



THE
NIGHTBOUND
SOLDIER

MILANA
JACKS

THE NIGHTBOUND
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FAE-TED KINGS

MILANA JACKS

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PROLOGUE



Nottuza

The silk sheets slide off my skin as I leap out of the coffin and stretch my old bones. They groan from lack of use over the past nine millennia I spent sleeping. Yawning, I rub my eyes and look around the dimly lit tomb. Spells colored in red ink, carved into the charcoal walls, cast a pinkish glow on the space.

The ambiance reminds me of Helen's pleasure house instead of a tomb set deep inside the mountain that rises beside a small remote village at the far end of the Winter Fae Court. At my feet lies the nocturno who gave up his life force to awaken me. Crouching beside him, I examine his face and sort through the memories I acquired from drinking his blood.

His name is Navanel, and he's one of my descendants. Not by birth, of course. Nocturnos have no natural-born children, only those we make by sharing our life force with them. Since my life force comes directly from the fairy who made me, and I was his first undead creation, my life force is the strongest.

It should make my nocturno bloodline the strongest as well. But that's not what I gathered from the vampire at my feet. My bloodline is not as prevalent as it used to be back in my span. If the news of my loss of power isn't sad enough, I also gather that my kind have split into seven houses. They fight among each other or form alliances to destroy the

opposing houses based on whatever selfish need drives them at the time.

Division among the nocturno is not in our best interests, but in the best interests of different members of our food groups.

Along with the unrest in the Unseelie courts, my kind have lost their way. The newborns are weak and slow. And those houses I see in my head? For generations, they've enlisted fae families to serve as their food. This means that the food knocks on the door and makes itself available. It's no wonder my kind are weakening.

We are the undead army.

Hunters.

Predators of the night, not grannies knitting by fireplaces sipping stale blood from champagne flutes.

I cover the wounds on the vampire's ravaged neck with his torn collar, then pat his head.

"You're better off sleeping." I slide my hands under his body and pick him up, then put him in my coffin, his purpose of awakening me and allowing me to see the fate's prophecy now served.

After drinking the blood of a seer, he received glimpses of the future, and the future says a fae with magic to raise the dead has been conceived. The baby, once born, will need the protection of the undead army.

I close and lock the coffin of the resting nocturno before climbing out of the tomb.

NOTTUZA



Two cycles have passed since I awoke, and the inherited memories from my successor are helping me adjust to the new world. Chopping wood outside his house while the brutal fall winds batter my body calms me and allows me to think. I'll be damned if I'll sit by the fireplace while doing the thinking when I can work outside where the cold winds, like the hands of multiple lovers, reach for me, making me feel alive.

The winds whoosh into the house as the front door closes behind me. I walk to the basket near the fireplace to fill it with the chopped wood before picking up the fire poker, intent on clearing out a space for fresh wood. Since it's been burning for only a short while, there's still plenty from when I filled it before the sun came out.

As winter approaches, the time under sunlight shortens, and with it, my time spent up here in hiding. Eventually, the living will find out I've awoken, and I look forward to any bloody confrontations they throw my way. I'm especially excited about the power moves among the vampire houses and the Winter fairies.

The recent chronicles my neighbor, the Unseelie king, sent me from his vast library taught me about the current affairs of the fae courts. I was particularly interested to read about his conquests of both the Fall Court and the more recent confrontation with the entire nobility of the Winter Court,

which led to the destruction of the Winter Court's buildings, the scattering of the fae armies, and general mayhem.

Chaos means there's a need for order, and bringing order sometimes feels like the reason I exist. Order makes sense and provides stability in the kingdom. The impending birth of the baby the future will call the Ice Princess requires a stable kingdom and the governance of a strong army she can command. An army that serves her exclusively.

Since a royal ass can't sit on a destroyed throne, I must bring the Winter Court's throne back to order. This will require remodeling, rebuilding, and lots of unpleasantries. It will get worse before it gets better, and the challenge threatens to set my unbeating heart aflutter.

The shadows gathering in the corner on my left herald the appearance of the Unseelie king, a tall, broad-shouldered male wearing a formal black-on-black uniform with silver buttons and a single red sleeve. His long black hair looks tousled, and he's wearing a beard. Trimmed, but still, it's facial hair.

Combed and pulled tightly and neatly at the top of my head, my long hair is in perfect order. I would rather be caught alive with a bleeding and beating heart than wear hair on my face.

I give him a once-over. What is it with this male's hair?

Even though we're neighbors in a mountainous three-village settlement with a population totaling under one thousand people, the king is a recluse. I haven't seen him but twice since I arrived on this property. The first time was when he thought I murdered a nocturno he called Vane. Navanel is the male's full name, and once we sorted out who I was and why I'd been awoken, the king seemed thrilled and sent me books to get me up to speed with modern fae times.

The second time I saw him was when I went down to the village streets to eat, and he intercepted me, saying I could have my food delivered. I refused the virginal food he sent me and have traveled long distances to feed ever since.

Hunting and luring prey is a matter of survival for me. I cannot feed from a weakling virgin fae with barely any magic. I require full meals, not snacks, which is what brings the king here this evening.

The Unseelie king is taking me to dinner.

“I presume you’re ready,” he says. The shadows swirling around his feet extend toward me and start wrapping around my ankles. This is how the Unseelie fae travel. Via shadows. I have other means of travel, such as running at great speeds, but I accept his way regardless.

“I would like a suit like yours. It makes you look handsome and powerful.”

“It’s not the suit.”

“It’s certainly not the tragic hairdo either,” I deadpan.

He mumbles something in the modern fae language.

Living out here in seclusion hasn’t given me much opportunity to converse in this twisted new tongue I learned from reading his books.

“Pardon?” I lean in, and as I do, I take a whiff of his life force. His fae magic. It smells like a mountain of power. This king is called the Army of One, and he’s one of the most powerful Unseelie kings to have ever existed.

“I said I have a gift for you.” He reaches behind his back and pulls out a long, slender sword, which he rests on his palms before reading the letters engraved on the blade, his pronunciation of the words accented and too smooth for what they spell out.

“Kneel and receive the blade.” The king of all the Unseelie fae holds out the old spelled sword.

I tilt my head. Maybe we will have a problem. “You know I can’t kneel for you. I serve the magic that made the undead, and not any king or queen.”

“The fates prophesized that I will father the Ice Princess who will become the undead maker. Until then, you serve me. Kneel.”

I remain standing. “I need proof.” I want to drink from the fate who prophesized the arrival of the new undead maker.

The king snorts. “Nice try. I know you swiped all the memories from the vampire who awakened you. And I’m much less patient than you are.”

“And much more hot-tempered than me as well,” I add. He destroyed half the fae courts.

“All the more reason for you to kneel and not make me return you to the place from which you crawled.”

“You have no idea from whence I crawled, and you shouldn’t test me.”

He snorts. “I know a fate who sees all that’s come to pass, so if I ask nicely, she’ll tell me where you’ve rested all these centuries.”

“It’s millennia, and the fates have blind spots.”

The king won’t budge.

I sigh. “When I existed as a fairy, there were no courts, but different fae tribes governing different parts of fae lands. Since now the only bloodline with undead magic belongs to the Winter Court, I know where I belong. Rest assured, I want to see the Winter Court restored to its glory. But you, albeit powerful, are not the carrier of such magic, and it’s physically impossible for me to kneel for you.”

“Why?”

“Because you are living.”

The Unseelie king smiles. It’s a deranged smile, and I side-eye him. “Did I say something that makes you happy?”

“Indeed. I had to be sure you are who you say you are and that the Winter crown is forever in my family’s favor. It is for my unborn daughter, you see. I must know that when she calls upon her undead army, you will, without reservation, defend her.”

I smile back, my fangs sharp but retracted. “I’m looking forward to it.”

The king places the sword on my palms. The touch of the cold weapon sends blood rushing up my arms, down my belly, and between my legs, the prospect of using my sword again exciting me.

“My brother-in-law hates it when I’m late,” he says, eyes twinkling.

He means the Summer king. “Then we ought to make him wait longer.” The shadows crawl over my calves, up my thighs. So familiar and comforting, like dear old friends.

“He’s arranged for your entertainment underground, but the same rules apply. He wants his nocturnos alive and well.”

“None of the nocturnos are his,” I say. *Or yours, or alive, for that matter.*

The shadows envelop my body, the old fae souls, long dead, whispering traveling spells at me. I hear the chorus of them as if they’re in the room with us. I slide my hands into my pockets and hum an old military tune.

The Unseelie king starts whistling along with me.

“You know this one?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “No, but it sounds like it should be played for a marching army.”

“It was.” We have much in common, this king and I. Getting what I need while he’s on the throne of all the Unseelie fae shouldn’t be an issue.

NOTTUZA



The nocturno who woke me violated the Summer Court's strict policy on violence during gatherings. He walked into the Summer Fae Court and lost his temper, killing the dungeon master vampire who was near and dear to the Summer king, thereby assuring retaliation, if not of the Summer king, than of the dead male's vampire house and any house aligned with it.

Since this happened right before the Summer king's wedding, the Summer fae royals handled what could've been a complete disaster for everyone in attendance. And by everyone, I mean the entire world, who gathered there this past summer.

While the unrest between my people is just another spate of chaos for me to tame, I'd have preferred to leave the fae out of our affairs, but the only thing leaving after the shadows deliver us to the Summer Court is the Unseelie king.

"Happy hunting," he throws over his shoulder, then walks out of the plush gardens and toward the Golden Palace.

The Summer Court's palace takes up more space than I imagined it would. The structure is large, opulent, shiny, and the people moving about on the grounds are louder than the screams of ten thousand fae fighting on battlefields.

I have no idea what I'm walking into, but based on the memories in my head, my people congregate beneath the Summer Court. Some waste away in the dungeons for crimes

against the fae (mainly for uncontrolled lust and feedings) while others, those who've learned to coexist with the living, entertain the fae.

I pluck a pretty yellow flower growing from a tall, trimmed bush and bring it to my nose. A combination of orange blossom and lilies tells me this flower was made by magic. A hybrid scent, neither orange nor a lily, but a more pleasant-smelling combination of both.

Almost like a nocturno.

Neither dead nor living, but a dead fae brought back to life by magic, then left to its own devices to figure out how to survive once the magic that keeps it alive wears off. And the magic in the blood of the fae I ate from last is wearing off right now. This slows me down, so before I venture into the unknown, I take a walk through the gardens, the tall bushes providing perfect hiding spaces for young lovers and old cheaters.

They also provide the perfect cover for feeding.

The moans I hear reveal the positions of my prey. I listen for male voices. I prefer feeding from males, for they won't arouse me. I just want a meal, preferably a powerful fae meal. Since I'm in no rush, I stroll at leisure, passing by at least three couples with magic comparable to that possessed by the male I fed from before. Inside me, it won't last more than a few spans, and then I'll have to feed again.

I need a fae aristocrat. My memories tell me the fae have been breeding to increase the strength of their magic, and those with the most are at the top of their class, so therefore at the top of my food chain.

A fae runs into me, her magic so strong, it feels like being hit by lightning. My fangs drop, my claws spring out, and I grab the prey and sink my teeth into the soft neck.

A single pull makes blood gush into my mouth, and the moment I taste it, I know the strength, the sheer force of it, threatens my control. I dare another pull and another, then

immobilize the fae, who's trying to get away, and lick the neck wound, closing it instantly.

There's a pretty diamond stud at the tip of her pointy ear, along with five other golden earrings. My lips at her ear, I whisper, planting a new memory into her mind: "A big bug bit your neck. You swatted it and moved on with your life."

Instead of leaving as I should, I linger and make the mistake of inhaling her scent.

She smells like...the sun I haven't experienced in nine thousand turns. Summer nights spent by the firepits while feeding from thousands of beautiful fae. She smells like the ocean breeze, the sand between my toes, the sunburn after a span spent diving in the deep sea, and before I sink my fangs back into her soft neck and drain that sun right out of her, I release her and disappear into the night.

NOTTUZA



I'm never feeding from a Summer fairy female again.
Never ever.

She tasted like a wet dream I never even knew I had. When I walked into this court, I thought I would dine and observe only, but I've underestimated their breeding practices if they've produced creatures with such powerful magic, and overestimated my ability to control myself around that power.

Granted, I parted ways with the delicious meal that ran into me in the gardens, but I could've remained sucking on her for an entire evening.

I could've done many other things with her as well.

One whiff of her almost made me forget why I came here in the first place. Luckily, I pulled myself together and ignored my arousal, then moved on with my surveillance of the court before I followed the loud music and found the court's underground, where my people congregate with the fae.

The nocturno in charge of the place greeted me and offered me a seat in the middle of the massive underground space, which was filled not only with fae and nocturnos, but with elves and even lycans. It seems as if they're all happily mingling.

I'm starting to understand why the Unseelie king felt the need to bring me here. This court is merry and serves as an example of stability.

The entertainment center's location is adjacent to the dungeons, which is brilliant, for it serves as a gentle reminder of the severity of punishment one might endure for breaking the Summer king's laws regarding violence inside the palace. In addition, the patrons are circulating various herbs that fog their minds and bring them lots of joy. I recognize the scents, for those herbs have been around longer than I have.

All in all, it's impressive order keeping.

"The male who ran this place before you..." I start a conversation with the young dark-haired nocturno I'm sitting with on a plush, dark blue sofa situated on a raised podium. It's got a perfect view of the entrance and everything that's happening in the place.

The male, whose name escapes me, crosses one leg over the other at the knee and spreads his arms across the couch's back. He tilts up his face and taps two fingers in the rhythm of the orchestra playing an upbeat tune, while sirens swimming in clear glass aquariums all around us match the notes with their extraordinary, seductive voices.

I clear my throat, a subtle reminder that I'm speaking, but wait for him to acknowledge me with a look before I complete my sentence. Appearing busy and uninterested, he's making me wait.

"What about him?" he finally asks, still looking around the room, showing me he's in charge and a busy male who's on watch. I decide to call him the Infant Overlord. People often throw these mini power fits when threatened, and I'm used to them since I'm a threat to everyone.

While he's not watching me, I am watching him.

His short, dark hair is styled away from his face, no doubt to expose the raised cheekbones and dark eyes with long lashes. Those are some of his finest features, and I like how he goes to great lengths to appear attractive. Since it's against the Summer king's laws to hunt, when one takes care of oneself, one spends much less effort attracting prey.

“What kind of nocturno is named Luthier?” I ask about the male who used to run this place.

“Hm?”

He’s still practically ignoring me. “It sounds as if he comes from this court instead of the Winter Court.”

The male chuckles. “And you sound like an old nocturno from some backwoods village in the Winter Court.”

“Let’s say that I am.”

“Then...” He picks up a flute holding a pink drink and sips it. I wonder how often he has to feed if there’s but a trace of fae blood inside whatever alcoholic beverage poisons the lining of his belly now. “Welcome to the new world. Have you fed yet?”

“I have.”

He leans in conspiratorially and graces me with his attention. “Because I happen to have some top-tier fae blood.”

“Do you now?” I ask doubtfully.

Not picking up on my cynical tone, he places two fingers in his mouth and whistles. From behind him, a fae female in thigh-high pink leather boots and a pink bathing suit who is walking on top of the service bar that stretches from wall to wall waves her arm toward a siren dancing in the aquarium across from her. The siren nods and swims away. Moments later, a pair of Summer fairies dressed in transparent linen clothes make their way toward me.

There are bite marks on their necks.

“They’re the finest. Twins. You’ll like them.”

I catch the nocturno’s gaze and trap him with my commanding power. “When they get here, you will wave them away.”

Trapped in the compulsion and having no clue it’s my idea and not his, the nocturno nods. When the females arrive, he asks for drinks. Once they execute his order, they depart as I asked, leaving me with a pink flute in my hand.

It smells like a bleeding drunk sailor, so I presume it's something fruity laced with lycan blood. I stare at it, contemplating another millennia of sleep so that I don't have to watch the demise of my people.

What has become of my soldiers?

Oh, my little brother, if you were alive to see us now, you'd kill us all and never raise us again. "Are you aware that norturnos aren't meant to consume anything besides blood?" I ask, curious whether drinking pure blood is even a thing for norturnos living in this court.

The male nods. "Those are lies our kind has been told before the houses formed alliances with the fae. Now we consume anything we want. Freedom!" he shouts.

The Summer king must've sold them on the idea that impairment of their strength and faculties equals freedom. I must meet this male, for I must face this formidable enemy. Brilliant tactic.

Norturnos are the faes' natural predators, raised from the dead during the time when fae magic threatened to collapse our entire world.

It was also during the time that fae lived in nothing more than clay huts or in the trees, or even in holes underground. These fae now called Summer fae had gills and lived in the oceans with the sirens. Before they walked, many of the Summer fae swam with the merfolk. This is why they have close ties to the ocean creatures. In a way, they're cousins.

Noise coming from the entrance on my left gets my attention.

The fae crowds waiting at the entrance beg admittance from a pair of massive lycan males who redirect more than half the hopefuls upstairs, where the Summer king holds parties for folks who have no business seeking the thrill of a bite. Or sex. Or whatever my people offer down here.

"What's happening?" I ask.

"A small issue in the dungeon."

“You are the male responsible for the prisoners and the nightly entertainment?”

“You ask too many questions.” He snaps his head toward me again.

I detect anger in his voice. Finally. An emotion other than careless surrender.

It makes me wonder if these nocturnos are all spelled.

Could it be? What kind of fairy magic would it take to spell every nocturno, every fae, every siren, merfolk, lycan, and probably other species I haven't even seen yet into utter submission?

A *voca*'s power, possibly, but even the most powerful *voca* would go insane having to control this many magical creatures night after night.

They're not spelled. This is their life. Wasting away in the cheerful dungeons of the Summer Court. The Unseelie king brought me here so that I could witness the demise of my people.

The living subdued the undead. Without the magic of the undead present in the world, the nocturnos have lost their strength and their way. We were once guards. Soldiers. Fierce warlords. Not these pathetic fae servants divided into seven vampire houses.

“Can you walk under the sun?” I ask, unafraid of his anger.

He looks at me like I'm stupid. “Naturally. Only the elderly weaklings can't.”

“The elderly are weaklings because they cannot walk in the sun?”

He gets distracted again by a group of fae females wearing tiny dresses. They pass by the lycan security guards, and one of them throws up her hands, “We're in! Let's party!” She swipes a bottle from a fairy's tray and chugs, leaving her throat exposed. In a room full of harmless nocturnos, no wonder she's carelessly exposing her jugular.

Even the fae used to exercise more care with their throats.

The vampire beside me smiles before sipping from his flute. “Pretty much,” he says.

“I take it most elderly don’t live in the Summer Court?”

“If they do, you’ll find them in the dungeons or scavenging what’s left of the fae in the Fallen Court.”

“And the Winter Court?”

He frowns. “You just wake up or something?”

I nod, happy that we’re finally having a conversation without me having to scramble his brains with compulsion. While I got some memories from the vampire who had awoken me, his seclusion meant he lacked information about the world. Besides, the moment he came here, he got into a fight with the male who held power over the vampires down here, which tells me his temper got in the way of business. He was supposed to seek an alliance, not start a war with another house.

“The Winter prince has practically ruled the Winter Court for almost a century. He funded four of the vampire houses and gave the heads of them land to plow and farm and govern.”

My fierce people are farmers plowing unfertile frozen lands now. Any more of such information tonight, and I might cry. “And what of the other three houses he didn’t fund?”

“Two fled here, to the Summer Court. One is in the Fallen Court.”

“You’re telling me that our kind are now at the mercy of fae kings?”

He laughs as if I’m the one who’s been fooled. “Mercy? The fae are still our food. We own lands, houses, banks that hold coins. Even made several trade deals with races outside fae lands. Some of us hold more wealth than you can imagine, old male.”

He lights up some herb and starts smoking it, but sees something at the entrance and puts out the smoke from the pipe almost immediately. Watching him, I witness a flash of

red in his gaze. Under his pants, he starts growing erect, clearly displaying both hunger and lust.

He vaults off the couch.

Alert, I sit up and follow his gaze to the entrance.

Walking past the security guards is the most beautiful creature I've ever seen. Long tanned legs hold up a perfect hourglass figure wrapped in a tiny little beige dress. Black and indigo pearls hang from her slender neck and drape between her breasts.

Long, voluptuous, golden hair bounces off her shoulders, and as she nears where I'm sitting, I see that her perfect little toes are exposed by golden sandals with heels so high, I wonder how she doesn't break her ankle stepping up onto the dais.

"Princess Fleur." The male bows so low, I wonder if he'll suckle her toes.

The female practically glows, the way a soldier with a beacon signals that the enemy forces are coming my way. And this is most definitely an enemy of stability and the queen of chaos, the kind of female that can topple kingdoms. Or erect them at her will.

The longer I stare at her, the more my eyes water, as if I'm staring at the sun itself. She's so powerful, it's no wonder she's the Summer princess, and one of the finest examples of why the fae breed for power.

"Glut." The female speaks, her voice echoing inside my head as if she's moaning my name. Between my legs, I grow erect, and my sac starts to fill with seed. Her presence reminds me of life itself, as if she's the beating heart of the living, as if she's everything that matters.

With her voice still pulsing in my ears, a haze comes over my eyes, and my growing erection makes me believe she invited me into her bedchamber. My gums start to itch, as if I were made a nocturno last night and now I can't control my lust.

Instead of ripping out her throat, though, I dig my claws into the couch and rip out chunks of it. Feathers and cloth fly all around me, and I feel much better.

The princess stares.

I throw the couch stuffing behind me and dust off my palms as I stand and bow before Summer royalty. When I straighten, I avoid looking directly into her eyes lest I command her to join me tonight so she can show me what a good princess she can be for me.

I avoid her gaze even as she steps closer to me and looks up, trying to draw me in. “There you are.”

Her words imply she sought me out. Perhaps the Unseelie king told the royals upstairs that he brought me as a guest. I doubt it, since I asked him to keep my arrival quiet for a few spans, until I’ve had the chance to get the feel for modern vampire life in the Summer Court.

“Were you searching for me?” I focus on her lips. Plush, red, glossy. Above her upper lip, near the raised cheekbone, she has a dark circular birthmark. It complements her face ever so beautifully.

Look at her.

Unwilling to listen to my own thoughts, I grind my teeth. The princess is not telling me what to do, not manipulating my mind, and she’s not even an invasive force that would make me want to remove her head for daring to attack me with her magic. And yet I know she is directing her magic at me. Magic I can’t identify. It’s unlike anything I’ve come across before.

Warm. Lovely. See the chaos.

Chaos?

Something to be tamed. Fine, I’ll bite and take a look.

The blue of her eyes swirls like the seas during the storm. She’s almost glowing with magic as she tries to trap me in her spell. When I glance around, I see that the entire crowd of over five hundred people is looking at her, smiles on their faces and storms making the colors of their eyes swirl.

It's an enthralling type of magic, magic similar to a compulsion.

The people make their way toward her. Slowly, as if trudging through mud, but moving nevertheless.

I'm unsure what kind of power she wields, but it's glorious. And, frankly, difficult to resist. Even for me.

I take her slender hand and flip it over, exposing the underside of her wrist. I kiss it, lingering for a moment to feel her rapid pulse against my lips. She's excited, and perhaps a little scared.

I consider sniffing her so I can catalog her scent, but kill that idea quickly. I'd better not test my control. She's a powerful, beautiful royal female, the kind males lose their faculties for.

And I hate losing. Faculties. Control. Power. Anything at all.

"Pleased to have met you, Princess. You are as beautiful as the sea and as tempting as a siren. Have a lovely evening."

I *velosi* out of there at top speed.

I left her my jacket. An excuse she can use to find me.

FLEUR



From across the sofa, my brother El’jah blows on the fresh blue nail polish he applied on my toenails. Big blue eyes the same color and shape as mine look up while he places my feet on his chest and grabs my calves. He gives them a squeeze.

I groan as he starts massaging my muscles, which are sore from walking all night in sandals, searching for information on the whereabouts of a nocturno I met last night. Even after a span of sleep, after my body healed and rested, my muscles still feel sore.

“Just what the healer prescribed,” I tell him.

El’jah narrows his eyes. “How are you still sore?”

I roll mine. “Danced almost the entire night.”

El’jah gives me a bored look because we often communicate without words. He knows I’m lying, mainly because we carry a kind of magic that easily reads other people. My brother feels people’s desires, and I desire to find out more about the nocturno I met last night, but if I tell him about the vampire, including how he resisted my magic, El’jah will insist upon meeting him.

Worse yet, any nocturno found resistant to my magic poses a threat, and El’jah might tell my brother, the Summer king. I don’t want Et’enne in my private business. Or any business at all, personal or otherwise, until I’ve had a chance to

investigate. But I must tell El'jah something, and it has to be true.

“A male walked away from me last night.”

“You mean you shooed him off?”

I shake my head. “That’s what’s weird about this. I invited him.”

Following several incidents that happened after I bloomed into a young adult fairy, my parents locked me inside the palace and even closed off the court for several mating seasons while I trained with the best teachers in the world to control my growing magic. Nobody could classify the type of *voca* or mind-calling magic I wielded. The only thing we knew for sure was that whatever it was, it attracted people, pulling them in like a life force.

El'jah's eyes widen and he opens his mouth to ask me more about it, but stumbles over his words before uttering, “How do you mean he walked away?”

I giggle. “Very easily, apparently.”

“Because you left your magic in the chambers along with your desire to bang him?”

I laugh. “Because he seemed uninterested.”

“So you finally learned how to shield.”

Our brother Et'enne uses this term. Shielding. He is a *voca*, a mind reader and manipulator, and he is very powerful, with full control of his magic. He describes the process of shielding as closing the curtain on the world outside and being at peace inside his mind.

I've never been able to do that, mainly because I dislike walls between myself and others. I want to let people in instead of shutting them out. If I shield, I'm closing off the world. “I don't think I'll ever learn how to do that.”

He strokes his jaw. “Who was it ?” His eyes sparkle with intrigue.

El'jah's magic is similar to mine, and sometimes (often) I envy his ability to control it.

“A random nocturno I met.”

A tilt of his head as he senses I'm avoiding the details.
“And where did you meet him?”

“If I tell you, promise you won't get mad.”

He lifts his pinky, and I hook mine with his.

“Promise,” he swears.

“Evie arrived.”

“And?”

“The girls and I got together. One drink led to ten, and we went to the dungeons.”

“Fleur!”

“Shhhhh.” I press a finger over his lips. “You'll alert *you know who*.” My big brother can read minds from a distance. Nobody really knows how far he can reach, and the last thing I want is Et'enne mind dropping in on our conversation.

He's put me away twice before, locked me up just like my parents did. For my own good, so people won't hurt me while I get ahold of my magic, but still, he's protective and controlling, and I have no idea what he'll do if he finds out there's a mysterious vampire visitor resistant to my magic.

“If he's uninterested,” El'jah says, “Et'enne won't care about him. Keeping you safe from those who are interested and can't control themselves around you is more of our concern.”

Right. But what if I'm interested in him? I can't say that, or El'jah will turn over the entire court looking for the vampire before I can find him again and lure him in, see if what happened last night was a fluke.

“A mated male can walk away,” I say.

“Nocturnos don't get mates,” El'jah says.

The fae get fae-ted mates, and our king is one of them. He spouted his fae-ted male wings on his wedding span before the entire world. I cried a lot that span, for my heart almost burst from happiness.

“Maybe he fed from someone and was in a trance from their magic, so it overrode his brain and he’s not seeing you correctly.”

“Is that possible?”

“Almost everything is possible.” El’jah puts my feet on the sofa.

I wiggle my toes. “You know what else he did?”

“What?”

“When I offered him my hand, he turned it and kissed the underside of my wrist.” I lift my wrist and point. “Here.”

“That’s a sign he’s one of their elders.”

Notturmo elders are usually either murdered by their predecessors or live in seclusion. They’re difficult to come by, which just adds to this vampire’s appeal. “How so?”

“Back in the old age, when a notturno was approached by a powerful highborn female fairy, he would bow and wait for the offered hand. If the lady exposed her wrist, she invited his bite.”

I huff. “I did not invite anything. He invited himself by turning my wrist any which way he wanted.” The side of my neck starts tingling as if anticipating his bite.

“Might be his arrogance,” El’jah says. “Just how you like them.”

“It doesn’t matter if I like him. He left.”

“Our court?” he asks, luring me into telling him the truth about spending all night trying to find out this exact thing.

I shrug. “I didn’t look. I spent the night dancing.”

Right after the best teachers told my parents they believe I’m a *voca dei lura* or a Summoner, like the infamous siren

Br'ar, who sank more ships and drove more males crazy than most of her kind living back then have done combined, my parents murdered everyone familiar with my magic and forbade me from leaving the Summer Court.

My brothers, although less restrictive than my parents, prefer that I stay in the court too.

It's for my own protection as well as the protection of others.

But like a curious hummingbird flapping her wings inside a cage, I'm dying to someday escape.

FLEUR



When our king calls, we answer, and El'jah is no exception, not even though he's the king's sibling. He'd much rather spend the span in the spa with me, but we're watched constantly, and people must see us doing exactly as our king says. Of course, Elijah and I disobey and protest and provide Et'enne with counsel, but for the most part, we trust Et'enne's decisions. He's made us all wealthy, healthy, and powerful.

Since the Golden Palace hosts many events at night when it's cooler, most of the time we sleep during the morning and sometimes even into the afternoon. Normally one of us royals host either a brunch or lunch and then dinner. Since Et'enne's presence at any event draws the most crowds, he's been entertaining more often than usual this fall season.

We've managed to keep over half the world here in the court after the royal wedding by announcing the coronation of our lovely queen, a fate who sees all that's come to pass.

If anyone would know anything about the vampire I met last night, it would be June, but June would spill to Et'enne, and even if she didn't tell him I'm asking questions about a nocturno, my brother would pry it out of her brain.

I heard that June gives him unobstructed access to her thoughts. She's gracious and kind and knows what to do with all the power and arrogance that comes with mating my brother.

They're a power couple, and with all being well in our kingdom, that means the rest of us royals and aristocrats are starting to get bored. Thus when one of my best friends slides into my chambers without knocking or begging entrance, looking like she spent the night with a pack of lycans whose only mission was to please her by wringing dozens of orgasms out of her, I clap my hands. "Tell me all about your night. I want names."

Evie duckwalks inside as if she's sore between her legs.

"Definitely names." I open the doors to the terrace and sit at the swing, patting the spot next to me. The weather this late in the afternoon, while gorgeous at all times of the turn, is exceptionally pleasing as we near winter. A drop in humidity is always welcome.

The Duchess of Victoria makes her way toward the terrace and closes the doors to my chambers. She practically falls onto the swing cushion with me and sighs heavily, her dreamy gaze cast at the sky.

This past summer, her parents sent her to the palace with the task to fetch a husband who would rule the province after her father's death. But in the time she's been here, she figured out a lady of wealth needs no husband in order to rule. In fact, a husband might impede her authority and diminish the wealth of her province. Since learning this important life lesson, she has stayed in the palace, waiting out the demise of her disappointed father, who petitioned the court to replace his heir with anyone of our choosing.

Much to her father's displeasure, the court voted to keep the succession line with whomever is next in line, which means Evie.

Beautiful black locks frame her perfectly oval face, while smears of last night's makeup under her eyes tell me she's in need of the kind of quick treatment El'jah and I already applied to ourselves. I pat her knee and walk back inside, where I pick up towels soaked in warm water with herbs and peppermint, then return to sit with her.

"I'm supposed to wait on you, my princess."

“Good to know you still remember I exist.” I poke her forehead so she tilts her head back, resting it on the back of the swing, which is now facing my chamber. The swing rotates, so when I sit, I can choose to view either the fireplace in the chamber or the sea.

“That feels so good,” she groans when I apply the towel over her face.

“You haven’t slept at all, have you?”

Under the towel, she shakes her head. “Couldn’t. Drank from a vampire last night.”

I gasp. “Evie le Victoria, what would your father say?” Vampire blood makes us more energetic. It’s also been said it numbs the pain and extends the pleasure of sex. I wouldn’t know since I’ve never tasted nocturno blood.

“Father would say nothing. He’s dead.”

“Oh, Evie.” I take her hand in both of mine. “When did you find out?”

“Last night.”

No wonder she went all out. “I’m sorry. I pushed off my briefing till later, so I hadn’t heard the news yet. We’ll leave immediately to attend the funeral and get your affairs in order.”

“Thank you.” She lifts the towel and peers at me from under it. “The vampires sure know how to make a girl forget.”

I shake my head. “You shouldn’t use their mind-wiping skills to heal grief. Once it wears off, the grief remains. Wait. Only older vampires can wipe a mind for a night, then give it all back.”

“Mmhm. This one was old.”

I was wrong about the lycans. She spent the night with a vampire. Which one? I’m afraid to ask. The moment I think she might’ve spent the night with *my* vampire, I press a hand over my mouth. “I like him.”

Evie removes the towel and blinks. “Who?”

“Nobody.”

“Um.” She wets her dry plush lips by swiping her tongue over them. I pass her my glass of water and she drinks, taking another towel from me and draping it over the inside of her left wrist. “Names, please. If we like the same vampire, then...” She smirks. “We make a sharing pact.”

I throw my head back and laugh. “Deal.” For whatever reason, I brace myself.

Evie opens her mouth. I can tell she wants to say something, but she frowns, then says, “I can’t remember his name. I’m sure I know it, but I can’t remember.”

“You can remember. You just can’t say it, as in share it with anyone.”

That’s even worse. It means the notturno is skilled at mind wipes. According to Et’enne, this type of memory control is advanced.

“How can I not say it?”

“I presume you’re under a compulsion not to.”

“Oh my fates. This is so wicked!” She giggles. “I can see his name in my head, but I can’t tell you.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered. I don’t know the name of the notturno I met last night either.”

“Thank the fates. I would hate having to share with you.”

She uses the towel to wipe off the makeup under her eyes. The charcoal stains the gray towel. “What did he look like?”

“Painfully powerful and handsome.”

She nods. “Painfully. I like that.” Evie levels me with a look. “The mind-wipe thing makes it hard to focus on anything besides having a good time last night, but I’m pretty sure I overheard one of the notturnos say they want to party with El’jah while they still have a chance. You know what that means.”

It likely means they think El’jah is going to get the call of duty soon. They think Et’enne finally found my brother a

bride.

“It will be as our king wishes it.” That’s all I can say. I love Evie and she’s one of my best friends, but some of the matters of the royal family remain in the family. I trust her, but my brothers and I keep dangerous secrets my friends are better off not knowing.

Our biggest secret is our magic. People speculate about the kind of magic we carry, and we let them, but we haven’t declared our powers. We want our enemies to remain uninformed.

“What else did you hear?”

“They talked about the Winter Court.”

I snort. “There is no Winter Court.” The Unseelie prince and his mother tried to take the king’s crown. He released the full force of his power and killed the prince, exiled the queen regent, and destroyed the Winter Court, scattering his aristocrats and vampiric houses. Those who plotted against him are in hiding, but others are displaced and have no home to return to. The Unseelie king nearly razed his court to the ground, leaving only one tower intact.

It’s been prophesized his mate, who is also the sister of our queen and a fate who sees all that will come to pass, will deliver their baby girl at the top of that tower, and that their child will carry the magic that originally created the nocturnos, magic that the fae world hasn’t seen since vampire creation.

“That’s exactly why they think the power they’re feeling on the rise is going to reconstruct the Winter Court.”

A shiver runs down my spine. Most nocturnos sense power the way fairies do since nocturnos lived as fairies before they turned undead, but something about the way she speaks makes me sit up straight. “What kind of power? Can you be more specific? Try to recall some details.”

“It’s making them want to go to bed early and wake up with a hunger for blood the likes of which they only experienced when they first rose as the undead. Their elders are rising at twilight and becoming faster now.”

Nottornos' powers on the rise is never a good thing for the fae or the world in general. The undead share a violent history with the living. "Have they mentioned why they think they're feeling all that?"

Evie nods, curls bouncing. "They talked at great length about this nocturno who rose from the dead. Or the undead, in his case."

"What of him?"

