsters live?"

"I wouldn't say that too loud. You'll hurt their feelings."

"Oh my fucking god, Rowan! Why are we in here?" I shuffled closer to the fire. "This will keep away demons? Are you sure? Do we have enough wood to keep it burning through the night? Should we get more? What if it goes out when we're sleeping?"

"It won't."

"How do you know? Are you the fire whisperer?"

"Because I enchanted it," he answered with a glimmer of amusement in his topaz eyes.

"Enchanted it? You can use magic?" He had used sleeping dust on me, but it was possible to create a concoction like that without magic.

Rowan nodded before tossing a small stick into the fire. "I've been able to wield it since I was a kid. Never learned how. It was just there, inside me."

He was like Thane, then. Born with the gift. "Why not use that magic for good? Why become a criminal?"

Hardness touched his features. "You say that like I had a choice. My magic didn't open any doors for me. It closed them

even more.”

“Why?”

“Do you always ask this many questions? It’s exhausting.”

“Sorry.” I chewed my bottom lip.

Rowan breathed out a sigh. “Go on. Ask another. I know you’re dying to.”

“Why did your magic close doors?” I asked. “My boyfriend, well one of them, is a physician and heals people with his magic.”

“One of the three men who warm your bed?”

“Um.” My face heated. “Yeah.”

“Not all magic is the same,” he answered. “It depends on the person and how the mana speaks to them. Healing magic isn’t my specialty. My life would be a lot easier if it were. Maybe then people would be more accepting. Mine is... darker. I was an unwanted orphan kicked to the streets with no fancy title or family name to hide behind, so I used my magic the best I knew how. To survive.”

I didn’t need it spelled out for me; he specialized in dark magic. I dropped my gaze to the fire pit and watched the flames crackle along the wood. “How will this keep demons away?”

“By creating a sort of camouflage,” he answered. “Any demons who wander past won’t see us. Those who are stronger may sense us, but they’ll mistake us for one of them.

We've also both eaten from the forest, so that will strengthen the glamour."

"Eaten from the forest?"

Rowan flashed a grin. "The apple."

"Oh, for fuck's sake." My stomach flipped, the little food I'd eaten turning to a putrid acid in my gut. "Are you saying I ate a demonic apple? Will I grow horns? A tail? A second head?"

"Horns would be an improvement on you, I think." He smirked. The asshole. "But no. You will remain the same little clumsy human you are now."

"I'm never eating another thing you give me."

"By your moans as you ate, I'd say you enjoyed that demonic apple."

"I didn't moan." I wrapped my arms around my torso and glanced around, paranoia growing. When a twig snapped nearby, I jumped.

Rowan cocked his head, the traces of humor washing from his face.

"What?" I asked, taken aback by his sudden mood shift. "Is there something scary behind me?" I flipped around to check. When a leaf fell on my cheek, I screamed and swatted at it. Dear lord. My anxiety was through the roof.

"Wow." Rowan breathed out. "Another thing I didn't expect. Seeing your reaction to everything, I actually feel guilty for this."

“Guilty enough to let me go?” I asked, hopeful. “Well, I’d want you to guide me safely out of this creepy forest first and *then* let me go.”

“I can’t do that.” He smoothed a hand over the top of his auburn hair. “It’s too late for that now anyway. I’m sure he knows we’re here.”

“Who?”

“Lord Onyx,” Rowan answered. “I’m taking you to the Shadow Realm.”

Chapter Seventeen

Deeper Into the Woods

It turned out, if tired enough, even sleeping in a demon infested forest was possible. Rowan woke me before daybreak, and we continued the trek through the trees.

“Pick up your feet when you walk,” he said. “Your shuffling is grating on my nerves.”

“Maybe you should’ve thought about that before kidnapping me,” I responded, my voice still rough from sleep. “I’m tired, hungry, and having coffee withdrawals. You also said you’re taking me to the demon lord. So excuse me if I’m not skipping eagerly toward my death.”

“Lord Onyx won’t kill you. Probably.”

“Probably, he says,” I muttered. A break in the branches showed lighter areas of the sky as the sun started to rise. Sunlight might not chase the demons away, but it brought me some comfort nonetheless. “Why are you taking me to him? I’ve never met the guy, and I’m pretty sure he has no idea who I am.”

“You honestly can’t think of a reason?” Rowan hopped over a fallen tree trunk. Rot had spread along the wood,

hollowing it in places. “You really are daft.”

“Okay, that’s it.” I came to a sudden stop. “I’m not taking another step until you give me some answers.”

“Is that so?” Rowan turned to me, one brow in an inquisitive arch. The dark-green covering he’d worn over his face the day before hung around his neck now, like a sort of scarf. He still wore his cloak, but the hood was lowered. The summer day should’ve been hot, but within the shade of the dense forest, the air held a chill.

“Yep.” I shivered as that chill sank into my bones. “So start talking, or we’ll be here all day.”

“Fine. I’ll humor you. But we can’t stop walking.” Rowan surveyed the surrounding trees. “We’re in the thick of it now, deep in demon territory. The glamour of camouflage will start to wane soon. Staying in place for too long will get us both killed.”

My teeth chattered as goose bumps spread down my arms and legs.

“Here.” He unclasped his cloak and slung it around my shoulders. “You look pitiful.”

I pulled the material closer to my body, grateful for the small sense of security and warmth it provided. “Thanks. I’d feel even better if you gave me my necklace back too.”

“Not a chance.” Rowan gave my shoulder a small push. “Walk.”

So, I walked. And walked. And waited for him to give me answers.

“You thought I was a bandit,” he said after several moments of silence. “Because of the attacks?”

“Yeah,” I answered, hoping the guttural growling I heard was my hungry stomach and not some horrifying monster lurking in the shadows waiting for the perfect time to strike. “They’ve looted the towns around Bremloc for the past few months before venturing closer to the capital. Maddox—” I snapped my mouth shut as my throat got tight. “Um, I mean, some of the knights think someone is behind it all. Like it’s leading to something bigger.”

“It is. Well, partly. Money is certainly the motivation of some.”

I stumbled. “So you *are* one of them.”

“No, I’m not,” Rowan answered. Realizing he’d grabbed my waist to keep me from falling, he jerked his hand away and used it to push my shoulder again in an unspoken demand to keep moving. So I did. “I’ve been traveling from town to town for a while and happened upon a group of men in a small tavern. One drank too much ale and let a few things slip.”

“Things like what?”

“How all of this started,” he said. “Someone met with the leader of a gang of bandits and told him to spread word amongst his ranks, as well as to other groups, about an opportunity to earn more coin than any of them would ever dream of having. All they needed to do was stir up turmoil in the lands around the capital before invading the kingdom.”

“Why?”

“To create a diversion,” Rowan said. “A sleight of hand, you could say. Draw attention to Point A in order to leave Point B wide open.”

I mulled over his words. “So their goal is to be noticed. To be as loud and violent as possible to draw attention while someone else does something sneaky behind the scenes? But who? And what?”

“Many of the bandits weren’t privy to that information, and rightly so. The more people who know, the bigger chance the plan would be compromised.” Rowan leapt up and snagged an apple from a low-hanging branch. He wiped it on his shirt before offering it to me.

“Nope. I’m good. I’ve eaten one demonic apple too many.”

“Suit yourself.” He took a bite. “It would’ve helped disguise your scent. And I bet you smell awfully tasty to the demon that’s been stalking us for the past half hour.”

“What? Give me that apple.” I rushed to his side.

Rowan chuckled before handing me the fruit. I took a bite and shifted my gaze around as I chewed. Hopefully it worked its magic and soon.

“Fortunately for me,” he continued, “the drunkard in the tavern heard of the real plan behind everything from one of the mercenaries hired for the job. News then spread to several of the bandits, and many branched off from the main group in hopes of earning even more coin than what was already promised to them. That’s when I decided to try my hand at it. One thing led to another, and here we are now. The end.”

“No, not *the end*. I still have too many questions.”

“What a surprise.”

“Don’t be a smart-ass. What’s the real plan?” Another question poked at my brain. “You said earlier *someone* approached the bandit leader and started all of this. Who?”

Rowan smiled. “A servant from the palace. Or so I heard.”

“Palace?”

“From the kingdom of Haran.”

I paused mid-bite.

“Finally, some recognition in those emerald eyes of yours,” Rowan said. “These bandit attacks were orchestrated by the kingdom Bremloc is at war with. Haran sent bandits and mercenaries to your kingdom. As for the real reason behind all of this?” He reached out and gripped the side of my neck. “You.”

The processing center in my brain broke. I stared at him, struggling to understand a word. I was also acutely aware of how warm his palm was against my neck. “Me? But why? What did I ever do to the kingdom of Haran?”

How did anyone from Haran even know about me? None of this shit made a lick of sense.

“Ah, I’m sure it’s nothing personal,” Rowan responded, veering on mocking. “Everyone thinks you’re a goddamn saint. Kindhearted, poised, well-spoken, and all of that. A true man of the people. But unfortunately for you, little treasure, your bloodline is rooted in a decades long conflict. Capturing

you would give Haran the advantage in said conflict and turn the tides in the war. You would be at King Silas' mercy, and your father would have no choice but to agree to his demands or risk you losing your head."

Suddenly, understanding slammed into me. "Wait." A laugh bubbled up in my chest. Not that any of this was funny. No, not at all. It was just so freaking absurd I couldn't even believe it. "Who do you think I am, Rowan?"

He frowned. "What kind of question is that?"

"Just answer it."

Rowan's topaz eyes narrowed. "Prince Sawyer."

I laughed again, and this time it came out slightly unhinged. Fitting. That's exactly how I felt.

"What's so funny?" Irritation bled into his normally cool tone.

"Talk about one hell of a misunderstanding." I wiped at my eyes. I couldn't stop laughing. Looking back, it all made sense: how he'd first addressed me and his snide comments about me being born with a silver spoon in my mouth. "I take it you've never actually seen Prince Sawyer?"

"I..." Rowan's gaze locked on mine, and his face lost a bit of color. "What the hell are you implying?"

"As flattering as it is that you mistook me for Sawyer, I'm not the prince. My name is Evan."

His eyes blew wide. It was the first time I'd seen him look so rattled. He'd been nothing but cocky since I'd met him. "Stop lying. You're trying to trick me, and it won't work."

“Do I look like I’m lying?” I asked.

“Golden hair. Green eyes. A demi-human for a companion. You were at the beach with the cat, the same section of beach the prince is known to visit.”

Another laugh spilled from me. I also kind of felt like crying for some reason. “Kuya is my best friend. Prince Sawyer is my friend too. But I don’t have a royal bone in my body. I’m just a nerdy, coffee-obsessed bookworm who owns a café. I’m not a prince.”

Rowan stared at me in disbelief before, finally, realization seemed to sink in. He plopped down on a tree stump and scrubbed his hands over his face. And then, he started to laugh too. It was brittle. “I’m such a fool.”

“Eh, don’t be too hard on yourself.” I walked over to sit beside him. His remark about the hungry demon stalking us was partly to do with that. “If you’d never seen Prince Sawyer before—who is way more handsome than me, I promise—it might be possible to mix us up. We do have the same hair and similar eyes, but it’s just a coincidence. No relation whatsoever.”

He breathed out a dry laugh.

I offered him the rest of my half-eaten apple. “Want some? I heard it’s supposed to keep the demons away.”

Hand trembling, he accepted the apple and took a bite. He looked up at the tree tops, his gaze distant. “This was supposed to change my life. I was finally going to...” He swallowed hard. “It doesn’t matter now.”

A ray of sunshine came through the branches, the light chasing away the shadows. At least in that spot. “Never thought I’d say it, but it’s sort of pretty here. Well, if you forget about all the things that want to eat us for lunch.”

“How can you be so calm about this?” Rowan asked, his eyes meeting mine. “You should be screaming at me. Hitting me. Something. Not sitting here giving me your apple and trying to make me feel better.”

I shrugged. “You’re beating yourself up enough for the both of us. Screaming at you won’t solve or change anything.” I focused on the sunbeams. “I’m not as calm as I seem though. I’m glad I finally have answers, but I’m also worried for Sawyer. If what you say is true, the hired mercenaries are still after him.”

“I reckon he’ll be heavily guarded soon,” Rowan said. “A bandit was captured and questioned. One who knew the truth of it all. He alerted the knights to the real target, which is why I made my move when I did. To get ahead of them.”

“How do you know he told them?”

A trace of a smile showed on his lips. “My shadow magic. I used it to listen in on the interrogation.”

“Shadow magic? You can use shadows to eavesdrop?”

“Eavesdrop... among other things.” He ate more of the apple. “So, your name is Evan?”

“Yep. I also go by Muffin Lord and Thorn Prince. But Evan will suffice.” I peeked at him from the corner of my eye and felt a victorious jolt in my belly when I caught him

smiling. Well, kind of. It was super faint. “I have another question.”

He dropped his gaze to the apple, that faint smile on his lips growing bigger. “Of course you do.”

“Haran hired bandits to create a diversion, so all eyes would be on them while mercenaries or whoever snuck in to capture Prince Sawyer, right?”

“Yes.”

“And you heard about the plan and decided to capture him yourself,” I said, and he nodded. “Then why are we here in the dark wood on our way to see the demon lord instead of on the road to Haran?”

“It would be a ship, not a road,” he responded. “Haran is across the sea, a good two week’s journey. And that’s only if you have a fast ship. You really don’t know a thing about this land, do you?” Unlike other times when he’d said it, warmth filled his voice.

“Ship. Road. Whatever.” I waved my hand. “They both take us places. Now, answer the question. Why are you taking me to Onyx?”

“To put it simply, I saw a better deal and took it.”

“Better deal?”

“What would Haran have given me had I brought Prince Sawyer to them? A bag of coin, sure.” Rowan tossed the apple core in front of us and wiped his hands on his pants. “But then I remembered Haran isn’t Bremloc’s only enemy. Lord Onyx and his demonic army have been in conflict with Bremloc for much longer. He’s also way more powerful. I figured if I

showed up at his door with you in tow, he'd give me a much better reward than anything gold could buy."

"Something better than gold?"

Rowan nodded. "A place by his side."

"Are you in love with him?"

"What? No." Rowan snorted. "I've never seen him. Very few people have. Even fewer actually know how to reach the Shadow Realm. But I do. Or, at least, I believe I do. The realm is hidden behind a magical, protective veil that won't open for anyone unless Lord Onyx wants it to. So I thought if I had something he wanted, he'd grant me an audience with him."

"And being by his side would mean you'd get to live in that realm," I softly said. "Also protected behind that veil."

He regarded me. "Something like that."

Why did that sad look in his eyes make my chest hurt? He was a smart-mouthed and cocky criminal who planned to hand me over to the demon lord. Yet, there I sat with a twinge in my heart sympathizing with him.

"A lot of good it will do me now." Rowan stood from the tree stump and walked a few paces away. "If I show up with you, he'd more than likely kill you, then kill me too for wasting his time."

"Does this mean we can turn back now? Since I'm just a nobody, there's no sense in continuing on."

Rowan's features softened. "You may not be a prince, but you're far from a nobody, little treasure."

That nickname kick-started the butterflies in my belly. And when he smiled a little, still with that soft look in his dark-gold eyes, those butterflies soared higher, traveling through my rib cage and landing on my heartstrings.

“Can you take me home?” I whispered. “Please?”

The leaves rustled from the bush beside me.

Rowan tore his eyes from me to look at it. “Evan, you need to—”

A deep growl cut off his words. Bright-red eyes glowed from within the leaves before a dark shape rose up, towering over the shrub. The outline of its body shimmered like smoke, and it was feathered with a massive beak. Like a demented crow.

I barely had time to grasp what I was seeing before the thing lunged at me.

Something slammed into my side and knocked me off the tree stump. But the hit didn't come from the monster crow.

“Stay down,” Rowan said in a low hiss, his body covering mine as we lay on the forest floor. “Don't speak.”

The crow snapped its head from side to side, as if searching for me, before making a croaky cawing noise. It couldn't see us on the ground? That's when I noticed the shadows rolling over mine and Rowan's bodies.

His shadow magic.

He could use shadows to eavesdrop on conversations and apparently control them too, using them as a sort of cloak to conceal us from sight. Abandoning me to save himself

would've been easy. He could've let the monster crow eat me while he escaped. Yet, there he was protecting me instead.

The weight of him gave me a momentary distraction from the scary as hell beast skulking around the tree stump. And as his scent infiltrated my nostrils, something sweet yet smoky, the blood heated in my veins and my pulse quickened.

Oh no.

I recognized the response. I had felt it three other times. Usually, I didn't realize it until kissing one of them, but I felt it so deeply as Rowan stared down at me, his topaz eyes brighter amongst the shadows. The heat of his body seeped into me, erasing the chill.

Lupin had said I'd have five lovers in this world—maybe more. One of the five was destined to either love me or kill me. Could it be Rowan? He was certainly dangerous. A wild card; his behavior unpredictable depending on his mood. He was the type to screw over anyone for a dime.

The pressure of his hand against my mouth lightened but didn't move away completely. His gaze lowered to my lips, and my breath hitched. My heart hammered hard against my ribs. Was he going to kiss me?

Did I want him to?

"It left for now," Rowan said before lifting off me. The shadows retreated, seeping back into the leaf littered forest floor.

"What was that thing?" I sat up, confused by the whirlwind of thoughts racing in my head. I missed the feel of

his body on mine and tried to convince myself it was only because I was cold.

“A corvus daimon,” he said, resting a hand on his sheathed dagger as he surveyed the forest. “Or, a crow demon. Wicked bastards, they are. It alerted the others, so we should get moving.”

“Don’t gotta tell me twice.” I pushed to my feet and hugged the cloak closer to my body. Catching a scent, I pressed my nose to the material on instinct.

It smelled like him; sweet, yet smoky, with a hint of pepper. Like black cardamom. Which only strengthened my suspicion that Rowan was one of the men Lupin had told me about. Love interest number four. The tingling warmth in my chest when our eyes met, my body’s response when we touched, and how I’d picked up on a scent that was uniquely his—it all added up.

Or maybe I was reading too much into it. Also possible.

Rowan led me from the area, but I wasn’t sure if we were going deeper into the forest or heading back the way we’d come. It was easy to get turned around and lose my sense of direction. An already established quality of mine: getting lost in the woods.

“Hey, Rowan?”

He walked a pace ahead of me and glanced back. “Yeah? What is it?”

“Thanks. For saving me.” I burrowed more into the cloak. My insides were fluttering like crazy. “See... your magic *can* be used for good. Without it, I would’ve been bird food.”

Surprised flickered across his face before he turned away. “Yeah, well, it would’ve been annoying if you’d gotten eaten. You’ve been enough of a headache for me already.” With his hair pulled to the side and held in place with the gold cuff, one ear was exposed. The tip was red, the flush noticeable even with his darker complexion.

I smiled.

And then I stumbled.

“By the gods,” he muttered as he stopped to look back at me. I’d fallen to my knees. “Do you *want* more demons to attack us? Keep making so much noise, and they will.”

“Sorry.” I stood and winced at the sting in my left kneecap. A sharp rock had cut through my pants and nicked the skin. “I didn’t mean to.”

That softened him, if only a little. He expelled a breath and advanced closer. “You’re a mess. Here. Let me see.” He knelt to examine my knee. “Just a scratch. You’ll live.” He rose up and shook his head. “How have you survived this long?”

“Luck, mostly, with a generous dose of coffee.”

“And muffins? I recall you rambling about them too.”

My stomach grumbled at the mention of muffins. Since breakfast yesterday morning, I’d only eaten the pecans Kuya and I’d bought from the market and the two demonic apples. I was starving and grossly undercaffeinated.

But being hungry was the least of my worries.

A familiar caw pierced the air, so loud it made me flinch. Rowan flew backward and slammed against the closest tree trunk.

“Rowan!” I called out to him. He’d hit the tree hard. “Are you okay? Please don’t be dead.”

He groaned and sluggishly stood, using the trunk for support. “Save your tears. It’ll take more than that to kill me.” He regarded his satchel. “I think your necklace helped.”

“Good,” I said, relieved. “What happened? Why did you —”

My relief at him being alive was short-lived. Because I might not be soon. There was a heavy flapping of wings before the back of my hair ruffled. And with it, the hot tickle of someone—or something—breathing.

Chapter Eighteen

The Great Escape

What was more horrifying than being attacked by a demonic crow? Having him return with a flock of his equally horrifying buddies.

And god were they hideous; red eyes, massive feathered bodies that towered over me, and pointed beaks, some misshapen and cracked with what looked like blood dripping from the tips. They put Herbert the Terror to shame. I would've preferred that little, muffin crumb loving insect over these grotesque fuckers any day.

Before the one behind me could strike, I rolled to the side. Chills raced down my spine at the memory of its hot breath on my nape.

“Evan!” Rowan stumbled toward me. “Move!”

A second crow lurched at me, snapping its beak inches from my face. It would've got me had I not jerked away. It flapped its wings and screamed—that's the only word to describe the high-pitched squawking.

I searched the ground for anything I could use as a weapon and spotted a large stick. I ducked to retrieve it right

as the crow swatted at me with its wing, the air rippling above my head as it passed over. Another miss.

Rowan withdrew his dagger and rushed to my side, still unsteady on his feet but regaining composure fast. Together, we faced off with the crows. They had formed a circle around us and were making noises that would haunt my dreams for the next hundred years. I counted four in total.

“Any ideas?” I asked, waving my stick at one of them as it paced in front of us. “I assume the shadows can’t help hide us this time.”

“Hide us? No. But they can still help.” Rowan closed his eyes and deeply inhaled. On the exhale, his eyes snapped open. The irises glowed a brighter shade of yellow as he upturned his hand, palm-up and fingers gnarled.

I looked toward the crows, not seeing anything at first. But then I noticed the shadows pooling around their legs.

When Rowan squeezed his hand into a fist, the shadows swarmed around the four crows, engulfing them. More horrible sounds filled the air. Screeching and crunching, like bones being crushed. When the shadows retreated, the crow demons collapsed to the ground, their limbs twisted at unnatural angles. Some of their muscles twitched before stilling altogether.

“Goddammit,” Rowan said with a pant, slumping forward. I caught him against my chest. “That took a lot out of me.”

“That was fucking awesome! Like, incredibly disturbing and gross, but awesome.” I was still holding him. Neither of us moved away.

He lifted his head and rested his cheek against my shoulder. “Are you hurt?”

“No. Not even a scratch. Holy shit. You saved us.”

“Not for long,” he said before stepping out of my arms. “I sense others nearby. We need to leave. Now.”

We took off running.

Rowan was nimble on his feet, movements agile and swift. He even managed to keep me from faceplanting several times on top of that. Each time I stepped down wrong or slipped on the fallen leaves, he grabbed my arm to keep me upright. The sting in my kneecap was all but forgotten as we ran.

Shrieks pursued us. Branches snapped, like something large was bursting through them. Or using them to travel, jumping from tree to tree. A demonic monkey, maybe? God. I hoped not. The monsters making those shrieking noises gained ground, closing the gap between us. Other sounds mingled too; heavy grunts and snarls.

“Don’t look back!” Rowan told me.

“No worries! I won’t.” I leapt over a fallen branch, and he automatically reached for my waist to make sure I landed properly on my feet. “Can you use the Shadow Crusher again?”

“Shadow Crusher?”

“It’s what I’m calling that awesome spell you used on the crows,” I rasped, fighting for my life. Running was torture. “Superheroes usually name their powerful attacks. The one you used definitely deserves a cool name.”

Rowan shook his head. “You’re something else. No, I can’t use the... Shadow Crusher again. Not yet anyway. It drained too much of my mana. With proper training, I’d be able to harness more magical energy for longer periods of time. I’d be much more powerful.”