"They're calling him the general, and he's come to unite them under one banner." Evie locks her eyes with mine. "And he wanted me to tell you that. Oh yes, I remember now." Her eyes widen. "He told me to tell you to stop looking for trouble."

It's him! And he knows I was searching for him.

Evie yawns. "Can I crash in your glorious bed?"

"Of course. Meanwhile, I'll arrange our trip to the province."

"Do I have to attend the funeral?"

Some of us grew up with fathers we remember with fondness long after they're gone. Others, like Evie, weren't so lucky. Et'enne took most of our father's wrath while El'jah and I, having been born after the Summer throne's heir, were nonexistent. Our father left us alone. Utterly alone for the better part of our lives.

"I'll be there with you," I promise her.

Evie crawls into my bed and yawns again, making me yawn too.

"By the way, the general asked if you appeared at these gatherings?"

"He asked you that?"

"Mmhm."

"And what did you say?"

"I said yes."

I lean in as her eyes flutter closed. No way am I letting her sleep on this. I shake the mattress. “What else?”

Evie’s eyes fly open. “That was all he asked.”

“How do you know if you can’t remember things?”

“I know because he told me what to say to you before I can be released from his compulsion.” Evie’s eyelids slam down like shutters.

I gasp, moving the mattress again. “Evie,” I hiss.

“I’m sleepy.”

“No wonder. A nocturno spelled you. Did you even have a sexy night?”

Her eyebrows draw down. “No, no. I danced a lot, and my legs hurt from dancing with...with one of his warlords.”

“Warlords?” I shriek. “One of them means there’s several of them. How many are in the court?” I shake the mattress to no avail because Evie is fast asleep.

FLEUR



There's an iron bench deep inside the maze of the palace's gardens. Our father claimed it belonged to one of the fairies who went to war and then came back as a notturno. What's curious, Father had explained, is that notturnos can't recall memories from when they were fairies, and yet they gravitate toward the places they came from before their transition.

The notturno returned home from war with this bench.

After sunset each span, he would walk up and down the beach carrying his bench and speaking to himself in a tongue older than our oldest book, a tongue he learned during his fae life, before our people solidified our current literature.

Since notturnos started showing up in the world around that time, and they fed on the fae, the fairies feared the notturno. One night, they banded together and attacked him. He slew them, so the fae sent more, and he slew them too. He slew many until a brigade of fae attacked him.

Before dawn, all three hundred soldiers lay dead on the sand, their blood coloring the sea red. After dawn, not a soul remained, only the bench on the sand, the crimson waves washing up between its legs.

Since the bench was made of iron, my people left it on the beach for a long time as a memorial to the fallen fae. Eventually, one of my ancestors removed the bench and used it

in the dungeons for torture. My father made Et'enne sit on it down in the dungeons and, later in life, up here.

Iron drains our power, so I use the bench often to help with magic purging. Et'enne chews herbs and drinks other magical remedies to silence the voices in his head and control his *voca* magic. El'jah uses sex, and I've used that remedy too.

All three of us have found something that helps us control our powers. If we don't purge or use tonics, we'll end up in no better state than the powerful Unseelie king who destroyed two fae courts. He's found a partner in life now, and by the looks of him when he visits with us, the male's regaining some of his faculties, but not without paying the price of losing control first.

All power comes with a price, and I pay mine as the iron starts to burn my palms.

Huh, too soon. Normally, my purge lasts from when the sun touches the sea on the horizon to when it sinks into it. The sun has just started setting.

I sit on the iron bench a little longer, gritting my teeth and gripping the seat until smoke rises from my skin. A passerby could smell that, so I lift my palms and look down at the retreating blisters.

It's odd that I can purge the magic so quickly this evening. As if I've been drained already, and now I'm overdoing it. But I haven't purged in a while, and last night in the gardens, I only went for a long walk and didn't even come near these parts.

Probably a fluke occurrence with the changing seasons. Winter is coming, and with it, news of the general and his warlords.

Last night, when I searched for the notturno, I never checked the dungeons, primarily because nobody ventures there by choice. The dungeons house criminals who the notturnos guard, and some of those guards are more dangerous than the prisoners. Et'enne hires scary monsters to patrol our dungeons, which hold scary creatures.

Unless the general left the court, that's the only place he could be. Since I can't seem to summon him to me, I must seek him out and question him about what Evie told me. I don't like that he manipulated my friend, but he released her and she's safe, so I take that as a gesture of goodwill.

Standing, I fix my skirt and my tube top and clear my throat, pushing back my shoulders.

The sun is sinking into the sea as I leave the gardens, heading into the palace from the back entrance. Once inside, I descend the steps toward the less frequented corner of the Golden Palace, which hides an unguarded secret passage in the corner of the hallway behind my late father's favorite plant.

"He loves gardening," my mother used to say to explain the excessive time he spent in the gardens when I was a kid.

She lied.

He loved hiding things in the gardens. Coins, drinking, orgies. The bench he tortured Et'enne on.

The worst part about my parents' relationship? My mother knew what he was doing. She knew and she ignored it, perhaps even encouraged it so that she could invite lovers to her own bed. And while each couple does what they will with their marriage, and I support the idea of individual freedom, I love the idea of finding that one loyal male who will share my long life with me a lot more.

Such a male would have to be powerful and self-controlled, like a king or a trained prince, but since I'm barren, kings won't marry me, and the princes who've courted me didn't have enough discipline to stay away from me even when I refused them.

Once Et'enne heard about the incident with the Spring Court's aristocrat who courted me one summer, things changed. After his party returned to their home, the male dove from the roof of his tower.

Nobody blamed me openly, but people gossiped in private. They said I drove him to his death.

Several summers later, another male and I entertained a long relationship until he started hitting me. I left him, retreating into the mountains. He followed me there. I thought he would end me, but El'jah figured it out and told my older brother, who made the male vanish.

My king also placed me under his observation and closed the Summer Court for several seasons. And ever since, I've chosen my partners carefully and gauged the kind of self-control a male possesses when he's around me, even while continuing to purge on the bench and wishing my magic would completely drain away.

I grab a dark brown scarf from the clothing rack we supply for our guests and wrap it around my head before slipping into the hallway that leads to the secret portal. Before calling up the portal, I look around for guards.

None.

Good.

Straining, I push away the heavy stone planter that holds a plant the size of a small tree to reveal the secret portal. I flick my wrist, and a purple-green shimmer appears on the wall. I step through it, quickly closing it after myself and praying the commander of our armies, and my dearest friend, D'Artaron, remains on the outdoor training grounds torturing (he calls it training) our new military recruits.

He's too good at his job and would find me out immediately.

The portal deposits me inside an empty cage deep in the dungeon. My toes curl as I shiver. Brrr. It's cold down here. And eerily quiet even for this time of span, which is morning for nocturnos.

The vampires stay away from sunlight, for the rays slow them down. For some of them, the light causes burns, and I've even heard of death from prolonged exposure. Younger nocturnos can function under the sun, but I've yet to meet a vampire who didn't prefer the rhythm of his natural nocturnal clock.

I approach the iron bars and listen more closely.

In the entertainment part of the underground area, music plays softly. I hear workers chatting and moving around, arranging glasses and plates and preparing meals for the night ahead. However, in the dungeon, I hear nothing, as if everyone is asleep.

While the undead sleep differently from the living, mainly in the way that they mimic the actual dead without heartbeats, I didn't expect silence down here. Guards patrol the cells and often chat among one another. The dungeons aren't this quiet.

Something is wrong.

It's him, my instinct supplies.

He's doing *it*. Whatever *it* is, the male they call the general is doing it. I know this like I know how to wrangle an outrageous twenty-five percent for myself out of every deal I make for my king and Court. I like having my own coin, for it gives me the freedom to do things my brothers would never sanction.

I eye the only prison cell door that can be opened from the inside. Et'enne had this cell remodeled after spending part of his childhood in it. The dungeons carry painful memories for him. I've often wondered why he still keeps the dungeons active in the court, why he hasn't closed them.

The magically spelled key hidden under the ninth stone of the third row of stones to my left unlocks the cage, and I poke my head out, seeing perfectly well in the dark.

Not a soul appears in the long hallway.

My plan was to summon the general while safely inside the cage, where he can't reach me. I wanted to ask him about Evie and forbid him from placing my friends under his compulsion. Which he shouldn't have been able to do, since Evie, like me, has been bred from the finest fae stock and as such is powerful.

A nocturno shouldn't be able to manipulate a powerful fairy.

I've never met one who could manipulate me. And I've never met a male who could resist my magic either. This nocturno resisted, so I must know who he is and how he's doing it. *But you know what they say about curiosity?* the rational, scared-shitless part of my brain supplies.

Yup, but I must discover what he's up to undetected. Besides, I'm no coward. I'm just a fairy walking in the dark.

Quietly. Ever so quietly, because nocturnos hear as well as, if not better than us, I tiptoe down the hallway, passing several cells with prisoners inside who are indeed still sleeping. It all appears normal, until I reach an unlocked cage. I press a hand over my mouth so I don't gasp, fear making my heart race.

This block holds ruthless creatures, dangerous males sentenced to spend their long lives down here. Some have even been transferred into the care of my family's magical powers since the dungeons were built long ago.

The lack of iron on the bars of this open cell tells me the male inside wasn't a fairy. I would bet my entire cruise ship line it was a nocturno. Has the one they call the general been released? Has he been here all along? If so, we must return him immediately!

I keep walking and hit the end of the hall. Right or left? I look each way.

On the left are the older cell blocks with gates that swing open, and on the right are the newer blocks with sliding gates which remain closed. This tells me that the prisoners from the older cell blocks have been released.

But not all. Only some.

I venture down the left block, suppressing my magic. It feels like an itch under my skin. I want to call the males to me and put them back in their cells, but it's risky. They could be so hungry that instead of returning to the cells, they'd want to feed on me.

Thing is, there doesn't seem to be anyone awake and the guards have all vanished.

I've come all this way, and I'm not going back now. I must know what's happening down here. If I call for help, I'll never find out. Either the general will end me or end whatever he's doing. And I'm certain it's him, the same nocturno I met last night.

Before I round the corner, I hear something. I stop to listen, trying to quiet my racing heart. But I can't, so I listen past the thumping in my ears.

A shuffling of bare feet.

And humming.

Confused, I poke my head around the corner.

Guards stand facing the iron bars and away from the path the prisoners are slowly walking down, their feet shuffling, unaccustomed to movement. Some of them are skeletons dressed in tattered, ancient clothes, starved nocturnos awoken from a deep slumber of who knows how many centuries. In a neat line, they're moving toward the shadow portal emerging on the wall of a long, dead-end hallway.

Our guards, with their minds swimming inside a nocturno's compulsion, are humming one of the Br'ar songs from the lycan lands. In this version of the song, the infamous siren named Br'ar lured in a lycan Alpha, who, after spending three millennia servicing her as a lover, slew her and escaped her grip to become a legendary vampire general named Nottuza.

Wait, what?

That sounds wrong.

Lycan Br'ar songs don't mention vampires.

He's in my head!

I hear chuckling and turn to see the nocturno from last night leaning against the bars of the cell right behind me. I open my mouth to scream, but no sound comes out.

He presses an elegant, clawed finger over his lips and says, "Shhh, my flower, you'll wake the hungry undead."

FLEUR



The vampire I've been looking for stands before me dressed in last night's clothes. Except now, dust clings to his black-on-black outfit, and his mussed hair has fallen out of its tightly combed high ponytail. An arrogant smirk and a lazy perusal of my figure tells me he expects to get away with sleeping in the dungeons, stealing prisoners, manipulating our guards, and intruding on my thoughts.

He most certainly will not.

I release my magic and instantly hear the footsteps of the vampires halt. The dungeon guards fall silent.

Nottuza (pretty sure that's his name from the wrong Br'ar song he fed me) flicks his gaze over my head and takes a step toward me.

"This is not a good time to play with skeleton dolls," he says, voice deep and raspy. "These dolls will bite if I release them."

"Put them back where they belong, or I will."

"They belong with me."

"They belong in the prison," I hiss. "And you, as a visitor to this court, belong upstairs in the chambers we assigned for the Unseelie king's guests." Pretending to be a silly female, I wipe the dust off his chest. "Nothing can clean this. We'll burn it and get you new clothes. Return the prisoners and join me upstairs. I'll forget I ever saw this."

“Yes, you will.”

What’s he mean by that? “Come. My brothers would love to meet you.”

“I bet they would,” he says, gaze focusing on something behind me.

I sense the males moving toward me now. All I have to do is walk them into their cells and then take my guards outside and away from this powerful vampire.

“Stop,” he commands me, and my magic falters.

Oh no, you don’t.

I ball my hands into fists. “I won’t let you walk out of our court with prisoners.”

“And yet I will.”

Two nocturnos walk past us and into their cells, locking the iron gates behind them.

I smile sweetly.

He smiles too, showing me long, sharp, thick fangs. “Will you keep me as your prisoner too?”

“Get over yourself.”

“I know you were looking for me last night.”

“Only because I knew you were up to no good.”

He smiles wider. “Your friend should’ve told you to stay away.”

“You shouldn’t have invaded Evie’s mind like that.”

“You shouldn’t have imprisoned my lords.”

“You mean your warlords?” Three males walk past us, heading for their cells. The guards are moaning now, slowly coming to. I’m pulling them toward me while Nottuza holds their minds captive. They’re struggling. The battle between our two magics causes pain, but I can’t let them go.

The vampire’s eyes narrow as he watches my magic working on the prisoners.

“Release my males, and I will release your guards.”

I double up on my magic. Had I known I would use this much tonight, I wouldn't have purged. “Surrender the prisoners, and we can negotiate. I'm nicer than either of my brothers and will make you a good deal. Ask anyone.”

“I'm interested in dealing with you, but surrendering isn't possible. You want my lords? Take them.”

Loud snarls rip through the air from behind me, and I turn to see horrifying creatures only partially covered with flesh rushing toward me. Nottuza moves out of the way, and I sprint as fast as my feet will carry me back toward the safety of the closed cell.

Not fast enough.

One of them grabs my hair. I scream, and I'm released, and in the blink of an eye, Nottuza pins me against the wall of the safe cell. His cold body is as hard as the wall against my back. And I mean hard in all the ways, some that matter more than others.

The chase aroused him.

He presses against me, cold hands encircling my neck, his thumbs pushing up my jaw, forcing my head to tilt up so I can look at him. My heart's beating so hard in my chest, it's as if it wants to escape. I want to escape, yet I don't.

We're trapped in the safe cell that's not safe anymore. The baddest predator in the dungeon occupies the space with me.

He speaks in an old fae language until his subjects stop snarling.

His gaze is on my lips, and he doesn't hesitate to dip his head and brush his mouth over mine. “Your magic owns you and your better judgment. It's very powerful chaos. I can help you control it.”

Many have tried. The commander and I have been training all my life. “You can't.”

“But you want me to. You need me to. It's what draws you to me. Thrice now.”

“Thrice?”

“I’m afraid so, but let’s be sure.” He sniffs my hair, and his nostrils flare. A growl rises from his chest, and his hands squeeze my throat more tightly, but then he blinks and, seemingly composed again, releases his death grip without removing his hands. “You are the most irresistible female I’ve ever met.”

Males have complimented my beauty all my life, and yet I feel heat rising to my face as if I’m blushing. It must be the lack of air, though he’s not squeezing me tightly, just holding me in place in a very controlling way.

“We saw each other twice, not thrice, and the first time I came upon you was a coincidence. This time, curiosity,” I say.

“Or fate.”

“I doubt the fates would arrange this.”

“Ask the fate and find out.”

Maybe I will. “My brother will want those prisoners returned.”

“They’re not his prisoners. They’re my soldiers.” He’s whispering against my lips, kissing me, coaxing my mouth to open. I won’t, but oh, I don’t feel as if I’m the irresistible one.

“There are no nocturno soldiers, for the nocturnos don’t have an army. Or a general, for that matter. Are you aware of that?” Maybe I’m dealing with a delusional vamp. They come in all kinds.

His head bobs, and he sighs. “Oh, my flower, I am painfully aware of that, which is exactly why I was awoken.”

“Do you mean someone woke you up to create an army?”

“Correct.”

“But why?” There’s only one reason, but I want to hear him say it.

“Because undead magic is returning to the fae world, and I will rise with it.”

“You will rise with the undead magic?”

“Mmhm.”

“Like the Nightbound Soldier from the story?”

“Just like him.”

“The Nightbound Soldier doesn’t exist.”

“That’s a lie your ancestors told you so you could sleep better at night. Ask the fate.” He kisses me, then uses his speed to escape, leaving dust, confusion, and chaos in his wake.

FLEUR



The cold from the bare prison stone seeps through my bare feet and starts prickling. I struggle to move and can't, not even a little.

Nottuza must've planted a command inside my mind that won't allow me to come after him. There's no other explanation for my paralysis. Even the people in the dungeons have come back to life. In the hallways, I hear the guards chatting while I struggle to take back control of my body.

Like a fish out of water, I open and close my mouth as I attempt to scream for the guards to stop the vampire from escaping with fates know how many dangerous criminals, but no sounds come from me.

It's probably for the best, for I don't believe any of these males would be able stop him. I couldn't either, but that's not saying much. I'm untrained in combat and more of a lover than a fighter, but my magic should've swayed him toward me, made him want to please me and return the prisoners to their cells. It didn't work, and I don't know why he's able to resist.

I never met a male (or a female, for that matter) who could resist my magic's promise of comfort and pleasure.

He's dangerous.

Calculating.

Cold.

And a puzzle I must solve.

As soon as I can move. Damn him!

Go on, my flower. His voice purrs in my mind, and I feel the mental release. My knees wobble, my head swims, and I lean against the cold cell wall, looking up at the ceiling and breathing deeply so I can take a moment to compose myself and steady my rapidly beating heart before I approach the bars and listen.

The sounds of the chaotic and swift movements of the guards along with the shouting I expected never come. Instead, all I hear is guards distributing meals and prisoners chatting in their cells as they eat.

Approaching my cell is a cart with wheels, the same style cart we used in the palace before we switched to newer models that make less noise, and I wonder if I should make haste and leave, pretending as if I were never down here, or raise an alarm.

Clearly, something is wrong. By now, the commander would've raised the alarms, maybe even placed the entire underground under lockdown. But from what I'm hearing, these people are going about their business as usual.

Despite the cold, I stay a bit longer, hoping someone will react and call on our guards from above, but nothing changes, so I sneak out the same way I came in. Through the family portal leading back upstairs into the palace.

The moment I step into the well-lit hallway, I start pushing the planter back into place. It feels heavier than usual because my strength has waned. After purging my magic on the iron bench and then using it on the males in the dungeons, not to mention Nottuza, my biceps and thighs shake as I push. Yet, I can't hide the portal anymore.

Annoyed, I collapse the portal completely, because having it out in the open like this is a security risk for our family. I must remember to tell El'jah about it. He'll put it back in place along with the planter.

I dust off my hands on my clothes and start moving toward June's tower, intent on asking her about the Nightbound Soldier, who can in no way be real. Suddenly, a tall, dark figure flashes in my peripheral vision.

I scream as I jump away, my shoulder hitting the wall.

"Dear fates, D'Artaron! You scared the magic out of me." I catch my breath before I tell him the series of events that occurred in our dungeons. D'Artaron will get our guards to secure the prisoners, as well as the court.

The commander of our armies, who is also the head of our security until he hires someone he thinks fits the position (thousands of applicants later and none are good enough in his opinion), frowns, eyes flickering between me and the space where the portal used to be.

"Curious to find you in this part of the palace," he says.

Well respected within the military ranks, with powerful magic that moves objects, D'Artaron is the kind of commanding officer every father wants for his daughter, every king wished they had commanding their army, and every princess hopes is in her security detail or a secret lover.

He's tall, with broad shoulders and a handsome masculine face, with dark hair that reaches just past his chin. Amiable, brooding, and utterly unavailable, as well as chaste, our commander walks around breaking hearts as if it's his duty.

It's not. His duty is to my brother, the king.

All hope that I could gather as much information about Nottuza from June before I put together a plan on how to handle the vampire and present it to my brother vanishes. The commander will take over from here, and I'll be lucky if he shares what he intends to do about Nottuza.

Maybe I can wrangle a span or two from him before he tells my brother about me visiting the dungeons and putting myself in a position where a powerful male could hurt me.

Et'enne will lose it.

The commander looks like he might lose it too, but I must answer him.

“Give me until tomorrow before you brief Et’enne.”

“What happened?”

“I visited the dungeons.”

His eyes widen. “Whatever for?” he asks calmly, but I hear the growling disapproval in his tone nonetheless. I’ve known this male most of my life. He’s like a brother to me.

“I met a vampire last night, and I was curious about him.”

“And?”

“I found him.”

“In the dungeons?”

I nod.

“You met a vampire last night whom we then secured in the dungeons. They’re called criminals, not vampires. Did he hurt you? Is that why we put him in the dungeons?”

The planter wobbles. Thinking that someone hurt me upsets him.

“He didn’t hurt me.” Though he could’ve killed me. “He freed some prisoners and left with them, and, judging by your demeanor, you already knew about it. I just wish someone had told me a little bit more about our dealings.”

D’Artaron seems confused. “No prisoners were freed.”

“Sure they were. I saw them walk out.”

“We move them around from cell to cell, but no one left the dungeons.”

I witnessed at least a dozen of them stepping into the shadows. “Have you checked with the guards down there?”

D’Artaron snorts at the implication he hasn’t done his duty promptly and with the efficiency of a super fairy.

“And how did you evade guards from the dungeons and here?”

The family portals are a secret. I bite my lip.

The commander shakes his head. “How many of these portals are there that I don’t know about?”

“You’ve uncovered most of them.”

The commander grumbles disapprovingly.

“So nobody reported missing prisoners?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Missing prisoners aren’t unusual down there. Monsters roam the dungeons, Fleur, which is why it’s not a place for any princess, certainly not one with magic that attracts them.”

“What if the dungeon master is in on the escape and just hasn’t told you?”

“We have fae guards down there and vampires who spy for us. Everything is as it should be. Except for you.” D’Artaron offers me an elbow. I take it, knowing where he’s going. I’m following because arguing with the commander is futile.

“You like villains,” he says.

“I do not.”

“You always have. It’s why I never stood a chance.”

I bark a laughter. “You never stood a chance because you married your duty to my brother, and I don’t share.” And also because the commander carries the kind of powerful magic our kingdom must replicate. I can’t give him children.

I don’t bring up that reason, but rather change the subject. “Give me a span before you tell the king.”

“I can’t.”

Worth a shot.

We round the corner, where we meet a pair of guards on patrol. The commander instructs them to search the dungeons, and they run off with the order.

“We inspect our own dungeons?” I ask.

“Not often, but you’re telling me there’s a vampire who left with our prisoners and that the new dungeon master could

be part of it, while I received no such report. It's possible you saw an ordinary span down there where the guards move the prisoners around, so I'm double-checking."

"Nothing was ordinary. Trust me."

"Tell me about the vampire you went after."

"Tall. Dangerous. Handsome. Kind of like you, but with longer hair."

"And you don't know him?"

"No."

"Do I?"

"Maybe. His name is Nottuza."

"Sounds familiar, but I can't quite place it." The commander flags a few guards over and they flare out around us to escort us while the other guards search the prison.

"It's not necessary to guard me. The threat is gone."

"How do you know?" The commander picks up his pace, and I have to almost run alongside his long strides.

"I saw him leave."

"I take it you hid from him."

When I pinch my lips, the commander stops and stares me down. "You followed a dangerous vampire into the dungeons and watched him take prisoners and leave you as a witness?"

"That's right."

"He's either stupid or he left you to report this on purpose. Which do you think it is?"

"He left me on purpose."

"How well do you know him?"

He's asking if I took the vampire as a lover. "Not well at all."

"While I sort this out, I want you to stay with El'jah."

Here we go. "El'jah is not my keeper."

“Maybe he should be.”

“I’m not twelve, D’Artaron.”

“But you’re behaving like you are.”

I lift my hand from his arm.

He stops and stares me down. “What am I supposed to think when you tell me you’ve visited the dungeons, hm?”

“You’re supposed to think I have a good reason for doing so. One that could quite possibly save us some span seeing as how nobody is alarmed. It’s as if nothing happened, but I’m telling you, something *did* happen.”

“If something happened, I’ll find out. I don’t need you investigating or chasing criminals.”

“I was inside the safe cell.”

“For your information, that’s a torture chamber.”

“But not for me.”

The commander sighs. “You’re not telling me something.”

“Okay, fine, I wasn’t in the cell the entire time.”

“Fleur!” he bellows.

“Before you chastise me, had I not left the cell, I wouldn’t have uncovered his ploy, and apparently, you would be none the wiser.”

“Are you questioning my security measures?”

“There was a breach.”

His jaw works. “If there was one and someone managed to cover it up, they’re very powerful, and you should stay as far away from them as possible.”

Oh boy. The commander is right. He’s right. He often is.

I take his hands in both of mine. His touch is warm, his scent that of leather and dominance, his beating heart a strong reminder that I encountered a very undead male only a few moments ago.

Flickers of my drained magic rise. “I followed my instincts about this male, for I had to know his intentions toward our court. That’s why I went there. I wouldn’t put myself in harm’s way if I believed it frivolous or unimportant. I’m a crown princess, and I also want to ensure the prosperity of my court. You know that if my womb is of no use, I still have other uses.”

“We keep records of all the vampires entering our court. Detailed records, Fleur. Nobody by that name has ever been here, and I know this because our security briefs would mention someone who could compel a powerful fae.”

“Wait. You think I was compelled and I’m fabricating the entire thing?”

“I must get you to Et’enne.”

“Oh. I haven’t been compelled.” Not in the sense he means. “I know what I saw. The search will confirm it.”

D’Artaron’s gaze holds pity.

He doesn’t believe me.

FLEUR



The king's quarters take up the largest part of the family's housing in the court, and the family's favorite gathering spot is the sprawling terrace overlooking the city, the marina, and the vastness of the blue seas beyond. We love having breakfast with Et'enne on this terrace. It's a tradition.

While it's not breakfast time, I'm happy the king will receive me here and not in the throne room.

The throne room is formal, and my brother's words uttered there final. In the throne room, he's the king of the Seelie Court, but out here, he's also my older brother who pauses from speaking with his valet as the commander and I walk onto the terrace.

Great big obsidian wings tipped in golden yellow rise behind wide shoulders, which are covered with an elegant black jacket with tiny gold buttons sewn at the seams. Gorgeous handiwork.

It appears he's just returned from an outing, as there's a crown pinned at the top of his hair, which is tightly pulled up into a ponytail sitting high on his head. With the dark Unseelie-like eyes he inherited from our mother, hard-edged jaw, and high cheekbones, along with the overall power he exudes, Et'enne was voted the handsomest of all the current rulers.

No surprise to any one of us. The Summer kings are bred for beauty and power, and with Et'enne, my parents secured a

Seelie *voca* bloodline, previously only found in the Unseelie Court. He can whisper into minds and access anyone's thoughts. Which is precisely why the commander brought me here.

While my brother doesn't swoop into my mind often, if he perceives a threat to our kingdom or myself and finds me lying about it, he will read my thoughts.

On his way out, his valet gives me a slight nod. This is good. It means my brother is having a pleasant span and can be reasoned with. The family and those closest to us have ways of dealing with our complicated and lovable mind-intruding king.

Et'enne gives me a once-over, and his gaze lingers on my feet. They're dirty, covered in prison dust all the way up to my ankles. Just from that, he knows I was in the dungeons. Great.

"Are we doing it in the dungeons now?" Et'enne drawls.

"We're not, no." I swipe a drink from the service cart. I offer it to him, but he refuses. The commander won't drink on duty (which is always), so I don't bother offering him one.

"I met a *notturmo* last night." I sip my bubbly champagne. Light peach flavor. Mmmm. Refreshing.

"Me too," Et'enne says. "I met many *notturnos* last night." He looks at the commander, likely because he recognizes that I'm stalling and Et'enne likes his briefs delivered fast and to the point.

"Fleur believes that there was a breach," the commander says. "And that some of the prisoners escaped."

"I take it by your tone you don't believe that?"

The commander shakes his head.

"The *notturmo* I met last night in the club—"

Et'enne raises a hand, silencing me. "Since when do you frequent the underground?"

"It was Evie's birthday."

"I see. Girls' night out. And did you have a grand time?"

I nod. “I met him last night, and he walked away from me, even though I wished he’d stay.”

Et’enne smiles. “The one who got away.”

“Exactly. Naturally, I sought him out.”

Et’enne nods, so we’re in agreement.

“I searched for him everywhere, and when I couldn’t find him in any of the usual places, like the chambers where we house our guests, I went to the dungeons.”

“And you discovered him there.”

“He was freeing the males I think are his warlords.”

“His warlords?” my brother prompts with a tilt of his head. He doesn’t seem as concerned as I expected. Maybe it’s not a huge deal. But then again, Et’enne knows who we keep down there, whereas I only know they’re criminals.

He looks to D’Artaron. “I presume you’ve sent out a search? Quietly, so as not to alarm anyone or tell them we have nocturnos who call themselves warlords on the loose.”

“Yes, my king. So far, the streets are as usual and my birds and my spies are circling. Nothing is causing alarm, but I’ll remain vigilant.”

Et’enne tosses a nut into the air and catches it in his mouth. He offers me the bowl, and I take a nut, fling it, and it hits my nose. He eyes the commander, and the other male shakes his head, uninterested in our games.

“Sounds like you handled it. Yet you dragged my sister here as if she’s done something wrong when we both know her social mingling delivers valuable intelligence.”

“And wealth,” I add.

“And wealth,” my brother concurs. “I won’t bend her over my knee for going into the dungeons, and I don’t think she’d let you punish her either, so I don’t see why we’re having this conversation.”

“I believe the nocturno she met last night slipped something into her drink to weaken her and make her see

things that aren't there.”

“You think a vampire compulsion would work on her?” Et'enne asks.

“I do, and I've sent more males to confirm that nothing happened.”

“No nocturno is strong enough to wield a compulsion that's effective on my sister.”

“Then we wait for the report from the dungeons,” the commander says. “It would be helpful if you would confirm by reading her memories.”

“What makes you think I haven't?”

“Well, what did you get?” I ask.

“He calls himself Nottuza,” my brother says.

Damn, he's gotten so good at mind reading, I couldn't even feel the intrusion. Usually, I feel Et'enne's magic like a prick behind the eye or pressure in the brain.

“That's right,” I say.

“Except, he's a fraud. Nottuza is long gone, so long that most nocturnos don't even remember him. The only reason I recognize the name you call him by is because Professor Piston obsessed over the history of the vampire race.”

“Because he himself was a vampire,” I say.

My brother smiles. “I didn't think you remembered him. In any case, Nottuza is long dead.”

“He *feels* old, Et'enne.”

“How so?” the commander asks.

“I don't know. I can't explain it other than that he feels old. Besides, his fae language is harsh and accented.”

“That could be because he spent time away from the fae courts,” D'Artaron argues.

“It's not him,” my brother says.

“How can you be sure?” I ask. “Some vampires are over a thousand turns old. Not many, but there are some.”

“Nottuza is the first fae to have risen from the dead and become a vampire. The entire race of people are named after him. Notturnos.” Et’enne moves to sit down, and we sit with him. My brother starts sipping from my champagne. “June is talking in my head.” He taps his temple, indicating he’s communicating with his fae-tesd mate telepathically. “Says hi. She wants me to tell you a story about this male.” Et’enne purses his lips while listening to the fate who sees all that’s come to pass.

Impatient, I start tapping the table, then get another drink.

“Speak!” I screech, and plop onto the chair. I lean toward him.

Just as my brother opens his mouth, El’jah bursts onto the terrace covered in a rainbow of pixie glitter and wearing leather pants and a long pink wig. A papier-mâché unicorn horn sticks out from his forehead.

“Grab a chair,” I say.

He sits at the other end of the table where our mother used to sit. She’s no longer living with us in the court since she snatched Et’enne’s queen a while back. My brother is crazy about June, and my mother isn’t.

“We’re having a family get-together and it’s not about food, so one of us is getting bartered, Fleur. Or both of us.” El’jah peels off his thick fake eyebrows, one then the other. Once done, he rubs his forehead. “Are you selling me and Fleur to the kings in the lands unknown?” El’jah whispers playfully. “Please let it be just her, for I never want to be sold to the king. I don’t kneel for guys. Just girls.” He pouts. “When they beg nicely.”

Et’enne massages his temples. “So you won’t tell me?” he asks out loud, but we know he’s talking to June.

“She has to!” I screech again. “She must.” I must know who this vampire is, or I’ll drive myself crazy looking for answers. I dislike mysteries. And where are the commander’s

people to confirm I'm not making up the dungeon escape story?

El'jah grips the unicorn horn and pulls. "Ouch." He pulls again and scratches his face. The horn's not coming off. "The little girl glued it on permanently, it seems."

"Little girl?" I prompt.

"An actual child. I made a round at the school today. Et'enne is making me work." El'jah keeps picking at the base of the horn.

"How dare he?" I mock.

D'Artaron comes around the table and grips the horn. He rips it away, a piece of El'jah's skin coming away with it.

El'jah winces, blood welling up on the spot.

"Impatient, are we?" Et'enne asks the commander.

"My king, if you don't tell me all about this Nottuza vampire right away so that I can reassess the level of threat he poses, I'll stab myself in the eye with this cardboard horn. Only because jabbing it into your eye is too tempting."

Et'enne smirks. "I had to get the facts straight from June. This is a long and interesting piece of history, and more than what the tutors taught me. The history books don't cover the time during which Nottuza was alive."

"Which time are we talking about?" the commander asks.

"He existed nine millennia ago."

El'jah whistles. "Can someone bring me up to date on the current events?"

"We are trying to ascertain," Et'enne says, "if Fleur met a vampire named Nottuza and if he extracted some males he calls warlords from our dungeons, all while the commander was none the wiser and Fleur was left to inform me."

Short and to the point.

Realizing the seriousness of the situation, El'jah stops fidgeting with his pink wig. "And?" He runs a hand through

his long blond hair, the wig falling off behind him.

“Long ago, before the fae courts, when fae existed in tribes and were nomads much like the creatures we know now as savages, they would roam the lands resting in some areas, setting up camps in others, or, as was the case with the Olan tribe, looking to settle at the confluence of the Yesha, Kaya, and Mesy rivers.”

“That’s in the Winter Court,” the commander says.

“Precisely.” The males exchange looks before Et’enne continues. “But two other tribes arrived there at the same time as the Olans, and battles for the land ensued. The other two tribes joined forces and defeated the Olans.”

“Oh no,” El’jah comments. “I was rooting for them.”

“Instead of allowing the fallen a proper burial, which at the time was a body raft over the riverbanks or a pyre, the other two tribes threw the bodies of the Olans into a ditch and covered them with soil. They left them there and went on setting up their camps.

“Among the Olans was a little boy, no older than eight turns, who hid in the trees and watched his big brother die on the field. At night, after the other tribes left, the boy dug up his brother’s body and performed a ritual to raise him from the dead.”

A shiver runs up my spine.

“The ritual in the story is, as my June tells me, a myth. It wouldn’t have worked for anyone else besides this boy, who previously did not present with any magic. You see, he carried the magic that raises the dead and unknowingly used his magic on his brother. Nevertheless, his brother awoke, and the boy, happy and desperate, made his brother promise he would never leave him alone again.”

“Aww,” I say. “That’s a lovely, sad story.”

“His brother swore an allegiance and also vengeance, but he needed more males to avenge the tribe’s demise, so the big brother asked the boy to share some of his magic. The boy

agreed.” Et’enne pauses. “The little fool. We should never share magic with others.”

We all nod in unison.

“Go on,” El’jah says. “Tell me more about the honorable little brother who saved his big brother. Mmhm.”

Et’enne rolls his eyes. “The big brother performed the ritual, which was simply feeding his dead friends, Leroy and Ledger, his blood. And they rose at twilight. Newly undead.”

“I’ve never heard of this,” the commander says.

“Nobody has because nobody knows besides the people who were there and my June.”

Which is why Nottuza told me to ask the fate. “Is that it?”