“Is that what you wanted with Onyx? For him to train you in the dark arts or whatever? To help you hone your craft?”

“Stop talking and watch where you’re running,” Rowan snapped, steadying me again as I slipped.

That’s when commotion came from ahead of us. Hooves beating against the earth, the sound thundering.

“Oh god,” I said, voice rising with both my labored breaths and the new stirring of fear in my gut. “Is it a hooved demon? A monstrous man-eating goat?”

It could’ve been a boar too, like one of the huge ones I’d seen a group of adventurers from the Guild lug through the market on their cart, the wheels creaking under the weight of the gigantic beast.

“Over here.” Rowan stopped running and grabbed my shoulders, pushing me against the closest tree. He took a stance in front of me. To protect me?

Movement showed through the trees as whatever it was advanced on us quickly. A black stallion then burst through the greenery.

And on its back, dressed in full armor and with a battle-hardened gaze?

“Maddox?” Tears stung my eyes, and I went weak in the knees, nearly collapsing from the relief. Despite my brave

face, I didn't think I'd ever see him again. Those tears worsened when I noticed he wasn't alone in the saddle. "B-Briar."

Neither of them had spotted me yet. Rowan had concealed us off to the side, out of sight.

More horses burst through behind them. I saw Callum, Quincy, and Duke. Even Hudson. Sir Anton, a knight from the First Order, was there too, riding a white horse with patches of gray spots on its rear.

They had come for me. My vision blurred even more, and the tears finally fell, rolling down my cheeks. I wasn't sure how they'd known where to search for me, but the 'how' didn't matter. All that mattered was they were there.

I stepped forward, but Rowan pushed against my chest to hold me in place.

"Let me go!" I told him, terrified they would ride past us.

"You heard him," a familiar voice said from my left. "Take your hands off him."

The air whooshed beside my face before Rowan leapt to the side, dodging an attack.

My attention was torn from him when I caught sight of silver hair. I then met a pair of purple eyes, and my sternum squeezed. "Lake?"

"I'm here," Lake said, taking me in his arms. As his spring water and faint peach scent reached my nose, I released a whimpering cry and buried my face against his neck. "I told you I'd find you. No matter how far away I am."

Another cry tore past my lips.

“Evan?” Maddox called out. His voice. Dear god, his voice. So much relief laced within it that it shook. I turned just as he reached us. He pulled me in for a crushing hug, his large body quaking as he held me. “Don’t *ever* leave my side again. I..” He lowered his face to my shoulder, and although he didn’t make a sound, he trembled.

“I’m okay,” I croaked before breathing him in. Leather and warm spice. More tears. “You came for me.”

“Of course we did,” Briar said as he joined us. He pecked kisses along my cheek and jaw. Then, one to my temple. His favorite spot. He shook too, and when he spoke, that shake reflected in his voice. “You are the most important thing to us, love. When Kuya told us you were missing, my heart stopped.”

“Is Kuya okay?” I asked. “He’s not here, is he?”

I didn’t want him anywhere near the dark wood.

“He’s fine,” Briar answered. “And no, he didn’t come with us, although he wanted to.” He tried to get his arms around me but couldn’t. “You need to share, Captain.”

“No,” Maddox mumbled against my neck. He still hadn’t released me. “I need just another moment. Or ten.”

I met Lake’s stare over Briar’s shoulder. He stood off to the side, surveying the area in between looking at me. When I reached out a hand, he took it and brought my knuckles to his cheek. A low whine crawled up his throat.

“Where is he?” Maddox then asked in a deep voice that gave me chills. He lifted his head, and rage penetrated through

his blue eyes. “The bastard who took you.”

Rowan was a dead man. Plain and simple.

“Over here, Captain,” Quincy said, his chocolate brown hair a bit messy as he aimed his sword at Rowan, who stood between him and Duke. “He was trying to sneak off.”

“Well, my services are no longer required,” Rowan said, back to his cool confidence. That cocky smirk was back too. He then gave a little bow, fluttering his fingers. “You strong knights with your big swords are more than capable of safely escorting him from the forest. I now leave him in your hands.”

“You’re not going anywhere, thief,” Maddox growled. “I’m dragging you back to Bremloc in chains where you’ll answer for your crime.”

“You’ll have to catch me first.”

“Uh, Captain?” Callum said, unsheathing his sword. “I hate to interrupt, but we’ve got company.”

The demons. The ones that had been chasing me and Rowan. The relief at seeing my men had made me forget about them.

Loud screeches and roars grew in frequency, as did the skittering of leaves and branches.

They had finally reached us.

Shortly after I'd first arrived in Bremloc, Callum had told me stories of the dark wood and all the demons that dwelled within it.

I was now seeing those demons firsthand.

Monstrous monkey things, more nightmarish crows, and other horrifying creatures relentlessly attacked. Some were mammal-like and others resembled serpents. The knights held them at bay, striking them down and driving others back.

Briar stayed by my side, standing between me and any possible threat, while Lake and Maddox joined Callum and the others. Each time a demon lunged at one of them, my heart stopped. Yet, no matter how many they killed, more flooded in.

"Demons just keep coming," I said, my gaze flitting around the wooded area as my boys fought hard. "They can't fight them off forever."

Briar watched the knights and demons clash, indecision in his hazel eyes. "Maddox told me to take you and run if things took a turn for the worst."

"No." I shook my head. "I'm not leaving them."

He looked at me with a mix of love and pain in his eyes. "I can't leave them either."

Them. Not just Maddox.

Hudson stabbed a demon in the chest and sent it hurdling toward the tree we stood beneath. Briar moved closer to me. That's when I noticed the dagger in his hand.

I felt like crying. My sweet Briar who only wanted to save lives... now clutched a weapon meant to take them.

“I’m surprised to see Sir Anton,” I said in an attempt to distract my mind from the sickening twist of fear in my gut. The knight roared as he sliced a demonic monkey’s head off. The blood was a black goo-like substance. “How did you even find me?”

“After I administered the truth serum, the bandit revealed Prince Sawyer was the target,” Briar said, his grip tightening on the dagger’s hilt as another demon got a bit too close for comfort. “Fortunately, the prince hadn’t left the castle yet. Lady Alina had spilled tea on her dress, and he was waiting for her to change. He was immediately taken to his room and guards were stationed outside his door. Sir Anton was escorting me and Maddox from the castle when Kuya found us and said you were missing. Maddox suspected one of the bandits mistook you for the prince and captured you in his place.” His smile was tight. “We found Lake at his cottage and relayed the information. I knew he’d be able to track you.”

“How?” I asked. “Because he’s a demi-wolf?”

“That, and because you’re his mate.”

“His mate?”

Briar nodded. “I sensed the soul connection between you the morning after you bedded him. The two of you were bound together that night, a bond that goes deeper than romantic love. Once a demi-human imprints on someone, or finds their soulmate, that bond can’t be severed. It’s how he tracked you.”

Eyes stinging, I found Lake among the blur of clashing bodies. My shooting star.

“Wait.” A fresh wave of fear crashed into me “Sir Anton now knows about Lake! What if he—”

“Don’t worry, love.” Briar took my face in his hands. “Anton is... how should I say it... understanding of your situation. More than most would be.” As my confusion deepened, he smiled. “His wife is a demi-fox. Not a wolf, but they are also seen in an unfavorable light among many. Anton won’t do anything to harm Lake.”

“Evan!” Maddox shouted, locked into combat with three demons at once. “Move away from the tree!”

Something wet landed on my shoulder. Slime? The branch creaked, drawing my eyes up. Six yellow-green eyes stared down at me, all mushed together in a slimy face that looked like a giant radioactive worm. It had drooled on me. Drool that had seeped from a gaping mouth full of razor-sharp teeth.

I froze.

Luckily, Briar didn’t. He tackled me just as the evil worm struck. I heard the chomp of its teeth right above my head before we landed hard on the ground. The worm, now on the forest floor, wiggled toward us.

Briar hurried to his feet and slashed at it with his dagger. It curled up, making a sick high-pitched crooning sound as toxic green blood oozed from the top of its slimy head.

“We were almost eaten by a worm,” I said, staring at the four feet of nastiness.

Briar helped me to my feet. “Your protection stone.” Frowning, he touched the base of my neck. “You’re not wearing it.”

“About that...” I released a nervous laugh. “Rowan stole it.”

A pained cry from the middle of the fighting had my insides cinching. Quincy dropped to one knee and clutched his stomach. Blood pooled from between his fingers.

“Q!” Duke shouted before lunging toward the demon that had wounded him. It looked like a mix between a bird and a lion—a large beak and wings but with a long tail, brown mane, and paws bigger than my head.

Frantic, I searched for the others. Callum favored his left side, a nasty gash on his right leg. Anton wasn’t injured, but he was losing strength. Maddox and Lake fought side by side, both scratched and bleeding in areas. The leather part of Hudson’s chest armor lay in tatters, having been sliced at and bitten.

A crow demon lunged at Hudson, and he knocked it away with his shield. Its sharp beak sank deep into the metal before it yanked the shield from his hand. Before that beak came down on his head, a dagger flew through the air and lodged in the crow’s neck.

The person who threw it? Nowhere to be found. But I knew it was Rowan. I recognized the dagger as the small one that had been fastened on his upper thigh.

Hudson jumped back up and fought beside Duke, both of them shielding Quincy, who didn’t look too hot. He was so

pale.

Twigs snapped from the forest behind us. Green eyes glowed from the shadows beyond—higher in the trees and some ground level. More giant worms or other terrifying creatures I had no interest in meeting.

“We need to move,” Briar said before leading me from the coverage of trees as more demons flooded the area from all sides. It was no longer a safe hiding place. He led us to the edge of the fighting and snapped his head in different directions. The hand still holding the blade trembled.

That caused a similar trembling in my heart.

“Briar!” Maddox fought two jaguar-looking demons a short distance away. They had leathery skin and sharp spikes going down their spines. More advanced toward him, slinking through the shrubs. Meeting Briar’s gaze, he nodded once. A signal.

Briar made a small sound. Whatever Maddox wanted him to do, they’d discussed beforehand. And he didn’t want to do it.

“Maddox told me to take you and run if things took a turn for the worst.”

The breath froze in my lungs.

“No,” I said, voice so thick I could barely get the word out. I looked at Maddox, then at Lake, both engaged in a fight they may not walk away from. “We can’t leave them.”

“Evan...” Briar’s eyes glistened behind his glasses.

“You love him too!” I choked out. “How can you leave him here to die?”

A tear slipped from the corner of his eye. “I promised him I’d keep you safe.”

“I don’t care what you promised him! I’m not leaving.” I dropped my gaze to the ground.

“What are you doing?” Briar asked.

“Searching for a weapon.” Spotting a stick, I bent and grabbed it.

“The knights were right about you.” A sad smile touched Briar’s lips. He brushed the backs of his fingers across my cheek. “You’re small but brave.”

I returned his smile. It felt shaky. “We can’t leave them, Briar.”

Exhaling, he lowered his hand from my cheek. “I know. I’d never forgive myself if I did.”

“Me either.” It was my fault we were there in the first place. They had come to rescue me because I was a freaking damsel in distress who couldn’t do anything right, other than bake muffins.

“Take this.” Briar offered me his dagger.

I shook my head. “That’s yours. Besides, Maddox told me not to wield sharp objects.”

“I’m sure he can make an exception just this once.”

“Better not chance it,” I said. “You know how he gets when he’s mad. That vein at his temple will pop one day.”

Briar chuckled. It echoed with the worry we both felt.

Stick in hand, I went to step forward when something dropped in front of me.

“Do you have a death wish, little treasure?” Rowan asked, straightening up from his landing crouch. He was only a few inches taller than me. “You can’t even walk across flat ground without tripping. What makes you think you can fight demons?”

“I have to try,” I said. “Those men fighting? They’re my family. And they’re here because of me.”

“Your solution is to fight demons with a stick?” Rowan rolled his eyes. “You really are a mess. A total, clumsy mess of a boy who can’t even clasp a cloak correctly. Here. Let me fix it.” He stepped closer and fiddled with the fastening at my neck. When a surge of warmth spread through me at his touch, settling in my core, I did my best to ignore it. “There. Now if you die, you’ll at least look good doing it.”

“Wow. I appreciate the confidence.”

“I told you before. I tell it like it is. And you, little treasure, are no fighter.” Rowan glanced at Briar, who had moved closer to me. “I’d do as Specs here says and leave while you still can.”

“I can’t,” I responded. “I won’t.”

Rowan ruffled the back of his dark-auburn hair and sighed. “Figured as much. Then at least take this.” He withdrew a small dagger from his belt. How many did this guy have? “It’s tiny, like you.”

The dagger had a leather wrapped handle with a blade measuring five or so inches. It was way better than a stick. “Thanks.”

“That’s a loan,” he said. “So expect to return it to me. Meaning, don’t get yourself killed.” With a cocky curve to his lips, he grazed his fingertips along my jaw. “Your face is much too pretty.”

Briar pushed against Rowan’s chest. “Take your hands off him.”

“Ah, don’t get your knickers in a twist, Specs. I’m leaving.” Rowan put his hands up and took a step backward. His topaz eyes moved to me. “Remember. I’ll be expecting that dagger back. It’s special to me.”

He then leapt up into the nearest tree.

“Dammit!” I exclaimed, gaze sweeping through the branches in search of him. “He still has my freaking necklace. I should—”

Briar pulled me in for a kiss. His lips trembled on mine. “I love you.”

The gravity of our situation pressed down on me again. It had momentarily lifted while talking to Rowan, but as everything came back into focus, things didn’t look good for us. Demons continued to swarm us. The knights were injured and running on fumes. Lake’s movements weren’t as quick now as exhaustion weighed on him too.

As for my necklace? Rowan could have it. What would a protection stone do for me now anyway? My men didn’t have one. And if any of them fell, well...

Don't think about it.

“I love you too.” I pushed my face against Briar’s neck. Magnolia blossoms and springtime. The center of my chest burned. A burn that rose up my throat and settled behind my eyes. “Do you remember our first kiss? You were outside stealing flowers.”

When he laughed, it was croaky. “Picking them, not stealing.” He held me tighter, his body quaking. “The Night Kisses only bloom beneath the light of a full moon. Little did I know something in me would bloom that night too. My love for you.”

“And you say Maddox is a sap.”

Another laugh. It cracked a little.

Hudson yelled as one of the bird-lion beasts sank its teeth into his leg, yanking him off his feet. As he slammed to the ground, a second one sprang forward and bit into his bicep, tearing at his flesh. Callum drove a sword into its skull before striking at the other.

Quincy was still on his knees, body swaying with the effort to stay upright. Duke and Anton fought off demons left and right.

“I need to help them,” Briar said, his expression fixing into a strong determination. He embraced me again. “Stay here. If a demon gets close—”

“Stab them.” I nodded to my dagger. “Got it.”

Briar, after glancing at me one last time, darted toward the knights. He went to Quincy first and placed both hands over

Quincy's stomach wound. Light radiated from his palms. A demon lunged at Briar's back.

"Briar!" I cried out.

Callum struck the demon down before it made contact. Briar nodded to him before swinging his satchel around and pulling out a glass vial. He had brought healing tonics with him. Smart cookie. He gave one to Quincy before rushing over to Hudson, who was moaning in pain, blood pooling from several deep gashes.

My chest hurt so much. None of this seemed real.

More than anything, I wished it was a bad dream and that I'd wake up to see my men in bed, safe and sound. I would then attack them with kisses and cuddles and stay that way for hours. Just grateful they were alive. Grateful we weren't in a demon infested forest about to be torn to shreds.

But we were.

I then searched for the two men who owned a piece of my heart. I found my wolf first.

Lake's teeth had elongated, and he used them to rip out a demon's throat, making him look even more like his animal counterpart. He was still so beautiful in his ferocity though.

"Captain!" Callum shouted. He fought more of the bird-lions, protecting Hudson. Briar had given Hudson a healing tonic as well, but he hadn't gained back any strength yet.

My heart dropped into my stomach as I followed his gaze.

Four of the jaguar demons surrounded Maddox. Blood cascaded down both his arms, and some of his armor had been

broken off—bitten through. Bodies lay all around him. He'd cut down dozens of them but they kept advancing. As a jaguar demon lunged at him, he barely raised his shield in time to block it. He stabbed it in the chest before slinging the demon off the blade, adding another body to the pile around him.

He was losing strength. I saw it in the sluggish way he lifted his sword.

He wouldn't last much longer.

No. Tears burned the backs of my eyes as I charged in his direction, jumping over a fallen branch, then dodging another demonic worm. Anton severed its head, and I nodded in a silent thanks. He returned the gesture before facing off with another.

“Stay back!” Maddox shouted at me. “Goddammit, why are you still here? You should've left long ago.”

“As if I'd leave you, you stubborn asshole,” I responded once beside him, clutching the small dagger in one hand and holding the stick in the other. I could use it to whack something with at least. “You may be my knight in shining armor, but even knights need to be rescued every once in a while.”

Maddox, though visibly exhausted, tried for a smile. It looked more sad than anything. “You say I'm stubborn, yet here you are putting yourself in danger.” He slumped against me, leaning his head on top of mine. More demons encircled us, jaws snapping and mouths foaming. “I wish you would've left, sweetheart. This is no place for you.”

“Of course it is,” I said, throat burning. “I’m by your side. It’s exactly where I wanna be.”

A deep snarl came from the left.

The biggest wolf I’d ever seen emerged from the shadows. But it wasn’t a wolf at all. Not exactly. On all fours, it stood at nearly eye level with Maddox. The gray and white fur glimmered at the ends, as if stirred by magical energy in the air. Saliva pooled from its mouth, its impossibly large and sharp canines glistening. Bright yellow eyes glowed as they locked onto us.

The Fenrir. A demon Callum had said moved lightning quick and was one of the deadliest in the dark wood. It had the ability to use mana too, making it a far more lethal foe than the other demons around us.

It was the same type of demon that had once wounded Maddox and left the scars on his abdomen. Scars I had often kissed and traced with my fingertips while in bed, our bodies tangled together between the sheets.

The Fenrir snapped its jaws, and its eyes glowed brighter. It then sprang forward and leapt in the air, mouth open and its teeth aimed right at Maddox’s neck.

I moved on impulse. Without even thinking about it. I threw my arms around Maddox, placing myself right in the Fenrir’s path.

“Evan!” Maddox cried, his pupils blown wide. “What are you—”

A weight slammed into me from behind, the force of the hit sending me and Maddox to the forest floor. The breath was

knocked from my lungs. I hadn't felt the piercing bite of its teeth. Probably the adrenaline. Or maybe my body was in shock, numbing the pain response in my brain. A small mercy.

"No!" Briar bellowed.

Maddox lay under me and cradled me against him, a sob tearing through his throat. "Oh, sweetheart. What have you.... why did you..." His words broke off into a gut-wrenching cry, and as he turned his face into my hair, warm tears trickled from his eyes.

"Evan?" another voice shakily said. Lake.

"Help him, Briar!" Maddox sat up with me still tucked against his chest. "He... he jumped in the way... I..." Raw pain tore through his gruff voice. "Gods, please help him."

I focused on Maddox. The ends of his long dark lashes were wet, and the ache in his deep blue eyes was one I felt in my own chest. I didn't want him to be sad. "D-Don't cry."

He released a rough, grief-stricken sound.

Briar and Lake reached us, one dropping down on each side of me. A hand smoothed up my back, the touch light. Hesitant.

Lake whined and pushed his face into the side of my hair.

Everything else was quiet. I didn't hear any sign of combat. Why?

"There's no blood," Briar said, touching the top of my spine. "I could've sworn the Fenrir tore into the back of his neck." He glided his fingers across my skin before stilling. "That sneaky scoundrel."

“What is it?” Maddox asked, still cradling me.

I realized then that the ache in my chest was literal. Not just an emotional response. Wincing, I drew back and touched the tender place below my neck. I touched something else instead. “M-My necklace?”

Briar’s misty eyes gleamed with a smile before he lifted his glasses to wipe at them. “He must’ve fastened it on you when he adjusted your cloak.”

I hadn’t registered the weight of the necklace because of the front clasp on the cloak. It was a decorative piece of silver, so I’d just assumed it was what I’d felt bumping against my chest. The protection stone rested beneath it.

“The Fenrir didn’t bite you,” Briar shakily said. “It hit your back and was repelled. The stone worked. It really worked.” He pressed kisses into my hair. “It protected you.”

“Thank the gods.” Maddox kissed my brow, my cheek, then my lips. Kissing everywhere he could. “You silly, silly muffin. Throwing yourself in harm’s way to save me. Don’t you *ever* do something like that again. Do you hear me? You’re more important than anything. My life included.”

“How touching.” The voice was unfamiliar. Silky but deep.

Almost hypnotic.

Maddox shot upward, keeping me pressed to his side as he readied his sword. He had dropped his shield earlier. It was too busted to be much help now anyway, the metal bent back like it had been made of plastic instead of forged steel.

Briar and Lake stood as well, their gazes finding the man who'd spoken.

The demons had stopped attacking. That explained the sudden silence. They now faced the stranger, and maybe I was mistaken, but their heads appeared to be bowed.

The man's raven-black hair touched the middle of his torso. Several strands in the front had been braided and pinned back, giving him a regal, yet warrior-type appearance. He wore a crimson-colored outfit that reminded me of a traditional Chinese robe worn by males, with ornate silver stitching and a black sash tied at his waist with a sheathed sword. The front fell open, showing a peek of a dark-red tattoo on his chest. The same red that reflected in his eyes.

"Impossible," Briar whispered.

"You know him?" I asked.

"I know *of* him." His incredulous expression gave way to fear. "But no one in the past decade has ever seen him and lived to tell the tale. That's Lord Onyx."

"My reputation precedes me," Onyx said, his red eyes narrowing. They shifted to me. "You. Boy. Come closer."

Maddox stepped in front of me. "He's staying right where he is, demon."

"I called off my demons in a show of mercy," Onyx said with an icy layer in his silky voice. "Watch your tone or I'll set them loose on you again. You're in my domain, knight. You'd do well to remember that."

"And why show us mercy?" Lake asked, taking a defensive stance to my right.

Onyx's gaze locked on him. "A demi-wolf. You fight alongside those who have cast you out. Why?"

Lake's purple eyes faintly glowed as his lips thinned into a sneer.

"Ah. I see." The demon lord regarded me. "It's because of you. I sense the soul bond. Yet, your soul isn't only bound to one, is it, human? All three of the males at your side are connected to you. How fascinating. That's not all that fascinates me, however. There's something... familiar about you."

When Onyx stepped forward, Lake snarled. Briar tensed, raising his dagger. Maddox placed me behind him, shielding me completely. I peeked around his bicep.

"If I wanted to hurt the tiny human, he'd already be choking on his own blood," Onyx said, as if bored. He tilted his head a fraction, his mouth hitching up as he looked at me. "The male with the shadow magic called you a little treasure. I wonder just how valuable you are."

"His name's Rowan," I said. "He only brought me here because he wanted your help and thought he could use me as leverage to get it."

Onyx seemed amused. "What reason would I have for you?"

"He thought I was a prince." I shrugged. "Unbelievable, I know. Sawyer is way more handsome and cool."

"This Rowan took you prisoner, yet you stand here now attempting to help him. My interest in you grows." Onyx then sighed and regarded the other knights. Quincy and Hudson

still didn't look well, but they were sitting up and conscious at least. Callum, Duke, and Anton were covered in scrapes and dirt but stood tall, ready to fight if it came down to it. "I chose to let you all live this day. Leave my forest at once before I change my mind." His red eyes moved back to me. "As for you... I suspect we'll meet again."