“We’re just getting to the good part. June’s words, not mine. She’s very passionate about stories from our past. In any case, the newly risen big brother shares his blood with more males, and by now he has more than a dozen. Meanwhile, he himself is getting hungry, but is unable to keep anything down. He starts getting sick, thinks he’ll die again, and takes his friends and his brother to a retreat so he can recover and plot his revenge away from the two tribes, who outnumber them.”

“Patient. Calculating,” the commander says. “Not prone to impulse, nor driven by hunger or vengeance. He retreated to regroup.”

“A tactical retreat,” Et’enne says, seemingly excited by Nottuza’s decisions. “The undead are wandering the lands, and Nottuza is becoming weaker and weaker while noticing his preference for animal flesh, particularly blood. He has long canines we know now are fangs with holes in them, which drives him to suck, but he’s unsure on what.”

“Not on his mommy’s tit, that’s for certain,” El’jah supplies.

“His friends are growing hungry and weak as well, and they think they’re dying, until one night, a group of males attacks their camp and the big brother bites and sucks from the blood vessels in their necks. They all drank that night. The

attackers died. That was the first taste vampires got of what it feels like to drain fae magic, and they never looked back. It was, in their experience, the most exhilarating feeling in the world, for it made them feel alive again.” Et’enne gives me a pointed look.

I swallow and touch my neck. “He hasn’t fed on me, if that’s what you’re suggesting. No vampire has. I don’t share my magic.”

Et’enne continues. “The big brother’s friends try their hand at raising the dead too, and soon, the group of only a few males grows into over a hundred. Word of bloodsucking creatures killing and raiding at night spreads through the villages, and soon the villagers are calling them the vampire horde. Once the numbers reach about three hundred, the vampire horde returns to the juncture of the three rivers and exacts their vengeance on the two tribes. They keep most of the males from the original two tribes.

“They’re growing at fast pace now. The fae people are noticing, they’re forming alliances, and going on the offensive, and before you know it, hundreds of turns have passed and the small group of males now numbers in the tens of thousands, and the fae numbers are falling.”

“Shocker,” El’jah says. “The big brother was a nasty motherfucker.”

Et’enne narrows his eyes. “Or you could say he was the general who led the largest undead army history never recorded. Twice over.”

“Who did they fight?” I ask.

“The living.”

We stare at our king.

Someone knocks on the door, and I gasp, startling after the silence that followed the revelation that vampires hunted fae and ruled these lands.

“Forward,” Et’enne says to the people at the door.

A guard I've often seen with the commander steps onto the terrace. "There was no dungeon breach. All prisoners are accounted for, and the dungeon master apologizes for any misinformation. He assures us everything is normal downstairs."

"No way," I whisper as the male leaves.

"Fleur, did you actually see this male leading the prisoners out of the prison?" the commander asks.

"Yes. Well, not all of it. Not at the end. I was in the safe cell, so I didn't see them walking out. But that's what happened. He was here and he took them. Prisoners were missing. Locked cell doors were open. I'm not lying. Et'enne, please, you have to believe me."

Et'enne taps his fingers on the table. "I believe you."

"Thank you, brother."

"If he couldn't compromise you, this means everyone else has been wiped. Whomever you met last night carries substantial power."

"June can tell you anything," the commander says. "Anything that's happened."

Et'enne shakes his head. "She told me enough. We must leave the fates out of our affairs. If we call upon one, they all come, and I may then have a situation out of my control."

"And we *hatezzz* it when things aren't in our control," El'jah says, his voice like Et'enne's.

I suppress my laughter. Et'enne loves power, and with it, control over decisions and people. Most kings do.

"What are your orders?" the commander asks.

"We operate under the assumption there's a powerful vampire on the rise. It's unlikely he'll be interested in the fae, but more in the politics of his people. The houses are always warring, which is how we like them. Busy with their own problems. Activate our sleeping vampire allies and let them report on anything they hear. You're dismissed. Fleur, a word."

I remain with my brother on the terrace.

He hooks my pinky with his, the ring that identifies him as the Summer king reflecting the moonlight.

“You’ve been purging too much of your magic,” he says. “You’ve barely anything left.”

“I know. I...” If I tell him I used it to lure in vampires and prisoners, he might lose his mind. While I mingle in society and listen for potential threats and also opportunities for our court, Et’enne forbids me from engaging with anyone, especially not a dangerous nocturno. “I’ve been visiting the iron bench more often.”

Et’enne makes a sour face. “Easy on the purging, and stay away from the dungeons.”

“Yes, my king.” I flex my pinky as a promise.

“The thought of a nocturno walking into my court and exiting like a wind without arousing any suspicion is troubling. The only saving grace is that if nobody knows, I have no need to retaliate. Besides, your memories tell me he didn’t know you were there. You did well to watch him and walk away to inform the commander.”

My heart starts to dance. That’s not what happened. Oh my fates, this vampire is powerful to have been able to hide this from my brother. “Don’t read me, please. I’ll tell you.”

“I only glimpsed. It wasn’t invasive, I promise, and I wouldn’t have had I not considered you compromised.”

Maybe a glimpse means he didn’t see everything. Maybe I should tell him. Let him see everything, invite him into my head. And yet I can’t. It’s as if Nottuza is my dirty, awful secret, a male nobody needs to know about.

“You said he walked away from you,” Et’enne says.

“Mmhm.”

“Do you think he’ll come back?” he asks.

I shake my head. “I think he took what he needed.”

“But will he return anyway?”

“Why would he?”

“For you, Fleur. Do you think he’ll return for you?”

I shake my head again. I don’t think he will.

NOTTUZA



Empty bellies rush toward food faster than full ones, desperation often a great motivator. My males are no different. Nothing's quite as motivating for them as the promise of a hearty meal after centuries of hunger.

My warlords, Ledger and Leroy, separate from me first and lead the rest of the males I released on their advice. They picked them, not me. I don't know any of them, but if they do, it's good enough for me.

My warlords should've slept with me and awoken with me. Instead, a dispute between vampire houses led a vampire to awaken the pair of them before our time. Because undead magic wasn't conceived of yet, my males suffered centuries of weakness and imprisonment in the dungeons of the Summer Court.

Now they're free and hunting in the backwoods of the Winter Court, uncovering the fae who fled the Unseelie king's vengeance after they conspired against him, and by default almost prevented the conception of undead magic.

Fairies scream silently as my males gorge on their blood and absorb their magic.

Not even the most powerful fairies can defend themselves when we hunt in this way. The way my old horde hunted once inside a large settlement, using both our speed and strength.

To prevent either panic or rising voices, we enter the homes in pairs and drink quickly in one fell swoop. This way, we cover a lot of ground, and my warlords will recover more

quickly if allowed to gorge on both the blood and the magic of the living.

Thinking about how two of the most powerful nocturnos in existence spent centuries or maybe more imprisoned and rotting in fairy dungeons while their vampire brethren played dungeon masters next door and even carried out their meals and executions at the same time makes me want to return to the Summer Court and burn it down.

They're lucky I've taken a fancy to the Summer princess and wouldn't want her inconvenienced, even though she would happily leave my males rotting for a few more centuries at the very least.

They went without food for cycles at a time. Ledger, my fiercest lord, had turned into nothing but a skeleton. They might've even forgotten he existed down there. It's a miracle the brothers survived.

Like a proud daddy, I stroll down the moonlit cobblestone street, whistling my old military tune, enjoying the sounds of my males gobbling down meals as they zip between fae homes in this small town. And then I spy a tailor shop.

This is no ordinary tailor shop, though. In the window display is a military uniform.

Ledger rushes out of a house, some flesh already forming over the left side of his face. He offers me a fae male hanging limply over his shoulder. "You want?"

I wave him away. I haven't had much of an appetite since the delicious female meal I consumed in the Summer Court's gardens.

Ledger drops the male. "Did you eat at the Summer Court?"

I nod.

"Summer fae are the most delicious."

"Mmhm." I move toward the tailor shop. "I heard a scream from the house at the end of the street. Check it out. Bring me the nocturno who doesn't know how to hunt."

“Yes, General.”

The entrance to the already-broken-into shop opens without resistance, and the jingling bell at the top of the door draws my attention. I rip it off and examine it. Animals in pastures would have these bells. Why is there a bell on the door?

Puzzled, I pocket it and take down the manikin in the window. It's been dressed in thick white riding pants, leather riding boots, a tight black shirt with a high neckline, and a leather jacket decorated with artfully designed silver embroidery. Pinned on top of the manikin's lifeless face is a long black hat. I strip off the clothes, then dress quickly and gaze in the mirror.

Dirt from the dungeon mars my cheek. I rub it off with my thumb, which leaves me thinking the Summer princess saw it. Slightly annoyed, I wipe my thumb off and slide on the hat, arranging it lower, over my red eyes. The princess excites me.

“Are you the maker of this fine suit?” I ask the owner of the heartbeat I hear behind the partition at the end of the room. He won't answer me. He's been hiding, steadying his heartbeats so most nocturnos won't hear him. “It's rather admirable how you can control your heart in such a way when faced with the threat of death.”

When the male won't answer—I can tell by the scent in the room that the heartbeat belongs to a male fairy—I *velosi* to the partition and peel it open to reveal a kitchenette. The heartbeat grows louder in my ears. It's coming from inside the cupboard under the sink. I crouch and open the cupboard.

Inside is a fae child. A boy with dirt on his face and warm brown eyes that squint as they see me. The stench of fresh urine makes my nose wrinkle. There's another boy next to him, even younger, who's starting to cry, but quietly, silent tears running down his cheeks. By the looks of them, I can tell they're brothers. I recall my own brother with fondness and embrace the pain of his absence before closing the cupboard and exiting the shop.

I'll find a tailor elsewhere. Perhaps steal him from the Summer Court when I visit the princess. And I'm definitely visiting her again. One must eat, after all.

NOTTUZA



Over the course of seven spans, the males from the dungeons have filled out, most of their flesh regrown on their bones. Ledger and Leroy have even regained their skin. Yet, for some odd reason, the right side of Ledger's face is lagging behind in the recovery process. I've offered him my blood to see if we can restore his appearance before we leave for the Winter Court.

Sharing blood with him has left me weaker than expected, and since I seem to have developed a taste for the Summer princess, the blood of others pales in comparison. In fact, tasting other blood is like eating from a bucket of leftovers saved for pigs. I can't even swallow it down. Which leaves me with no choice but to feed from her.

Her scent in the room is stronger after she bathes at night than when she bathes early in the morning. I inhale a lungful of her scent now, which conjures up images of nights spent rolling in the sand with her, her laughter making me think I have a beating heart, her hooded blue eyes making me feel like I'm the only one for her.

Her magic calls me even in her sleep. A restless, deceptively submissive call, promising to make all my fantasies come true. Because I'm hungry, or simply because I conjure excuses when it comes to her, I leave the safety of the shadows in the corner of the room and approach her bed.

The cooler weather in the northern parts of the Summer Court means the rooms are heated this time of turn. She sleeps

under a thick comforter, with her right foot sticking out over the mattress.

She sleeps this way every night.

On her belly, with this foot out. It's a lovely part of her body. Petite, with cute toes, the nails of which she paints black, and an anklet that connects with a tiny chain to the rings around three of her toes. All gold jewelry. All carefully placed to accentuate the beauty of her foot.

I run a claw over the arch of her sole.

Her toes wiggle.

I grip her ankle, her magic flaring against my palm. My fangs lengthen and throb against my gums, and I marvel at how someone so petite can hold such powerful magic inside her. Then I remember that she can't. Not quite. The way her magic zaps my palm, then starts crawling over my arm like a thousand firebugs gives me an erection.

Goose bumps rise over her smooth skin, and I chuckle, then cover her foot with the comforter. From my pocket, I take out a toy soldier and place it next to the two other soldiers on her nightstand.

Fleur is a smart female. She doesn't wonder who they're from. She knows who visits her at night, leaving soldiers on her nightstand. And I figure when she's ready for me to visit her bed, she'll invite me to touch parts of her that will give her more than just goose bumps.

Until then, I'll only feed.

On my pretty prey, who is most beautiful when she sleeps, when unaware I'm watching, patiently waiting for her to stay up late one night and spend the night with me. Eventually, she'll grow more curious.

Eventually, I'll grow accustomed to the draw of her magic, so much so it won't pose a threat to my self-control.

For now, I feed on the delicious blood that's unforgettable and unlike anything I've ever tasted. So addictive that it's a painful craving in my belly when I'm away. A dangerous sign

that her blood is the only thing that can sate my hunger, her magic already holding power over me.

Nobody can know I crave her blood.

I ought to fuck her out of my system.

I ought to drain her.

I ought to wed her.

As if hearing me, her magic flares, heating her blood too much. I grimace at the temperature and retract my fangs from her arm and give the wounds a lick so they'll close up. By morning, Fleur will be healed and awakened with wet panties, knowing I fed from her again.

I wonder why she lets me. I think my visits are her dirty secrets as much as they are mine.

What an exquisite game we play.

As I take my leave, Fleur rolls away from me and onto her side, tucking the large, fluffy comforter between her legs. Her flimsy silk nightgown exposes the perfect curve of her ass cheeks.

They're begging for a touch, a squeeze, the gentle tap of a leather belt.

Between my claws, I clasp the lace at the hem and lift it, exposing her beautiful firm and full bottom. I grit my teeth, struggling against waking her up and shoving my shaft between her thighs.

Outside, I hear the guards changing shifts. I've lingered far longer than I should, risking discovery by the guards who walk inside her chambers to check on her while she sleeps. An odd thing to do, but also comforting to know that the Summer king guards his sister with more vigilance than ever since she told him about me. Which I'm sure she did. I left her unharmed and only with memories, albeit with a few minor adjustments.

I retreat into the corner, ready to leave, when Fleur moans. She's aroused and needy, even if she doesn't know it. Her magic strikes and makes a fist around my shaft.

I shudder.

This magic is tactile. Un-fucking-believable. If the Summer princess weren't already powerful enough, tempting enough, now I also find out that her magic is tactile. It feels like her small fist is squeezing my sac, massaging it.

I must leave.

And I can't. I want her so badly.

I could shred the flimsy dress and have her. I could have her flesh and blood. My gums inflate, extending my fangs again, but I retract them swiftly before completely losing control. Nevertheless, I'll take a trinket from her.

Using my claw, I slice off a piece of her wet hair, then force myself back into the shadows and out of her chamber just as a guard pokes her head inside.

I didn't cover Fleur's bottom.

I want to scoop out the guard's eyes with a spoon now. Even if the guard is a female. I don't care. None should see Fleur's bottom, even though I know she invites people to look at her figure freely.

My addiction has no boundaries.

Fuck me.

The moment I arrive back in the remote castle in the village, I fist the strand of her hair and bring it to my nose. I inhale so loudly, I snort, then unzip my pants and squeeze myself until I turn blue in the face. And while I'm busy regaining control and forbidding myself from stealing the Summer princess and moving us somewhere where no one will ever find us, and where I can drink from her at my leisure and whenever I please, my males are also busy, it seems.

For down in the village, the Unseelie king's locals are screaming.

NOTTUZA



Screaming locals means one of my males has lost control. Or it means Ledger is strolling down the streets. The flesh on Ledger's face hasn't completely filled out yet, and if he's mingling with the locals looking like a half-baked corpse, they'll be howling.

Except it's likely the former, since my entire unit is gone.

Just as I open the window of my chamber and prepare to jump out, heavy booted footsteps thump downstairs. Crouched on the windowsill, cold autumn wind battering the right side of my face, I tilt my head and listen. It's not one of my males. I hear the heartbeat of a living.

"Psst," a small voice sounds in the room. I tense, looking around, yet seeing nobody.

"Over here," it says. It's coming from one of the toy soldiers I purchased as reminders for Fleur.

I hop off the windowsill and stand before the little soldier on the dresser. It winks at me.

Aamako. The Unseelie king's magic designation is *armatuno*, meaning an army of one. He commands objects, or more specifically, he turns them into military tools, which often manifests in a deranged way. Such as whispering toy soldiers.

I exit the chamber and walk down the stairs. "My dear king," I say. Although he's not my king, he is endearing. The reins he holds over his power have been known to snap on occasion. I can relate to that. His struggle to control his vast

power endears him to me. The desire to drain the fae and devour the living so they can never threaten undead magic always churns at the back of my mind.

The lust for complete dominion over all species is a thing for males like him and me. I don't know why he doesn't take over the world, but I know why I won't. Because I did take the world once before, and I disliked who I became because of it.

Wearing a thick black robe and unlaced boots, Aamako sits in a chair by the fireplace, clutching a bleeding heart in his left hand.

Seething, I sit across from him. "That better not be Ledger or Leroy."

"Don't know either of them."

I close my eyes and breathe deeply to calm the million and one ways I conjure up of how to snap this living creature's thick neck before he can even blink.

"We are in alliance," I say. "Murdering my male warrants an explanation."

He tosses the heart into the fireplace. "I said no locals."

It's neither of my twin friends. "That's the same as me telling you not to eat from your gardens, but instead get on the stag and ride him to the market seven cities away only for a sack of the same kind of potatoes you grow in the backyard. The younger males, like the one with his heart sizzling in the fireplace, feed more often, and the locals make for fast meals. I'm sure nobody died until you made them dead."

"I said no locals."

"Then we must leave for the court."

The *armatuno* magic has taken hold of Aamako more than once, and when he recognized just how dangerous he could be to himself and others, he retreated into this village in a remote part of his court, leaving affairs of the crown to his late brother's wife and her son, Aamako's nephew.

The mother-son team ruled over the court in Aamako's name for over eighty turns. Only recently did Aamako wrestle

the power back from them by defeating an attack on his person and crown. Unfortunately, once his magic is unleashed, it behaves like a wild winter storm, taking out everything in its path.

Provoking Aamako resulted in the killing of his nephew, the exile of the queen regent, and, sadly, the destruction of the Winter Court. The Unseelie king is the king of all the Unseelie fae without a functioning court. He's destroyed both the Fall and Winter Courts, and his people have dispersed. But not for long.

"The power vacuum left by the destruction of the Winter Court will invite all sorts of leeches. Pun on blood leeches intended. I've learned that the powerful nocturnos ruling their respective vampire houses have taken in some of the fae who've fled your court. This means they will mingle, maybe even convince the fae to pledge loyalties to the houses. New alliances will be made, and not in your favor. You need the people's favor."

Aamako snorts. "I need only Augusta's favor. Everyone else can view me from afar."

"You sound like a dragon I used to know."

Aamako sighs. "Ah, the old spans, when dragons flew over the Unseelie courts." The bottle of bourbon on the bar behind the king sloshes and tips as Aamako's magic pours him a drink. The glass slides over air and lodges between his fingers. He takes a sip and makes a face.

"I hear the bourbon here is nasty," I say.

"Nasty everywhere now since the savage hordes are making it and distributing it around the world." He chugs the contents and shudders visibly, then holds up the glass, asking his magic for another.

I guess we all have our quirks. His are just more noticeable and destructive than others.

"The Winter Court?" I prompt. "How is the recovery progressing?"

"Slowly."

“Is there a way to hurry it up?”

“Not without hiring lycan crews.”

“And how can we hire the crews?”

“We can’t. But I know someone who can.”

I frown. “Excellent. In the meantime, my people and I will set up residence in the Ice Princess.” When Aamako’s parents heard the prophecy that the magic that could raise the dead would be born again in the Winter Court, they built a tower. It’s called the Ice Princess, a structure containing hundreds of mini residences, ballrooms, army stations, and even dungeons. It can house thousands of nocturnos.

“A stronghold,” Aamako says.

“Precisely.”

Aamako appears uncomfortable. “There will be an army of vampires at the center of my court.”

“Correct.”

“Which will anger the fae.”

“Most certainly. Your baby is prophesized to be born on top of that tower. I serve the magic born to her, as do two other powerful males, as will anyone under my command. When the living come for her, she’ll need the strength of all her armies.”

Knowing what I’m telling him, Aamako sucks in a breath. “You know futures that my mate doesn’t tell me. The ones where enemies will come for my child.” Objects in the space around us start levitating.

I stand and pry the glass from his hand, walk over to the bottle and pour more bourbon, then return the drink to him. “At ease, Unseelie king. It is why I’m around now. Your mate shared the vision of the future with the male who used to own this home, knowing he would awaken me. The rules of the living don’t apply to your daughter, and her birth will change the world. We must protect her magic and make room for her to grow too.” Make room for her people as well, not starve them, weaken them, punish them for eating.

“Do you plan on meeting with the heads of the vampire houses?” he asks.

My plan is solid, but I share it with no one. The living cannot be trusted. Not about this. They won’t approve. They won’t understand. “I do, as I know they’ll try to take me out. I’m a threat to their order.”

“The winter solstice is coming,” he says as if thinking the same thing I am. It fits my plan.

“It’s an opportunity for your people to mingle and mate.”

“Except nobody wants to mingle with me,” Aamako says. “Or I with them.”

“The fae want to mingle with each other, I assure you, and if you invite them to stay in the Ice Princess, they will come for the season.”

“Augusta sent out the invitations, and they’re pretending they haven’t received them. Some people are moving out of the court completely.”

“Seeking refuge in the Summer Court, I presume?”

He nods.

“You will lose bloodlines to the Seelie just as the *voca* bloodlines got lost to them.”

Aamako snorts. “You’re lecturing me on losses when tales of your hunts are spreading. Don’t think I haven’t heard about the town you and your males attacked.”

“They were traitors. You’d have killed them yourself if you could have found them.”

“I know!”

I lean in on my elbows. “You’re mad I robbed you of an opportunity to lay waste to another town.”

“Maybe.”

“You’re hopeless.”

“I want a safe kingdom. I have a mate and a child on the way. I can’t have vampires on the streets terrorizing my

people. Not even the traitors, and definitely not the locals.”

“Which is why I suggested we all move into the heart of the Winter Court along with any fae willing to share blood with us.”

Aamako nods. “You can have the Ice Princess as your residence, but under one condition.”

I nod. “I’m listening.”

“That the Summer princess takes over the winter solstice opening event.”

Over my undead body! Remain calm. Remain calm. “Explain.”

Aamako raises an eyebrow at my barking an order at him.

“Can you clarify why she is necessary?” I bite out, unable to hide my agitation. Fleur cannot be anywhere near the Winter Court this mating season. The tensions are too high, the risk to her life too great.

“She’s popular among the fae, a guarantee of good times and safety. If she attends and sends out invitations for my winter solstice celebration, people will come.”

“She won’t do it.” I have no idea what Fleur will do.

“My mate will ask her.”

“The fae kingdoms will clash if something happens to her.”

“Nothing will happen to her, General, because you will personally guarantee her safety. Consider it an audition for the protection of my child once she’s born.”

I chuckle. “You seem to think I’m one of your subjects.”

“You are for as long as you’re in my court.”

If I shared my blood with him and ended him, I could make him one of mine. But I think he might be provoking me, testing my control, testing to see if I’ll snap the way he might. “Nobody needs two unhinged powers in one court,” I tell him. “You can trust I’ll always act in the best interest of undead

magic. If you think the Summer princess will bring your people back together, then she's just another blade in our arsenal."

"Precisely," he says as he retreats into the shadows.

I reach into my pocket and take out the strand of hair. I lay it over my knee and start braiding it while waiting for my males to return from hunting to tell them the good news.

We secured a stronghold.

All we need now is the undead army.

What we need not is a pretty princess getting in the way.

FLEUR



The funeral on Evie's estate went as well as expected, with many relatives vying for the riches and threatening Evie's position in society. If she doesn't mate soon, no number of connections to the royal family will help secure her position.

Before passing, her father amended his will and put restrictions on Evie's inheritance. If she doesn't marry by winter's end, she'll lose her home and title.

I want to help her find a suitable match, but it'll be much more difficult now that our court is out of the mating season. More difficult, but not impossible, and I must come up with an idea before Evie's spirits deflate as the time spent idling lengthens.

My friend deserves her inheritance, and she would hate depending on my charity or, worse, have to marry someone she doesn't love.

It's past twilight by the time I walk into my bedroom and sit on the edge of the mattress. I close my eyes and send a prayer to the fate who sees all that will come to pass (who happens to be my friend Augusta) that she will deliver me something tonight, because I'm out of ideas and time and hopelessness is starting to take hold after we failed to reach an agreement with Evie's relatives.

They're descending on the estate like vultures. She doesn't even know half the cousins claiming blood relations now. Standing with a sigh, I stretch and collect my hair up into a

bun. As I do so, the figurines Nottuza has been leaving on my nightstand catch my eye. I pick up one of the four figurines, disappointed he's stopped visiting and then annoyed I'm disappointed about not getting night visitations from a dangerous nocturno.

And yet, I wish to see him again. I wish his cold lips would descend on top of mine.

The golden buttons of the small figurine's red uniform coat are painted in a perfect round circle. One would think it was made by elven hand, but I know elven work, and this isn't it. Either Nottuza is buying them from the fae toy makers or crafting the soldiers himself.

And then gifting them to me. At night. It's both creepy and exhilarating. Daring as fuck. If my brothers found out I have nightly visits from a male neither of them knows anything about, they'd lose their minds.

I drop the figurine into the pocket of my fluffy, dark blue robe that hangs over the portable dresser and walk behind the partition to sort through my wardrobe. I miss my designers, tailors, and crew. Picking out a wardrobe for another formal dinner where Evie's large family will surely attack her again is a chore.

I don't wish to go.

But I must, for I talked Evie into attending. She can't seem weak. She must face them, appearing as if she's certain of her position. Easier said than done, even when I'm by her side. Which is why I won't leave her for the Summer Court, even though I have obligations.

A little black dress catches my eye. I slide it off the hanger and put it on, then walk back into the room and run into a fate.

I screech and backpedal, the partition curtain falling as I stomp on it.

Fates often wear long, dark veils over their faces, making them appear more mysterious and sometimes frightening. Like now, when she's snuck up on me.

Back against the wall, I whisper, “June, is that you?” I love my sister-in-law, but when she’s being all fatey, the magic buzzing around her creeps me out.

“You will meet your fate at the Winter Court,” she says, her voice sounding as if a chorus of females speaks it.

This is Augusta, the fate who sees the future, the one I prayed to just moments ago.

I gulp. “What do you mean?”

The fate’s magic settles over my senses like a balm of cool water on a burn, and Augusta sweeps away her veil. Blinking, she smiles, and there she is, my friend, the white swirl of magic retreating from her gray eyes.

Confused, she looks around. “Oh, this is where I landed with that vision, huh? Neat.”

“Welcome.” I step over the fallen partition carefully so as not to hurt myself. “Can I hug you, or is hugging against fate rules now that you’re the Unseelie queen?”

She opens her arms, and we hug.

“I missed you, Fleur.” She inhales loudly. “You smell so good.”

“As do you.” She’s a Seelie fairy through and through, but with a hint of danger and powerful fate magic. Since mating Aamako, Augusta carries the scent of Summer fae with a hint of winter evergreens and leather.

“You look radiant,” I tell her.

“You look...” She sighs. “It’s really unfair you look beautiful even before you’ve dressed for an outing.”

“Let’s have tea.” I take her hand and pull her toward the door, but she stalls. “I can’t stay long. I’m actually here unofficially.”

Her magic tingles my senses. Creepy.

I sit at the foot of the bed and fold my hands in my lap. Bad news or warnings or times when fates visit your chambers are best taken while sitting.

“What is it?” I ask, worrying my bottom lip.

“Aamako and I want to host the winter season.”

“Great news.”

She nods, then worries her lip as if she’s carefully choosing her words. “I see turmoil in the near future. A shift in power, and you at the center of it. Fleur, when you arrive at the Winter Court, you must stay away from the room at the bottom of the tower. It is spelled, and if you go inside it, you will enter a sleep so deep, you won’t be able to awaken from it.”

“Thank you for the warning.”

Augusta makes a sad face and takes my hands in hers. “I’m sorry for the gloomy forewarning. I wrote to you, and I bet my letter arrived and someone hid it.”

I tsk. “Evie’s folks remind me of my own mother.”

“Vicious,” Augusta says. “It’s a good thing you summoned me, then.”

I frown. “I didn’t summon you.”

“Sure you did, Fleur. I felt the tug and answered.”

I gasp. “You mean to tell me that when people call upon fates, you can feel their call as tugging? Thousands of fae all over the land are calling for you all the time. How do you bear it?”

Augusta laughs, her voice sounding like multiple voices in a chorus. “Your magic paired with the future events called me.” She lifts a finger. “Hold on, June is communicating. She says she found the letter.” Augusta extends her gloved hand, and the chamber door creaks open, admitting a letter. It lands on her palm. “Here it is.”

Having a fate for a sister-in-law means I’m used to displays of the fate’s power and the sensation of ants crawling under my skin as it manifests, but each fate has her own special magic, and Augusta’s magic feels anticipatory, making my heart beat faster.

I accept the letter and read it.

“A guest of honor, huh?” I keep reading the lovely handwriting. “And I get to bring my ladies?” I ask. “This handwriting is near perfect, long strokes curving in all the right places. I’m fond of a fine written word.”

“Aamako wrote it.” She shrugs. “I scribbled. He wouldn’t let me send you my scribbles.” June and Augusta grew up on a farm where time spent perfecting one’s cursive writing was better spent farming and keeping a roof over your head. Watching them navigate the riches and power of the court has been eye-opening.

“After tonight’s dinner, I’ll tell Evie the good news.” Mingling with the Winter fae will be no small task, but a husband can be found there.

Augusta’s gaze falls on the figurines on my nightstand.

“Nice work,” she says as she makes her way toward them. She takes one and examines it. “Have you met the Nightbound Soldier?”

I shake my head. “I’m not sure. Maybe I have.”

“You have. He’s cryptic.”

“And creepy,” I add.

“That too. Can I have one of these?”

No! I collect them. “Yes, of course you may.”

Augusta walks toward the window and stands there, her back to me while the wind blows back her veil and skirts.

“He is already here to pick you up,” she says.

“He who?”

“The nocturno delegation that will take you to the Winter Court.”

The flare of Augusta’s magic nearly blinds me, forcing me to close my eyes.

When I open them, she’s gone. Lying on the wood of the windowsill is a figurine of a female lying on a blue bed. She has golden hair, and I would think someone carved me if not

for her hands, which are neatly folded over her large pregnant belly.

The fates are reminding me to be grateful for what I have. And I am.

Yet I yearn for more. For a fae-*ted* mate who loves me unconditionally, for a house full of magical children, and a life dedicated to raising them. But I was born into wealth and power, and one shouldn't want for more.

Perhaps the fates find me greedy and have taken from me that which I want most. Or is it that I want babies because they're out of reach for me?

I don't know which, but I do know that Augusta wouldn't have left me with a figurine of a pregnant blonde girl out of cruelty. She left it for a reason. I examine it more closely. The blonde girl's eyes are closed. She's sleeping, and this is a reminder of Augusta's warning.

Should I stay in the Summer Court? Not accept the invitation?

The door bursts open, and I spin around and screech, nearly coming out of my robe. I grip the figurine in both hands and bring them to my chest so my heart doesn't run away scared for its life.

Evie's navy robe that matches mine flutters around her feet as she rushes into my chamber, brown eyes wide, face flushed. She flings open the window, nearly causing the glass to shatter.

"Holy fates and mother of fates. Fleur, look."

In the distance, against the moon, a flock of birds is flying our way, their wings batting with fury. I listen along with Evie.

"Those aren't birds," she says.

"They're bats."

"Even weirder."

"Milady," a soldier says from the door, "please get away from the window."

“Tell your males to stand down,” I say, knowing the property is full of fae guards.

“I don’t know, Fleur. These things are flying our way.”

“Don’t be alarmed. A fate visited me just now.”

“And?” Evie bites her bottom lip.

“And...” I can’t say we talked about the Nightbound Soldier because Evie might think I’ve finally lost my stones. “And she invited us to the Winter Court for the season. This must be the delegation that’s going to take us there.”

“What?” Evie looks nervous.

“We’re leaving for the Winter Court.”

Evie blinks. “On bats?”

“Those aren’t just bats.” I point out the window.

The flock of bats descends, and as they touch the ground, the animals transform into a convoy of seven obsidian carriages. The edges of the carriages are sharp, almost like horns, and dipped in red paint. The doors are unmarked.

Identical twin males step forward, tall and packing muscle under the red coats they wear over all-black uniforms. The one with scars on the right side of his face looks up, and his eyes immediately find Evie. There’s a moment when time pauses, and all I hear is her heartbeat speeding up, rushing blood into her face, flushing her cheeks.

“You’ve always been a sucker for damaged bad boys,” I tell her.

“Says the kettle to the pot.”

“The Winter Court has those in spades,” I say.

“I need a husband, not a bad boy, and definitely not a nocturnal bad boy.”

“Winter fae are in season. You need a fae that’s in season, or you lose everything.”

“But the Winter Court is Unseelie.” She clasps her hand over her mouth as soon as she says it. “Sorry, Fleur.”

My mother was an Unseelie, which makes me half Unseelie. “They’re Unseelie, I know, and if you bring an Unseelie husband back here, your family will think twice before trying to take away your property. If we don’t try in the Winter Court, we’ll ask my brother to force your family’s hand. But if Et’enne gets involved, it’s out of my hands. He’ll appoint you a husband of his choosing to secure power for the court.”

“Better to choose one for myself, then.”

I nod.

“What if they’re all ugly over there?”

I chuckle. “We have alcohol for that.”

Evie laughs, then bites her lip again, looking down. “The batshit-crazy carriage awaits.”

FLEUR



Since Evie and I had planned to depart her estate for the Summer Court, most of our trunks already carried our belongings. The staff added a few more thick furs for the colder climates, but other than that, I'll hire Augusta's tailor and most definitely her shoemaker, who I heard was a *pictorra*.

She draws outfits on mirrors, and we can view them on us before we commission them. Besides, Winter Court fashions differ from ours, and other than the short trip I recently took to the lycan mountains, I haven't worn thick furs or leathers in many turns.

Outside, Evie's stepmother and cousins rush out of the houses on the estate, glowing in delight that Evie is leaving.

"They think you're leaving for good," I say. "That because these vamps came to fetch us, means you're joining the vampire houses." When a fairy petitions to join a house, the nocturnos send carriages, and once a fae becomes a nocturno, they lose the memories of their fae life.

Naturally, if they run into their family or someone else they know, the other party speaks of their previous life, but the vampire houses are pretty good about keeping their people away from their fairy homes and families. Additionally, fae families tend not to bring up the past in case a vampire they knew from when he was a fae comes into their orbit again.

This rarely happens, which is why Evie's family is descending and saying goodbye to her.

Her stepmother, an unpleasant lady with a powerful bloodline who has had two sons with Evie's father, shows us her teeth. "You have chosen wisely, Evie. Moving on with a nocturno life."

Evie smiles back in the same way. "You're mistaken. I'm —"

I interrupt. "Your hospitality was much appreciated. Your husband would be happy to know how you've welcomed and cared for his heir after his sudden departure."

The female narrows her eyes, no doubt at the words I chose, namely *heir* and *sudden departure*. *Heir* is given since they disputed Evie's status because of her brothers. And *sudden departure* because I think she murdered her husband.

The lady bows deeply. "You are most welcome at any time, my princess. And you, Evie dear." The female spreads her arms, and Evie dutifully embraces her.

"I'm sure the nocturno life will suit you. Their females have so many freedoms given that they raise no young."

A jab at me, no doubt.

The older of Evie's two stepbrothers approaches, dark blue eyes looking concerned. "Are you certain you wish to leave with my sister?"

Politely, I smile. "Quite certain, yes."

"I would prefer it if you would accept my company."

"Whatever for?"

He glances at the carriages. "As your guard. Surely the Summer king wouldn't want his sister traveling with the nocturnos alone."

"Awww, that's kind of you, Selval, but if I brought guards, the vampire houses might take it the wrong way."

"You're not..." He looks around and sees nearly everyone is starting to gather around us, my magic drawing them in naturally, my excitement over seeing the Nightbound Soldier

again almost making me glow. Selval grabs my elbow and moves me aside.