Shadows then swirled around his feet and engulfed him. Once they dissipated, he was gone. The surrounding demons then took off into the trees, leaving us alone.

"Ev!" Callum threw his arms around me. "Thank the gods you're okay."

I returned his embrace, feeling that annoying sting in my eyes. I was such a cry baby sometimes. "Thank *you* for coming to my rescue." I focused on the other knights. "All of you."

"Couldn't let anything happen to our Thorn Prince, could we?" Duke said with a lopsided grin. He helped Quincy to his feet, letting the injured knight lean on him for support.

"Why did he let us live?" Hudson asked, staring at where Lord Onyx had stood moments ago.

"I'm not sure." Briar handed his dagger to Anton, as if wanting to rid himself of it as fast as possible. My heart wobbled when I remembered he'd killed the monstrous worm. It might've been a demon, but he'd taken a life. I knew it weighed on him. He then pulled me close, burying his face in my hair. "But I'm grateful for it."

"I'd save that gratitude, physician." Maddox picked a leaf from Briar's hair before touching a cut on his cheek. "The

demon lord isn't known for his mercy. We're in his debt now."

"And he will one day return to claim that debt," Lake said as he slipped his arms around me.

"I suspect we'll meet again."

What had Onyx meant by that? Why would I see him again? I was too tired to think about it. I slumped against Lake and pushed my face into his chest, closing my eyes. He nuzzled my hair. Another set of arms then came around me from behind.

"That's a worry for another day," Maddox said, picking me up. "Let's go home."

Chapter Nineteen

Home Sweet Home

Coffee, muffins, and sex with the men I loved made for one hell of an awesome morning.

Maddox sucked on my earlobe as he pumped into me, our bodies slick with sweat. Briar reached between us to stroke my cock, meeting Maddox for a sloppy, but perfect, kiss.

It had been four days since we returned from the dark wood. And in those four days, the men who owned my heart had barely let me out of bed. Outside of work hours anyway. Even then, the three of them fussed over me, making sure I didn't work too hard. I was allowed downstairs in the morning to cook breakfast and prepare a few batches of desserts before they ordered me back upstairs.

Fortunately, Peter, Alice, and Miles had kept the café afloat. They'd also insisted I take time off to rest. I guess being kidnapped had made everyone overprotective of me.

"Let me hear you," Maddox murmured, snapping his hips harder. "I want to hear how good I make you feel."

Good thing the café was closed that day, otherwise all the customers in the dining room would've heard my moans as he

railed me hard and fast, the bed creaking and thumping against the wall. I fucking loved it. Just like I loved him.

Like I loved all three of them.

Maddox and Briar had me now, but Lake had been with me earlier that morning after we'd woken. I had slept in his bed last night. He still wasn't comfortable being intimate with me around them, so when we had sex, it was only the two of us. The time with him was special. Just like it was special with the other two.

"Fuck." I threw my head back against the pillow as Maddox hit my sweet spot. When I came, it was loud and hard.

"Such sweet sounds, love." Briar lowered his face to my neck and kissed my necklace; the only thing they'd let me wear, stripping me of everything else. He then peered up at Maddox, his light-brown bangs falling over his eyes. "You too, Captain."

Maddox tossed him a shaky smile before groaning deep. His hips jerked before he came too.

Yeah, it was a perfect morning. One made even better after I bathed and went downstairs, finding Lake in the kitchen. He had cooked us lunch. Well, brunch, I guess, since it wasn't quite afternoon yet.

"You made omelets." I grinned as he plated them. Four. One for each of us. "They look great."

Lake's tail wagged once before he forced it to still. "I had a great teacher."

He had also prepared sautéed spinach leaves with cherry tomatoes and sprinkled cheese on top. I helped him set the table before starting a kettle for tea—Lake and Briar’s preferred morning beverage. While it steeped, I made coffee for me and Maddox.

Maddox and Briar came downstairs a short while later, freshly bathed and dressed. Since our return, they had worked every day but had left later in the morning—after fucking me senseless—and then returned in the evening.

As much as I wanted them home with me, the kingdom, being in the state it was, needed them. Dealing with the bandits and the conflict with Haran took priority.

“I hope Prince Sawyer is okay,” I said as we all sat at the table together. “Do you think he’s still under house arrest and forced to stay in his room? I wish I could bring him some cupcakes.”

Maddox placed his hand over mine and gently squeezed. “He’s safe. That’s what’s important right now.”

“I can’t believe they’re still holding the autumn ball with everything that’s happened,” I said.

Briar dabbed at his mouth with a napkin. “Preparations have already been made, and it would be too short of notice for the invited guests.”

“Most of the bandits have fled the kingdom,” Maddox said. “The ones who weren’t captured anyway. I’m sure the ones hired to capture the prince are still lurking, but security around him has more than doubled. They won’t be able to get anywhere near him.”

“Good.” I worried my bottom lip. “But still. A ball will bring in a lot of people. One of the mercenaries could sneak in.”

“None will get past me or my knights,” Maddox said. “Every knight will be on duty during the ball, covering the castle perimeter, inside and out. I assure you Prince Sawyer will be safe.”

“You’ll be working during the ball?” I asked, a bit let down.

“Frowning is unbecoming of muffins,” Maddox said. “You’ll get wrinkles.”

“Says the one who’s always sneering,” Briar muttered before sipping his tea.

“I was hoping I’d get to dance with you. With all of you.” I shook my head. “But now that I think about it, I probably won’t be able to dance anyway. I’ll be too busy in the kitchen.” Nerves swarmed my belly as I thought of all the nobles and royalty who’d be eating my food.

Maddox arched a brow. “You can dance with those short and clumsy legs of yours?”

“Rude.” I jabbed a tomato with my fork and popped it into my mouth.

“I, for one, would love to see you dance,” Lake said, his eyes gentle as they met mine. Gentle and sad too. “I’m sure you’d be breathtaking.”

That’s right. He wouldn’t be able to attend the ball. I’d had this fantasy of my three men dressed up, looking

handsome as hell, and me dancing with each of them, spinning around the ballroom floor as an orchestra played.

“I wish you could be there,” I said, moving my foot to rest against his under the table. He pressed his to mine in response.

“I’ll see you before you go,” Lake responded. “And I’ll be here when you return.”

“Yeah.” I smiled and knocked my foot against his again, causing him to smile too. I then looked at Maddox. “What are we going to do about Haran? Rowan said they’re the ones behind all of this. Are we going to armor up and march for war? Or, I guess it would be, get on a ship and sail to their kingdom, but whatever. We have to—”

“What is this *we* you keep mentioning?” Maddox asked. “Last I checked, you’re no knight.”

“Hey, I wielded a pointy object and didn’t poke my eye out.” I tipped my chin up. “I’m one step closer to being a knight.”

He choked on a laugh and squeezed my hand.

Maddox had known the kingdom of Haran was behind the attacks before the captured bandit had spilled the beans. He just hadn’t known *why*. During the long journey home from the dark wood, he’d finally revealed details about his meeting at the Guild. No sense in keeping it confidential with all that had happened to me.

Maddox had met with a man who said Haran sent the bandits in an effort to weaken Bremloc’s defenses. Maddox had then conversed with Captain Vander of the First Order on how they should proceed. A plan had been in the works to

send a small force to Haran—as scouts—when they learned about Prince Sawyer being the real target.

Now, even though he hadn't told me yet, I was sure war plans were being set in motion instead.

After breakfast, Maddox and Briar kissed me before putting on their shoes and heading for the door.

“Wait!” I snatched the basket off the counter and hurried after them. “You forgot the muffins!”

I had baked them for the knights. Quincy and Hudson were feeling a lot better, but Briar had kept them in the medical ward under observation, just to make sure their wounds were healing as they should. Baden had finally been discharged from the clinic and, according to Maddox, upon hearing about me being kidnapped, had said he was sad he'd missed all the action during the ‘gallant rescue of the Thorn Prince.’

I was glad he hadn't been there, though. It had been nerve-wracking enough having the other knights there. I didn't want anything bad happening to any of them. They were my family.

“How could I have forgotten?” Maddox took the basket from me and planted another kiss on my lips.

“Make sure those get to your knights.” I lightly poked his chest. “Meaning, don't eat them on the way.”

His brows pulled together. “Not even one?”

“Are... are you pouting?” I asked. Maddox made his eyes bigger. More pitiful. I giggled. Damn him. “Fine. You can have one. But no more than that.”

He winked before exiting the cottage, his boots stomping down the porch stairs.

“Have a great day, love,” Briar said, combing his fingers through my bangs, then tucking them aside. I needed a haircut. “Be sure to rest.”

“I will.”

“Lake will tell me if you don’t.”

I cracked a smile at that. It was so simple, so small, but it was further proof that he and Maddox had accepted Lake. Welcomed him.

Once they left, Lake and I cleaned the kitchen. His tail occasionally bumped me as we washed dishes, and when our eyes met, a smile was never far behind. I then curled up with a book in the parlor, and he laid his head in my lap as I read.

We spent most of the day like that; cuddled together, stealing kisses at random, and enjoying each other’s company. Resting wasn’t so bad. It was nice being lazy every now and then.

Later, once the sun began to set, I started dinner. Summer was on its final breath, the warmth slowly turning to crisper air, especially in the evenings. I chopped potatoes, carrots, and celery and added them to a pot before preparing the meat. A hearty stew sounded amazing.

Lake had helped me make dough earlier, and we’d set it near the window to prove. I checked it and nodded, pleased by the rise, before putting it in the oven to bake. Once everything was cooking, I left the kitchen to find my wolf.

A creak came from above me.

Smiling, I took the stairs up the second floor and poked my head into his room. My smile fell once seeing him.

Lake stood by the window, staring at the trees. There was a wistfulness to his expression. A longing. Reality bled back in. I sometimes forgot he had another home out there. One he probably wanted to return to.

“Do you miss it?” I asked. “Your cottage?”

Lake turned to me. “A little, yes. It’s the only home I’ve ever known. It’s where my memories are.” His gaze returned to the trees outside the window. “Gardening with my father. Watching him whittle and then begging him to teach me too. Seeing him in the kitchen as he cooked. He used to grab a stool and place me on top of it so I could reach the counter. He taught me how to chop vegetables and eventually how to cook.”

His melancholic tone made my chest ache.

I stepped farther into the room. “As much as I love the idea of you living here, I know it’s not a place where you feel...” I struggled for the right word. “Safe.”

“I do feel safe with you,” he said.

“You do?”

He nodded. “But it’s not my safety I think of when you’re near me. It’s yours. In the weeks I’ve spent by your side, you’ve burrowed deep into my core. Like maybe you were always meant to be there.”

“Briar said I’m your mate. Is that... is that true?”

Lake lifted a hand to his chest, as if an impulsive response. “I believe so, yes. I have nothing to compare the feeling to. But it’s strong. Stronger than anything I’ve ever felt.” He approached and took hold of my hand. As he slid his fingers between mine, he softly smiled. “It’s how I found you. I sensed your life force and followed it.”

“Thanks for that. I would’ve been demon food otherwise.”

“Any demon that dares try to harm you again will have to go through me first.”

“What about Onyx?” I whispered, fear clouding the spaces between my ribs. Suffocating me from the inside. “He was surprised you were with us.”

“Are you worried I’ll join his side?”

“What? No. I don’t believe for a second you’d ever go with him. It’s just...” I looked at our joined hands. “I don’t know. You wouldn’t have to hide in his realm. You’d be accepted, just like all the other demi-humans who’ve sided with him.”

Lake cupped my cheek. “I go wherever you go. Simple as that.”

“But what if people learn about you, Lake? Sir Noah and Sir Anton already know about you. Thankfully, they’re okay with it, but what if someone else—”

Lake kissed me. I whimpered against his lips, the cracks in my chest closing.