I tug away, but he holds firm, so I wrap my fingers around his wrist. “You will say what you meant to tell me, then release me and walk away.” *Voca* magic infiltrates his mind, and he releases my elbow, then leans in and whispers, “You’re not going to join the nocturno ranks, are you?”

“Oh, no. I would never,” I lie.

The thought had crossed my mind. Nocturno females aren’t expected to breed, and while my brother doesn’t bring up my marriage, he’s aware I’ve remained unmarried way past my time.

I build wealth for our kingdom and form strong alliances. That’s what I do. The king won’t try to find me a husband again, for he wouldn’t allow another fae to hurt me. Since I secure deals and alliances, it makes sense for me to accept Augusta’s invitation.

I’ll heed her warning is all.

Evie’s brother won’t let the subject go. “I would still feel more comfortable if you would let me accompany you, Princess.”

A vampire *velosis* toward us and stops a foot away from Evie’s brother. It’s one of the two twins.

“You’re welcome to join us,” the nocturno tells Selval, voice chipper as if he’s excited about the idea.

The gathered family gasps, and the mother rushes to her son’s side. “He was being a gentlemale is all. He doesn’t want to join you.”

The vampire speeds away, appearing once more at the carriage in the middle with the red door. He opens it. “This way, Princess.”

The other male, the twin with the damaged face, opens the other carriage’s door. “This way, my lady.”

“Evie and I ride together,” I say, now uncomfortable for the first time. Ladies ride together. It’s customary, not that

there is much that's customary about the bat carriages or the three nocturnos running them.

"She rides with us," the vampire says. "You ride with the general."

"Your general is here?" I ask, failing to hide my excitement.

The vampire nods.

I smile. He came to fetch me. Personally. He could've just sent these two males for me.

Males in positions of power don't fetch females, or when they do, it's because they're ready to spend the long ride either fucking or talking business. I wonder which of the two he has in mind. Maybe a combination of both.

Evie and I walk toward the carriages and hug before parting.

I give her a reassuring nod. My friend is a powerful fairy, and as such can take care of herself. Still, I pause before stepping inside my carriage.

"What's your name?" I ask the vampire at my door.

"Leroy," he says.

I hitch a breath. It's Leroy and Ledger from June's story about the Nightbound Soldier.

Afraid, but determined to make sure he understands I expect Evie's carriage to travel alongside mine, I crook a finger toward Leroy, using my magic to draw him in. "Come here, handsome."

Leroy stiffens, fights the draw, then gives in with a groan and bends toward me.

He's quite tall and I'm short, so I rise on my toes and purr at his ear, "Evie and I are like you and Ledger, but born of different parents. You understand?"

He's sniffing around my face, a low growl developing in the back of his throat.

“I trust she’ll be treated to multiple orgasms or, if not, left alone.”

“Fleur,” Nottuza barks from inside the carriage, breaking my spell. “Leave my male alone and come flirt with me.”

Leroy laughs. “See you at the Princess, Princess.” He joins Evie and Ledger.

I climb inside the carriage and sit opposite a male wrapped in shadows. The scent of leather, dominance, and a subtle hint of dried crushed lavender attacks my senses immediately.

While the scent of leather stays on males like him as if they’re born with it, the dried crushed flower, lavender specifically, is unusual and makes me think it might be his mating scent. But I’m unsure, as I’m unsure about everything that has to do with this male. Why release a mating scent if uninterested in mating? He’s nothing more than a stranger I seem to have attracted who’s now tormenting me with the most delicious male scent I’ve ever smelled. I want to drown in it.

Meanwhile, his body language is off-putting, reserved, almost warding me off.

His legs are uncrossed, but not spread widely, which means he doesn’t slouch, but sits with his back straight as I would expect from a military officer.

In the Summer Court, when a male wants a female for grooming or chatting more intimately, he widens his legs. It’s an invitation for the female to sit on his lap. I wonder if he knows this.

Some lycans don’t, though they learned fast while docked on our shores.

His hands rest in his lap, folded, tattoos peeking from under a thick leather jacket.

No, he definitely won’t fuck. He wants to talk business, then.

Disappointed, I look out the window as the carriage lifts.

Goodbye, Summer Court.

FLEUR



Riding on a unicorn is the most flying I've ever done, and that was in the magical hidden land where everything is beautiful as well as intoxicating, so I didn't mind the heights or the movement of the animal.

Now I'm sitting on a hard bench inside a dark, closed box with a powerful nocturno hiding in the swirling shadows. It's creepy.

I look out the window. Evie's estate is shrinking into nothingness as we ascend into the sky and travel in a way I'm unaccustomed to. The view outside only makes my heart race more. The noise from many bats flapping their leather wings and propelling the carriage forward adds to my unease. Nothing, but dark skies surround me.

I turn from the window. While I can see in the dark, I can't see through the Unseelie shadows, which raises the question, how is this vampire commanding the shadows?

Suddenly, the carriage starts shaking, and I fist my hands in my lap so as not to show fear. Or scream so loudly that it would damage his eardrums.

"I've never traveled this way before," I start, hoping conversation might ease my fear.

The vampire grunts in a way that makes me think he's acknowledging that I've spoken, but has nothing to add.

I try a question next. "How long is the ride?"

"Long."

“Very informative.”

A grunt again.

“Are you going to sulk in the shadows the entire ride?”

“I like watching you.”

“A good soldier watches over the princess.”

He chuckles. “Exactly.”

I close the window curtain, then glance to the window on his left. He pulls the curtain closed too, and now I feel trapped inside the box with a vampire. Not that I wasn't before, but somehow, it's worse now.

“I won't hurt you,” he says.

“I'm not afraid of you.”

“I smell your fear.”

“I'm unaccustomed to your method of travel is all.” I would've arrived with the portal. Or heck, even Unseelie shadows sound better than bat carriages, but polite society dictates I remain calm and grateful for his thoughtful fetching of me in any manner he could.

“I apologize for the inconvenience and the outdated mode of travel. It's the only way I could retrieve you...” He pauses then adds, “and all the trunks.”

“I hardly brought any trunks.”

“I counted twenty-three.”

“Only because I intend to commission many new styles once I arrive at the court. Bringing business to the people in the Winter Court is high on my agenda.”

“Perfect.”

“See, now we're talking.” I scoot over and sit in the middle of the bench, my knees fitting perfectly between his legs. I lean in slightly, not slouching, though, because a princess doesn't slouch. “You and I both know you could've sent your lords for me. You didn't need to be here.” When he doesn't respond, I lean in further. “So?”

“So what?” he asks.

“Why did you come for me?” I scoot closer, at the edge of my seat now, trying to pull him in with my magic, but it’s as if I have no magic. His resistance and control attracts me, not the other way around.

“The Unseelie king and his mate requested I personally guarantee your safety during your stay at the Winter Court.”

I must commission something outrageously cute for Augusta. “I take that to mean the Unseelie royals want you as my bodyguard.”

“Take it any way you wish, as long as you do what keeps you safe. I would have written a protocol for you, but I’m aware you won’t follow it.”

“You’re probably right. I’m still stuck on the fact the future fate glued us back together.”

“We weren’t apart much.”

Oh my. He’s referencing his nightly visits. “Watching me the way you have been is bold even for you.”

“How so?”

“If my brothers found out...” I leave the rest of the sentence to his imagination.

Nottuza is quiet for a beat, and then he asks, “Did you speak with the fate who sees all that’s come to pass about me?”

I nod. “June told me how your brother raised you from the dead. About Ledger and Leroy and the rest. It’s the real Nightbound Soldier story.”

“Then you know everything.”

“What if I wanted to get to know you more?” I swallow, suddenly nervous he might refuse. I’ve always flirted openly and freely, seeing no reason to be coy. It’s not in my nature. Seduction is a game of give and take, and while I never needed to give much, I’ve never had to seduce anyone immune to my magic or anyone as controlled as this vampire either.

Nottuza's legs spread wider.

Is he inviting me to sit? Does he know that males in the Summer Court spread their legs, silently inviting a female to sit with them? He's from another time, a past so far gone that nobody besides June remembers it. He could be getting more comfortable and not inviting me at all. If he were any other male, I'd plop myself in his lap and flirt, but for some reason, I can't flirt as openly with Nottuza.

"That's exactly my problem, Princess. You wanting to get to know me more. Me watching you from the shadows."

"Now we're talking juicy goodies. Go on, soldier, don't let me stop you."

"What would you like me to say?"

"Explain why you're visiting me at night."

"Because I like to watch you. I said that already."

"It's not enough. I want to know what this is between us." I motion with my hand from him to me.

"I have no answer," he says.

"Do you mean you don't know?"

He'll never admit it if he doesn't, and I know better than to ask a proud general a direct question such as that, for he could say hurtful things like "there is no us." I have no idea why that would even be hurtful. I barely know him.

Yet, the fate intervened, and that must mean something, but perhaps only to me.

I shake my head. "Never mind," I say. "I shouldn't be so forward with you. The pressure in the air and change of altitude is designed to confuse one's mind. Enjoy your ride, General, and thank you for fetching me in person. My brother will be pleased you offered your services and protection during my stay at the Winter Court." I pull back both physically in my seat and with my magic, emotionally and mentally.

Business. We can talk about business. “From what I understand, the Winter Court repairs have been going rather slowly. Where will the mating season be held?”

Nottuza rests his hands on his thighs. He has long, elegant, masculine fingers with perfectly shaped, sharp claws, which are retracted now. This also tells me he’s controlled, while I’m flustered and unable to settle in the cabin with him. He takes up so much space, so much air. In his presence, I struggle to breathe properly. Good fates. I don’t understand how this male has such an effect on me.

“They will hold the season in the Ice Princess,” he says.

The only tower left standing after Aamako’s fight for his throne. “Is that where I’ll be staying?”

“You will stay in the remote village, locked underground, away from everyone.”

My eyes widen.

Nottuza chuckles. “That’s what I wished for, but since the fate took the matter of your arrival into her own hands, you’re staying at the Ice Princess.”

“It sounds as if you would rather I stayed at my court.”

“Correct.”

As a Summer princess, I am a perfect example of good fairy manners, even when people hurt me. “Ouch,” is all I say, swallowing the expletives I’m mentally hurling his way.

“Only because your arrival complicates everything for me.”

“Thank you. Your honesty sounds so much better now.” I turn up my nose. “You can say what you will, soldier. The fate invited me, and you will deal with it.”

Nottuza cups his knees, his claws extending as he leans forward and parts the shadows from his face. “The fates look after the fairies. I have the task of looking after my people and you. It’s not one and the same, for what is good for the fae people isn’t always good for mine. Or for you.”

“Okay.” I lean in, waiting for more. “Was that all?”

“Yes.”

“You get no medals for speechmaking.”

Nottuza extends a hand. “Come here.”

I accept his hand, and he tugs, maneuvering me into his lap.

This close to him and with his scent stuffing my brain, I can barely contain my excitement, and yet I must. I never want him to think I like him when he’s struggling with liking me.

One hand comes around my back and settles on my left hip as he positions me to sit on his left thigh, my back leaning against the cabin and his left arm resting on my hip.

An extended claw taps the wooden bench. “Put your feet here.”

The heels of my shoes tap the place he pointed to.

Nottuza wraps his fingers around my right ankle. He squeezes tightly, not painfully, not gently either. It reminds me of a restraint, and the sexual implication of his touch fires up my senses. Tingles sparkle under my skin, and I flush with the beginnings of an arousal I haven’t felt since the night I met him.

The scent of crushed lavender grows thicker in the cabin and makes my eyes flutter. I’m not the only one our proximity affects, but he’s so much better than I am at hiding his attraction or arousal.

Perfectly composed, Nottuza stares at his fingers around my bare ankle. “Your arrival in the Winter Court requires adjustments to the plan I already set in motion. It is incredibly challenging to course correct a perfectly coordinated plan that’s already been set off.”

I lean in and sniff around his jugular, but he growls, warning me off.

I pull back. “Sorry,” I whisper. “Got carried away there. You were saying?”

“I was explaining my reservations about having you at the court.”

“Your explanation is as clear as mud, General.”

Nottuza sneaks a hand under my coat.

Oh my fate. My breathing, my breathing. I must calm it so he can't tell how he's affecting me, but I can't when his cold palm touches the warm skin under my dress. Instead of pulling away, I moan, encouraging him onward.

He grips my thigh, a flash of red coloring his eyes.

I must've imagined it. He wouldn't allow a show of any sort of emotion. A vampire flashing a red eye means he's either hungry, aroused, or anticipating violence.

“You're wound up tighter than a serpent around a dove's neck. Let go, my flower,” he whispers at my ear and envelops me with his arms as he would a baby. “You haven't slept much for the past two nights as you waited for the soldier who is bound by night and sworn to protect you.”

“How perfectly romantic.” I nibble his jaw. “If only I knew who he was.”

“If only,” he repeats. “Sleep,” he commands, and I nod off instantly.

NOTTUZA



After Aamako assigned me with *the princess post*, I tried changing his mind. I listed many reasonable reasons why Fleur should stay in the Summer Court, including the possibility of violence around the Summer princess, which nobody will tolerate, least of all her brothers, who will go to war with the Winter Court if Fleur is harmed or even inconvenienced.

Ever since the rumors of her infertility and multiple fallouts with her past lovers, including two princes, her family no longer interferes, meaning they've given up on matching her with a strong breeder. Fleur takes partners on her own.

Males are allowed to court her only if she invites their attention first, and if any aren't familiar with how to approach or show interest in Fleur while at the Summer Court, her brother El'jah, who is believed to carry *voca* magic as well, handles the males.

If El'jah isn't around, the commander of the Summer fae armies protects her, and since he's a formidable fighter, males tend to avoid her when he's on her duty. Then there's the Summer king, who, if rumors are to be trusted, wipes Fleur's memories of experiences that could cause her pain.

I can only imagine what those experiences might be, and it makes me want to show the males who touched her violence the likes of which these lands haven't seen since my boots stomped over the skulls of my enemies.

Ah, the good ol' spans of mayhem and bloody vendettas. We dealt with threats differently back then. Not the way Fleur deals with them now: politely and without much fuss.

Nasty rumors about Fleur's inability to go into heat circle her like sharks in the waters. And as is the case with matters involving Summer royals, the rumors quiet when people meet the princess. With her magical voice and pleasant manners, she slays with kindness. People wish they were her, even though they have no idea what it's like to be her.

It's like this.

Sitting in the lap of a violent, dangerous predator and trying to understand him, cater to his needs, which she hopes will serve her court and her fates. Most wouldn't get into the coach with me at all. Females tend to run from me. Not her. In the gardens when I hunted, she practically ran into me as if we're destined to meet.

While I believe we create our fate, the fairies with strong faith believe the fae fates will serve them what they will. If I told Fleur about our brief garden encounter, I wonder if she would chalk it up to destiny. If she would attribute it to the fate's hand that glued us together.

She's fond of fates. Aamako sent Augusta after Fleur, knowing Fleur wouldn't refuse her request to attend the winter season.

I kiss the top of her head, which is resting on my shoulder, and tuck stray hair behind her ear, tracing the long string of pearls riding up her pointy ear. I slip the earring off and slide it into my pocket, where I keep the soldier figurine.

I wonder where she keeps her figurines.

I could ask.

Mentally, I slip into her subconscious. "My sweet flower," I coo, "do you know it's me who visits you at night?"

"Yes," she answers, still sleeping.

"Good. This is good. And do you wish me to continue visiting you?"

“Yes.”

Speaking with her subconscious feels flawless, as if I’ve done it my entire lifetime. I’m far better at this than I am making conversation with her otherwise. “Did you bring the figurines I left for you?”

“Mmhm.”

“Where are they?”

“I can’t tell you.”

I frown. Not flawless after all.

I enter her mind a bit deeper, mainly cruising the memories she collected at her friend’s estate. Curiously, she is hiding the recollection of waking up and finding my soldiers and then going about putting them somewhere. Even if she left them where I placed them on the nightstand, I should see memories of her waking up and looking at them. Yet, I don’t.

Her *voca* magic is a kind I’ve never come across, so her mental agility likely prevents me from invading. With the fae who aren’t *vocas*, I can access just about everything. And then, as is the case with vampires, erase it all thereafter.

Mentally, her magic feels like a gentle caress, inviting me deeper inside her mind. I dive in, and her magic starts wrapping around my power like a grapevine, pulling me inside her deeper and deeper. Before I realize what’s happening, I’m experiencing her childhood memories.

Hand in hand, we’re standing on the beach. The bright sun hurts my eyes, so I shield them and tell her I must leave, but she’s a child and cute and I couldn’t say no even if it would save my life. I let her pull me into the ocean. We dive together, me swimming more slowly behind her, while I watch her grow into an adult fae female before my eyes. I’m still swimming behind her when her legs merge and become a mermaid fin.

The tail slaps the left side of my face, disconnecting me from her.

The force of the disconnection makes me gasp and blink to clear away the mental fog.

The scent of blood wells up in the cabin, and I touch the left side of my face. My fingers come away bloody.

I hold a siren in my arms.

This is not a drill, soldier.

FLEUR



I guess I needed a nap more than I thought I did, and snoozing on Nottuza's lap, wrapped in his muscular arms, was one of the finest sleeping cots I've experienced in a while.

His strong and enticing scent makes me nuzzle into his jacket, and as I stretch, my bottom slides down his thigh and between his legs. He has a sizable rod, and feeling it makes me squirm on his lap.

He squeezes my bottom and says, "We're descending."

"We are, but you're not," I mumble sleepily, referencing his rod.

The flying carriage dips sharply, dragging my stomach along with it. I press a hand over my mouth so as not to throw up, hoping the nausea will pass as the carriage levels out again, but that's not what happens. My belly's upset.

Nottuza opens the curtains, peers through the window, then closes it. "Clear."

Winds start battering the carriage as we dip and climb over the Winter Court's mountain ranges. My tummy rises and falls, and when the coach starts shaking left and right, my belly feels like it's in my throat. I'm blue in the face with a hand over my mouth whereas Nottuza calmly sits on the bench as if glued to it, occasionally glancing out the window.

"We took the scenic route," he says, looking a bit guilty. "I thought I'd show you the beauty of this court from this vantage point, but I see how that was a miscalculation."

I want to throw up on his finely pressed uniform, and if I respond, I might. Since the Summer princess isn't allowed such weaknesses, I simply nod and pray that the fates end my journey before I empty my belly all over my companion.

Merciless cold winds continue to pound the carriage as we ascend and descend the numerous peaks and valleys of the Winter Court.

Right before I bend over and expel whatever is left in my stomach, the carriage settles into a steady descent. Out the window, at the very top of the mountain, lit by thousands of magical lights, shines the Ice Princess tower. At this time of night, the tower appears light blue. Stunning.

From this vantage point, the structure stands in the middle of the carnage the way a warrior princess might: unharmed, strong, and always beautiful. The tower looks as if the Unseelie king didn't wreak absolute disaster on the court.

He preserved the tower. When the control over his vast power slipped, he laid waste to everything besides the tower, where the fates prophesized a powerful Unseelie female would be born. Still, seeing the Winter Court in shambles makes me sad.

Of course, I don't blame Aamako for wanting to keep his crown. He's the rightful heir and the most powerful of the Unseelie fae males. At the same time, I don't fault his nephew for wanting power either. It's in fairy blood to seek more power, especially when given governance over people at a young age.

But the fact that the king and the prince regent destroyed the court remains. Sometimes, everyone is at fault. Rarely are events as large in scope as this one a result of a single party, but a cascade of events that led to the destruction.

As we approach the fortification, the winds lash at us as if angry that the summer is arriving with Evie and me. It almost feels as if the winds want to shake us and make us turn around.

"The Princess is one the most stunning creations I've ever seen," I say as we near one of the high floors.

Nottuza chuckles. "I agree."

I glance his way and do a double take when I realize he's not looking out the window anymore, but staring at me.

"Thank you," I tell him.

He nods.

Icicles decorate long, high windows along each of the tower's floors. My eyes naturally follow the height all the way to the top. Shutters guard the chambers on the top floor, but above it, from the roof, a display of neatly formed icicles stuck on platinum metal rods fan out like a peacock's tail in a beautiful display of red, white, and black. All the colors of the Winter Court.

"Landing," Nottuza says and tightens his hold around me.

The carriage slams onto the landing post, causing the guards stationed outside to rush toward us and try to stop the carriage before it hits the tower. But the forward momentum is propelled by the winds at our back and ice collected on the post doesn't help to slow us down. At top speed, we slide, heading straight for the tower wall.

I lose my shit and screech, eyes closed. "Oh my faaaates!"

Nottuza moves us, and suddenly, I'm upright, my feet touching the ground. A crash makes me scream again, but then blessed calm, only the sound of winds whistling about. Not daring to open my eyes just yet, I grip his jacket and dig my claws into it.

"You're shaking." He brings me into his arms. The scent of him soothes me. I'm fine. I'll be fine.

"I haven't operated this mode of transportation for quite some time," he explains.

I look up at him.

Nottuza's breath seems to catch, and he pushes me away, holding me at arm's length, staring into my eyes as if seeing me for the first time.

I break eye contact first, the broken carriage that slammed into the tower drawing my attention.

Reassuringly, I nod. “It’s just some wood. We made it through.” Evie’s carriage landed behind ours, and she’s still inside, so we’re fine. Except, Nottuza is staring at me with that same expression I can’t quite place.

“I’m fine, really. The ride, apart from the landing, was pleasant. Oh wait, you’re bleeding.” I reach for his neck beneath his collar, searching for the wound and noticing mild white lines on his face. Those indicate recently healed wounds. “You heal instantly,” I say. I’ve seen fast healing, but not this fast.

“I didn’t get those from the landing.” Nottuza steps away, wearing the same blank, stern expression I often see on my brother Et’enne and our commander when they’re addressing their subjects, when they’re distancing themselves from emotions when speaking with certain people.

I can almost feel him shutting off the part of him he allows me to see. The caring part of him he shows me sometimes. But by the fates, that is the best part of this male, and when he shuts it off this way, it feels like he’s walking away. Again.

And I won’t let him see that it bothers me.

“Evie,” I call out loudly, wishing I could shout like most people, but I can’t because a princess doesn’t shout. At least not in a foreign court and when others are watching.

“Evie,” I call out again while turning about the icy platform. A gust of wind blows and almost knocks me off my feet. I stagger back, and Nottuza places an arm across my chest and secures me to him.

He squeezes my shoulder. “Let’s get you indoors.”

“Not without Evie. I must ensure she’s well.” I’m biting my lip and thinking of screaming her name when the door opens and one of the twin vampires steps out. It’s the one who’s more serious and has a half-fleshed-out face.

“Ledger,” Nottuza says in a voice that carries nicely without shouting and also reverberates against my spine,

causing a stirring of arousal between my legs. A male hasn't turned me on the way Nottuza has in so many turns. Perhaps never.

With him, I feel like a bouncy engorged clitoris. Inwardly, I laugh. "Evie, I just thought of something wicked. Come on out so we can laugh about it."

Ledger jerks his head slightly. "The duchess needs a moment to settle her stomach."

"Go ahead, Fleur," Evie rasps from inside the carriage. "I'm fine, but if I sit up now and walk, I'll throw up."

"I'll have herbs prepared and draw us a bath." I squeeze Nottuza's arm. "How many staff members do we have?"

"As many as you commission."

I turn in his arms and look up. "What do you mean?"

He offers me his elbow, and I take it so we can find shelter from the whipping winds.

"Nobody's ever lived in this tower, and the former staff scattered after the coup. We don't have much of a setup around here."

The Winter fae guards wear black on black with white and red coats. The young pair of males guarding the gates are wearing white jackets, with white gloves and hats.

"Good evening," I greet them, knowing they won't reply.

Shades of red color their already wind-beaten red cheeks as they try to keep their eyes focused straight ahead. The nature of my magic pulls them away from duty and toward me, and if they'll perform guard duty where I'm staying, they must get used to the pull. We wait, but they might've forgotten their wits once my scent stroked their imagination. They're turning all shades of a red, ripe tomato. Cute.

I don't want them to get in trouble with their superiors for straying gazes. "Open the gates," I whisper, gently reminding them.

A whiff of male arousal that is not Nottuza's blows in with the winds, and Nottuza growls low in his throat before pushing the gates open with shockingly strong force.

The massive heavy doors slam against the wall, shaking the ground under us.

The vampire marches inside, then turns and fixes the lapels of his uniform, the bottom hem of his jacket, and then he clicks his heels together as a soldier expecting a king might do.

“Welcome to the Ice Princess, Princess. The royal family's floor is all yours. You may take any room you wish. May your stay be merry and bright.”

Then he *velosis* out of there so fast, it makes me think the wind swept him away.

Was that another way of saying goodbye again?

Damn him.

FLEUR



Nottuza brought me to the Winter Court and left me on one of the upper floors of the Ice Princess, a massive structure no fae has ever lived in and no Summer fairy has ever even visited. While I appreciate the freedom of exploring the Ice Princess on my own, the speed of his departure leaves me with questions, namely about his urgency.

Judging by the quietness in the tower, one would think it's abandoned, but vampires move soundlessly, and the Unseelie can do the same via the shadows. If the royal family, meaning Aamako and Augusta, let me pick any space I like on the floor, it means this floor and likely at least two floors down are at my disposal.

The clicking of the heels of my boots disrupts the silence as I approach the spiral staircase in the middle and look down the twirling length that ends in a pitch-black void, of shadows, no doubt.

"Creepy," Evie says next to me.

"Oh my fates! How is it that people are creeping up on me like this and I don't hear anyone?" I tug at my pointy ear. "Maybe I'm losing my hearing."

Evie looks worse for wear, with bloodshot eyes. "You should really be more alert, Fleur. Especially in this court."

I shrug. "I should, but I'm not, because the scariest monster already left. How are you feeling?"

She pats her belly. "Still nauseous, but better." She looks around. "It's bright and airy. I expected a dark tower where

everything looked like the dungeon of pain and screams.”

The Ice Princess’s walls are painted iridescent white with a touch of silver glitter. Tall, thin windows built between the floors let in plenty of light, making the glitter on the walls twinkle.

“The architecture in the Winter Court,” I tell Evie as I grab her hand and pull her toward a door, “is spectacular and, in some parts, I hear, unusual because the Unseelie family carried the magic of structural design.”

“You know I love a well-made structure.”

“And a well-made male.” I tuck my hand around her elbow.

“Mmhm,” Evie mumbles as we stand before the elven-made off-white door of the first room on the right from the entrance.

The door features a light gray painting of buildings under a mountain range and a single tree with pink blooms. I trace the blooms with my finger. “I doubt the late prince ever touched this tower, but it wouldn’t surprise me if he toyed with it even if he wasn’t supposed to. He ruled this court for over eighty turns.”

“Still couldn’t overrule the king,” Evie says. “It’s too bad, really. Maybe it would’ve saved the court.”

“Or maybe the prince’s rule would’ve expanded the court beyond the borders. Neguan was an ambitious male without conscience.” Unpleasant memories of the late Useelie prince arise.

“Are you saying that he was an entitled prick with an inflated ego and far too many females falling for him for you to spare him a glance?”

“Something like that.” It’s why he tried to force me. Luckily, El’jah stepped in. My brother isn’t always the sweet golden boy everyone thinks he is. There’s a terribly vicious Unseelie side to him that comes out to play whenever people provoke him. Every one of us has a darkness inside. It’s just that some of us control it better than others.

“Shall we?” Evie opens the door, and we enter a bright space with a massive bed covered with a black silk sheet with little white and red bears painted on the edges. Two silver pillows stand out on the bed, while the crocheted tapestry in pale red and white hangs above the bed, acting as a headboard.

Two lounging chairs, one black, the other, white, face the unlit fireplace. A small alcove on the side tells me there’s a dressing room and probably a private bathing chamber with a pot. The walls are painted too. Mountain ranges again.

It’s a beautiful space. I want it.

Evie side-eyes me with light in her brown eyes previously dulled from the nausea the trip gave her. “Whose room is this?”

“Yours?” I prompt, even though I like it.

“You don’t want it?”

Even if I did, the twinkle in Evie’s eye tells me she wants it, but she’ll refuse it because I’m the crown princess and her friend. “Nah. I’m looking for something bigger.”

Evie smirks. “Bigger, huh?”

We’re perverted. Our heads are full of big rods we’d like to ride, so every reference to size is taken out of context. When she and I are alone, most times our conversations stroll down the perv lane.

She walks to the bed and falls on it, face-first. “I rode a crazy mobile out of my crazy family’s house and buried my father, who left me with an inheritance my husband will claim. And I don’t have a husband. This room found me. The bed...” Her eyes flutter closed, “is so fluffy.”

“I will call for a bath,” I tell her.

“Sleeping,” she says softly.

“You should bathe first.”

“I’m dead to the world.”

“That’s a vampire line.”

Evie's eyes close like shutters. "Oh well."

I search the floor for staff, but when nobody arrives, I shrug off my coat and throw it over the chair on my way to the fireplace. I grab the fire-starting bundle and unwrap a rope holding a bunch of dry branches dipped into combustible oils.

Instead of the rope, they could use silk wraps like bow ties or even masculine sailor knots made of silk, for silk adds a finer touch to the kit design and looks prettier on display in the basket near the fireplace than the heavy rope. Small things, often overlooked and underestimated, can bring us joy.

Footsteps sound in the hallway, and I turn to see one of the twin vampires standing at the door. It's Ledger.

He bows quickly, then looks over at Evie.

"How is she?" he asks.

"Tired."

"Will you two share the room?"

I shake my head. "I'm just starting the fire for her."

He snorts. "Do you even know how?"

"I do. However, I will say one of the many perks of living in the Summer Court is not having to do this often."

Ledger walks to the end of the bed and removes Evie's boots. He tucks them neatly under the foot of the bed, then stands there for a beat before turning on his heel and facing the wall. "I will get the fire going," he says, his back turned to me. Some Unseelie would have his head for this.

Standing, I wipe my hands on the towel hanging from the side of the fireplace, expecting Ledger to tend the fire like he said he would, but he's facing the wall still.

"Um, may I ask what you're doing?"

"I'm waiting for you to leave."

How strange. "I would prefer to watch how you get the fire started so that I can learn to start my own later. The staff hasn't arrived yet."

He nods, still not looking at me. “I mean no offense, but I have orders.”

“What are they?”

“They’re...mine.”

He’s reluctant to tell me, but I want to know. “Your orders?”

“Yes, Princess.”

“Nottuza gave them to you?”

Ledger nods.

“Did he order you not to look at me?”

“Correct.”

“Why not?”

“Because he thinks you’re a siren.”

“A what?” I raise my voice, then self-correct in a measured tone, “How utterly absurd.” I point at my boots. “I have legs.”

“Yes, but have you always had them?”

I march to the male. Looking up, I force his gaze to lock with mine. When it does, he grits his teeth as he feels the pull of my magic. “Sirens feed on fear and torture. The only thing I have in common with the sirens is that I like the company of fun lycans better than the foul company of vampires who have a habit of disappearing on me. Tell your general I said that.”

“If you try anything, I will avenge him.”

I giggle. “If I were a siren, I wouldn’t even have to try to seduce him. I’d already have snagged him, and so you see, I’m not a siren. Just a fairy female who has honed the art of seduction. Or at least I thought I had, until I met your general. He’s proven me wrong.” I tilt my head as a thought occurs to me. “He thinks I’m a siren because he’s been seduced?”

Ledger swallows. “No.”

“You’re lying.”

“Fuck.”

Giddy with excitement, I poke the vampire on the chest.
“Tell your general he’s going down.”

NOTTUZA



L edger is pacing my war room which the modern language calls an office. Leroy is sitting on the table in the center of the room, chewing on a piece of evergreen, releasing scent from the tiny branch into the room.

The smell gives me nostalgia.

Vampires can't remember their fae lives, but the smells, sounds, and sometimes faces seem familiar. Over our long lives, we learn that familiarity comes from the places and people we used to know.

I spent some of the best parts of my childhood in what is now called the Winter Court moving from village to village and settling not too far from here. I know this because my little brother told me our history. The pain of my memories stuck with me for many turns, prompting me to set up a rule for all the other vampires who wished to create notturnos out of the dead fae. The mind wipe and a clean slate is one rule I put in place that still stands.

My people have either disregarded or bent other rules, which in turn has placed them at the disadvantage at which they find themselves now. What makes matters worse, the ruling fae, meaning the Summerlings, have convinced my people that dividing themselves into different vampire houses, as well as walking in the sun is to their advantage.

It isn't.

But the fae have manipulated my people for so many centuries, they can't even see how the fae suppressed them.

I intend to make them see.

“Leroy.” I point at the border village on the map of the fae courts in front of him. “It’s not a foreign language. There’s no reason to study the location this intensely.”

“The map doesn’t match what I’ve seen while scouting.” He pulls out a crumpled piece of paper and starts unfolding it.

After scouting, Leroy draws his own map. At this stage of reconnaissance, the map is made of doodled papers bunched up in his pockets. We’ve used Leroy’s doodle maps during some of the most difficult land conquests, and I have no doubt he knows what he’s talking about.

“According to the map Aamako gave us, the borders haven’t changed since their wars ended. They’ve settled with whatever land they agreed upon after the peace proclamation. But when I scouted, I could see that the lines between the Winter and Fallen Courts have blurred, with the Winter Court crossing the border into the other court.”

“Makes sense since Aamako rules both.”

“He doesn’t rule either.” Ledger continues to pace the room, now circling the round table.

I dislike being circled about, so I move toward the exit and lean my shoulder against the doorframe, crossing one ankle over the other. I tuck a hand into my pocket and grab the toy soldier, swiping my thumb back and forth over its head. “Aamako is like most other predatory beasts. Best left alone and admired from afar. He knows it, and we know it. Those who didn’t aren’t walking among us anymore. He rules by proxy.” As my little brother ruled through me.

Ledger continues circling, sometimes scratching the back of his neck. A nervous gesture.

“They’ve built settlements inside the other court,” Leroy says.

“They who?” I ask.

“The Winter fae.”

Ledger snorts. “The Winter fae who are no longer in Aamako’s favor because they traded the loyalty to their king for the approval of the now-dead prince regent to build beyond their borders. Am I right?”

Leroy shrugs. “Don’t know yet.”

“I’ll find out,” Ledger answers. “But first, why do we care?”

“Because Skylander dragons have been spotted in the Fallen Court,” Leroy says.

“And?” Ledger throws up his hands, seemingly losing patience with the conversation.

“Because,” I answer, wondering what’s bothering Ledger, “Leroy thinks dragon activity means the dragons are reclaiming that land.”

Leroy chuckles. “Actually, General, only you would see power plays at that level. All I was thinking is that Skylanders dislike intrusions and there’re at least two spots I identified as possible nests near those towns. If any of those dragons is a female, she will incinerate the towns.”

“So you want to warn the fairies of an impending dragon attack?” I ask.

Leroy shakes his head. “They already know. They’re preparing an offensive.”

“We will stop the offensive. I don’t want the fae starting a war with the dragons.”

“Why not?” Ledger pauses. “They’ll kill each other. All the better for us. When the undead magic wielder comes into her own, she’ll raise them and have a fucking dragon army.”

“Ledger,” I say in a warning tone. “A fae who wields undead magic and dragons could destroy the world. This time around, I would prefer if we coexisted in harmony with the living because now, we have a kingdom. A kingdom with a power vacuum, but a kingdom nonetheless. The dragons are keeping to themselves in the same way Aamako is. We will keep it that way.”

“What do you want me to do with the traitor settlement?”

“Bring them back into the Winter Court.”

The brothers exchange looks.

“As fairies?” Leroy asks, his eyes flashing red in anticipation of sucking the fairies dry of magic.

I roll my eyes. “Guess.” He knows better than to ask. His orders are clear. “Once the town is empty, seek an audience with the Skylander in the area and tell her the town is empty. She will burn it down so nobody returns, and we will settle the matter of expansion without casualties.”

“Brilliant,” Leroy says.

“Thank you.” I bow. “Then turn toward the Spring Court, find whichever traitors are hiding there, and invite them back into the Winter Court. We shouldn’t hunt in foreign territories. Remember that.”

“The fae won’t come,” Ledger says.

“The Summer princess is here. They’ll come.”