“I love you, Evan,” he said. “More than I can even comprehend. When you went missing, a part of me was lost

too. I didn't feel whole again until you were back in my arms. I refuse to leave your side. Now or ever."

Tears welled in my eyes. "I love you too."

"So you see?" Lake brushed away one of my tears. "Although a part of me misses the solitude of my cottage, a bigger part wants nothing more than to be here with you. Watching *you* in the kitchen as you bake, beaming at a tray of cupcakes fresh from the oven, flour dusting your cheek. Hearing you hum to yourself as you make coffee." He brought me closer, slipping one arm around me and still holding my hand with the other, almost like we were caught in a dance. "I've made new memories here with you. Ones I never want to let go of."

"Do you think you'll ever see this as your home?" I asked, throat tight.

He softly smiled. "I already do."

We kissed then, mouths softly meeting as our hearts beat to the same rhythm. And when he swayed from side to side, taking me with him, I smiled against his lips as we danced to that sweet melody only he and I could hear.

"My cheek is wet." I wiped at it. "Why is my cheek wet?"

"Because Kuya licked you." He pounced on me and purred as he snuggled closer. And yep, he planted more slobbery kisses on my face. "Kuya is so happy Evan is safe."

Sir Noah had brought Kuya to visit that afternoon, the first time I'd seen either of them since my capture. With Prince Sawyer being the target, it put Kuya at risk too, so he'd been on lockdown right along with him. He still was, kind of, but with Sir Noah as his escort, he'd been allowed to see me.

"The prince sends his regards," Noah said. "He wished to accompany us today but the king forbade it. He asked me to give you this." The knight withdrew a folded letter and handed it to me.

Kuya snatched it from my hand—with his teeth—and scampered away, stealing a strawberry cupcake off the counter on his way out of the kitchen.

I laughed. Some things never changed.

"Are you hungry?" I asked Noah. "We just ate dinner, but there's leftovers."

"No, thank you," he said, posture straight and hands behind his back. His gaze, however, flickered to the counter that not only had cupcakes but cookies too. Including his favorite flavor.

I exaggerated a sigh. "Look at all these sweets. You know, it would be a shame for these sugar cookies to go to waste." I picked one up and waved it in front of his face. "Can you hear it, Sir Noah? It's saying, 'Eat me. Don't let me go in the trash.'"

The knight then did what I'd never seen him do before. He broke into a wide smile, flashing his pearly whites, and accepted the cookie. "I suppose one couldn't hurt. Saving it from the cold fate of being in the trash is a noble cause."

I snorted. “Exactly. Oh! Will you take some to Prince Sawyer for me?” I asked, already hunting for a basket to send them in.

“Of course,” he responded with his mouth full. “It would lift his spirits.”

“How is Lady Alina? Is she still at the castle?” I wrapped up an assortment of cookies and placed them in the basket. Yes, I was being nosy. Sue me.

“Unfortunately, the lady was forced to return home,” Noah answered. By his tone, it didn’t sound like he thought it was very unfortunate at all. That made me smile. He clearly cared for Sawyer beyond his duties as a knight and wanted him to be safe *and* happy. “The baron felt it was an unnecessary risk to keep his daughter at the castle with the current situation, so she was sent away in a carriage days ago.”

“Will she come back for the ball?”

“That’s yet to be determined.” Noah finished the cookie and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before putting it behind him again, returning to his formal stance.

“What about the announcement of their engagement?”

He kept a stoic expression, though his lips twitched just a fraction. “I’m merely a knight and not privy to certain details of the prince’s personal life; however, I’d assume the announcement will be postponed for the time being. At least until the threat is better dealt with.”

“Damn,” I said. “Such a pity.”

It was the one good thing to come from all of this. It had bought Prince Sawyer more time before his engagement

became official.

After Kuya and Sir Noah left, I found Briar and Maddox in the dining room playing cards. Lake sat a few chairs down from them and watched. But him even being in the same vicinity as them caused little prickles of happiness in my chest.

“The cat had this in his mouth,” Lake said, handing me the letter. “There’s some drool on the edges.”

“And strawberry frosting,” I said, seeing it smudged in the shape of fingerprints. “It’s a good thing he’s adorable.”

I sat beside Lake and unfolded the letter, revealing super fancy handwriting. The pages smelled nice too, like fresh air and lavender.

Evan,

I hope you’re well. Apologies for not seeing you in person. I’ve been confined to my room for the past week. You’d think it would be utterly dreadful, however, it’s given me time to catch up on my studies and even read several books in leisure, which I haven’t done in ages.

Is that strange? I would imagine so. The quiet is nice though.

Lady Alina was sent home. I regret to say I’m pleased by that fact. Does that make me horrible? She’s a lovely woman, don’t get me wrong, yet her absence is a relief. How strange that I should feel so free while locked inside my chambers. A true contradiction.

But anyway. I suppose I should stop babbling. I don't write many personal letters, you see. I never have reason to. Well, until now. You're a dear friend, Evan, and it breaks my heart to know you were harmed because of me.

I'm told the one who abducted you slipped away. I hope you aren't frightened. I will assemble a unit of knights to guard you if you wish for it, all you need to do is ask.

I look forward to seeing you at the ball. And eating your desserts, of course.

Warmest regards,

S.

“He feels guilty.” I set the letter on the table. “If he wasn't a prince, I'd kick his butt for being so silly. I don't blame him at all.”

Briar offered me a tender smile. “He cares for you, just as we all do. I'm sure you'll get the opportunity to speak to him at the ball and ease his worries.”

“Miles will be here early in the morning, right?” Maddox asked, glaring at his hand of cards. He was either trying to bullshit Briar by pretending he had a bad hand... or he had a horrible poker face and it wasn't a trick at all.

“Yep,” I answered. “We're gonna do a practice run of all the things we're baking for the ball, just to make sure no recipes need to be tweaked or anything.”

Miles had helped me finalize the menu, and I was getting more and more excited about executing it. I only hoped the

fancy people at the castle liked it as much as I did.

“So you’ll make the pumpkin muffins again?” Eagerness gleamed in Maddox’s deep blue eyes.

I grinned. “If you’re good, you might even be able to eat one when we’re done.”

“I’m always good.”

Briar huffed at that, then jolted. “Ow. You ass. Don’t kick me.”

“My foot slipped,” Maddox said before focusing back on his cards. “What do you say, wolf? Want to play a hand with us?”

Lake’s ears perked. “I’ve never played before. I don’t know the rules.”

“We’ll teach you,” Briar said.

Damn if that didn’t almost make me cry.

I watched the three of them play and laughed when Maddox, bless his heart, kept losing. Lake was a quick learner and picked it up easily, winning two games in a row. Briar won another.

“This is horseshit.” Maddox threw his cards on the table. “I’m going to bed.”

I laughed so hard I snorted.

“Ah, so this amuses you?” Maddox came over and picked me up from my chair, throwing me over his shoulder. He swatted my ass, and I giggled harder.

And when he ran from the dining room, taking me with him, Briar and Lake threw down their cards and followed us up the stairs.

Life was unpredictable. There were good days and bad days. Scary ones too. I had been taken from them and feared I'd never see them again. Hell, we'd all nearly died in the dark wood. But there we were now, laughing and falling deeper in love. Building a life together.

Whatever life threw at us next, I knew we'd be able to handle it.

“Prepare yourself, muffin,” Maddox said as we reached the master bedroom. He tossed me on the bed before unfastening his shirt and pulling it over his head. “I don't plan on going easy on you.”

“Oh yeah?” I grinned up at him, so happy I could burst. “Wait, what's that I hear? Your pumpkin muffins fluttering away in the wind? I think I hear them saying something too.” I made my voice higher. “Maddox, you've been bad and can't eat us.”

He dove on top of me. I squealed as he tickled my sides.

Lake stood against the wall, tail wagging and faintly smiling as he watched us. Briar lightly nudged him before coming over and joining us on the bed. Helping Maddox torture me with merciless tickles.

“Wolf?” Maddox asked as he pinned me down. “Care to do the honors?”

“No,” I whined as I squirmed beneath him. Briar lay beside me and kissed my forehead. I peered up at Maddox.

“You’ve corrupted Briar. You won’t corrupt my gentle Lake too.”

“Me? Corrupt? Nonsense.” Maddox dipped his face to my neck and grazed his teeth along my jugular vein. “Besides, you love it.”

He was right. But I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of admitting it.

Lake stepped toward the bed, his furry ears lowered, as though nervous. Maddox shifted his weight to the side allowing Lake to settle on top of me. His purple eyes gleamed with excitement and nerves. But mostly, I saw love.

I smiled up at Lake before he pressed a kiss to my lips.

It felt good to be home.

Chapter Twenty.

Evan Wears His Fancy Pants

On the morning of the autumn ball, a force of knights showed up at my front door to safely escort me to the castle. Was a guard of ten men overkill? Probably. But it had been a direct order from Prince Sawyer.

“Take care of him,” Maddox told them with a hard expression. He would be heading to the castle soon with Briar.

“Of course,” Sir Anton responded. “No harm will come to your male.”

“See to it that it doesn’t.”

Briar bumped Maddox’s shoulder. “Evan is in good hands. So stop snarling.”

That snarl only intensified.

I laughed and wrapped my arms around Maddox. “See you this evening?”

His eyes softened, revealing that tenderness he reserved solely for me. “Yes. Behave until then.”

“I’ll be too busy to do anything else.” I stood on my tiptoes to plant a kiss on his lips, then went over to Briar to do

the same. “You’ll be there too, right?”

“Yes,” Briar responded, patting the top of my head. “I’ll have your suit sent over this afternoon. It’s at the tailor at the moment for final touches.”

We had visited the market a few weeks back where my measurements had been taken. The custom suit had probably cost a fortune, but Briar refused to admit it. I loved it though. It was a three-piece dark green suit—so dark it appeared to be black from a distance—with the same deep shade for the undervest and a white shirt.

Lake had stayed upstairs when the knights came for me, but we’d spent the morning together. I cast a look toward the staircase before following the knights out. They helped me into a rounded carriage pulled by a team of white horses.

I felt like Cinderella. She’d been on her way to a ball too. But luckily for me, I’d already found my true loves. And come midnight, I’d still have them. The magic that had brought me to Bremloc wouldn’t fade.

This is my life now.

I smiled as I peered out the small window.

On the way, we picked up Miles from the lower district. He was so tall his head touched the roof of the carriage, so he had to bend lower. He beamed with an excited smile. It would be his first time going to the castle. Since Peter and Alice would only be helping us serve during the ball, they wouldn’t be joining us until later that afternoon.

The carriage bounced as the horses carried us down the cobblestone road and through the castle gates. We were then

taken to the front steps and helped out. The morning air was still warm, summer not quite ready to let go, but there was a faint crispness too.

“Good morning,” a pretty red-haired woman greeted us from the steps. She looked to be in her mid-forties with laughter lines and a friendly smile. “Welcome to the castle. I’m Rose. I’ll show you to the kitchen.”

The two of us were then given a tour of the kitchen—it was freaking huge—and introduced to the staff. They would be helping us. Thank god. Feeding so many people would require way more prep work, baking, and decorating than Miles and I could manage on our own.

“Beautiful work,” Rose told Miles, admiring his piping job on the first cupcake.

He blushed. “Thank you.”

Rose then snapped her fingers at her employees. “See how he’s doing it? Do it just like this.”

“Yes, ma’am,” they said before copying the method on the other batches of cupcakes.

Our menu for the ball consisted of desserts that could be easily served to the guests on platters and placed on the banquet tables for them to walk up and grab. Pumpkin muffins, chocolate petit fours, lemon macarons, personal-sized carrot cake loafs, Kuya Berry Delight cupcakes aka strawberry, and a selection of cookies; including chocolate chip, snickerdoodle, and pumpkin spice.

Miles was also making his specialty fifteen layer vanilla sponge cake with the chocolate ganache and raspberry jam.

And I'd be making pumpkin spice lattes and the house blend coffee for the refreshments.