Leroy snaps his fingers. “Just like that.”

“That’s correct. Her magic is like a vortex, pulling in all the boats in the vicinity. They want to steer away, they know they should, but they can’t. The boats will arrive. They can’t help it. She’s the reason the Summer Court attracts so many crowds. Even the dragons attend.” She’s incredible.

“Boats?” Leroy asks.

“Analogy,” I answer, pulling the soldier from my pocket. I roll the toy over my knuckles. “Although, don’t be shocked if lycan boats try to break through the ice to get here. They follow her like puppies.”

Ledger stops in front of me, looking like a little girl whose dad got her a donkey instead of a pink unicorn. “I might have conversed with her.”

“Uh-oh,” his brother says. “Bad Ledger. The general said no looking or talking or sniffing around the flower.”

“The flower?” I repeat. “Did you call her ‘the flower’?” Nobody besides me gets to call her that.

Leroy points at his brother. “He did something. Not me.”

“Ledger?” I prompt.

“I told her you think she’s a siren,”

I push off the wall. “You what?”

“I’m sorry, General, it just popped out of my mouth.” He touches his lips, then pulls my ear, creating a gesture I don’t recognize.

“What the fuck does this mean?” I touch my mouth and yank his ear so hard, he yelps. That felt great. I do it again.

“Word vomit,” Leroy says, enlightening me. “He vomited out of his mouth and into her ear.”

“For fang’s sake, Ledger, how did this siren conversation even come about?”

Ledger throws up his hands. “One moment, I was making a round, checking to see where the ladies had settled, and next thing I know, the siren is holding me by the balls and twisting every word out of me.” He forms a clawed hand and gestures with a squeeze and a twist.

A growl works its way out of my chest. “She touched your balls?” The image makes me want to rip off his balls and make him eat them.

“It’s a figure of speech,” Leroy says in his brother’s defense. “He didn’t mean it literally. If she really is a siren, she’ll seduce her way into everyone’s minds.”

Ledger nods. “Including yours, General.”

“It’s not his mind I worry about,” Leroy says.

I snort. “I have no heart.”

“I’m sure he was thinking about your dick,” Ledger says. “Right, brother?”

“No, twat. I was thinking about his heart. Why would I think about his dick? Wait, are you?”

I open the door. “I’m done here.”

NOTTUZA



By now, the Summer princess should've settled into the room of her choosing. If her sleeping patterns are the same as they were in the Summer Court and on her friend's estate, then she would already be in bed.

On the top floor, the sounds of the fall winds whipping the tower are louder than they are on the bottom floor, so I tune them out and listen more carefully.

The heartbeats of the sleeping living are more difficult to hear than when they're walking because they're soft and steady, and with the noise of the winds, I'm having a difficult time telling which room Fleur picked.

Ah, there's one heart beating. I sniff through the crack in the door. Evie's lovely scent comes to me. Summer fairies sure smell delicious, but that's not the one I'm looking for.

I move on to next door, sure Fleur took the adjacent room, but it's empty, so I keep walking around the floor and listening for the heartbeats. Then I hear a female singing.

My instinct, the part of me that ensures my survival, senses danger, but the song soothes it. I walk five doors down toward the common areas closed off by double doors.

I push them open. The scene before me is one I'll never forget.

The nude Summer princess is perched at the other end of a long pool. Long blonde hair drapes one side of her body, covering a single breast, while the other breast stands pertly at attention. It's perfectly shaped and sized.

If I were the sculptor of a female body that arouses and pleases me in all ways, I couldn't have sculpted any female more pleasing than Fleur.

There's a ring in her belly.

A golden chain around her small waist.

Her legs are crossed and swaying in the water like a fin.

Behind her are high arched windows, through which I see a silver stag standing on the terrace, rocking his massive horns back and forth as if dancing to her song. Every verse she sings is sultry and seductive, and because she's staring right at me, it feels like she's singing for me. She is. I know it because darkness starts closing in on my vision.

"Princess," I say calmly even as my world spins and the vortex that is her draws me in. "Best be certain whom you're inviting into your bed. Or, should I say, pool."

"I'm not afraid of you," she says.

I chuckle. "No, you wouldn't be, would you?"

She smiles, and her eyes, the same color as the pool, crinkle at the corners. "Ledger told me you think I'm a siren."

"Many people think you're a siren."

"They say that, but they don't really mean it. Like a siren and a *siren* are two different things."

"Certainly."

"You think I'm an actual siren." Briefly, she lifts her legs in the air and wiggles her toes. "With feet. Tell me, General, how is that possible?"

"Merfolk can walk on land."

"Not many," she says, "and only for a limited time. They dislike land. I love land."

I walk to the edge of the pool and tuck my hands into my pockets, rocking back on my heels.

"You sure sing like one."

"I was born with a singing voice."

“And a long tail instead of legs.”

Fleur throws back her head and laughs. “My dear vampire, just because a girl knows her art of seduction, it doesn’t make her a siren.”

“My dear princess, you are either lying or hiding your true nature somehow. Your magic is that of a siren.”

“Are you saying you’re attracted to me?”

“With all my being.”

“But you walked away. More than once. You leave and you return whenever you please.”

“Except tonight. Tonight, you called me.”

She nods, biting her lip. “Sometimes, I sing when I’m bored.”

“What is it that you want?”

Fleur uncrosses her legs and scoots to the edge of the pool. Luxurious hair falls over her back, exposing her entire body. Darkness threatens my vision, shadows from the corners slithering over the floor as if she’s calling them too.

I develop tunnel vision.

The only light is her.

She practically glows.

I hiss, and her magic retreats along with the shadows that return to the corners of the dark room. She’s powerful, all right.

I start unlatching my cuff links. “If you are bored, I will send a battalion of males to entertain you.”

“I can fetch them myself.”

I bet. “Yet, you called me.”

“Whatever makes you sleep better during the span, vampire. I called nobody, but sang a song. You’re the one visiting me at night, climbing up here hoping I’d be sleeping so you could watch me. Tell me, soldier.” She crosses her legs

again and scoots into her previous position, looking scorned. “Did you bring the toy soldier with you? Is it in your pocket?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe I’ve decided to finally fuck you.”

Blue eyes blink before she collects herself. “And maybe now that you’ve decided to fuck me, I’m going to walk away.”

“You won’t.” I take off my jacket and fling it toward the leather seating area on my right. Slowly, making sure I toy with each button, I remove my shirt and toss it over with the jacket.

I grab my belt and unbuckle it. This one I don’t toss, but drop it at my feet. Her eyes follow the belt, remaining hooded as she looks back at me when I start unlacing my boots and removing them.

My pants join the jacket, and I spread my legs, fist myself, give it a few tugs.

Fleur eyes me with an appreciative gaze. She likes what she sees.

I pick up the belt and dive into the pool.

FLEUR



The room selection took me longer than I thought, but I settled on the quarters connected by a door with the common area, mainly for easy access to the gorgeous freshwater pool, where I decided to wait out the vampire.

Since he believes I'm a siren, I figured I'd perch by the pool and sing for him when he comes. I didn't expect him to get naked and dive into the water.

Which he has.

Nottuza swims underwater, then surfaces and slams his hands on the tile on either side of my body. He rises up and hovers over me, our faces inches apart. Droplets of water trail down his cheeks and his perfect strong nose, while his eyes, pitch black and terrifying, hold mine captive.

The scent of crushed lavender infiltrates my brain, and when I swallow, it's as if it's stoking the fire in my throat and belly. If I didn't know better, I'd say this male can send me into heat. But I do know better, and Summer fairies go into heat during summer. Since I'm infertile, my heats are irregular at best. With a womb that can't hold a baby, nature doesn't find the heats necessary. This is the most I've been turned on in a long time.

"Spread your legs and come closer," he says.

I scoot toward him and throw my arms around his neck. He's wet and cold. I'm warm and dry from the waist up. The two opposites that attract in the most natural of ways. His

body fits mine, and I sniff under his ear, hungry for more of his scent.

Nottuza shifts his weight onto one hand and places his cold palm at the small of my back to bring me in closer, my bottom almost slipping off the tile and into the water.

He sniffs behind my ear now, and a subtle growl develops at the back of his throat.

I throw my head back, giving him better access, wondering if he wants to bite me. Excitement runs through me like lightning, and my clitoris pulses with arousal, my channel contracting, releasing lubricant. I wonder if he'll take me here and now.

He closes his lips over my throat, and I gasp, grabbing his shoulders.

He chuckles and sucks briefly before letting go. He stares at the spot on my neck. In disapproval of whatever he sees, he shakes his head, then kisses my cheek, whispering, "I want to possess you in every way a male could possibly possess a female. And if you think that's romantic and cute, know that I want to lock you underground with me and not let you see the sunlight if it means it would keep others from looking at you."

I have no words.

He rears back and smirks. "Now, be sure you want me fucking you this winter season."

"The entire season?"

His jaw ticks. "Princess, this isn't a game for me."

"Or for me," I rebuke.

He tilts his head. "You can have any male you wish for as long as you wish and however you wish. I'm not one of those boy toys or a king or a prince. I have no throne, and I am bound by night and undead magic. I've existed for more than several of your lifetimes, and that's long enough for me to know what I want and how I want to live in the future. History and my mistakes have taught me well, so I warn you, Princess,

I am not your hero. I am the villain who will do whatever it takes to secure power and the survival of my people.”

“We’re all villains to someone.”

He chuckles.

“Will you tell me how you’re able to resist my magic? During your long life, you’ve had practice?”

“Maybe.” He fists my hair and speaks at my lips. “Does it turn you on that you have no control over me?”

“Yes,” I admit.

“That’s a good girl.” He dives back into the pool and grabs my feet to wind his leather belt around my ankles. He throws my legs behind his head, then resurfaces with my legs around his neck.

His cold palms part my thighs, thumbs spreading my pussy. He sticks out his tongue and licks.

“Oh my fate.”

“Mmmm,” he says, and licks again, making a noise with his mouth as if tasting a delicious meal. My body flares to life and my channel undulates painfully, expelling heat out of my opening as if serving him a feast.

Nottuza smirks and swipes his thumb across my opening, collecting the liquid. He watches me as he puts his thumb in his mouth and sucks it. He pulls it out with a pop.

“How many spans until the winter season starts?” he asks.

“Thirteen.”

“Do you think you can save your orgasms until then?”

“Noooo.” I shake my head, and he presses his thumb against my clit.

“I can’t. I want to come right now.” I make my best sad-puppy face. “You wouldn’t want to keep me wanting for so long.”

“Oh, but I would.” He strokes my swollen bud.

My eyes flutter closed as he kisses my neck and lower yet, sucks on my breast. First the left, then the right. One finger strokes my clit and then dips inside my opening until I settle down off the high, then he's back at my clit.

His other hand holds my throat, sometimes squeezing, sometimes content to control my body that way. He kisses me often and with abandon, and especially when I start begging for him to let me come, but no amount of begging will sway him, which only makes me want him more.

He's denying me the most basic of pleasures. He makes me swear I won't touch myself for the next thirteen spans. He wants to own my orgasms, my pleasure, and me. And by the time he's done with me, I'm a mess of frustrated tears, which he licks from my cheeks.

He carries me to bed.

He watches over me while my eyes close for the night.

The last thing I see is a toy soldier on my nightstand.

FLEUR



S *even spans later*

Waking up in the cold Winter Court with the scent of crushed lavender lingering in the room that the raging fireplace had already warmed up would be my favorite way to wake up if the male carrying the scent had visited me last night. Or any of the seven nights since our last encounter in the pool.

The sun's position above the mountains tells me it's early in the afternoon, too early for the Nightbound Soldier and his older vampires to be awake, but a perfect time for me and the event staff to make last-minute preparations for the masked ball that will start later in the night.

Many Unseelie families will attend tonight's ball, and with the bachelors and bachelorettes of seven families already arrived and situated in rooms downstairs, that should bring the number of attendees over one hundred and thirty. A nice small party, perfect for warming up the folk for the winter season opening night.

The masked ball is the first of the events leading up to the season's opening, an event I hope will attract over a thousand eligible fairies willing to mate. To hit that number of attendees in under a few spans, the masked ball must go smoothly and the fae must look the way the fates made us: drop-dead gorgeous so all the other eligible fairies who aren't here decide they must come for the winter season.

The continuation of fae bloodlines depends on coupling. The neglect of mating customs and the absence of invitations from the Winter Court's royals during the seasons has contributed to the distrust and even disdain of the Crown. But the Unseelie Crown will rest on a fair queen now, and since she's brought me here for the season, I must ensure the Unseelie have a lovely time.

Which presents a challenge.

Many of the families aren't here for a lovely time.

Many are here to bicker about the past or even dole out vengeance, making cruelty appear the most desirable mating trait.

Good thing Evie came. With her pleasant smile and harmonious magic, she spells some of the females and most of the males without them noticing.

I sit up in bed and sigh at the single soldier on my nightstand. It's the one from seven nights ago that Nottuza left after eating me out and putting me in bed.

When he requested I reserve my orgasms for him, he asked for exclusive control of my pleasure. I agreed, thinking he would tease me. Relentlessly. But seven spans later, and with fae males staying in the court, releasing their mating scents around the group of females Evie and I befriended, it's all I can do to stop from combusting with sexual frustration.

And no general in sight to release me from the deal or relieve me with his clever fingers.

As I rise out of bed, my nipples brush the silk of my deep blue nightgown, and even that soft friction sets my channel fluttering.

I can't remember the last time a male turned me on without being in the room with me. It makes me both frustrated with Nottuza and curious about him.

I slide my feet into fluffy slippers and shrug on a robe before exiting my chambers and entering the common area by the pool, where we've set up our gathering center. Every court should have one, and seeing as how this is the largest and

prettiest area of the tower, it's a perfect place for people to meet.

Granted, other floors have a common lounge with a pool and even mineral spas, but this is the largest one and with the best positioning. The Unseelie call it the Sun Lounge, a reference to the pair of us from the Summer Court who started improvements on the space.

I come here every late afternoon, right after I wake up.

The moment I open the door, the smell of freshwater lilies floating over the pool hits my nose. I inhale deeply and think of the warmth of my court. I miss it. I do, but the nostalgia evaporates when I take in the noise of staff and the fairies already preparing for the big night.

Dahlia, a middle-aged shoemaker with one of the most desirable magics in the design world, is making rounds, showing the ladies what their outfit will look like in the many mirrors Augusta sent with Dahlia when the designer arrived at court.

The mirrors make the room appear larger, which is a great thing because the court is filling up quickly. Their snotty manners aside, some of the new arrivals carry powerful magic, which is what the fae courts need.

That and more staff.

This season, the court is providing fabrics and jewelry, and trunks filled with mating supplies, the same way we provide for anyone staying in the Summer Court. Thus, the Unseelie who want to look their best must come to court. In addition, some of the poorer families can come to court and not spend coin they don't have on trying to look as good as their rich peers.

Evie waves from across the room, where Augusta's hairdresser is braiding her hair.

"Over here," she says as loudly as it's appropriate to without shouting. The noise level is clamorous, and a high duchess of the Summer Court doesn't shout.

I walk past the pool and take the only other chair at the small round table where she sits.

“Good afternoon, Princess,” Augusta’s personal stylist bows.

“Good afternoon, I see you two started working early.” I pick up the first cup of tea in a row of seven different teas. I’m testing them for the season as well as monitoring the preferences of the Winter fairies, who are drinking from the assorted box. They seem to prefer their traditional green and pale pink teas, as well as the Summer Court’s teas with lighter notes of menthol.

I swirl this afternoon’s new addition in my mouth, noting the bitter taste before the sweet finish. “Mmhm.” This is different. “What is this?”

“My herbal remedy for surviving this court,” Augusta’s hairdresser says.

“It’s quite good, actually.”

Evie leans in. “It has alcohol.”

“In that case...” I set it aside. “We can serve it later in the evening.”

Evie slides the cup back to me. “You’ll want a sip or a few before you start the span.”

“Is it bad news about the trunks I ordered?”

Evie drinks her tea.

I tilt my head and practically pour the tea down my throat.

“Okay,” Evie says. “The trunks haven’t arrived yet, and the Winter fairies are starting to show signs of going into heat. The females are becoming moody and rather...” Evie leans in and whispers, “bitchy.”

I promised trunks upon trunks of nesting supplies delivered straight from the Summer Court, which means they expect not only trunks, but the finest beddings, the highest thread counts that make the body feel like it’s resting on a cloud.

While freaking out about delayed packages, I smile as if everything is dandy. “The lycans will deliver,” I tell Evie, but we both know I’m speaking to everyone, since they’re all listening. “They always do.” They always have delivered when Rohan sailed with his crew, but since he’s passed on the captain’s hat to his son, Duane, there have been delays.

Granted, Duane delivers the goods as well. But it’s usually at the very last moment, and that means I worry more than I should and have to start contingency planning. In the Summer Court, I know what I’m working with. Every tailor is at my disposal and willing to help with the season’s preparations. But out here in the Winter Court, the staff is already stretched thin and the tailors are few and far between.

“Milady.” A pretty, young Winter fairy wearing only undergarments approaches and curtsies before speaking eagerly. “I believe the lycans arrived last night.”

I stand abruptly. “Why has no one notified me?”

She swallows and steps back, so I turn and chug my tea. It does calm the nerves. I look at the hairdresser. “We’re going to need a barrel of this tea.” I turn toward the female who approached the table. “Join me for a walk.” The moment we exit the common area, I move away from the door and motion the female to approach.

She does so reluctantly.

“What is your name?” I ask.

“Winter, milady.”

“That’s a beautiful name.”

Her gaze drops, and I note the subtle slackening of her shoulders. “It’s a commoner name, milady.”

That is true. But judging by the subtle scent of cherry blossoms coming from her voluptuous, shiny, dark brown hair and the smoothness of the skin of her face and neck, as well as the lack of lines or cuts on her elegant hands, the female is highborn.

“The name *Winter* is the equivalent of *Augusta* in the Summer Court, and Augusta is your queen.”

The female’s eyes widen, and she drops to her knees, fingers clutching my robe. “I meant no offense to our queen. Please don’t tell my king. He’ll have my head for speaking ill of her.”

I grab her hands and tug so she will rise back up. “You offended no one, least of all Augusta. She is a kind queen, and your king can be merciful.”

She is nodding.

“I’ll tell you a secret. Do you promise to keep it?”

The female nods rapidly. “Sever my head if not.”

I make a sour face. “Okay, that’s violent.”

“It’s a saying in our court.”

Lovely. “King Aamako only cares about preserving the throne for his heir and eliminating threats against his mate. Do you plan to overthrow him?”

The female shakes her head. “Not me, no. But my brother-in-law died in the attempted coup. He sided with the prince regent, and now my sister is hiding and has sent me here to try to make amends for our family.”

“Tell her all is forgiven. Tell her the Winter Court is starting anew.”

She doesn’t seem convinced, and there’s no amount of soothing that will change her mind. Time will heal these wounds and bring back the Winter fae people. If they can hold the winter balls during the season, it will restore some of the faith in the Crown. If not, I dare say the Winter Court shall remain in rubble, which will halt the advancement of magical fae bloodlines.

Nobody wants that, not after so many Unseelie fae bloodlines have been compromised. Granted, if the Seelie wanted to sweep in and take over the Unseelie courts, now would be a good time, but my brother is all about creating peace and prosperity.

King Aamako wants the same thing for his court. It's just that he's most effective in combat and not so effective in dealing with the delicate dynamics of fae peoples.

But this conversation isn't about fae politics. "Let's leave the king to do his kingly thing and you and me to do ours. How about the lycans?" I prompt.

The female points downstairs. "I saw them."

"Where?"

"On the ground floor. I can show you."

We descend a flight of stairs, and I follow her into one of the courtier quarters, presumably hers. Once inside, she walks straight to the window and peers downstairs. "There they are."

Bare-chested lycans dressed in baggy leather construction pants skate over a frozen patch of water. They're carrying sticks and chasing a round black object I can barely make out.

"Nice view," I say, and the female blushes at my open appreciation of the lycan male form. They're built strong, and every muscle on their bodies begs to be touched. My fingertips tingle.

"See the lycans with green towels tucked into their pants and hanging over their hips?" she says, pointing. "Those are the newcomers. The other ones are the construction crew working on the Winter Beauty over there."

I narrow my eyes, trying to see better. Even with our keen eyesight, this is a bird's-eye view, and that makes it harder to see.

"And the green-towel guys got here last night?" I ask.

"Yes, milady. They docked and brought the trunks."

They brought the trunks! I clap my hands. "Woohoo. We're saved! Where are the trunks?"

"The vampires took them."

I blink. "Pardon?"

“It was quite an affair. The lycans unloaded the trunks on the sleds and delivered them here. The vampire brothers received them, and everything seemed to be going well until the...” She starts flushing profusely, and I look around for a hand fan. There’s one on the reading chair by the window. I fetch it for the lady before she faints.

She accepts the fan and flares it out. “My fates, some of these lycans will send the court into heat before time.”

“Yes, dear, they’ve blessed us with their presence.”

“Mmhm.”

“Carry on,” I prompt.

“When the young lycan alpha...” She fans herself faster.

“Duane,” I tell her. “His name is Duane.”

“When Duane requested your presence for the handover of the trunks, this tall, scary nocturno appeared out of nowhere. He wasn’t there and then he was, and the brothers moved back as if he’s their boss.”

My heart starts beating faster. “Do you know who the scary nocturno is?”

“No, milady. Never seen him before, but he had an accent and a rasp in his voice.”

Nottuza. “And what did he say?”

“Not much of anything, actually. He stood there like a giant scary wall, and I think the lycans got the message, which is why Duane told him to get out of the way. The lycan used profane language.”

“I suppose that didn’t go over well.”

“He and Duane exchanged words.”

“What kind of words did they use? Dick-measuring kind?” Lycan alphas, especially young ones, love a challenge and gauging their power against a male they perceive as another alpha male.

“Something like that, yes. Duane demanded the scary one show him to your quarters, and the vampire told him no.”

“Just no?”

She nods. “The nocturno didn’t have much to say besides telling Duane that seeing you and delivering the trunks to you in person is not going to happen. He did thank him for the delivery, said he will have the trunks inspected, and that the lycans should depart.”

“But Duane stayed,” I say. “Because he doesn’t trust that the vampires will deliver my trunks, and he can’t get paid or keep our trade agreement without handing them right to me. In person.”

Nottuza is in the court. I thought perhaps he left on business and that’s why he hasn’t come to see me. But no. He’s here, and the entire time he’s been in the court, he hasn’t visited me, keeping me at arm’s length like I’m his puppy instead of a female from whom he demanded commitment.

If he won’t come to me, I shall draw him out. Besides, I want the trunks, and, frankly, I want to thank Duane. Sailing over icy seas all the way to the Winter Court right before the winter is dangerous. I want him to know I appreciate it.

I tuck my hand under the female’s elbow. “Let’s say hi to Duane.”

FLEUR



Descending the Ice Princess tower on foot instead of using either a portal or shadows is a tasking ordeal.

“Milady,” Winter says from behind me, as we’re both using the rail as we walk. “Duane spoke about you intimately.”

She’s interested in the young lycan. “Duane is a business associate. Nothing more.”

“But he asked about your chambers.”

“Only because we’re not in my court, and for all he knows, my chambers encompass an entire floor and are places where I receive guests.” The staircase seems never-ending, and I conclude portal transport is necessary, which means I need Aamako’s permission to set those up.

“I wish I had your confidence,” Winter says. “With regard to males.”

“It’s not so much confidence as it is training. My magic attracts the opposite sex, and so I’ve trained myself to use it. That is all.”

“If I may disagree, milady. You’re also nice, and that in itself is attractive.”

“Polite manners come with the territory too. I am a royal.”

“Royals aren’t...” She snaps her jaw closed, teeth clamping loud enough for me to hear.

“If you meant to say that royals aren’t nice, you’re correct. Some aren’t, and frankly, I can also be a royal bitch, but so can

everyone. We all have bad and good in us.”

“You make it all look easy.”

“All?”

“All that it takes to be a crown princess.”

I pause closer to the bottom floor. “It’s...it’s only because of training and also because it’s the only thing I know how to be.” Since I will never be a queen or a mother, it’s the only thing I will ever be. “Which family did you say you were from?”

“I hoped you wouldn’t ask.”

“Then I won’t.”

Those left behind by the traitors prefer going by their first names now, and since I accepted it as such when they first arrived and settled in their quarters, it’s the new social norm. At least for this season. That doesn’t mean I don’t know or won’t find out who she is and where she’s from. All my friends are vetted, and she’ll become one of them. I like her.

For the next three floors, Winter and I descend quietly, our steps slower as we grow tired. By the time we land our feet on the ground floor, the guards stationed at the doors leading outside exchange looks, even though they’re supposed to stare straight ahead.

“Where is the back exit?” I ask.

Neither of them answers, but I hear a throat clearing and a low tapping noise that I follow to the back of the stairs and down a long undecorated hallway past three massive doors leading into what I presume are ballrooms or even a throne room.

Nobody ever gave me a tour.

I have no idea what the tower holds, but I’m willing to bet most of it is gloriously empty and just waiting for pretty winter decor. And it should damn well have it. Well, if you ask me.

At the back door, a handsome male guard with a mane of curly black hair braided tightly at the sides of his head taps the

hilt of his sword. He's wearing black on black with red cuff links and red jacket buttons. His collar is also red.

I look up at him, and he locks his dark eyes with mine. He's a vampire guard. A quick glance at his ears tells me he still has pointy fae ears, meaning he's newly made. I haven't met one so young in... I'm unsure if I ever have. Nottornos train the young vampires before they're reintroduced into fae society.

"Colnis?" Winter asks as if she recognizes him.

"You are not allowed outside," he says.

I offer Winter my hand and give her a side-eye when she doesn't take it. Once she takes my hand, I intertwine our fingers. "She is escorting me."

"I wasn't talking about her."

It takes me a moment to understand that he's saying *I* am not allowed outside. "On whose orders?"

"The general's."

"You mean Nottuza's?"

The vampire nods.

"You must be mistaken. Your general doesn't command me."

The vampire frowns. "Those are the orders."

I step closer, and the male lowers his head, his eyes flashing red. He's hungry and soon to be horny.

"Can you tell me exactly what he ordered?" I whisper. "Word for word, please?"

He licks his lips, inviting me to rise onto my toes. "The Summer princess stays inside the tower."

"And what happens if you open the door and I walk outside?"

"I will get released from duty."

"And you want to serve the court?"

“I want to serve under the general.”

Hm. I trail a finger down his cheek. “Open the doors, and I promise I’ll stay inside.” My magic makes his eyelids heavy, and his fangs descend, tips pushing at his bottom lip.

“Open the doors. Trust me. I won’t compromise your station.”

The male opens the doors and steps aside.

The cold wind carries shouting lycan voices from the frozen water beside the square where they’re still playing. I hold the lapels of my robe closer together at the same time that the nocturno guard shrugs off his jacket and places it over my shoulders.

“Thank you, soldier.” I sniff, and although his scent is different, there’s an unmistakable trace of Nottuza’s scent on the male’s jacket as well.

It turns me on. I bring the lapels closer to my nose.

The lycans playing their game start cheering and draw my attention back to them. One group cheers while the other group throws obscenities at one another. I spot Duane wearing leather pants that are sliding off his hips. He grabs them and pulls them up, holding them with one hand while laughing at the arguing bunch.

The moment our eyes meet, he drops the stick and skates toward me. I know he’ll do something sexy and obscene right before he drops to his knees and uses the lack of friction provided by the ice to slide on his leather pants all the way to the door, stopping just before he knocks me down.

I stand between his legs, his crotch touching my feet. He lets go of his pants, and they loosen and fall lower, revealing his pubic hair. He’s sweaty, which means his alpha lycan scent is trickling into my nose.

And Winter’s.

Beside me, she whimpers.

“Duane,” I greet him.

“At your service.”

I giggle. He’s young and cute and not for me, but I’m certain he would make Winter very happy during this mating season. Since I aim for everyone to have a grand time, especially those females I want to make my friends, I say, “Welcome to the Ice Princess.”

Duane smiles and stands to his full height. “Is that an invitation?”

“To stay in the tower,” I clarify. “I can secure a lycan-only floor.”

Duane looks up as if gauging the tower. He shakes his head. “I’d rather sleep on my boat.”

“Excellent choice.” A male voice, like a blade, slices the sexual tension my magic incited.

I step back.

Duane growls, then looks at me. “Who the fuck is this asshole?”

Nottuza should offer me his elbow now, instead of standing somewhere behind me, listening and watching. We should show a welcoming united front. But no, judging by the look on Duane’s face, Nottuza, remains where he is, probably in the shadows where we can’t make him out.

Outside, the night swallows the last remnants of what’s left of the weak sun that spends the spans struggling to shine through the thick clouds. Gray clouds and mood dominate the Winter Court.

“General?” I prompt. I let my magic travel over to him, caress his senses.

Even though I’m certain he’s wearing black leather boots, I don’t hear him approach, but only feel him when his fist wraps around my hair. The instant he touches me, my body flares to life, responds to him by releasing my mating scent.

Oh my fates.

He's not tugging my hair, but holding it tightly while pounding me with his dominant male scent so much that I have to hold back a whimper.

Nottuza seems like a reserved person. I didn't expect him to show such a brazen display of possession. I take a moment to gather my wits about me, and while I do that, Duane has already smelled how my body responds to Nottuza's territorial claim. And it's a territorial claim lycan males understand well.

That was likely why Nottuza did it. Nothing speaks louder than the scent of female arousal.

Duane lifts a dark eyebrow. "Him?" He points at Nottuza. "You can have any male you wish. Heck, you can have a pack of males if you wish." He sizes up Nottuza and lifts his chin, nostrils flaring. "Why him?"

"I wonder that myself," Nottuza says, shocking me even more.

"Good question," I agree. But I don't know the answer.

Maybe it's because he sets my heart aflutter, and my magic wants him to tame it, wrangle it, control it. All of which is terrible for my heart, because a male like Nottuza, a male who can stay away from me for over seven spans and not once want to come inside me or, heck, even on me, is the kind of male who can walk away and never look back.

Nottuza releases my hair, but before letting go, he spreads his claws over my scalp, causing a tingling sensation to spread down my entire body all the way to my toes. My magic responds as if it's his to wield and forces me to step closer to him, as if I'm some sort of needy pet.

I growl.

Duane's eyes widen.

A princess doesn't growl. Around this vampire, I can't seem to hold on to my faculties.

I tap my throat. "Pardon me, something caught in my throat." They heard a growl and know it's a growl, but whatever. Moving on now. "You must be tired and hungry."

Duane nods. "And we've been out here all night."

"I'm sorry about that. We have many lessons to take regarding proper manners around here in the Winter Court. Let me make it up to you. You are very welcome to rest and shower as well as dine at the Ice Princess."

"The boats will do," Duane says.

"You are a wise male," Nottuza draws.

"I insist," I snap.

"Fleur," Nottuza says. "A word in private."

I almost stomp my foot, but I think growling at him will do again. "Of course. Be right back."

FLEUR



Nottuza ushers me into a sterile room where a repeating sequence of the world map serves as tapestry. Red pins mark some places; black, blue, and white, even purple mark the others. A table in the middle holds more maps and a few books.

Nottuza throws his uniform jacket over it before loudly closing the door behind us. Not quite slamming it, but not closing it silently either. I can feel him simmering with questions, and so I walk around the room, making him wait.

“D’Artaron has a room similar to this one. You should invite him over for tea. The pair of you could jerk off over military strategy and visions of world domination.”

When he doesn’t respond, I look over and find him with his hands folded over his chest, leaning against the door. Casual. Relaxed. In control. Makes me want to shake him.

My magic stirs and touches him, caressing his cheek, down his body, gently teasing its way into his pants. And then my magic moves into his body as if he can absorb it. Strange.

Since there are no chairs, I sit on the table and cross one leg over the other at the knee, making sure my robe parts, revealing my brand-new, blue leather boots I’m trying on for tonight’s ball.

Nottuza nods appreciatively. “Are you wearing those boots tonight?”

“Maybe.”

“They suit you.”

“Barefoot suits what I intend to wear better, but the floors are too cold for that.”

“Then have them heated.”

“Elven fire magic is essential for that.”

“Bring the elves, then.”

“I tried.”

“And?” he asks.

“They won’t come.”

“Make them come.”

“That’s not my style.”

Nottuza smirks. “Hence the reason Aamako brought you here.”

I huff out a breath. “Against your advice, I presume.”

“Correct.”

“I don’t like to stay in company where I am not wanted.”

“Oh, you are wanted. Very much so.”

I’m trying not to misinterpret what he means. Does he want me? I think he does, but most males want me. My magic makes it so. The difference with Nottuza is that I want him, and I want him to want me in a way that has nothing to do with my magic, but everything to do with me. Just me.

Why him? Duane’s question remains, which reminds me of why we came into the office. “You wanted to see me in private?” I prompt.

“What is your relationship with the young wolf?”

“Duane is a business associate.”

“We’re all just that to you.” Nottuza tsks, but it’s more at himself than at me, as if he said something he shouldn’t have.

“You made me promise to hold my pleasure for you, and then you displayed possessive gestures toward me in public.

Those things don't go unnoticed, especially not by the lycan gossip mill. There was a fae female there."

"Winter," he says. "I saw her."

"How come you know her?" I flush with jealousy, and Nottuza notices, smirks.

"I know everything that's happening in the court."

"Because you're running the fae court?"

He's at me before I can blink. He grabs my knees and spreads my legs. He stands between them, his scent of dominance unmistakable.

I grab the lapels of his uniform and tug, popping the buttons.

He traps my wrists behind my back. "Take care with your assumptions," he says. "The Unseelie king kills for power."

"Except when he knows things we don't. Like the future?"

I hit a nerve. I can tell. I grew up with powerful males, and when there's talk of kings and kingdoms and crowns and thrones and empty courts begging for leaders to take them, it turns them on. Nottuza's scent is practically clogging my nose, he's so turned on.

"Let me give you release," I whisper and tug my hands, but he won't release them.

"I'm not the one who needs it."

"Sure you are. Everyone needs to get off."

"None more than a siren."

I giggle. "With the siren again." But I stop giggling when he moves my hands around his neck and forces my fingers to intertwine behind his head.

"Keep your hands there, Princess."

He's going to play with me! I spread my legs so wide, two of him could fit between my legs. I move to the edge of the table, our bodies touching now. He kisses my cheek, down my

jaw as his cold hands find their way under my robe to hold my breast.

A thumb moves back and forth over my nipple.

“Have you been a good little princess for me?”

“I have, General.”

“How good?” A finger enters my pussy, and I shudder, thrusting my hands into his hair. He tsks, and I intertwine my fingers. He’s so frustrating, yet I find that so hot that when his thumb brushes over my clit, I think I might combust.

“I think I’m going to come,” I say. Nobody arouses me like this male does. *Why him?* This is why. He turns me into a mindless puddle of lust and promises me nights of pleasure and even some pain. Why not him?

“You won’t,” he says. My magic accepts his command as if it’s her law.

“What are you doing to me?” He’s stroking my clit in the most arousing ways.

“Controlling your magic.”

“How?”

“Easily.”

I don’t know how he’s doing it, and in the moment, I don’t care. I just want to come. Wait, no, I don’t. I don’t, but I should want it, because he’s moving his finger inside me fast and flicking my clitoris. A growl rises at the back of my throat, but there’s something else, a kind of a purring noise I’ve never heard myself make that startles me.

Nottuza steps back and licks his finger. “Your pussy tastes better than blood.”

“And you would know because you feed on the blood of fairies.”

“As my nature requires.”

“The fae male out there.” I point as Nottuza starts fixing my clothes, drawing my robe closed around me, leaving off

the jacket the guard gave me and tossing his own jacket over my shoulders. “You didn’t just feed on him. You made him.”

“I did.”

“I don’t know if anyone has told you, but the fae aren’t just meals for vampires anymore. There are laws in place.”

Nottuza steps back, eyes narrowing. “Laws that benefit only the fae.”

“No.” I shake my head. “Laws that protect the fae and the notturnos.”

“Laws that forbid hunting and feeding. Laws that dilute our blood and make us weaker. Laws that defy our natural way of life.”

“You can’t simply make more notturnos.”

“I can.”

“You cannot. They’re fae. Does Aamako know about this?”

Nottuza chuckles. “Aamako wants to eliminate all the traitors.”

“And you’re making them vampires instead?”

“That’s right.”

“To what end?” I ask.

“I need people.”

“What for?”

“Protection.”

“From what?”

“From those who wish us harm.”

“I don’t understand.”

He presses a finger over my lips. “All in good time, Princess.”

I bite my lip. “The vampire houses won’t like it, Nottuza.”

He tucks his hands into his pockets. “Good thing I don’t need their permission.”

“What you’re saying is crazy.”

“It’s actually sane and the only thing that makes sense.”

I wave my hand about the room, indicating the maps of the world. “No, no, the houses have rules, and we have rules, and the world we live in has rules. You can’t just wake up and fuck it all up.”

“Language,” he reprimands with a smile.

He’s so beautiful when he smiles that it disarms me, and my shoulders slump. “You will start a war.”

He gathers me into his arms. “No wars.”

“When the houses hear about you making nocturnos, they’ll descend upon you.”

“Yes, my siren, and thus I must prepare.” Nottuza sighs. “I didn’t wish for you to come to court.”

“Because you know blood will spill?” I look up at him.

He nods. “Most certainly.”

“Will it be fae blood?”

He shrugs. “It depends.”

“On?”

“You.”

“I want to minimize the suffering of my people.”

“Start by getting rid of the lycans.”

“After they rest, shower, and eat.”

Nottuza rolls his eyes. It’s a such a childish gesture that I laugh.

“Pretty please?” I bat my eyelashes at him and feel my magic unfurl and attack him, asking him, begging him to do as I wish.

Nottuza shakes his head at the same time that he says, “Fine. They rest and they’re gone right before the ball tonight.”

I squeal because the ladies (and some fae gents) will be delighted with the energy the young lycan males bring to the evening. “So much fun.”

Nottuza is at the door and opening it as I slide off the table.

Outside, Duane is already flirting with Winter, making her blush profusely. When he sees us walking up, he takes one look at me and then Nottuza and says to the vampire, “You folded, didn’t you?”

Nottuza mumbles something incoherent.

Duane points at him. “You folded like a roof under dragon fire.” He sticks his fingers into his mouth and whistles. “Come on in, boys.”

He swaggers past Nottuza, making a roof out of his hands, then touching his palms together. “Like a roof, vampire.”

NOTTUZA



The lycans barge inside the Ice Princess like a pack of sweaty, wet dogs.

They're so familiar with my princess that each one gets to kiss her hand and whisper offers into her ear while she giggles and laughs, exhausting herself by climbing back up the stairs so she can lead them toward the top floors where the fae females are squealing with delight, having been informed of pending decisions about indulging in lycan male company.

Once the loud lycans and giggling fairies move away from the spiraling staircase and into the rooms on the top floors of the tower, I return to my office. Leaving the door open, I lean against my table, gripping the wooden edge until my claws dig into it and splinters start driving into my flesh.

The smell of blood in my office draws in the newly made notturno guarding the outer doors. He flares his nostrils, eyes becoming red.

"Come in, Colnis." I motion him in, and he enters immediately.

I release the table and stare at my bleeding palm, then start picking the wood splinters out of it while he watches, hungry for my blood.

After a notturno has been made, they crave the blood of the living. Because my blood brims with undead magic, much like a baby is soothed by the milk of the mother, my blood soothes all their cravings.

The house leaders, I hear, don't feed their newly made vampires, likely because their blood is diluted and they don't wish to share their power. With no ways of soothing the newly made norturnos, they keep them locked away and later "integrate" them back into society.

The norturnos who drink from me often as they're transforming in body from fae to vampire become stronger. I'm interested in creating strong soldiers. Thus, I offer him a drink. He takes it without sinking his teeth into my flesh, even though I'm certain he'd love nothing more than to do just that. And I don't have to pry my hand away from him either. He releases my wrist on his own, eyes returning to black almost instantly.

"Leroy was right about you," I tell him.

"How so?"

"He watched you, asked about you, learned that you possess a great deal of self-control. Those types of qualities stay with a male when he moves from fae life to vampire life. How are you sleeping?"

"Not well, General."

"Are you dreaming?"

He nods. "Nightmares."

Lingering echoes of his memories. "They will pass."

The soldier nods. "The fairy who introduced herself as Winter recognized me."

I nod. "Many fairies at tonight's ball will recognize you."

"But I don't know who they are."

"They're the living. You're the undead, and I have an assignment for you."

The male clicks his heels. "I'm ready."

"Watch the lycans. Make sure they stay on their floor."

"Which is their floor?"

"Whichever one the Summer princess assigned them."

“What if she assigns her own floor?”

“She won’t,” I bark, and the male steps back.

“Of course not, General.”

“Dismissed.” As he walks out, Ledger and Leroy walk inside.

Ledger takes one look at me and closes the door, his fangs descending.

Leroy rubs his hands together, eyes flashing red.

“Lycans,” he purrs as if already hunting down one in their warrior form. Drinking lycan blood is like an after-midnight sip of liquid energy. Like a drug, a tiny sip of lycan blood won’t hurt. But it’s incredibly difficult to stop drinking, and infinitely easy to get addicted to.

Leroy remembers the taste. It’s why he’s excited.

“We can’t touch them,” Ledger says.

Leroy boos.

“First, we are hosting the Summer princess,” I say. “Now the lycans. Soon, we’ll host the elves.”

Leroy scrubs the back of his neck. “About the elves...”

“Don’t tell me.” I lift a palm. “You found elves willing to work here?”

“The princess did.”

“She told me they wouldn’t come.”

“I persuaded them,” Ledger says.

I approve of Ledger’s persuasion methods. “News?” I ask.

Leroy shrugs off a worn-out brown backpack and opens it, fiddles inside it, looking for something.

I raise an eyebrow at Ledger and point at the bag. “This thing is older than I am.”

“Stole it from a beggar, and nothing is older than you.”

“There’s beggars?”

Ledger nods. “They’re taking shelter in abandoned houses under collapsing roofs.” He copies the hand gesture the lycan baby alpha showed me that means a folding roof.

“Haha. Very funny,” I say.

“Here you go,” Leroy hands me a stack of papers.

I move away from the desk, and he puts them there.

“What are these?” I ask.

“Signatures.”

“Signatures?”

“Mhm. Of fae traitors who will trade immunity from persecution for a lifetime of service to you, oh great Vampire Lord of the Winter Court.”

I scrub my face. “Is that my title now?”

“Catchy, no?”

I shrug. “It’ll do.”

“It’ll more than do. A lord is a fae term, a familiar term, and it sounds much nicer than general. If you say general, they think you’re creating an army.”

“I *am* creating an army.”

“They can’t know that. Not on paper, anyway.”

Ledger snorts. “They’ll find out soon enough.”

Leroy continues, “That’s when we anticipate trouble.”

“More trouble than we originally planned for,” Ledger adds.

“Which is why we must replan,” Leroy says.

“Why do we need their signatures?” They forfeited their lives when they sided with a male who wasn’t their king. Traitors get executed. Permission to make them vampires isn’t necessary and most certainly not from them. I pick up a piece of paper and read. “It’s an agreement. A...a lifetime of service. Duh. I don’t need this.”

Leroy lifts a finger. “The houses do it this way, and if we’re to integrate into society, we just do what they do. Or at least appear so on the surface.”

“We won’t be a house,” I tell him. “I thought that was clear.”

“I get that, General. But there’s a question of legitimacy, and without the signatures, you appear to have forced the fae into service.”

“It’s not as if they have much of a choice. It’s death or undeath.”

Leroy sighs as if I’m annoying him. “In the modern world, we can’t simply create more nocturnos out of fae without their agreement.”

“You sound like the Summer princess.”

“Really?” Leroy flips his hair over his shoulder and flutters his eyelashes.

Ledger kicks him in the shin and says, “General, you can’t secretly make three hundred fairies. It will look like you’re making a secret army.”

“I am!”

“But they can’t know that until after!”

I wince at his rising voice. “Stop screaming.”

“You screamed first,” Ledger points out.

“Did not.”

“Did too,” Leroy says. “Boys, listen, without the signatures, the houses will go to the fae kings, and the kings will follow the laws of the lands, which say these agreements must be made between vampires and fae. With signatures, the houses will come after us for not consulting them first.”

“The existing nocturnos are governed by the living, and the living don’t rule us.” I push off the table. “We are the undead. We are our own people, and we shall rise again.”

“And exist alongside the living,” Ledger says. “This time around, we won’t be hunted, burned, or forced to endure sunlight or feed on corpses. This time, the undead will walk among the living for many turns to come.”

“Hear, hear,” his brother says.

I lean in. “The undead magic is inside a baby. A baby is weak. On the eve of her birth, the fates will go blind, and the magic of the living will grow angry. The clouds will block the moon and the sun for spans. The world will know she has arrived. The living will feel it, and they will want to hurt her, for they think she means them harm. During that time, they will come for her, and we must hold firm or die again, maybe never to return. So, fucking signatures or not, the fae walking through these doors tonight are all dead fae.”

“And what of the Summer princess?” Ledger asks.

“What of her?”

“She thinks it’s a masked ball,” Leroy says.

“It is.”

“What we’re trying to say,” Leroy says, “is that she wrote letters promising a ball and guaranteeing safety and asked us to distribute them to the traitor families that haven’t responded before. We used the letters to gather signatures.”

I clap Ledger on the shoulder. “Very clever.” I sense Leroy’s discomfort. “Is there a problem?”

“It will upset her greatly that I used her good name to recruit a secret army, an act that will provoke a war between the vampire houses.”

“I gather you’re more concerned about upsetting the Summer princess than you are afraid that the thousands of vampires of all seven houses will descend upon us. Is that right?”

“When you put it that way...” Leroy strokes his chin. “The answer is yes. There’s something...innocent and kind about her. I would hate to hurt her feelings.”

“You won’t.”

But I'm sure I will.

NOTTUZA



The best-laid battle plans are only as good as the ability to pivot with the enemy's movements. I can plan the field of the battle, the possible advantages of our positions, and whatever else is within my control, but the opponent's reactions to the applied force are my speculations, not certainties. Therefore, I must plan for several possible outcomes or pivot points during battles as I see them play out in my head.

My reactions to anything Fleur does are always shocking.

Entirely unplanned.

I often appear unhinged and unable to hold on to my wits.

And no matter how quickly I pivot in this relationship we're having, she keeps me anticipating her next move. It's exciting, knowing she will pleasantly surprise me. I've never been a fan of surprises, but Fleur might change my mind about them.

She surprised me by inviting lycans into the tower.

They've entertained her most of the span, and I expected they'd stay for the masked ball, but the princess and the young alpha parted ways earlier in the evening. She obeyed me. Surprise, surprise.

I watched as she said goodbye to the baby alpha. They embraced and nothing more. This placates the part of me that gets unreasonably jealous of anyone being around her. But I'm aware of her personality, mainly her seductive nature coupled with enjoyment of being around many people.

If I acted on my jealousy and hurt or killed every male with interest in her, it would mean I would have to slaughter several populations of the world. That would be greatly entertaining for me, yet very hurtful for her. I shall entertain my murderous jealousy in my head. Besides, I have more pressing things to deal with tonight. Like observing the fae traitors walking through the front doors.

Standing near the curtain in the back of the room, that's what I'm doing, or at least trying to do, while also keeping an eye on Fleur, who's changed two outfits so far. Now she's wearing a dove-feather mask over her eyes, paired with a beautiful white silk dress. The back of the dress seems to be missing entirely, and as she practically floats over the dark marble floors, embracing all the guests, everyone touches her bare skin. Some fairies are bolder than others, pressing their entire hands against the small of her back.

Would it be so bad if I dined on everyone?

I especially want to rip into the throat of the male who's been escorting her through the crowds and introducing her to the people she hasn't yet met.

Leroy catches me moving toward him and meets me near the corner by the other long, thick, black curtain.

"Who is the fae male with the princess?" I ask.

Leroy sighs. "He's one of the shadow crawlers Aamako dismissed and the former prince reactivated."

The thought of ripping out his fingers that keep curving around Fleur's elbow as he helps her move about makes me smile. "Tell me he didn't sign one of your ridiculous papers."

"He petitioned for the position in our ranks."

"Petitioned?"

"Mmhm. For himself and seven of his males."

"I had no idea we took petitions."

"We didn't either, but the modern world takes getting used to. He's a convincing fella. Carries battle magic."

“Age?”

“Over two hundred turns.”

I grunt. Just right for the princess. “Why haven’t I met him yet?”

“He hasn’t been cleared.”

“Why not?”

“Because he carried in a weapon.”

“And you allowed him around the princess?” I snap, drawing attention our way.

“The princess disarmed him.”

“Excuse me?”

“She found the weapon and asked him to hand it over.”

The shadows start climbing the walls as my temper rises.

Ledger comes from behind me, holding out a dagger with carvings on it. Some are lit, some aren’t, telling me that whoever spelled the dagger managed only part of the spell before the undead magic they’re not supposed to toy with killed them.

I shield the dagger with my body, and the three of us move into the shadows completely.

“You took this from the male who petitioned?” I ask.

“No,” Leroy says. “He handed it to me.”

“Why would he do that?”

“The princess asked him to.”

“Sadly, that makes sense. Does the male even know he’s been disarmed, or did she completely charm him to the point where he’s following her around like a puppy?”

“I’m leaning toward puppy,” Leroy says.

“And these are the males who will make up my army?”

Ledger and Leroy nod.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Keep the dagger for later. I want to read the spell for clues.”

When I turn, I find the male alone. The princess left again. It’s right before dinnertime, so she’s probably changing into another dress, hopefully this time one that actually covers her body.

The twins remained. “Is there anything else?”

“You think she’s yours,” Leroy says.

“She’s under my protection.”

Ledger sheathes the dagger. “When I tried to eliminate him, she intercepted, said nobody gets hurt on her watch and that I better obey, or she’ll have my head.”

I smile. “Vicious little thing.”

“I argued that the weapon is a wooden dagger intended to kill a nocturno.”

“She said you can take care of yourself.”

“She’s not wrong.”

“That’s not the point,” Ledger bites out. “The princess and most fae don’t seem to know you can’t die from a wooden weapon, but whoever made this”—Ledger taps the dagger’s hilt—“knows something. The engravings are too close to your brother’s handwriting to be a coincidence.”

I wave them off. “It’s misspelled, and the undead magic of my brother isn’t something people bottled up and now released into the dagger, so it won’t work.”

“How do you explain the spell partially lighting up?”

“Someone toyed with it. They’re not very good.”

“What of the fae male who brought it?”

On the other side, the grand doors of the dining room open, and people cease speaking. What was once a simple round space with white-painted concrete fitted between tall windows and dark marble floors is now an ocean-themed dining space

offering a buffet of seafood spread over a long table on the left.

Clear, pale gray-blue lights sparkle off the walls, and the painted waves on the windows appear to move, creating an impression of us being under the sea. Beige glitter sparkles over the black marble floors and makes it look like sand.

What's striking about it is that it's not a summer theme or a slice of the Summer Court's sea. It's a portrait of the Winter Court's sea with pale gray-blue waters, moody seas, and sunless skies. Traditionally, one would find such a landscape unattractive compared to the colorful landscape of the Summer Court, but the way it's presented here makes it beautiful.

She delivered a complete underwater dining experience without being underwater.

And there are make-believe sirens.

The Winter fae females Fleur gathered for the season emerge from under the table as if crawling from beneath the coral reefs I now realize the table and the food on it resemble. They're wearing their colorful hair in extravagant hairdos with bold makeup. Loose and seductive clothing, completely out of place in the Winter Court, stuns the crowds. But nobody is complaining.

I don't believe any of the males are even breathing.

Something wiggles on the empty dais at the opposite end of the room.

Fleur is on her belly, crawling over the dais. When she reaches the steps, instead of rising and walking the rest of the way, she swings her legs over the steps. People gasp as she displays a long, pale blue skirt that traps her legs and ends in an extravagant fishtail.

"Is it real?" someone asks.

It's not. I've seen Fleur as a siren. This is just a dress and a performance, a way for her to entertain people. The fishtail matches the pale blue dye in her hair. Her eyes, like a pair of beacons, shine so brightly, one cannot possibly look away.

“You might’ve heard...” she says, and hearing her voice draws up my balls, stiffens my dick as if she ordered it to stand up, “that a certain nocturno calls me a siren.”

The females chuckle.

Males? They don’t find the siren joke as funny. I’m not the only one she can arouse just by talking.

Male mating scents penetrate my nose. Every male here is hard and wants to fuck, and I’m not sure how they’re staying away. The instinct to grab her and fuck her into the floor is so strong that I’m forced to look away.

“It gave me the idea for a dinner under the sea. Welcome,” she purrs, and sweeps a hand toward the table.

I don’t eat, so I stay in the shadows, glaring at her from all the way across the vast space.

She’s wearing seashells over each nipple. My eyes drop to her voluptuous breasts, and she shimmies her shoulders, making her breasts sway.

“Aren’t you hungry, General?”

FLEUR



“Aren’t you hungry, General?” I whispered for his ears only, even though everyone in the dining hall could hear me. Heads turn toward the veil of the shadows, and moments pass as we all expect the general I called to answer me. When he doesn’t, I feel heat rise up my cheeks, and I try to squash it before it shows, but I can’t because I’m embarrassed I put myself out here on display for him, only to be rejected.

I’d like nothing more than to stomp out of here and find a nice corner to cry in, but that’s a luxury afforded to females who are not princesses. A princess never makes a scene.

A princess holds her own against all foes. Especially foreign ones.

Besides, I’m wearing a full fishtail that traps my legs. Even if I wanted to stomp away, I couldn’t.

The whispers start, and I swallow past the tears.

I worked for spans and nights, brought in people from all over the world to ensure the Winter Court would have the loveliest season, and all I asked for was a bit of attention from the male who brought me here in the first place.

My eyes cloud, and I blink, hoping it will chase away the tears, but then my chest starts to feel hollow and my breathing gets heavier, and I might just lose it out here.

I bend my legs at the knee and turn as if to wiggle my way across the dais, totally and utterly humiliated, when the whispering stops. The shadows rise in the air and form a flock

of bats that fly toward me. When they reach the dais, they explode into hissing shadows, and I, along with everyone else, scream, truly afraid.

Then I scent him before I feel his arms come around me and lift me, one arm under my knees.

Nottuza materializes with me in his arms. I fling my arms around his neck, smiling as if we planned this ordeal. People start clapping, thrilled with the show I'm certain he didn't want to put on for them. To him, they're just subjects, pawns to move around on his way to whatever power he seeks, but to me, they're peers I depend on for company in this beautiful journey we call life.

"What now?" he asks under his breath.

"Now we dine."

"You know damn well I don't eat."

"Yet you ate me out."

He looks down at me, seemingly shocked by my forwardness.

I smile sweetly. "We could move to the buffet line."

"Why are you wearing this?" he asks as he carries me to the buffet line.

Winter offers us a delicate salad on a tray. I take it and wink at her, her mating scent like fresh perfume teasing my senses. And Nottuza's, I'm sure.

"You decided to call me a siren. I must make the best of the nickname and own it so that the rumor mill doesn't think I'm hiding something. If they think I'm hiding it, they'll gossip, and gossip like that can hurt the winter season."

"You want the season to be a success even if people spread rumors about you?"

"People have all kinds of opinions about me. I'm at their disposal."

"You shouldn't be."

“I don’t see why not. It comes with the territory.”

“Don’t you ever want privacy?”

“Sometimes.”

We arrive at the end of the line, where Evie pours us two *ianke* drinks, traditional in the Winter Court. Nottuza thanks her, then turns around and stands there, scouting the seating arrangement. “Where are you sitting?”

“You mean where are we sitting?”

“I can’t stay.”

“You can.”

“I can’t. I will try to visit you tonight.”

“I’m not your whore.”

I spoke too loudly, and more than one lady gasps. Damn him. “You can’t just visit me at night. That’s not...that’s not what I want.” Might as well let it all out. Everyone heard me anyway.

Nottuza starts walking again, this time in the opposite direction from our table.

“Our table is over there.” I point.

“Are you sure you want to remain in company? You seem ready for a more private conversation.”

“I’m sure. People spent a lot of time preparing for this evening, and I must stay in attendance despite the fact this one handsome vampire is making me angry.”

“You get angry?” he teases.

“Everyone does.”

“What will you do about it?” He sighs and takes us to the table. He sits with me on his lap. I expected him to put me on the chair and walk away. Pleased he hasn’t, I wiggle on his lap, nesting my bottom, finding the perfect spot on his thighs where I’m most comfortable. There. Got it.

He notices I’ve settled and gives my bottom a firm squeeze, his gaze dropping to my breasts. They’re there for

him to look at, and I like how it takes an effort for him to look up and into my face.

“I clearly see the sea moving in your eyes. How can these people not think you’re a siren? It’s right here as plain as my wardrobe.”

He’s wearing black on black with subtle stripes on the collar that mark him as a military general. His hair is always pulled back and neatly combed, his claws manicured, his appearance severe and organized, and even when he speaks, he speaks with precision, his sentences direct and concise.

“Maybe I’m a siren only for you.”

He chuckles. “You all think too highly of yourselves, refusing to accept that a female as beautiful and charming as you might not be a fae at all. At least not full-blooded. A siren lurks inside you.” He moves my dyed blue hair and sends shivers up my neck as his cold breath touches my warm skin. He whispers, “The siren is your predatory side, the one I wish to bend to my will.”

He touches his lips to the underside of my ear.

Fates, this male turns me on.

Abruptly, Nottuza looks up, and as if dazed, I blink, needing a moment to return my attention to the people in the room.

A fae male carries his plate toward our table, and I smile politely, knowing he’s been assigned a seat with me since I uncovered a dagger on his person.

At parties, my brothers always sit with the most dangerous people in the room. This way, they can keep an eye on them.

The male glances at Nottuza, then, as if ordered, spins on his heel and turns away to find a seat elsewhere. Another male, the former clerk of the Winter Court, clearly assigned to the table with me, moves away too. A couple follows.

“What are you doing?” I ask Nottuza.

“Nothing at all.”

“If you wish to dine with me alone, perhaps you want to invite me to dinner. Right now, I must entertain, which means those fae you’re frightening away, I must reinvite to sit with me.”

“They can look at us from afar. Trust me, you’re entertaining enough just by sitting here.”

He picks up the pair of *lashi* sticks, examines them. “These are usually made of wood, aren’t they?”

“They are, but we’re dining with vampires, so glass *lashi* are more appropriate.”

He smiles. “Only you would consider that.” Using one stick, he pushes around the three items on my plate. A scallop, a piece of white fish, and rice bunched up in a tiny bite-size ball.

“Scallop first,” I tell him.

He stabs it, and I wince at the incorrect etiquette. “We use *lashi* to lift food and place it into our mouths. Gently.”

Evie, after finishing the service, grabs a seat with Winter all the way on the other side of the hall. Gah.

“I’m simply sitting here,” he says in explanation. “It’s not my problem people are scared.”

He stabs the fish and offers me a bite of stacked scallop and fish.

I lean back. “You could help.”

“How?”

“Quit stabbing the food and smile more.”

He bares his teeth, showing them to me no doubt for shock value. And I am shocked indeed, for his fangs are the longest vampire fangs I’ve ever seen. Coupled with his inflamed, red gums, he looks hungry. Is he?

My heart starts drumming, my blood heating up, my magic starting to buzz as if anticipating his bite. I touch the pulse at the side of my neck. “Oh boy.”

Nottuza squeezes my hip, and his thumb starts brushing my skin, making me wetter for him than I already am.

“You smile plenty for the two of us.” He offers me the scallop and the fish piece again.

I hold his wrist, my thumb pressing over his nonexistent pulse.

“Nottuza, are you familiar with the fae customs during the mating season?”

“Some of them, yes.”

“If you feed me and I accept so publicly, I will expect you to court me.”

He sets the *lashi* on the plate. “Ah.”

Reality splashes me like a bucket of cold water.

He won't court me. He'll never court me. If he wanted to court me, he wouldn't come to me at night as if we have something to hide, as if we're sneaking around the palace the way a queen might hide out with her general. Or worse, he thinks of me as a female available at his disposal whenever he so pleases.

Although I said I wasn't his whore in anger, I'm starting to believe he thinks of me as one. “I take as many lovers as I wish, and I make no excuses for it since my brother and many other males don't either,” I say, squaring my shoulders. “At the Summer Court, we live life to the fullest, indulging our desires with a mutual understanding between two or more people. When we share intimacy, we get what we came for in a night or a few nights, and then move on.”

“Are you seeking an arrangement with me?”

“I thought we had an understanding, but you disappeared for spans. I waited. You never showed, and that makes me feel...sad. Then, suddenly, you show up and pretend as if everything is fine, and I'm left wondering if it's me. It probably is me. It's always me. I expect to receive the same amount of attention I give. And I can give a lot of it. If you'd

only let me. Most people let me. Most people want to be heard and attended to. But you? You...”

Nottuza is not even blinking. I guess I have his attention now. “Go on,” he orders.

“I want more from you.” I touch my fingers to my lips, surprising even myself.

“You want a relationship,” he concludes.

“Yes,” I admit.

Oh boy, oh boy. I had no idea this was what I wanted from him. I’ve always wanted a relationship, but the partners were all wrong until he came around and righted it all by making me want the most “wrong” male for me of all. The Winter Court’s vampire military general.

My mother will have a good laugh when she hears about this. *My sweet barren daughter lies with a vampire. Useless seed in a useless womb. How fitting.*

The conversations start to die out, and if I thought I could get away with whispering, I was wrong. I didn’t think that, but I hoped people found their own conversations more interesting. Apparently not.

Nottuza’s gaze sweeps over the room, and he stands, picking me up with him. Using his claw, he pierces the middle of the fishtail dress and slices through it, tearing the fabric down the middle, exposing my legs.

He puts me down on the floor.

Oh my fates, this is the most humiliating moment of my life. I can never recover from this. *You shouldn’t have come here. You never think. Impulsive Fleur, always seeing only the good in people.*

“I regret to inform you that the princess is retiring for the evening.”

He interlocks our fingers and starts walking away from the table, and since he tore the bottom of my outfit, I can walk alongside him.

FLEUR



The moment we arrive at the empty hall, Nottuza grabs me and *velosis* up the stairs. He's so fast that before I can even scream from the surprise grab, he's pinning me against my bedroom door with his body, looking down at me with red eyes.

"I'm pissed, hungry, and horny, and you're the only prey in the room."

Heat I didn't think could ignite inside my body flares in my lower belly. The Summer fae rarely experience winter heats. We ovulate, but don't actually go into heat, and what I'm experiencing feels like a heat only this vampire knows how to stoke.

"You have me cornered and at your mercy," I tell him.

Nottuza bends slightly to grab the backs of my thighs so he can lift me. "You say all the right things, siren."

I wrap my legs around his waist. "Only because I wish to please you, General."

"You do please me, Fleur. You do know that, don't you?"

I shrug. "You don't come around for spans."

"I'm busy."

"Doing what?"

"Things."

"Don't leave me in the dark."

“I must.”

I look away. “This won’t work if you aren’t honest with me.”

“I’m as honest as I can be.”

I should push him away. I want to push him away, but the heat churns, my breasts growing heavier the longer he holds me, and his scent is driving me insane with lust. I reach to stroke his cheek, but he snatches my wrist and holds it above my head. I want to touch him, so I reach for his cheek with my other hand, but he does the same, trapping both my hands above my head.

“Have you been a good little siren and not gratified yourself?”

“Maybe.”

“You have. You have because you like to be controlled by me. You yearn for it, and from the moment we met, you’ve given yourself to me because something inside you, the instinct, the siren who lurks beneath the skin, the one causing chaos in your existence, has finally found a match.” He releases himself from his pants.

He holds me up effortlessly as he lines up his penis with my entrance, which is pulsing with need, my womb like a heart, contracting, pumping fluids into my channel, flooding it so the vampire can enter smoothly and his seed can make its way to my womb. Even if it won’t bear children.

The tip of him is cold, and I’m so hot, feverish even, and I want to scream for him to enter me already, but he’s hovering there, calmly dipping his head toward my mouth.

“Permission to fuck you into the door, Princess.”

“Permission granted, soldier.”

And then he enters me.

One agonizing, slow thrust that has my head tilting back and him closing the distance between our mouths and kissing me. His lips are cold, his cock is cold, his whole body might be cold, but I wouldn’t know because he’s wearing a uniform,

the abrasive material of it scraping against my inner thighs as he moves inside me, his large cock stretching me at the same time as it sates a long-lost desire for exactly this moment, for exactly this male.

I don't know what's happening to me or how I've come to crave this male as much as I do. As he fucks me and kisses me and controls my body by holding me immobile, I wish for this moment to never end. If I thought I wanted this male in my life before, now it feels like I *must* have him.

The revelation is jarring. It scares me. I moan into his mouth, then open my eyes, not realizing I've closed them. I find his eyes are closed, and it makes him even more attractive to me. He's indulging in the lover side of him. I bet he rarely indulges in anything.

This male likely sleeps with one eye open. And if not that, then at least he sleeps inside a small secured space he can control even when he sleeps.

With his eyes closed while he kisses me, he's telling me he trusts me. He's controlling my body, and that pleases him as much as it pleases me.

Lazily, he lifts his eyelids.

His eyes blaze red, and he pulls back, blinking.

"Phew, I almost got lost inside you," he says.

"That's the idea, soldier. Surrender to the pleasure."

He starts fucking me harder, his eyes almost glowing. "I can't surrender. It's not in me."

Our bodies are banging against the door, and he's so deep inside me, stroking places I never thought existed as pleasure points, making my channel undulate and milk him for seed.

"You will come with me," he says. "Not before, not after, at the same time."

Unsure I can hold off, I bite my lip.

Nottuza starts slamming into me, moving fast, creating friction. I want to come, but can't because he owns my

pleasure. But I can beg, and so I do.

I beg for him to let us both release, experience pleasure, surrender to each other.

“Come with me,” he says, and thrusts into me, releasing his seed at the same time that I scream, the heat ball that’s churning in my lower belly dropping and exploding into the most delirious orgasm I’ve ever experienced.

We’re panting. He’s still pinning me against the door, so I rest my cheek against his chest. “Thank you, General. May I have another?”

NOTTUZA



The princess's uneven breathing tickles my neck as she looks up at me with the blue eyes a fairy simply can't possess. I know this because Br'ar's eyes are said to resemble the moving seas, and she, much like Fleur, seduced males with a single look.

If she sang, they were doomed.

Until she fell in love with the male who broke her heart.

I wonder when I will break Fleur's. Perhaps tonight or tomorrow morning, when she realizes what's happened in this court. For now, I simply wish to enjoy her attentions, especially the attention of her fine pussy that keeps milking my shaft even though I've come already. Her channel doesn't let my shaft rest, but holds it in its grip while Fleur politely asks for more.

I release her hands and, still holding her against me, move us onto her bed, where I remain between her thighs.

Fleur reaches for my hair band, but I snatch her wrists and force them above her head.

"Let your hair down, General."

The message that I should relax doesn't escape me. "I don't think so."

"Let me touch you. You touch me plenty." She pouts.

I squeeze her bottom and kiss her pouty mouth. As I start moving inside her again, her heartbeat picks up and starts thudding in my ears. The noise feels strange, probably because

we're connected with our bodies. It's almost as if I hear her heart beating inside my chest.

I've not heard a beating heart inside my body since my nocturno life started. It's slightly alarming. But also new and different, and the kind of excitement I could get used to.

I could also get used to her warmth, her curves, her bottom, her breasts, even her soft cheeks that I like kissing occasionally. Not more than I like kissing her mouth. Or her moist pussy.

"You're cute. I wish to savor you." For longer than one night, I add in my head.

"I will make you a deal."

I stop moving inside her and prop up on my elbows.

Under me, she lifts her hips, protesting my stopping and burying me inside her to the hilt.

My eyes almost roll to the back of my head. "Anything you want." The moment it comes out of my mouth, I pinch my lips. "Fleur, no magic." She's trying to manipulate me.

"Gah, how can you resist?"

I peck her lips. "I'm annoying that way. The deal?"

I'm sure Fleur excels at negotiating agreements in her favor. Which I find challenging while buried inside her warm channel. Having her under me means I have little to no care in the world if the deal she wants will be to my disadvantage. I only want whatever she wants.

I growl. "No magic."

She giggles, clearly enjoying herself. "Tell me how you can resist."

"I just can. What's the deal?"

"I will tell you where the male got the dagger from"—she pauses when she senses my body going taut—"if you let me touch you."

"You will tell me where the dagger comes from anyway."

“I would, yes, but you’ve given me little to hold on to, and I desperately want to hold on to more. Don’t you get it?”

“Get what?”

“What’s happening to me.”

“You seem fine. Are you ill?”

She shakes her head and cups my face. “I’m falling in love with you, General.”

After a lengthy pause, I say, “I see.”

I didn’t plan for this. Is there a strategy for how to conquer this moment? Because I’m sure to destroy this bit of goodness I came across when I snatched the princess from the garden of her court and tasted her blood. Coincidence? Only if one believes in them. Connectedness is more like it.

“You see? Oh good, because I need you to see. See me. More often, in fact. Preferably every span during the winter season, because I’m sure you’ve sent me into heat and now I’ll need you to service me. Before you say anything as ridiculous as *I see*, let me tell you that I require service from you and no other, so that now you’re stuck with me. Also, I require touching. Lots of touching. Your hair, face, mouth, ears—”

I interrupt. “Ears?”

“Mmhm. They’re round. I want to run my finger over the curve.”

“They’re not as round as you think.” I take her slender forefinger and move it to the top of my ear. I press down.

Fleur gasps, blue eyes widening in delight. “Your fae point is still there! But how?”

“The point is a piece of cartilage that disappears when the fae dies.”

“I had no idea.”

“It tells me you’ve never been with a vampire before.”

Fleur sighs. “Maybe.”

“Because they’re beneath you?”

“Because I wasn’t interested in one before.”

“But they’re in the service of the fae in your court.”

“Some of them, yes. We provide shelter for many vampires, and they provide services in return. It’s not the way you paint it to be.”

“It is, but it’s been that way since long before you were born.”

“I fail to see how it’s any different from what you’re doing here. You’re in service to Aamako.”

“I’m happy you see it that way.”

“Which way is it?” she asks now, wiggling under me as if trying to move away. I’m not ready to end this night, because it’s likely to be all I’ll have with her. She’s falling in love with me, she said.

Sirens indulge themselves in pleasure, not love. She’ll forget me as soon as she departs the court. I’m the ass who’ll be left with memories of her I can’t erase, so I better make them the best I’ve ever had, for this court’s winters are long.

I release my hair. It cascades down my shoulders and, like a black curtain, envelops our faces.

My siren growls as she thrust her hands into my hair and starts rubbing until she makes a mess of it. She tells me where the dagger came from then lifts her hips, demanding I fuck her more.

Apparently, I agreed to her deal.

“Your dick is perfectly straight,” she says from her position, which is kneeling between my legs with her face level with my dick, which she’s holding up with both hands. The way she grips my shaft makes me think she’s staking her claim. Reminds me of a younger me on the battlefield riding a horse to the top of a hill and jabbing our banner into the ground so

that the fae would know that village or town had been conquered.

“I mean,” she continues, “it’s no shocker given how straight and narrow you are, but still, to not have even a bit of a curve is shocking.”

The princess is playful. I’m indulging all her whims and, frankly, enjoying myself in the process. Who knew life could be this much careless fun? “I’m not narrow.”

“Not in the shoulders.”

“Or in mind,” I say.

“Debatable.” She licks from the base of my shaft to the top, then lingers there before opening her mouth and swallowing the entire length.

I hiss at her.

She moves her head up and down and chokes on me, all the while watching me, those blue eyes as clear as any seas I’ve ever seen. If I fist her hair, I might force her to move too fast, and I don’t want her to move fast. I want her to use whatever pace she sets to please me, because Fleur is made to please.