In other words, it was a super busy morning that led into an even busier afternoon. It was so much fun though.

Miles and I nearly collapsed once the last batch of cookies had come out of the oven and placed on racks to cool. The kitchen was filled with hundreds upon hundreds of baked goods, all decorated and ready for the ball. On top of the individual sized desserts, we had also baked several large cakes to showcase more from the café.

“Good job,” I told him. “We make a great team.”

“We do,” Miles agreed, his face flushed. It was crazy hot in there, and we'd worked our asses off.

“Evan?” Bradley, one of the castle staff I'd met earlier, said. “If you'll follow me, I'll show you where you can wash up and dress.”

Another man bowed his head and said the same to Miles. My demi-bear friend seemed shocked by the hospitality. He still wasn't used to humans being kind to him.

I patted Miles on the back. “Next time we see each other, we'll look all spiffy and new.”

I then followed Bradley from the kitchen and down a corridor. He made small talk along the way, complimenting the desserts and saying he was eager to try one later. He led me to a well-lit room with a huge claw-foot tub in the center.

“Here you are,” he said. “Do you need assistance bathing?”

“Um, no thanks. I’m good.”

“Very well.” He tipped his head to me. “A servant will be in afterward to help you dress. Take all the time you need.”

Once he took his leave, I locked the door and looked around the room. The golden faucets, polished marble floor, and stained glass window exuded luxury. And there were like a million different soaps to choose from. After shedding my clothes and starting the water, putting in the stopper once it was the temperature I wanted, I sniffed each of the fragrant bottles.

Did I want to smell like berries, lavender, or the forest? There was also one that smelled spicy and another that reminded me of the ocean. I chose that one and added it to the water, smiling like a little kid when bubbles formed. I sank into the tub and scooped up bubbles in my hand before blowing them.

“Having fun?”

I screeched and snapped my head toward the corner of the bathroom where a man stood against the wall. Pale blond hair, a classy white suit, and a smirk on his lips. “Jesus fucking Christ, Lupin,” I said in a harsh whisper, not wanting any passing servants to overhear. “You scared the piss out of me. What the hell are you doing here?”

“I told you I’d return, didn’t I?”

“You couldn’t have picked a better time? For fuck’s sake.” I moved more bubbles toward me to make sure he couldn’t see beneath the water. “You can’t just interrupt a guy when he’s naked and vulnerable like this.”

Lupin's smirk faded into something softer. "What do you know of your parents?"

My confusion deepened at the massive topic shift. "Not much. I never met them. I got curious when I was eighteen and tried to look them up but couldn't find anything. Both parents are marked as unknown on my birth certificate. Why?"

The softness in his eyes shifted to something a bit... darker. Mysterious. It was an expression I knew well from him. "Your mother's name was Cynthia. She was adored by everyone who met her, and many spoke of her beauty far and wide. Golden hair and eyes that sparkled like jewels. You greatly resemble her."

Cynthia? That was my mom's name? A strange pressure moved through my breastbone. "How do you know this?"

"Because I met her."

Thankfully I was sitting in a bathtub, otherwise the sudden quake in my muscles would've sent me to the floor. "You knew her?"

All my life, I'd held resentment toward my parents. Being abandoned as a baby would make anyone feel like that. But Lupin spoke so highly of my mom. It was hard to view her in the same light. I wanted—needed—to learn more.

"Not well, but yes," Lupin answered. "She loved to cook and had dreams of opening her own bakery, but life had other plans for her. So she baked desserts and meat pies in her spare time and visited the slums, passing them out to the poor. Never taking a single coin in exchange. Many said her food had

healing energy, lifting the spirits of anyone who ate it. A trait clearly passed down to you.”

Knowing I had inherited her love of cooking made me feel closer to her—something I’d never experienced before. Emotion clogged in my throat.

“How did you meet her?” I asked. Lupin traveled all over the universe, visiting different realms. Anything could’ve caused them to cross paths.

“The Emporium came to her one day, just as it showed itself to you.”

“She was unhappy?” I asked. “That’s why your shop appears to people, right? To help ease people’s sadness.”

“Unhappy?” He shook his head. “No, she loved her life. But she made the grave mistake of falling in love with the wrong man. Your father. Now, don’t get me wrong. He loved her just as fiercely as she did him. However, he made many enemies in his life, enemies that became hers.”

“Why didn’t you tell me any of this before?”

“Some things are better left unknown,” Lupin answered. “Especially when the truth is so dangerous.”

“Dangerous how?”

“Because of who your father was.”

“Who was he?” My voice sounded so small. I felt like he was about to reveal something that would change my entire fucking life. Again.

“That, I cannot yet say.”

“Bullshit,” I said, refraining from the urge to splash bubbles at him. “I have a right to know. You wouldn’t be here otherwise, right? So tell me.”

“Revealing your father’s identity is too dangerous at this time.” Just as I was about to argue, he held up one finger. “But I’ll at least tell you this. Cynthia was called the Beauty of Exalos. A beauty your father couldn’t help but fall for when he journeyed to the city and first laid eyes on her.”

“Wait. Exalos? But that’s...” I couldn’t even finish the sentence. It was too much for me to wrap my head around. Too unbelievable. “That would mean my mom...”

“Was from this world, yes.”

I couldn’t respond. I could barely breathe.

“When Cynthia came to the Emporium, she wasn’t alone.” The skin around Lupin’s eyes grew taut. “In her arms was a baby. Evander, she called him. She begged me to take him somewhere safe. So I did.”

There was a loud ringing in my ears, and each breath felt like it had to pass through wet concrete to reach my lungs. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying the reason you never felt like you belonged in your old world and why you feel so at home here... is because this *is* your home. Both of your parents were born here.” A short pause. “And so were you.”

Lupin should get an award for being the biggest asshole wizard in the whole universe. After dropping that massive bomb on me, he'd pulled out a pocket watch, said he had to leave, and then fucking vanished.

He had given me a few answers but left me with too many questions. My mom had been from this world. So had my dad. A dad who had made many enemies. But why? And why had my mom begged Lupin to take me away? Why hadn't she gone with me?

Whenever I thought of it, my chest got tight.

"Breathe, mister Evan," Miles said. We stood beside a long table where we'd just finished sorting some of the desserts. The rest remained in the kitchen and would be served to the guests throughout the night. "You're awfully pale. Are you nervous?"

"Yeah," I said, which was true. I was pretty damn nervous.

"Don't be." He offered me a warm smile. "The night will be perfect. Everyone will love your food."

"Our food," I corrected, which made his smile widen.

Miles was dressed in a navy blue suit that complemented his brown hair and skin tone. The material was frayed in a few areas, and it looked too snug around the shoulders. He had worn one of his father's old suits. He'd told me his father had passed away several years ago, and him wearing the suit was like his father being able to attend the ball as well.

And no, that hadn't made me tear up, not even a little bit.

My racing thoughts flew right out of my head as soon as I saw the man who'd just entered the ballroom. Black hair slicked back, tall, and wearing a military dress uniform that fit him like a glove, he stole the attention of anyone who laid eyes on him.

His eyes, however, were fixated on me.

"You clean up nicely," Maddox said once reaching me. "For a muffin."

"Well, if it isn't Captain Smolder, here to set fire to everyone's hearts," I said. "And nether regions."

Maddox barked out a laugh before tugging me closer. "The only heart I care about is yours." He took me in, his gaze roaming my face. "You look breathtaking, sweetheart."

"So do you." Butterflies swarmed my belly. "No one can take their eyes off you."

"Let them look." Maddox took hold of my jaw and angled my face up. "Let them see who I belong to."

And then, he kissed me. I melted against him.

"What have I told you about sharing?" another voice said.

Maddox made a soft growling sound against my mouth before pulling back and looking at Briar. Any smart-ass remark he'd been about to make died on his lips. A sudden softness took him over. "I suppose you clean up nicely too, physician."

Briar more than 'cleaned up nicely.' Where Maddox was like sex on legs, devilishly handsome and full of smolder, Briar was elegant and so damn beautiful it made my chest

ache. He wore a simple black suit, but it was tailored to his tall, lean body to perfection. His light-brown hair had been combed back, but a strand fell forward, falling over the top of his glasses.

“Such a lovely shade on you,” Briar said as his hazel eyes raked up and down my body. He stepped closer and touched my cheek. “Both the outfit and this endearing blush in your cheeks.”

He then kissed me, probably making that blush worsen. Especially when we pulled apart and I noticed all the eyes on us.

The ballroom was mainly filled with the castle staff who were making sure everything was organized and ready for the guests to arrive. Some were the women I’d caught ogling Maddox on several occasions, giggling and whispering to each other when he passed by them.

What were they thinking? Maybe wondering why someone average like me had snagged two highly sought after hotties like Maddox and Briar. I wouldn’t blame anyone, if so. I wondered the same most days. But I didn’t care.

They loved me, and I loved them, and that’s all that mattered.

“I wish Lake was here,” I said.

“I know.” Briar touched the protection stone around my neck. “But a part of him is still with you.”

“Yeah.” My voice was thick. “After the ball, we can all go home to him. Bring him some snacks too.”

Maddox smiled before pulling me in for another kiss. A different set of lips then pressed to mine. They were taking turns kissing me. And fuck if it didn't make my knees weak.

"Duty calls," Maddox said. "I need to do a perimeter check before the guests arrive." He looked at Briar. "You really do look nice."

"Thank you," Briar responded. "As do you."

Maddox glided his knuckles along Briar's cheek before lowering his hand and walking away. Briar touched his cheek and softly smiled after him. I grabbed his arm and rested my head on his bicep. I loved their affection for each other.

Within the hour, nobles began spilling into the ballroom. Some were announced upon their arrival, and they descended the grand staircase, dressed in elegant suits and lavish gowns and adorned with extravagant jewelry.

"Court physician," a woman greeted Briar. Gray streaked through her brown hair, and she had the kind of face I always connected to strict teachers who'd swat you with a ruler if you misbehaved. "I'm from the academy of healing arts."

"Ah, yes," Briar said. "Professor Madeline, correct? I remember you from my last lecture."

"You remember me?" Madeline touched her chest. "I'm honored."

I caught the flirty little gleam in her eyes and pressed my lips together to keep from laughing. Poor Briar probably had no clue she wanted his D. Unfortunately for her, that D was mine.

The two of them became engrossed in conversation before a man joined them. Several of the academy professors, at least those with a high standing in the community, had been invited to the ball that evening.

“I apologize,” Briar whispered as he leaned over to me. “This will only be a moment.”

“Don’t be sorry,” I told him. “Go mingle and stuff. I’ll be fine. I need to check the desserts. Go have fun.”

“But—”

“Shoo.” I pecked a kiss on his lips. Then, I said low enough to where only he could hear. “Don’t make me spank you in front of all these people.”

He laughed, kissed me on the cheek, and then followed them over to a larger group. All had that scholarly look to them.

I studied the room, pleased to see people raiding the dessert platters. A few men devoured the pumpkin muffins, and ladies nibbled the petit fours, saying how cute and dainty they were.

Prince Sawyer was then announced, and I turned as he came down the stairs. He wore a white suit and lavender colored vest, as well as a thin, silver crown atop his blond hair. Spotting me, he came right over—as did the five guards shadowing him and probably would be for the entire evening. Sir Noah was one of them and nodded to me.

“Evan.” Sawyer stopped in front of me, a smile lighting his face. It showed in his eyes too, revealing a genuinely kind

soul who deserved only good things in this world. “It’s lovely to see you.”

“And you.” I bowed my head. “I’m glad you were able to attend. You know, with you being a prisoner right now.”

He chuckled at that. “Did you receive my letter?”

“Yep. Well, Kuya stole it first. By the time I got to read it, it had drool and strawberry frosting on it.”

“Sounds like him.” Sawyer glanced around. “He should be here soon. I heard the servants had quite the challenge dressing him. He scratched one of them and bit another. And when they tried to put shoes on him, he bit them again and ran away. If it were up to me, I’d let him be barefoot and wear his normal clothes. Whatever makes him happy.”