She knows exactly what I like and how I like it. I’ve never fucked or been fucked like this in my life. Granted, I hardly remember having sex, but I’m sure it wasn’t this good.

When I start growling, getting impatient while she’s toying with me, she cups my balls and weighs them in her small hand. As if that’s not arousing enough, she releases her mating scent that, as she’s come to figure out over the course of the night, makes me more aggressive, makes me fuck her harder.

There are red marks on her bottom and the backs of her thighs, claw cuts on her arms from where I held her, and a bruise is already forming on her left hip from when I squeezed too hard.

I’m not a gentle lover.

Good thing my siren isn’t interested in gentle.

Still, I control my response to her, measure each touch, afraid I'll hurt her. Meanwhile, her mating scent is muddling my brain and, like a drug, makes me want to let go, loosen up, lose myself in her.

“Surrender to the pleasure,” she says.

I'm close to coming. Fuck, she undoes me. Should I give in to the pleasure? I want to, I have to, I need to, I must. Warning bells about her magic sweeping inside my head sound, but they're so far away that I ignore them easily.

When I close my eyes and release myself into her mouth, the siren mentally takes me away.

I'm knee-deep in the sea. The sun heats my shoulders, but doesn't burn my skin. I look up at it and squint, shielding my eyes.

Something's hitting my leg.

I look down and pick up a seashell. It's large and reminds me of the seashells Fleur wore over her breasts this evening.

“Fleur!” someone calls from the shore. A dark-haired female dressed in a black corset and a black leather skirt stomps over the sand in her leather boots. An Unseelie fae. I gather this is Fleur's mother, former queen Demina.

She reaches the two kids playing in the sand. One of them is a beautiful blond boy who looks like Fleur. This must be the Summer prince, El'jah. The other is dark haired, but just as beautiful, and looks like the mother. This is her oldest brother, Et'enne.

Fleur's in the water, and she dunks as the former queen levels her with a glare. “Get out of the water, girl.”

El'jah leaps up and stands with his fists at his sides. “Leave her alone!” he shouts.

“If I have to go in there to get you, I'll cut off your tail.”

Fleur crawls onto the shore, her big blue eyes filled with tears, her golden siren tail reflecting the light.

El'jah argues with the mother while the oldest scoops up the siren and starts carrying her away. Over his shoulder, Fleur looks at me and mouths, Help me.

The vision collapses, and I return to the present.

Propped on my elbows, I'm fucking her while her hands hold my face. She looks worried.

"Nottuza, Nottuza." She rubs my face, and I notice the sweat accumulating on my forehead.

I lean on one arm and grab a sheet with the other to wipe my forehead. I rarely perspire. This sweat isn't from physical but rather mental exhaustion as my subconscious fought the siren's power. If I had surrendered, she would have kept me there, in her world, or rather, her memories, for as long as she pleased.

Anger rises, and I growl, but the way Fleur looks at me, all innocence and genuine concern, I'm certain she has no idea what just occurred. And while my power lies in manipulating memories, I didn't initiate this contact. Only a fool initiates mental games with a siren of this much magic.

Inside Fleur, however, the siren part of her is suppressed, hidden, imprisoned even, and since I can reach her with my power, it's possible that she wants to be let out. She wants me to help her, but before I do that, I must ensure Fleur's well-being. The last thing I want to do is hurt the princess.

If I were less selfish, I wouldn't have slept with her, but I'm not. I took her body as the most generous offering.

"Are you back?" she asks.

I smile, although if I had a heart, it would be breaking. Good thing I have no heart, for it would just become another enemy I'd have to destroy on my way to reclaiming vampire power in the fae-dominated world.

"I never left."

"Liar." She thrusts her hands into my hair again. She makes a mess of it. Again. And giggles, pleased with herself.

“You are handsomest when you’re coming. I want to watch you come all the time.”

Her channel squeezes my cock, and I groan as I grow thick and hard inside her again. Before fucking her more, I glance out the window, gauging how much time I have left.

Not much.

Better make the best of it.

NOTTUZA



Facing each other, we're lying on our sides.

Fleur is slipping into sleep, which lets me watch her in silence and allows me time to disassociate from this caring side she seems to evoke from deep inside me.

The bright moon shines through the window and illuminates the curve of her perfect body.

I run a claw over the hill of her hip and the dip of her slender waist, then over her arm, where I pause to take her hand and flip it over. I swipe my thumb over the inside of her wrist and bare my fangs, then pause, realizing I want her to offer herself to me so I don't have to sip her blood here and there and live in a perpetual state of hunger.

I snarl and drop her wrist, leaping out of bed before the idea of staying tangled up with her past dawn wins. If I stayed, I would jeopardize the lives of the people I promised to protect just so I could fuck the very cute fairy who will, eventually, dump me like she dumps dresses she deems out of style.

And that's if I'm lucky and Fleur no longer wants me.

If she wants me, the siren could entrap me in her world and keep me there for as long as she pleases, while out here in the real world, I'd be nothing more than a drooling vegetable.

I could spend my entire existence under the siren's spell.

Standing by her bed, I reach into the nightstand where I know she keeps my toy soldiers. There's a princess toy in there among the soldiers. I pick it up and run a thumb over the

pregnant belly before pocketing the figurine and taking out a soldier, then close the drawer.

I break off the toy soldier's head and leave the two pieces on the nightstand.

FLEUR



Yawning, I wake up like a kitten near her mother's belly. Warm and feeling safe, the waning sun heating my body this evening. The sun and the moon are next to each other.

Two opposites that, when put together, form a beautiful sight.

They remind me of Nottuza and me. Two very different people mating.

I don't reach across the bed, because I know he's not here. Vampires don't rest in places they deem insecure. He probably started the obsession with secure resting places, and now every nocturno has it in their blood.

I'm sure he left right after I fell asleep last night.

I wonder where he sleeps and what his bedchamber looks like. Perhaps some span, he will trust me enough to show me his private quarters.

Likely they are catacombs.

I laugh at the thought, then rise from bed. The moment I step onto my bare feet, liquid trickles out of me. I sniff. It's his seed. Smiling as I recall last night and the many times he came inside me, I think there's no wonder I'm full of his seed.

As I pass the mirror, I pause and examine my many bruises.

Oh, this winter season is starting out fantastic. "Woohoo!"

As I do my business and wash my face, I think about commissioning more short dresses and also trying to reach out to an elven tribe one last time about the heating arrangements. I want to heat the palace so that females can wear revealing clothes, even bathing suits, indoors if they so wish. And I do so wish.

I also wouldn't mind another pool area. A large one for a gathering and even hosting parties.

I remember Nottuza mentioning dragon fire, and while it's unlikely dragons will accept paid positions in the Winter Court, they might if I ask them. They might if they're invited for mating.

Thinking of mating takes me back to Nottuza and how even though he never said he's falling in love with me, I don't regret telling him I love him. Not even slightly, for I've never been this close to falling for any one male, and the feeling of having my heart full of love when I think of him is worth all the turns I spent searching for this very emotion.

Falling in love is riveting, an experience like none other, and I love the feeling of loving him. To be sure, he's a difficult male to love, but I could never fall for a male who came to me easily. Nottuza holds his own, and in bed, he controls me. Fucking him is wonderful. I can hardly wait until he wakes up tonight and we do it again and again, because he sure as heck is mine for the season.

Because he spoiled me with his big dick and endurance, he'll have to keep spoiling me all winter long. Perhaps more than a winter. Perhaps he would like to spoil me forever.

Oh boy.

I sit on the bed and grab a pillow, bringing it to my chest as if it's Nottuza's firm behind. I squeeze and wonder if the bite I left on his bottom remains.

He never bit me, though. But if he had, I wouldn't have minded. A male must eat too.

Food.

I'm hungry.

I put on my slippers and wince as my toe bumps into something hard inside the shoe. I invert the slipper, and a small object falls out and rolls across the floor.

It's round and wooden and looks like the head of the toy soldier Nottuza used to leave on my nightstand. I glance over to see the soldier's body lies there. I pick up the body and the head and throw them into the dresser, then walk outside, where the silence is as deadly as the dread accumulating in my belly.

We're not fully staffed yet, and the staff we have is busy at this hour, setting up breakfast around the pool area. There's nobody here, and it appears that nobody has been here since we left for the masked ball downstairs.

My white dress still hangs on the portable rack.

"Hello?" I call out as I grab the first thick jacket within reach and head toward the staircase.

I button up the jacket and realize from the smell that it's Nottuza's. Just wearing his jacket makes me more comfortable with the silence in the tower.

I peek down the spiral staircase and note the shadows from the bottom of the tower have traveled all the way to the upper floors.

"Are you all setting up shadow portals?" I ask nobody in particular.

The shadows retreat as if something sucked them back to the bottom.

A loud bang on a large drum sounds.

I scream at the top of my lungs and run back into the pool area, slamming the doors behind me.

Another bang sounds.

At the third one, I try to calm my erratically beating heart so I can hear what's happening, but the hammering in my ears is too loud.

I breathe slowly and focus on calming myself while stretching my hearing out past the door and down the staircase.

My magic stirs, also reaching out, seeking people. As expected, I find a large group of them downstairs.

“There you are,” I say, and head for the door.

It locked behind me, but I unlock it and exit.

The journey downstairs is as pleasant as it was when I descended with Winter. This time around, however, I’m skipping steps, curiosity propelling me forward despite the warning bells going off in my head.

Nottuza wouldn’t let anything bad happen to me, not like my family would.

I pause. *Where did that come from?*

My family would never let anything bad happen to me either. My brother, the king, would protect me with his life.

Frowning at my wayward thoughts, I reach the bottom stairs, where fae males wearing the same kind of jacket I’m wearing zip past me and across the lower floors, disappearing into the shadows. A male climbs from the bottom steps on my right and pauses to lace his boots. They’re new, as is his uniform.

I recognize the uniform. It’s the same one from the toy soldier inside my drawer.

“Hey,” I say, but he doesn’t seem to hear or even see me. After lacing up his boots, he sprints into the shadows, the same shadows Nottuza walked out of yesterday.

More males and even two females, both of whom I recognize, climb from somewhere below and rush into the moving shadows. Alone on the floor, I have two choices. Run after them, or climb back upstairs and wait for someone, anyone, preferably the handsome general who will punish all the Unseelie fae for this game they’re playing with me right now.

I pick the shadows.

Even though I hate them. My mother used to travel with them and has taught my brothers and me to use them. We

don't often, though, because Unseelie portals make our skin crawl.

As I step near the shadows, they recoil as if they won't offer to transport me, but they're not sentient, so someone is controlling this method of travel.

"You will let me pass," I demand.

The shadows still for a moment, then crawl over the floor. Before they have a chance to grab me and suck me into the unpleasant vortex, I step over them. I still get sucked into the vortex, though, and once the trip ends, I materialize someplace with dim lights behind a large group of fae all dressed in uniforms.

They're crowding in front of the tall doors, pushing to get into a room with red lights. As I move aside and let the eager fae pass, I spot the fae who brought the dagger last night.

"Hey," I whisper as if I'm doing something wrong.

He doesn't respond.

When I grab his elbow, he tugs away and pushes his way through the people.

I wait until they're all inside, and as the last person walks in, I follow them.

The room is round, with pulsing red engravings in the old fae language carved into the walls. The magic in the room creates an invisible barrier I struggle to push through. It's a form of ward, and since only our military knows how to use wards in these modern times, I have no idea what I'm walking into.

My steps are heavy, as if the magic in the ward doesn't want me to enter but has to allow it at the same time. I push through the threshold as if walking through knee-high mud. Once inside, I slide against the wall, remaining as quiet as a mouse. I'm not supposed to be here, that much is clear.

High ceilings with chains hanging from them tell me the space might have been used or is used as a torture chamber.

Why anyone would need such a large torture chamber is puzzling. Nottuza would know, I bet.

The fae are all dressed in the same clothes, military uniforms, to be precise. They appear to know where they're going, some stopping at designated spots and others maybe searching for theirs.

Near me is a bench.

I stand on it to get a better view.

Drawn on the floors are three concentric circles the fae are filling and once the circles are full of people and everyone stops moving, I get a better look at them. They all have red eyes now. Wha...

I gasp and crouch as Ledger, followed by Leroy, walks in. They move straight through the crowds. I try to make myself smaller as I realize I'm alone in the vampire den.

Quite literally.

Something terrible happened to these fae last night.

Oh my fates. I frantically search for Evie's face, and when I don't find her or spot the shape of her body among the people with their backs to me, I start cataloging the faces I do recognize.

"Good morning, three hundred," Ledger says in that firm, loud way Commander D'Artaron would greet his soldiers.

Three hundred? The story about the iron bench and the vampire who made three hundred dead fae into vampires comes to mind. I'm so scared.

"Good morning, Lieutenant," the people answer as one.

"It's good to see you all awake before twilight," Leroy says.

"Yes, sir."

"Are you ready for your undead life?"

"Yes, sir."

Wind brushes past me, and Nottuza appears in the center of the group. Magic pulses off the walls and congests the atmosphere. It's such powerful magic that I can see it forming red clouds in the air.

Nottuza cuts his palm, and the magical clouds burst like balloons, dispersing blood to the vampires, whose heads snap up, mouths opening to receive the drops. The newly made vampires swallow loudly.

"Congratulations." Nottuza's voice, raspy and deep, stokes my desires still. I want to leave, but I can't. I must stay and spy on their intent. This event is... I don't know what this event means. I don't know what he's planning. I can only hope it's not another coup against Aamako, because Nottuza won't survive it. Aamako will kill him and destroy everyone in this room.

Maybe even me if he thinks I'm involved.

But Augusta sent me to this court. Why would she if she knew I would get hurt? Because she's looking after her Unseelie court ruled by her Unseelie husband and the baby she has on the way. Maybe I'm a pawn.

Or maybe I'm only a pawn to Nottuza. Augusta, while seeing all that'll come to pass, is not the all-seeing.

The traitors wouldn't have arrived in the court if I hadn't invited them. Nottuza used me to draw these people here and then turn them into vampires, most certainly against the rules of the houses and even our fae laws on how nocturnos are made. He's broken every law in the lands. If I report this to my brother, Et'enne'll kill him.

If I report this to the Unseelie king, Aamako will have to kill him. Oh! I bet Aamako stayed away from the court, knowing Nottuza follows his ancient principles that dictate the ways he exercises his power, which he intends to impose whether we like it or not.

But he's risking his life!

I yank off his jacket and throw it on the floor, then stomp out of the horrifying room with the dreadful magic wielded by

a vampire who could've consulted with me. If he'd consulted me, I could've found another way, one that would minimize the risk to his person.

When I step into the shadows, they wrap around me like a familiar lover.

Nottuza must be controlling this portal in the same way he controlled every one of those vampires inside the room. The vampires can wipe minds and manipulate each other, but not on this scale.

I think Nottuza wields magic. I don't believe his magic left him when he was made. I think he's as powerful as any king. The difference between him and the fae kings is that the fae can't sense his magical power, so they have no clue what they're dealing with.

The shadows gently deposit me on my floor, and I wait for them to retreat before deciding what do to.

FLEUR



I storm into Evie's room and jump onto her bed, shaking her. "Evie, wake up."

She doesn't move.

I flip her onto her back. "Evie!" I shout. "Wake up!"

I press my ear to her chest. Her heart beats steady and strong, and she's making subtle noises that sound suspiciously like snoring.

"Evie?" I sit up on her bed and take a good look at her. She's in her pajamas and her face is serene, as if she's dreaming pleasantly. I look around her room, and my gaze lands on a pale green tea.

I walk to the reading nook by the window and sniff the tea, but can't detect any signs of tranquilizer herbs. I know most of them by scent, if not by scent, by taste, so I dip a finger in the tea, then flick the liquid with the tip of my tongue. I rub it against the roof of my mouth.

The tea tastes fine.

I leave her room and check other rooms, where I find the fairies who settled in the tower sleeping as well. Oh no, and my staff!

I rush down a few more steps and find the staff in their quarters, all sleeping. Unlike the highborns, they're not in their beds, but rather sleeping at their stations. In the kitchen on the tables, the stools leaning against the walls, hats over their faces as they snore loudly. In the corner by the kitchen, a

mama hunting dog is curled up with three puppies. All sleeping.

I check the puppies and make sure they're alive. They are.

"It seems I'm the only fae left awake in the tower," I say to the mother and pat her head softly.

"You are," a deadly dark voice says from behind me.

I jump and sprint into the kitchen, all the way to the other side, stopping by the back exit. I try the door, but it's locked, so I plaster my body against the wall between the door and the counter. Quickly, I scan the counter.

Nottuza leans against the doorjamb.

His long, straight, dark hair drapes over the front of his unbuttoned jacket. The white shirt under the uniform jacket is opened all the way to the navel.

I pick up a huge butcher knife. "Stay away from me."

He doesn't appear threatened. In fact, he pushes off the doorjamb and steps into the kitchen, but I make a jabbing move as if I'll stab him if he comes closer. He stops and lifts his hands, a smirk playing on his lips. "Put the weapon down. You'll cut yourself."

"Oh, fuck you." I squeeze the handle tighter.

"You did fuck me, and it was fun."

I pull back my arm and throw the blade.

Nottuza's speed makes it effortless for him to avoid the knife, which bounces off the stone wall and clatters to the ground.

Turning, he stares at it and then at me. "Where did you learn how to throw like that?"

"My commander taught me."

Nottuza's eyes narrow, and he scrunches up his nose, then picks up the knife and sets it on the large center island where the staff do most of the prep work.

“For the purpose of clarity, are we talking about the commander of the Summer fae armies?” he asks.

“We are.”

“Is he one of your lovers?”

“Maybe.” Ha! Not even close.

“If I severed his head, would that sever your relationship with him?”

“It would sever my relationship with you.”

Nottuza purses his lips. “Does that mean we still have one?”

NOTTUZA



The Summer princess is very beautiful when she wakes up.

Her voluptuous golden hair sticks out every which way, and seeing her without makeup and other glitz makes me feel like I've seen intimate parts of her, ones she won't show publicly so people can't hurt her. And she's hurting now because of what I did.

My instincts claw at me.

I want to comfort her, hug her, become a blanket of safety for her, but since she's upset, she might grab another knife and stab me in the heart. It wouldn't kill me, but it would cause me pain and would disable me for a while.

I can't afford such weakness at this time.

"If you're not going to make me a vampire or say something about those nocturnos downstairs and about the sleeping fae upstairs, and the staff here and elsewhere in the tower, then I don't know why you're here." She pulls back her shoulders. "I'm not afraid of you, vampire. If you end me to cover up whatever you're planning, I'll hunt you in the shadows. Mark my words, I'll curse your cause and nip at you every chance I get."

Her vengeful anger turns me on. I step farther into the kitchen, take off my jacket, and fold it neatly over the back of the chair at the end of the island. My pressed white shirt is wrinkled, but I don't want to make it dirty, so I look around

the kitchen until I find a chef. He's over by the sink, sleeping on his feet. I put on his apron and one of those tall white hats.

Fleur is still standing by the pantry.

I tap the chair where I put my jacket. "Have a seat."

"I'd rather stand."

"Childish petulance won't help our adult conversation."

"Maybe you should spank me and see if I'll behave better."

"I will!" I shout.

Fleur's eyes widen.

Shocked I'd lost my composure, I clear my throat. "Please have a seat so that I can explain."

Fleur huffs and walks to the chair. Before sitting down, she snatches up my jacket and hangs it on the coat hanger by the entrance.

I smile. She's figured out that I use my jacket to mark my territory. I want her near me or my belongings so that when males approach her, they'll be reminded that I'm interested in the princess.

She sits at the island, her back to the door, which tells me she trusts I'll watch the door and defend her from whatever intrudes upon our space. It's an intuitive move on her part, one a calculating soldier such as myself notices.

Near her is a basket of the fresh-picked vegetables the lycan boats delivered. Near it are the glass *lashi* eating sticks that the staff were polishing.

The princess pulls up her hair and creates a messy bun at the top of her head, securing it with a pair of *lashi*. Her long, slender neck is exposed, and since she's excited, her arteries throb, begging me to bite.

My gums become inflamed.

Nobody uses the power of seduction the way she does. Nobody. If she even senses I'm responding to her body, she'll use it to get me to do whatever she wants whether she's

conscious of using it or not. And I must keep my wits about me.

The challenge she presents excites me.

I grab a skillet and weigh it in my hand. “Katshi over there”—I nod in the direction of the chef—“never lets anyone who doesn’t belong in the kitchen inside the space.”

I glance at her and read the subtle leaning of her body toward me. She wants to listen. Despite everything, she’s curious. Always curious, my siren.

“The magic downstairs doesn’t allow visitors either. It should’ve warded you off. I’m puzzled why you were allowed inside.”

“I’m special,” she says in an even tone, telling me she doesn’t believe it.

“No doubt.”

“It was a joke,” she clarifies.

I shrug. “It is a fact. You are a siren with magic as powerful as Br’ar’s tho, I presume, during your lifetime, people have clipped your tail in a manner of speaking. Having a siren in line for the throne threatens the fae.”

“I’m not a siren.”

“You are.”

“Fine. But who are you?”

“I was one of the hunters in our fairy tribe.” I place the skillet on the stove and check the firewood, making sure I add logs before drizzling oil into the pan.

“One morning, during a particularly harsh winter, our hunting party ventured farther than usual to look for food, and I came across what I thought was a large bear. I chased the bear for the entire span and finally, near nighttime, threw my spear as he was on the run. Miraculously, I speared him through the heart. When I rushed to retrieve my kill, I flipped him over and realized it wasn’t a bear. It was a fae male wearing bear fur.”

I watch Fleur for a reaction, and her wide blue eyes practically beg me to continue.

“How do you like your eggs?” I ask.

“Hm?” She blinks.

I repeat the question.

“I eat parboiled eggs.”

“That’s not what I asked. What you eat and what you like are different.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’m guessing. Tell me how you like your eggs.”

“Scrambled.”

“Plain?” I doubt it.

“With cheese, bacon, and mushroom.” She grabs a mushroom from the basket and tosses it at me.

I catch it and grab the other ingredients.

While breaking the eggshell on the edge of a mixing bowl, I continue the story. “Once I realized the male came from a different tribe and his murder could cause us problems, I gathered up the body and tried to prepare it for burial. Our tribal leader found me and ordered me to leave the male where I killed him. I argued, but an order is an order, and I obeyed.”

I scramble the eggs in a bowl and pour them into the skillet. The sizzling and the aroma remind me why the living prefer to eat cooked food. They get to combine different flavors and scents, creating meals to their liking, not just settling for whichever animal they managed to seize in the forest.

The living also socialize during meals.

And they court their lovers.

I’m trying to do all those things with Fleur now so that she’ll hate me a little less.

“That night, I couldn’t sleep. Not only because we returned empty-handed so I was hungry, but also because it was my

first time ending a fae life, and I wanted to release the fae male into the afterlife. During the night, I returned to the body, but the male had gone. I followed tracks to his tribe, where I saw our tribal leader chatting with the elders of his tribe.”

“Uh-oh,” Fleur says.

I transfer the eggs onto a plate and serve her.

Even as her belly growls, she pushes the plate away.

“You asked me to court you,” I tell her.

“I changed my mind.”

“No, you haven’t. Eat.”

She huffs and looks away.

I scrub my face. “Please have a meal, for you haven’t eaten since yester breakfast.” I know because I watch her. What she eats, wears, how she sleeps and who she talks to. I know how she fucking breathes.

“I can’t accept your courting, Nottuza, not after what you’ve done.”

“You don’t know what I’ve done.”

“So tell me.”

“I’m trying, but you keep interrupting me.”

She blinks, then realizes I was making a joke. Smiling, she shakes her head. “Go on, General. What happened?”

“I was outnumbered so I ran back and told my mother, who didn’t believe me. She told the leader, and he sent his sons, Ledger and Leroy, after me. I ran away. You see, three different tribes were trying to settle on the same piece of land, and our leader set me up to make it look as if I’d started a tribal war so that the other two tribes would unite. Which they did, and slaughtered us all.”

“But you fled.”

“Oh, I went back for my little brother.” I tap my claw on the table. “I arrived at the tail end of the conflict and walked

into my house to find my mother already dead. I thought my brother was too, and I lost it and went after the leader.”

“Who defeated you.”

I nod. “Mmhm. He did, but my death was only the beginning of a great long life, and I owe it all to a boy.”

“Your brother was the first fae with undead magic.”

“Yes. The moral of the story is, for the undead, this is a new beginning. A chance at life they didn’t get while they were fae. And if I told you about it, you would have done what my mother did. Gone to the current authorities, which are the houses and your brother and even Aamako.” I lean in. “There is a shift in vampire power. Out with the old, in with the older. When you speak with your brother king, tell him I expect him to accept the obvious winner.”

“If you manage to unite the houses...” She swallows, finally understanding. “Nottornos are many, and if they all come together in this Court, the Winter Court will change.”

“We were born here, at the juncture of these rivers, in the freezing cold of the deadlands, and we will rise here again. Undead among the living. All I want is to secure the space for the Undead magic to thrive.”

“And for that, you needed bait. I was the perfect bait.”

I nod. “I would like to make it up to you.”

“You can’t.”

“I’ll try anyway. I can be terribly stubborn.”

“Stop being so charming all of a sudden.”

I smirk. “Your eggs are getting cold.”

“Why are the people in the tower sleeping?”

“They’re sleeping so I can spend some time with you.”

Her blue eyes widen and her jaw slackens. “Pardon?”

“Fleur, but for a few moments in any given span and when you sleep, you’re around people. Everyone is competing either for your attention or your good graces, and you indulge them

and make decisions for them and arrange this and that for them. Since you've said you're falling in love with me, I thought I could steal you for a night so that I could indulge you. For once."

"You want to indulge someone?"

"Not someone. Not anyone besides you."

She stands and curtsies, a measure of polite society. She plasters on one of those public smiles that I'm sure is sincere, but I dislike it directed at me. I want something private from her, something only for me.

"If you would be so kind as to awaken Evie so that we can depart, my brother, the Summer king would reward you with support should you win the impending vampire war."

"Fleur, let me court you tonight."

She shakes her head.

"I'll wipe the minds of everyone. Nobody will ever know you were here. They won't know you invited them. Your reputation will remain pristine."

"Thank you. I appreciate that."

"Fleur, I ask for tonight."

Tears start clouding her eyes. "But tonight isn't enough. Can't you see?"

I run a hand through my hair. "This is all I can give you. I'm bound by night and by undead magic. I can never see the sun, never tan on a boat with you, would hate living in the Summer Court because the nights are short, couldn't even live in the Summer Court without killing half the population, including your brothers. Maybe not both, but your king and I couldn't coexist in the same place for more than an evening."

"I could live here with you. I'll set up a portal and travel."

He shakes his head. "I can't allow portals."

"Well, we can't be enemies, Nottuza. I have friends in this court. Look at all these lovely people I met that you put to sleep."

“Even if we court each other for the entire season, in the end, I can’t give you a child, Fleur. I can’t fulfill the vital duty required of royal bloodlines. And the kind of magic you hold is an asset to your people. It should be reproduced and celebrated.”

“I’m barren.”

“Untrue.”

She heads toward the exit. “I’m leaving.”

I use my speed to materialize in front of her. “You’re not the only siren born to fae parents. There were others. In most cases, the fae parents turned the child over to the merfolk. With you, they found a way to hide your tail, and by doing so, tampered with your siren nature. It affected your fertility.”

“I have long ago made peace with the fact I’m never having kids. This is cruel. Even for you. Why are you doing this?”

“Because you deserve better than what I can offer you.”

“My heart doesn’t care about your honorable motivations. Your merit is stupid. I hate it!”

“Fuck.” I run a hand through my hair again. “You make me want to tear out my hair.”

“That makes two of us. Let me pass, soldier.”

The way she said “soldier” is meant to put me in my place. A power move on her part. I step aside, and she practically marches out of the kitchen.

“Your brother knows,” I say.

She’s still walking away. “My brother loves me and would never hurt me.”

“He didn’t do it to hurt you. He did it to keep you. Ask him. Better yet, ask your mother.”

Fleur turns, and her magic wraps around my body and tugs me toward her.

I don't resist, and climb the last few steps to her. As I face her now, we're almost at the same height.

"My mother is not available for asking," Fleur says. "She's hiding."

"Make her come out of hiding. Summon her."

She huffs. "You think it's easy. I don't even know where she is, how far away. I don't know where to start. Nobody trained me on... I can't."

"I told you I'll help you with your magic, and I have. Summon her. Get your answers. Live the life you were born to live." I step back and bow, waiting for her to offer me her hand, but she never does.

She simply climbs the stairs.

Fleur will go on and mend her heart quickly.

Trouble is, I doubt I will.

FLEUR



Nottuza released the fae from the sleeping spell.

None the wiser, they moved on with their lives.

After finding out my family hid things from me, I retreated from the Golden Palace and moved into a small village farmhouse nestled in the mountains of the Summer Court. It's June's old home, where her sister Julie lives.

It's secluded and quiet and just what I need after confronting three powerful and important males in my life. My brothers fessed up and confirmed that Nottuza spoke the truth.

One night, a merman caught sight of me swimming with my tail, but before he could report it to his people, El'jah, who was with me at the time, silenced the male by erasing the male's desire to tell anyone. He told Et'enne and my older brother whispered into the mermale's mind so that the male thought he dreamed it.

But my brothers knew it wouldn't last.

My parents, who were both powerful and who had spies everywhere in the court, found out about the sighting. They also knew they couldn't silence or control all the merfolk that could come upon me when I secretly swam as a siren. But they didn't turn me over to the merfolk right away.

At first, they forbade me from swimming with a tail, but I was too young, and controlling my nature was impossible, so they forbade me from visiting the beach or the pools or any bodies of water since I only presented as a siren on the bottom half and while in water. I did not have gills or other merfolk

characteristics, but my parents seemed to think those could develop if I swam more.

A few cycles after that, I was becoming weaker and weaker, until I fell sick in bed with no energy to even walk. Nobody knew what was wrong, except, according to El'jah, my parents. They knew that sirens needed water, but wouldn't let me in the water, thinking the sickness would pass. When the healers didn't know how to help me, my parents decided to call the merfolk.

They didn't have a choice. Their child was getting sicker by the span.

My brothers fought against calling in the merfolk, and in their struggle to overpower my very powerful parents, who didn't want a conflict with merfolk, my brothers violated the boundaries of nature.

The night before the messenger to the merfolk was sent out, El'jah unleashed his magic. It was a magic of desire, and every male and female out there had something they wanted or needed. He tampered with my parents first, then he moved on to Et'enne, who worked his *voca* magic on me.

He locked away the siren parts of me.

The ones Nottuza freed.

When I asked my brothers why they never told me about my siren half, they said it was because they feared it would disable whatever magic Et'enne set up. As I grew, the part of Et'enne's magic inside my head grew with me and became so interwoven with me that Et'enne feared that undoing the lock would damage me.

For all their faults, my brothers had no idea it could impact my fertility. We still don't know for sure if that's the case, and I'm not interested in testing it. Certainly not when a certain vampire who can't have kids either keeps visiting me.

I'm sure Nottuza thinks I'm unaware of his nightly visits, because he doesn't leave toy soldiers on my nightstand and because he's a savvy shadow user, but the scent of crushed

lavender in the small room of a farmhouse in a village nestled among the trees in the Summer Court is unmistakably his.

“It comforts me, you know,” I say out loud.

“What does?” Evie asks from across the table while using a small wooden spoon for stirring honey into her tea.

“Smelling him every morning. Knowing he’s coming around.”

June and Augusta’s sister Julie turns away from the sink and wipes her hands on an orange apron. “Is it just me who finds the most powerful nocturno creeping around my house a little scary?”

“Not just you,” Evie says.

Julie sets a large metal bowl of potatoes on the table. Three small knives stick out of it.

Evie grabs one, Julie another.

“His visits tell me he thinks about me. Maybe not as much as I think about him, but hopefully even more. I hope he thinks about me so much”—I snatch a potato and a knife and get to peeling the skin—“so very much that his head hurts.”

When they don’t reply, I continue, “Fates, I enjoy peeling potatoes. Slash. Slash. Slash.” I toss the peeled one into the bowl and grab another one by stabbing it. “I don’t know how I’d live my life without this kitchen activity. When I return to the court, which, by the way, might be never, since my brothers are liars and I don’t wish to live with them anymore, I will request potato peeling times.”

“You are welcome to stay for as long as you please,” Julie says.

I sigh. “The fates have blessed me with the best of friends. Thank you.”

The small and cozy, recently remodeled farmhouse is modern and warm, and Evie and I are loving the reprieve from the courts. Evie petitioned with the king. My brother declared her inheritance safely hers with or without a male companion.

But, behind closed doors, he gave her three seasons to find a male of her choosing before he picks one for her.

But all reprieves come to an end when you're a princess.

And I am still the Summer princess.

Thanks to my brothers, who didn't let my parents give me to the merfolk. I have so much to thank them for and so much to resent them for that going on a retreat was the best thing I could do at the time. Perhaps the only thing. I took the invitation to the farmhouse as a sign from the fates. June suggested I visit with Julie, after all.

And Julie is now nudging me to read the fifty-fourth letter Augusta sent me.

I shake my head. "I'm busy peeling potatoes." *Slash, slash, slash.* "You can read it if you want."

Evie opens the letter. "Augusta is saying the invitations to the winter wedding will be sent out tomorrow."

I snort, completely unladylike, and it feels so good that I snort again, like a piglet at the local market. "As if I don't know when the invitations for the grand event get sent. I invented those deadlines. Pfft."

Augusta invited me to the Winter Court. In essence, she used me too, and I'm upset with her as well.

"She says: *and as you know, you are required to attend, for I am the Unseelie queen and I demand it.*"

I stop trying to murder the vegetable.

Julie gasps and snatches the letter from Evie. "Let me see." She nods. "Oh, Augusta is serious this time. She's using her position to request your presence."

I use a pink cloth to wipe my hand dry, then extend my hand toward Julie.

She surrenders the letter, and I read it. "She signed it as a fate." The previous times she wrote, she signed as *your friend*, but since I haven't been responding, she's using other measures at her disposal.

“Uh-oh,” Evie says. “We better start packing.”

“Pfft.” I scrunch up the letter and blow onto it in my hands. It disappears.

Evie bites her lip.

Julie picks up her knitting.

“I’ll write back this time. Say I’m sick.”

“The thing is, Fleur, this is the wedding of a king,” Evie says. “He might find it offensive if you don’t show up.”

I chuckle. “Aamako used me the way he’d use any other weapon in his arsenal. He cares not if I show up.”

“Augusta can’t do this without you, Fleur. The accommodations and preparation for the wedding this size—”

“I sent her Taliant. She’ll have a wedding to rival my brother’s.”

“You don’t have to go,” Julie says. The needle slips and pricks her finger. Blood wells up, as does Julie’s weak magic, and she says, “You don’t have to go, but you should know that your general is unwell.”

I sit up. “What do you mean?”

“He’s...fading.” Her magic is fading as well, her eyes losing the cloud that seems to cover them as Julie sees things happening in other places of the world. Refocusing, she blinks, then looks around the table. “What did I say?”

Sometimes Julie is fully aware of what she sees when she stands with us; other times, she describes it as a flashing dream that she loses touch with when she leaves. I hope this is the former type, though it doesn’t look promising.

“You saw my general and said he’s fading.”

Julie frowns and rubs the drop of blood between her fingers. “He’s trying to eat.”

“Eat?” It takes me a moment to understand what Julie is saying, then another moment to realize Nottuza must eat, and that his food is blood. Fae blood, and much like the fae when

they enjoy meals, the vampires like to enjoy theirs. Nottuza, with his good looks and that dark, brooding, grumpy, dominant demeanor, could have Unseelie females tripping over themselves to indulge him.

“It’s feed,” I say. “Vampires feed. They don’t eat.”

“He calls it eating,” Evie says.

“How do you know?”

Evie blushes. “Ledger and Leroy told me.”

“Both of them,” Julie and I say at the same time.

Evie presses her hands over her cheeks. “Now, now, ladies, my mind went places that are making me hot all over.”