Affection thickened Sawyer’s voice as he spoke. Kuya might’ve been a little terror, but he was Sawyer’s little terror.

The man announcing guests then called out again, introducing another member of the royal household.

I inwardly groaned as I spotted Prince Cedric on the grand staircase. He had a beautiful woman on each arm and wore a crown, this one bigger and more elaborate than Sawyer’s. Along with the arm candy, crown, and flashy suit, he also wore a smug smile. I wanted to wipe it off his lips. With my fist. Or a chair. Yeah, a chair would be better.

Once at the bottom of the stairs, Cedric turned to each woman and kissed them on the cheek before dismissing them. They hurried over to a group of ladies who all squealed. Like being escorted to the ball by His Royal Douchiness was an honor or something.

Sawyer watched his brother for a moment before guiding me farther away. He clearly didn't want to chat with him either. Sir Noah and the other knights followed us over to the dessert table. Some of the displays had been pecked clean already. I smiled.

Peter grinned at me as he made his way over with a platter to refill the petit fours and cookies. Alice wasn't far behind him. I greeted them both and thanked them for their work.

"You're very kind to your workers," Sawyer said once they'd left again, the platters in their hands now empty. "Not that I expected anything less."

"I see us as a little family," I responded. "They've done a lot for me. When I was kidnap—er, I mean, when I was... missing for a few days, they held down the fort and kept things running."

Sawyer's expression fell. "You have my deepest apology for that incident, Evan. If I thought for even a moment you'd ever be targeted because of me—"

"Please don't feel guilty," I interjected. "It wasn't all bad. Mostly." Remembering a certain auburn-haired thief with topaz eyes made my heart wobble. Dammit. "Besides, it's not your fault I was mistaken for you. If you ever need a stunt double, you know who to call." I jutted a thumb to my chest.

Sawyer cocked his head. "A stunt double?"

I was just about to explain to him what it was when I sensed someone behind me.

"Well, if it isn't my favorite commoner."

I cringed at the voice before turning and coming face to face with the last person I ever wanted to see. “Prince Cedric.” I bowed my head to him and kept it lowered probably longer than necessary before lifting it again.

“I suppose you aren’t merely a commoner now, are you?” Cedric’s golden hair was cut short, the crown sitting on top. One even fancier up close, with rubies inside the silver. He had the same eyes as Sawyer but stood several inches taller with larger muscles. “You’ve made quite the name for yourself since we last spoke.”

Sir Keegan stood a few paces behind him, his hands behind his back and stare firm. He was Cedric’s personal knight and had red hair and a lean build.

“You honor me, Your Majesty.”

“I only speak the truth.” With a smile I definitely didn’t trust, Cedric stepped close enough for our chests to touch and tilted his head down to speak directly in my ear, “However, I hope you remember your place. You may have been polished and now shine brighter than before, but beneath that new shiny suit you’re still a meager pebble my brother found on the side of the road. Don’t forget that.”

A pebble? Seriously?

I didn’t respond.

“Good. It seems you still remember the little lesson I gave you about knowing when to speak.” Cedric drew back and dropped his gaze to my necklace. I almost wished he’d try to touch it. I would’ve loved to see it send him flying backward and land on his stupid, pompous ass. “I’ve not seen a stone

like this in person before, but I've heard of them. It's meant for protection, yes?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

He smiled at me again, but wickedness shone in his eyes as they shifted to Sawyer. "Perhaps you should find yourself one as well, little brother. Thankfully, the bandit captured this commoner instead of you, yet you may not be as fortunate the next time. And what a pity that would be."

Cedric took his leave, then, and approached a group of giggling women, laying on the charm.

Sawyer exhaled. "Once again, I apologize for his behavior. He can be quite nasty at times."

Typical Sawyer, trying to see the good in people who didn't deserve it.

"Evan!" a cheerful voice rang out before arms came around me from behind. "Kuya found you." He nuzzled my hair before rushing over to Sawyer.

The knights, in unison, stepped forward, hands landing on their swords. All except for Noah, anyway.

"Stand down," Sawyer snapped at them. "Kuya is no threat to me."

Kuya stared at the knights with an expression that wavered between shock and sadness. Then, it fled his face and his playfulness took back over. But I got the feeling it was an act. His excitement to see Sawyer was genuine though. "Look at Kuya's clothes!" He turned in a circle, tail flicking. "Kuya is fancy now."

I laughed when seeing his shirt was untucked on one side, and the buttons on his vest had been fastened wrong. He wasn't wearing shoes.

"You look perfect," Sawyer said, taking hold of Kuya's face. "My perfect kitten."

Kuya purred at the words and nuzzled his prince. That's exactly what Sawyer was: his. And even when Sawyer was eventually forced to marry Lady Alina, that wouldn't change. He would always be Kuya's... just as Kuya was his.

Wanting to give them a moment alone, I snatched a cookie from the table and bit into it as I walked around. Tall windows were on one side of the room, and I walked toward them, pleased to find a set of doors. The promise of fresh air and space away from all the people lured me out the doors and onto a back terrace that overlooked the garden.

I finished the cookie and leaned against the railing. A fountain stood in the center of the garden, a statue of a swan inside it. Flowers bloomed beneath the moonlight in an array of red, yellow, and some that glowed. The Night Kisses. The same flower Briar had been picking the night we'd first kissed.

I smiled at the memory.

"Hello again, little treasure."

I whirled around at the voice, seeing nothing but shadows. My heart banged hard in my chest. Had I imagined it? Then, from within the shadows, something moved. My eyes adjusted to the darkness a bit more.

Rowan sat on the railing, his back against the wall, one leg bent while the other dangled down. He wore a hood, but it

was pulled back enough for me to see his face. His topaz eyes stood out in the dark.

“How did you get past the guards and knights?” I asked, stepping closer to him. And yeah, I was fully aware how silly it was to approach a man who had freaking kidnapped me before, but I’d never prided myself on my common sense. “They’re all over this castle.”

“I have my ways,” Rowan said with that familiar cocky grin.

“Why are you here?”

“I heard there was a ball,” he responded. “I came for the food.”

“And to pickpocket?” I guessed. “There are lots of nobles and fancy people wearing jewelry I bet you’re just itching to steal.”

“Their riches hold no interest for me tonight. I have my sights set on something else.”

“If you’re here for the muffins, I have to warn you, there’s a knight who will fight you to the death over them.”

When Rowan chuckled, it had a sexy rasp that I felt in my veins, like electric pulses. “I don’t have much of a sweet tooth. Tell the knight he can keep them.”

“Yep. That just proves you’re wicked. How can you hate sweets?”

“Maybe I just haven’t eaten the right ones.” Rowan eased off the railing but didn’t come closer. Light from the ballroom

spilled through the windows beside us, and he stayed in the shadows, keeping away from the beams.

A sickening thought occurred to me. “Are you here for Prince Sawyer? I won’t let you take him. You’ll have to go through me first.”

Rowan studied me in silence for several heartbeats. “I’m not here for the prince. He no longer interests me.”

“Then why—”

He was suddenly much closer. Faster than my mind could process. His arms came around my waist, and he spun me around, pushing me against the wall. The shadows concealed us both as he peered at me, the dark-gold of his eyes bright.

Rowan leaned in, brushing his lips up the side of my neck. “Your pulse is quick. Are you scared of me?”

“No.” And strange enough, it was true. My pulse quickened for an entirely different reason as I caught the smoky notes of black cardamon wafting from him. “I still have your cloak. And your dagger. But I don’t have them with me right now.”

He pressed closer, sliding his hand to my lower back. “Keep them.”

“I thought your dagger was special. That’s what you said when you let me borrow it.”

“Well, now I’m giving it to you.” Rowan lifted his other hand to my nape and played with my hair. “That necklace protects you well enough, but I like knowing something of mine is protecting you too.”

“Why do you care?” I asked, voice shaking. “And why did you give me the necklace back? I thought you were going to sell it for a big bag of coin.”

“I found something far more valuable than coin,” he responded. His voice shook too. “A treasure unlike any other.” He lowered his face again and kissed the base of my throat. “You’re such a goddamn headache. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you.”

My blood was an inferno, burning through my body. Truth was, I hadn’t stopped thinking about him either.

Laughter spilled out from the ballroom as the balcony door opened. Two women stepped outside, their hands entwined. We were in the corner beside the railing, still concealed in shadow, so they hadn’t spotted us yet.

“That’s my cue to leave,” Rowan whispered, his mouth close to my ear. “Don’t forget about me, little treasure.”

As if I could.

He released me and sank deeper into the darkness. Just like what happened with Lord Onyx, the shadows then swallowed him, and he disappeared.

I lifted a hand to my neck, right over the spot where he’d kissed me. Rowan was one of the men I was destined to be with. Why else would I feel so strongly? An intensity he felt too.

In a sort of daze, I returned to the ballroom. Everything came flooding back, the sights, sounds, and smells. As the orchestra played, people danced and chatted. Music surrounded me, as did waves of dancing bodies. I spotted

Miles chatting with a girl in a yellow dress. A matching bow was in her hair. He offered her his hand, and the two of them made their way to join the other dancing couples.

Good for you, bud.

I then caught a familiar scent of warm spice and turned around, a smile not far behind.

“May I have this dance?” Maddox asked, offering me his hand. “I only have five minutes before I need to return to my post.”

“Then we shouldn’t waste a single second.” I slipped my hand into his.

He led me to the ballroom floor and placed one hand at my waist, linking our fingers with the other. My breath caught as I stared up into his blue eyes, like an ocean of mystery and a love so deep I could drown in it. We joined the other dancers, moving to the mid-tempo song. It didn’t matter that I had two left feet and couldn’t dance to save my life. Maddox took the lead, and we glided across the floor with ease.

“Where did you learn to dance like this?” I asked in shock. “Did they teach you in knight school? Lesson one, this is how you wield a sword. Lesson two, this is how you get your groove on to woo all the pretty boys and girls.”

Maddox smiled. It was so damn warm. “The only pretty boy I wish to woo is you, sweetheart.”

“No wooing necessary,” I said, my heart turning to mush at the nickname. “That ship has sailed. I’ve fallen hopelessly under your spell, Captain Smolder.”

“Gods, you amuse me.” He slowly spun us around the dancefloor as the orchestra transitioned to a slower melody. “I noticed our physician being swarmed by admirers.”

Our physician. I grinned like a fool.

“I think Professor Madeline wants to be his sugar momma,” I said. “Too bad he’s already taken.”

“Sugar momma?” Maddox asked, bewildered. I snorted a laugh, which brought that softness back to his eyes. “To answer your earlier question, I learned to dance from a cook in the orphanage prior to me joining the academy. She taught all of the children in between our meals. She also gave us etiquette lessons. So that we’d grow up to be proper young ladies and gentlemen, she’d tell us.”

“A cook?”

He nodded. “Before coming to the orphanage, she taught school but quit when her son died in the war. Her heart was too broken. She then doted on all of us.”

“There’s still things I don’t know about you,” I said, amazed.

“There are things I still don’t know about you as well.” Maddox brought me closer and rested his head on mine. “But I look forward to learning all there is to know.”

“Because I don’t want to keep anything from you, um...” I bit down on my bottom lip. “Rowan was here. I saw him on the balcony.”

Maddox frowned and stopped dancing. “Did he hurt you at all? How did he—”

“Calm down,” I said. “He didn’t hurt me. He just... wanted to see me. As for how he got past all of your men, I think he used the shadows.”

“He’s gone now?”

“Yep.”

“Good.” Maddox then continued dancing with me, but I caught him surveying the room a bit harder than before. “Remind me to track him down later and gut him.”

My grumpy, overprotective captain. I loved him more and more as each day passed.

I then recalled my conversation with Lupin. I was still in disbelief, struggling to process it. I had been born in that world. So had my parents. I wanted—needed—to learn more too.

And I would. Eventually.

But for tonight, I danced.

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