“Me too, friend,” Julie says. “My loins can’t remember what it’s even like, and you go on mentioning both. Twin vampires. Oh my.”

“The feeding?” Evie asks, deflecting the conversation.

Julie nods. “He was trying to feed, but kept throwing up.”

“Vampires can’t get sick,” I say. “They’re the undead.”

Someone knocks on the door, and the three of us jump. Since I’m nearest the door, I walk over and turn to Julie. “Who is it?” I whisper at her.

Julie shrugs. “I don’t know.”

“Open the door and find out,” a male voice says from outside.

“Ledger?” Evie rushes to the door. I think that answers my question about Ledger and Evie and all the blushing that happened at the table. I make a mental note to ask her why she never told me about him.

Or his brother. If there’s something to say about both or either of them.

Leroy, not Ledger, is at the door. Their voices sound alike.

Evie’s excitement drops a notch, and she fumbles to recover the obvious deflated smile with a clumsy curtsy before

peeking over his shoulder. When she steps back, and fear laces her scent, I know Nottuza stands outside.

Evie turns toward me, and I nod slightly, telling her I'm aware the general has come to call on me. For what reason, I can't imagine. There are too many reasons, and yet, maybe to him, there are none.

"Summer princess." Leroy bows. "General Nottuza wishes an audience with you."

"He does, does he?" I ask.

Leroy moves away as if I'll meet Nottuza outside now.

I take stock of the apron covering my sweatpants and sweater. I'm not dressed to receive a male who can turn away from me at will. A male I dumped. My ex-lover I can't seem to unlove.

"There's a new playground in town," I say to Leroy. "Tell him I'll meet him there."

Evie closes the door before Leroy can get a word out. She turns to me and eyes me up and down. "That won't do, my princess."

"No shit." I rush into the bedroom and start opening trunks, realizing we only have seven trunks here for both us, and we are utterly unprepared for a rebound.

FLEUR



I make him wait.

For an unreasonable amount of time.

To the point where I wonder if he'll leave.

At this late hour, near the middle of the night, all the children are fast asleep in their beds.

Only wicked, bad things that go bump in the night are awake.

One of them is me. The siren.

The other, my ex, who June called a faempire.

Before leaving the palace for the mountain, I looked him up in the court's library. Unlike other nocturnos, General Nottuza, also known as the Nightbound Soldier, is suspected to have retained his fae magic even while undead. A *voca* magic, the same family of magic that my brother possesses, and I carry yet a different bloodline, an Unseelie one.

More specifically, there are writings that state Nottuza should be treated as the most dangerous male of all time, seeing as how his magical abilities manifest in other vampires as compulsion and memory tampering. He is a faempire carrying *voca* magic and passing it on with every nocturno he makes. He is why they can use compulsion.

Moreover, it is believed that eliminating him would be the single most strategic blow to the nocturnos as a whole. Our ancestors advised putting him back to sleep and securing him so that he would never awaken again. Then again, our

ancestors advised us, the living, to remove all traces of the undead, especially the pure source of undead magic. Which will soon be born to Aamako and Augusta.

So listening to our ancestors isn't always wise.

But I can finally understand Nottuza's desire to protect the baby. Some of the fae or other living will find the Ice Princess a threat to our existence.

In the same way my brothers believe Nottuza is a threat to me.

If Et'enne knew I was meeting with Nottuza tonight, he'd try to eliminate him. El'jah would try too. *Try* being a key word. But even with all their might, I'm unsure if they could. Or if I would ever forgive them if they succeeded.

Which is why I'm here.

Following the path upon which my wounded heart takes me.

My high heels click over the cobblestone as I bring the lapels of my dark blue overcoat closer to my face. The mountain air is much chillier than elsewhere in the Summer Court.

The creaking sound of an unoiled swing complements the sound my heels make as I round the bushes and enter the playground.

Nottuza is sitting on the red middle swing and using his long legs to propel his body.

As I walk, he looks up, and I'm momentarily startled by his sunken cheeks, bright red eyes, and fangs that are so large, they don't even fit in his mouth.

"You came," he says by way of greeting, his voice deep, the rasp in it sounding like a growl.

I offer him my hand.

He stands, wavering on his feet before bowing and kissing my hand. "Princess."

“You may sit, General.” The formality is my shield, and I need all the protection I can get when I’m in the presence of this male. I haven’t recovered from him since I left him at the start of winter, and meeting him now is probably a bad idea.

Yet I can’t help it. I can’t. It’s as if he’s the one able to summon me.

Nottuza sits down with a sigh.

I do too, noting that he’s perspiring. While he’s well dressed in his uniform and coat, and also carefully groomed and smelling beautifully clean, like crushed lavender in a leather pocket, he is clearly unwell.

“You wanted to see me?” I ask.

He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “You look beautiful, Princess.”

“Thank you. I can’t say the same about you.” I feel like gloating because I want to think he’s miserable without me and has come here to profess his undying love for me, which would be a significant amount of love since he’s the oldest undead person capable of living forever, but I can’t gloat when the male is physically ill.

“It’s hunger,” he says.

“Hunger?”

Clearly uncomfortable, he nods.

“Can I get you something to eat?”

He smiles and looks at me, bright red eyes crinkling at the corners. “I missed your sense of humor.”

He missed it! “I have my moments.”

He chuckles, and it’s a such a nice sound that I can’t help but smile back.

When the silence descends upon us again, I kick the ground with my heels. “I’ve never done this.”

“This what?”

“Swing.”

“I thought all little girls played on the swings.”

“I had a tail, remember?”

“Ah,” he says. “I remember. And do you still have it?”

“I believe I do. Thanks to you.”

“Welcome.”

I bite my bottom lip. “You could’ve told me you’re *voca*. Or that you’re accessing my memories. Or that you built shields against Et’enne’s *voca* magic in my head. Do you deny it?”

“No.”

“They called you a faempire.”

“Who?”

“My ancestors.”

“They wrote about me?”

“Only one of them did. His writings are hard to come by.”

He shrugs. “I guess I’m not very popular.”

I laugh. “Now who’s the funny one?”

Nottuza chuckles and stands beside me. He grabs the rope of my swing and starts moving it, then comes around in front of me and tells me to lift my legs. He grips my heels and pushes me into swinging. I laugh as I sway in the air, closing my eyes, feeling the beauty of the night, the owls, and the flapping of bat wings heralding the arrival of Nottuza’s ride.

“Your calvary is coming,” I tell him, and open my eyes to see him standing in front of me, hands in his pockets, crescent moon hanging behind him.

I leap off the swing and land in front of him, digging my heels into the ground.

Nottuza caresses my cheek.

“You didn’t come here to chat,” I tell him.

“I didn’t.”

“Always on a mission.”

He nods.

“And unapologetic about it,” I add.

Another nod. “But never cruel. Not to you.” He licks his fangs. “Do you remember that night you asked me if I was hungry?”

The time he showed me he could bang me hard and make love to me all at the same time? Do I remember? Ha! “Vaguely,” I say with as much seriousness as I can muster.

“I was hungry then, and I am hungry now.”

If he were another nocturno, with red eyes and drawn fangs, and we were alone, I would fear him. But I don't fear Nottuza, even though he is clearly starving and asking for a meal.

I swipe my hair to one side and tilt my head, exposing my neck.

When he doesn't bite, I ask again, “Aren't you hungry, General?”

“Slowly dying of hunger, actually.” He bends and presses his lips over my pulse, a deep satisfied growl coming from his chest. “Which is why I have to take care. Come here, little siren.”

Nottuza takes my wrist and pulls me toward the overgrown weeping tree with massive, lush, thick, and long branches draping so low that Nottuza has to bend to pass under them.

Before sitting on the secluded bench, he flares out his coat, the red undercoat lining catching my eye.

“Nice coat.”

“Thank you.”

When I take his hand, he pulls me between his legs and looks up, only slightly because he's tall, so we're about the same height now.

“What are you wearing under your coat?” he asks.

“Nothing.”

Nottuza makes a strangled sound. “You’re punishing me.”

“I am.”

“That’s what I get for toying with a siren.”

“It gets worse,” I tell him and unbutton my coat. It slides off my body with a gentle thud. I perch on his lap and throw my arms around his neck.

Nottuza swallows hard, clearly trying to hold on to control, but failing. With a snarl, he bites my neck.

The pain lasts only a moment. Before I can even scream, a sensation as if my entire body is orgasming comes over me, the ecstasy making me moan and grab the back of his head and bring it closer to me.

“Don’t stop,” I tell him.

Nottuza draws from me with long pulls. My blood gushes into his mouth so hard, he’s nearly choking on it.

His arms hold me tightly so I can’t escape.

I have never felt more trapped.

And yet, at the same time, I have never felt more free.

Nobody makes me feel the way he does, and this includes making me come without touching me anywhere intimate.

Nottuza snarls as he pulls away, then laps at my neck, closing the wounds. Feeling a little dizzy from blood loss and euphoric from the orgasm, I slump in his arms. Bending over, he grabs my discarded coat and covers me, then presses my head to rest on his shoulder. I sigh blissfully.

“When will you arrive at the Winter Court for the wedding?” he asks.

I’m unsure I’ll even go, but I answer as if I am going because I don’t want to argue with him now. This is a beautiful night. One of my favorite nights ever. “On the morning of the wedding span.”

“Not before?”

“My brothers and I are arriving together.”

“And do you have a date?” he asks.

Oh my fates! I clear my throat. I must make the best of this. The siren in me demands it.

“As a matter of fact, I do. Commander D’Artaron will accompany me.”

“I’ll kill him.”

I lift my head. “We went over this. You sever his head, and we sever our relationship.”

“I will kill him, then make him mine.”

“You can’t touch him.”

“Oh, my siren,” he purrs. “I can. I really can.”

“But you won’t.”

“Nobody will know it’s me, and it’ll look like an accident.”

Okay, now he’s getting into planning territory, so I stop joking. “I have no date. The commander is there because protocol demands it, nothing more.”

Nottuza nods. His eyes have returned to their usual black color. He smiles, showing me the normal size of his fangs. “The siren is playful, I see.”

“She only plays with you.”

“That’s a good girl.” He presses my head back onto his shoulder. We remain on the bench, unmoving and unspeaking, until I fall asleep.

FLEUR



I love weddings.

They're the most glamorous, happy, and exciting events in the world. And a royal wedding? No event brings more excitement than a royal wedding. Actually, for me, there's only one: a royal wedding that people other than I have organized. Ah, what glorious bliss.

Taliant outdid himself. My staff from the Summer Court even got a commendation from Aamako, who offered them all jobs. Which they refused because they work for me, but still, I'm so happy they delivered an experience the Unseelie Court will remember with fondness.

After all, it's the first of many events that will repair the people's trust in their violent rulers, so it was important to get it right.

As I make the rounds this evening, checking the flower arrangements, the selections of meals and drinks and the elaborate, rich yet dim lighting setups, I slide a yellow card into the pockets of the service staff. The card can be cashed in at the royal treasury.

At the royal table, Augusta and Aamako sit with my brother and June, while El'jah is on the other side working the crowds. It feels like we're in the Summer Court with all the glitz and glam. However, it is on the darker side. Black pearl chandeliers contrast against stern white walls, interrupted by only a few carefully selected paintings. Red-inked calligraphy spans most of the room, courtesy of Aamako's sister.

Shouting comes from one of the tables, and El'jah and I lock eyes from across the room. Subtly, he jerks his chin toward the table. I shake my head, telling him I'm not going over there. He gives me those pleading eyes he knows I can't refuse. Our relationship, even when strained, requires little talking.

"Fine," I mutter under my breath and head on toward the noise.

Oh great, it's the Spring Court's royal family. The king and queen are supposed to be sitting with the other royals over with Aamako. I tuck my hand under Taliant's arm on my way there.

He gives me an annoyed look. "Those royals are driving me nuts."

"Did they ask to be moved?"

"Not quite. The queen sat with the prince and his entourage."

The seating arrangement is awkward with the queen sitting next to a young lady I don't recognize.

"Who did they unseat from that table?" I ask.

"You and El'jah."

"Was El'jah sitting with the young lady?"

Taliant chuckles. "How did you guess?" A kitchen staff member rushes up to Taliant with an emergency, and he bids me farewell. "Do your thing, Fleur. Bye!"

I move toward the table as quickly as possible without looking like I'm rushing to get over there as the argument escalates. The queen unseated El'jah, which means there're young people there whom she fears my brother will charm into his bed. If my brother wanted a male or a female, he could charm them from across the room. But she doesn't need to know that.

The Spring king and queen sit across from each other. They're in a heated argument, and they don't see me coming. The young red-haired female next to the queen spots me

approaching and stands so quickly, you'd think there was a fire under her bottom.

Her chair slides across the polished floor and hits a staff member, who trips and starts to fall, the tray full of drinks he was carrying tipping over. Either Aamako or the commander catches the falling objects with their kinetic magic, and the staff member doesn't fall, so the accident is averted.

The female apologizes and turns as red as a tomato.

She then lowers herself into a deep curtsey. "Princess Fleur," she says, and stays down, which is awkward because now that I'm standing in front of her, I see a red tiara in her hair. Since her hair is also red, it was difficult to spot from afar, but I see it clearly now. The female is a young princess.

"Oh, for fate's sake, girl," says the Spring Court's queen. Turning to address her husband, the Spring king, she continues, "You could've at least taught her how to greet another princess."

I don't recognize the young woman from anywhere, but that doesn't mean I can say that. It could offend her or the queen. I also don't offer my hand or ask her to rise. I simply say, "Pleasure to meet you..." I trail off deliberately, hoping the princess will take a clue and introduce herself.

Instead, she rises and mutters another "Sorry" under her breath.

The Spring queen explains, "She's my husband's acquisition. He's so fond of her magic, the next thing you know, I shall have to give her my son's chair. Best you choose your match wisely and listen to your mother, Fleur. We know best. Oh." She covers her mouth with a flaring fan. "I forgot. Your mother left the court."

Again, I smile. The queen didn't forget and damn well knows my mother didn't just leave the court. The rumors around her departure and June's ascension were too many to squash, no matter how hard we tried.

"If it were up to my mother, I would marry your son, but as you pointed out, I failed at that honor."

The queen cries out dramatically, “I still mourn the span you two separated.” She leans in and whispers, “But you know why we had to break off the engagement? You understand, don’t you, girl?”

I tap her wrinkled hand. “I understand.” They wanted heirs.

“This one,” the queen says, fixing the crown threatening to fall off her wig. The crown is too heavy for the set of hair extensions piled on her head, “comes from a family of fourteen. Three older sisters already married with children.”

“Family of seven, milady,” the girl corrects under her breath again.

“I detect an accent,” I say, trying to converse with the new princess while the Spring prince is away doing fates know what or whom. But that’s neither here nor there.

She nods. “I’m from Northorn.”

“Oh, our commander’s family lives in that province.” I raise my hand and catch D’Artaron’s eye. He moves through the crowds and meets me at the table.

The princess greets him, and I get a good look at the female the Spring prince will have as a queen. Bright red hair. Large, deep green eyes. She’s pretty, to be sure, and nervous, clutching her hands together.

I wonder how he treats her.

The commander’s scent of leather sweeps in just as forcefully as his presence near the table. All conversations die and the princess inhales deeply, eyes widening, her blush now spreading to her neck and chest. Why. yes, our commander is a very handsome male, one of the finest in our court.

I step to her right and block the view of onlookers while she gathers her wits about her.

“The commander of the Summer fae armies,” I say as D’Artaron lifts an eyebrow in question as to why I’m calling him over to a table he’d rather not visit.

“This is the Spring princess,” I say.

“Oh, they don’t call me that,” she whispers.

“They will now,” I whisper back.

D’Artaron loves to meet females the same way he loves idly chatting while wasting away the span on the beach, but he manages a smile and an elegant bow, remaining in that position, awaiting her acknowledgment.

The princess seems reluctant to offer him her hand, probably because she’s never done it before. Clearly, they haven’t treated her as a princess or taught her what to do now that she is one.

I stretch out my hand. “Like this. Never a fist or straight locked-out hand. Your fingers relaxed, elegantly falling, but not hanging like drapes. Go on.”

The commander takes her hand and flips her wrist, then kisses the pulse.

I gasp.

D’Artaron releases the female, and I stare at him, hoping my shocked expression will goad him into explaining what he just did. But he doesn’t. He stares back at me, that quizzical eyebrow rising again as if I’m the one who’s done something outrageous.

Nottuza is watching and warning me about D’Artaron, and I can hardly believe he infiltrated the mind of our commander, even if briefly. He could get killed for that.

I gather my wits. “The Spring princess is from the Northorn province.”

D’Artaron nods. “Which family?”

She answers him, and as they start chatting, she grows more comfortable, even if the conversation resembles an interrogation more than causal chatter.

The orchestra starts playing lively music, and from the corner of my eye, I see Taliant running toward the conductor. The music signals dancing, but that’s after the dinner. And yet when Aamako pulls Augusta onto the floor, Taliant stops and monitors the change in event protocols.

One wouldn't expect it from the brooding Unseelie king, but he loves dancing. My brother and June follow, and I look up at the commander as the couples start filing onto the dance floor. The Spring prince isn't around, and his father, the king, is chatting with a male at another table. This means the Spring princess has no partner.

"After the kings, the princesses and princes take the floor," I say.

The commander offers me his elbow as if to ask me to dance, but I say, "Of course I wouldn't mind, D'Artaron. We are here to have fun." I tap his shoulder. "Remember fun?"

He narrows his eyes, but I curtsey and leave him with the Spring princess, whom he takes to the floor.

I circle the floor until I spot a tall male shadow against the wall. The shadow moves, and I follow it, which in itself is exciting. Shadows *of* people are cast *from* people and this shadow has no person attached. I don't believe I've seen anyone use shadow magic this precisely before.

I'm following the walking shadow when a hand slaps over my mouth and someone snatches me into a portal.

FLEUR



I kick and scream, but stop at the feeling of a cold blade against my throat.

The shadow portal rides as smooth as any Seelie portal, telling me that this kidnapper is experienced, possibly one of the rogue shadow crawlers who used to serve the Unseelie Court.

My feet touch soft ground, and the shadows clear. I look around.

We arrived on a field surrounded by tall mountains and what appears to be gray ground. Wind carries ashes. The ground is covered in it.

Nottornos *velosi* past us, the breeze made by their speed the only warning before they materialize before me.

The blade leaves my throat, and the Unseelie who kidnapped me steps back.

I spin around and face none other than my mother.

She's wearing a dark coat that's seen better spans, and with how she piled her hair on top of her head, I'm guessing that, as with the Spring queen, her hairdresser is herself. Pale with dark charcoal drawn around her eyes, my mother appears unwell.

I wish I didn't care, but for all that she wasn't always kind to me, she is still my mother. Once upon a time, she was a role model of strength and beauty, one of the most feared females

in the world. She should still be feared, but it's difficult to be afraid of a sickly-looking elder female in rags.

“Mother!” I shout. “What in the name of the fates are you doing?”

She looks me up and down and says in a matter-of-fact tone, “You’ve finally gained some weight.”

I have. In fact, I’ve eaten so much hearty food on Julie’s farm that I’ve gained an entire dress size. While nobody else said a word, likely because the extra weight gives me more curves and makes my body more attractive, nothing slips by my mother’s notice.

“Looks like I’m eating for the two of us,” I tell her, referencing her weight loss. I feel a pang of guilt for bringing up my status and wealth and her clear lack thereof, but it passes quickly when I remind myself she kept the truth of my siren nature from me.

Mother huffs. “Since when have you become cruel?”

“Since I found out you almost offered me to the merfolk.”

Surprise registers in her eyes, and then something else I’d like to believe is regret. “Your brothers swore an oath not to tell. So much for their word.”

“A vampire told me.”

“The one you’ve been fucking?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” a male voice says at the same time that a nocturno appears next to me.

I hiss and move away from the tall male with chin-length blond hair. Surprisingly, he bows, yet only slightly, just enough not to be rude, but not quite the way he should greet a fae royal. He ignores my mother completely, which tells me he arrived with her.

“Mother,” I say. “What have you done?”

“A lady must eat, Fleur, as you so kindly reminded me. I cannot survive when you are eating for both of us. I am not

your child.”

Ouch. I slid right into that jab to my infertility. She’s done this often, and yet it hurts every time. The wounds of her sharp words are a part of my life. “Tell me what this is about,” I demand.

The male wears a dark cloak with an emblem that identifies him as the head of his nocturno house, and behind him, other males wearing dark cloaks appear on the field.

When they join him, I recognize most of them as the heads of the vampire houses, two of which are in the Summer Court and are our allies. I tilt my head, acknowledging those two, and notice no vampire is bowing or even giving me so much as a nod. They stand with the male in the front, telling me they’re all equal and have agreed upon whatever plan they’ll execute now.

“I count only six of you. You’re missing Vane., I say. Nocturnos keep arriving, now looking more like a gathering army than a secret meeting of powers. “Mother?” Fear makes my heart race.

“Stay calm, Fleur, and don’t try anything.”

“I do not wish to hurt you,” the blond nocturno, who goes by the name Belas, I believe, says. He crouches to swipe ashes from the ground. When he stands back up and opens his fist, the wind carries the ash over his shoulder and onto the coats of the other males.

“A dragon attacked this fae village,” he says.

“I know nothing of that, but if a grave crime has been committed, I promise to probe our allies for information.”

“A nocturno called Nottuza is one of those allies, is he not?”

Nottuza and I have kept our relationship private, and since he wiped the minds of hundreds of fae and nocturnos, only a few people know about it. All of them are people I’m certain wouldn’t talk.

This vampire is guessing at best. “I’m sorry, who?”

The notturno backhands me. It's quick, shocking, and painful.

I hold my heated cheek.

My mother growls, "This was not part of our deal."

"Your daughter is a lying whore who thinks she can manipulate us." He points at me. "I know you're involved with Nottuza."

I tap my cheek. "If you know that, then you know he'll kill you for touching me."

The vampire laughs. "Take a look behind me. I brought the wrath of all the houses here. When we're done with him, we'll take over the Unseelie Court. The undead magic we feel is becoming stronger." He leans in. "Soon, we'll come for your court. I'll make an example of you and make you my bride."

"You didn't kidnap me to tell me that. What do you want?"

"We want you to summon him."

I glare at my mother. Our magic is our family's secret.

She shrugs.

During our brief conversation, notturnos have kept arriving, materializing all across the field. All the houses brought all their fighters. There're over a thousand vampires now, and if I summon Nottuza, he'll come alone. He's powerful, but not this powerful.

"And if I refuse?" I ask.

"You won't," my mother says.

"I'll make you one of mine." The vampire bares his fangs, and I jump back.

"Fleur, do what the notturno says, and I'll return you to the party. Nobody will know anything. This is between the vampires, not the fae."

"He's *my* vampire, Mother."

"Stop with the dramatics and summon him."

“I’d rather die.” I pull back my shoulders and lift my chin. “Do your worse, but know that Nottuza shall have your heads.”

The flapping of leather wings makes the vampire turn.

I follow his gaze.

A colony of bats emerges from behind the mountain and descends upon us, making the thousands of vampires crouch and prepare for battle. The heads of the houses retreat from me, which opens a space in the field.

The colony descends sharply in a fury of batting wings.

The shadows of the night gather right in front of me, and the bats fly right into it, making me jump away.

Nottuza materializes as if out of a portal or thin air.

Around him, the vampire armies start emerging from the shadows, from behind the trees, down the mountains, crawling out of the ashes where they lay hiding this entire time. There are so many of them, thousands.

Nottuza takes stock of them, even nods at my mother, who starts retreating into her portal. “Fleur, come away now,” she says.

Frowning, he touches the swelling on my cheek. Disbelief passes over his face, and then his jawbone snaps out of the socket and slackens, accommodating his growing fangs. His cheeks rise, his eyes turn red and glow, and his power starts curling around his body.

It’s visible. Red and angry undead magic.

“I want their heads,” I tell him, then cover my mouth, shocked at my words.

“You shall have them,” he says, his voice guttural as he barely contains his anger.

I reach for his hand and start unbuttoning the cuffs of his jacket. One, then the other, while Nottuza growls from deep in his chest, making terrifying sounds.

Ledger stops next to us as Nottuza shrugs off his jacket, which I fold over my arm.

On Nottuza's left, Leroy steps up. "I'm so excited about this, I peed my breeches."

Nottuza's shadows start wrapping around my feet, bats circle, then drop from the sky and transform into his males. The three hundred.

Before I disappear into his shadow portal, Nottuza releases a terrifying battle cry.

FLEUR



Since I was gone for only a short while before Nottuza returned me to the party, nobody noticed my disappearance. Not even our commander, and that's only because the Spring princess lost control of her magic while dancing with him.

A bolt of lightning struck the windows, shattering them, but right before the pieces rained down upon the guests, the commander struck with his magic and put the glass back into place. Aamako dropped the shutters over the broken windows, and the party went on, albeit without the princess, who'd made quite an impression.

Needless to say, I missed out on the embarrassed princess, a very shocked commander, and an upset Spring royal family.

The moment I returned, I found Augusta and asked her to tell me if Nottuza would survive. She owed me big-time for not warning me about the vampire taking all those fae in the first place. Although she told me nothing of the future, she asked me to pray for him.

I did. As I entertained folks and diverted the gossip about the commander and the princess, I prayed to the fates for Nottuza's well-being.

But no amount of prayer helped me sleep, especially not when the dawn came, and I didn't know if Nottuza had made it back safely. Sometime in the morning, I made my way downstairs to his office floor, but I found it deserted. Which

could be because they were all sleeping or because they never made it back.

I walked back upstairs and tried sleeping. Sleep wouldn't take me under, so that afternoon, I left my rooms for the common area and drank my third tea alone. The Ice Princess houses only vampires now. And me, because I refused to sleep elsewhere.

I raise an eyebrow when my brother El'jah walks in and leans against the doorframe.

"Great wedding," he says, tucking his hand into the pants he wore last night and scratching his package. He yawns, blue eyes at half-mast.

At the table, I pour him a dark tea. "Have a seat, brother," I say. "What are you doing in this tower?" The fae are staying at the newly repaired Winter Beauty, where the wedding took place before moving into the Ice Princess for the dinner reception and the party.

"I have no idea." He chuckles. "Well, no, maybe I have a vague idea as to why I woke up here."

"The fae are supposed to sleep in the Winter Beauty."

"Right back at you, sister."

I have a reason. Nottuza is my reason. "You look like you had fun."

"I did."

"Tell me about it."

El'jah sits with me at the small table and rubs his face. "I think you should tell me about it, because I don't recall much."

"Oh, my sweet summer child, when will you ever grow up?" El'jah is older than me.

He winks, then gets up and grabs a towel from the folded clean ones by the pool. He wraps it over his shoulders. "Brrr."

I chuckle. "You get used to the chill."

"Have you gotten used to it?"

I shrug. “I think so.”

“I want to meet him, Fleur.”

“Meet who?”

“The vampire you desire.”

“He’s very busy.” I bite my lip, worried about Nottuza even though I’m well aware he’s a badass, with killer instincts and power to match, but his enemies had strength in numbers.

I’m unfamiliar with battle tactics, but I’m fairly certain having greater numbers is one of the ways people win battles. I hope Nottuza accounted for all possible outcomes, with one of them being the start of a vampire war that could take centuries to settle, which would devastate the region.

The wars disrupt the current power structures, and whether Nottuza likes it or not, the fae kings will notice and they will take sides. My brother will interfere in whichever way he sees will benefit our court.

My brother Et’enne walks in.

Good fates. It’s like he’s reading my mind and appears as if summoned. That’s not the case. I didn’t summon him and Nottuza built shields around my thoughts, so Et’enne can’t get in as easily as before.

I just love my vampire.

El’jah groans. “I don’t know what you’re thinking, but your feelings are making me all warm inside.”

Et’enne dips his chin slightly. “Good afternoon, beautiful people of my court. Your king has arrived. Nobody rise to greet him at once, please.” He’s playful and sarcastic this span. Nice.

El’jah tsks. “Shoooo.”

I slap his shoulder. “We can’t handle our king at this time, but we welcome our brother Et’enne to the table. Please let him come in.”

Et’enne grabs a chair, flips it around, and straddles it, resting his arms on the back.

His dark eyes soften when he looks at me, and he offers me his hand, his palm facing up. I place mine on top of it, and he brings my hand to his mouth and kisses it. We hold hands for a while before he releases mine.

“How are you, Fleur?” he asks.

There he is. Not the Summer king, but my eldest brother, the male who has looked after me all my life. Hearing about his involvement in hiding my siren side hurt me. Now I see it’s hurt him too. My brother rarely displays emotions or affection for fear of people taking advantage of him. It’s so good to see him as someone other than a king again.

We all used to have breakfast together, spend time together with family when we first got up. I miss that, and I think he does too. Hence, he wants to repair our relationship. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have come to this tower at this time. Et’enne doesn’t socialize this way. He doesn’t come to us. We go to him.

“I can see that you’re thinking, and I can’t read a word of it. It’s humbling. Can I taste some of the teas?”

I offer him several different sorts, then mention the one that will get us through the winter season. He takes that one even though he prefers the black tea that El’jah is drinking.

“June says your night was eventful,” he mentions, as if a fate telling him of my night is like talking about the weather.

Although June doesn’t restrict Et’enne’s access to her mind, her magic in itself might provide some boundaries, I have no idea how much she told him.

“I saw Mother,” I say.

Et’enne puts down his cup.

“Annnnd, the fun just ended,” El’jah says.

“Go on, Fleur.”

“She snatched me into a portal and tried using me to summon my vampire.”

“*Your* vampire,” Et’enne says, and I’m surprised he’s not asking about our mother. He’s been obsessing over finding her. She slips by him every time he gets near her.

“How is she?” El’jah asks. “Not that we care.”

“We don’t,” Et’enne confirms.

We do. We care a lot. It’s just that my brothers won’t admit it. She’s our mother and, for the longest time, the one person who held our court together, the one who preserved Et’enne’s throne. “She didn’t look well. I think the vampires fed on her and received her magic. They needed powerful food to face Nottuza.”

“We’re not food,” Et’enne says.

“I didn’t mind being his.” Food or otherwise.

Et’enne drinks the entire cup of tea, then passes me the empty cup. “More.” I go to pour, but El’jah stops me.

“Sister, our brother here is trying to deal with you having a boyfriend. Tea won’t do.” He walks to the bar in the corner to fetch a dark caramel-colored liquid. It looks like the bourbon the hordes have been selling all over the region.

When he uncorks it at the table, the strong smell of cheap liquor makes us all rear away from it. Nevertheless, El’jah pours my brother a glass, then two more and holds up his.

“A toast,” he says. “To us, the three idiots who still want their mommy back, even though she’s a royal bitch.”

Et’enne joins the toast with his glass. “To us and all the bullshit she’s yet to put us through.”

I join in and they stare at me expectantly. “Solseneme!”

We click our glasses and invert the contents down our throats.

I gag and, feel it coming back up along with the entire contents of my belly. I rush toward my room and barely make it before throwing up into an empty water canister the staff left from the baths. I’m heaving my brains out when I hear my brothers laughing their asses off.

I wipe my mouth and wash it out with mint-infused water, then sit back down at the table. “I have no idea what happened.”

They laugh.

“Do you remember when she threw up her ice cream on Father’s lap?” Et’enne asks.

El’jah nods. “And then turned around and threw up on Mother?”

I laugh with them because I remember my mother’s horrified face. It was at someone’s wedding, and El’jah let me drink that night for the first time. It was all too much fun. Not that I remember all of it.

We start talking about the things that pissed off our mother, and I’m grateful that my brothers are hanging out with me until twilight comes.

FLEUR



After a while, Aamako picks up Et'enne so he can show him the repairs he'd done to the court. I'd have loved a tour of the new Winter Court, but I'm too worried about my vampire to leave the Ice Princess.

June and Augusta steal El'jah for a cheese tasting. They're both pregnant and hungry all the time, not to mention my brother offers entertainment by just being himself.

I'm sitting on the edge of my bed and watching the sun go down, wondering if it's always taken the sun this long to fall behind the mountains or if it's just me who thinks it needs to hurry up already.

I'm biting my fingernails. "Come on, come on..."

Almost there.

The moment the mountains hide the sun completely, I sprint out of my room and down the spiral staircase to reach the still-quiet ground floor.

The vampires aren't up yet.

Besides, I have no idea where Nottuza sleeps.

I can locate his office and the round magic room, but I've never been inside his bedroom. Come to think of it, he's never spent the night with me. Or perhaps he has, but I've never woken up with him in bed with me. We've never shared breakfast.

Not that he eats food.

He does eat me. Quite well.

And now I'm thinking about his clever fingers, and tongue, and the pressure of his fangs when they pierce my skin, that hungry and horny growl he makes as he eats... Now, I'm horny.

"Hello," I call out, then remember I can summon him, but it feels like something a siren would do to lure her victims and not something I want to do to the love of my life.

Instead, I seek him out in his office. Which is, of course, empty of people. Not of books and maps. There're piles of those, even under the desk on the floor now. He needs a filing system and a bigger office.

Closing the office door, I turn and run into a male.

"Oh my fates, Ledger, you must announce yourself from now on."

"I have just arrived."

"Right." Vampire speed and predatory hunting skills.

"What are you doing here?"

"Looking for Nottuza."

"He will be resting for a while longer."

Leroy walks up from somewhere below, followed by several more nocturnos, most of whom I recognize from last night.

I worry my lip because everyone besides Nottuza seems awake. "Why is he still sleeping?"

Leroy digs into his pocket and hands me an old black leather sack. It doesn't look like it's holding several vampire heads, so I don't brace before opening it. Inside are torn pieces of clothing. Confused, I frown and pick up a piece, then examine it. It's the emblem of the Mecri vampire house. They're all emblems of houses, ripped from the jackets of the heads of the houses Nottuza defeated last night.

"Victory." Leroy smiles and pulls down his scarf. There's a horrible gash down the length of his throat.

“Thank you for having his back,” I say. “I want to see him.”

“He’s not awake yet.”

“Maybe I could still see him.”

The brothers exchange a look. “The living can’t access the space where our general sleeps.”

“Where is this space?”

Leroy hooks his thumb, indicating the large shadow portal beside Nottuza’s office.

“I’ve traveled through there before,” I tell him.

He shakes his head. “Even so, I have orders.”

They look identical, but they’re different in character, with Leroy being more approachable, more fun, and so I step closer and tilt my head, letting my magic do the work on the male. “Take me to him,” I whisper and lick my lips.

Leroy offers me his elbow. “This way, Princess.”

Ledger shakes his head. “No, no, no.”

Leroy guides me toward the shadow portal leading into the underground floor that holds the round room with the red magic I saw swirling around Nottuza last night.

“She’s one of the living, or haven’t you noticed?” Ledger says just as Leroy and I enter the portal.

Nausea lifts my belly, and when we arrive, I gag. My stomach has been empty since my earlier inability to hold anything down after that gross shot of bourbon.

Leroy shrugs. “Nottuza will wake up hungry. Having one of the finest meals in the Winter Court available will make him happy. Otherwise, we’ll have to put up with his horrible mood, and I don’t want to do that again, not when I can deliver food.” We wait for Ledger to open the massive double doors.

“You’re not allowed to leave him ever again,” Leroy jokes.

I smile. “Was he miserable?”

Ledger snorts. “You could say that.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Moping around,” Leroy says, “with mood swings worse than a pregnant dragonness in heat.”

“Oh,” I say, “Why would the dragonness go into heat if she’s already pregnant?”

Ledger answers, “He doesn’t know why.”

Leroy fills in, “It’s a saying in the Fallen Court, that’s all.”

“I never heard of it,” Ledger counters.

“It’s modern, you old bat.” Leroy is laughing now.

The room opens into the dim red glow of writing on the walls.

When I walk inside and the glow brightens, I stop.

Ledger curses. “Leroy, our wards are failing. The living can walk right in.”

“I’ll get on it,” his brother says, and they leave.

The doors slam closed.

I back away from them, a little frightened now.

A rumbling under my feet makes me plaster my body against the wall, and I watch the movement of the innermost circle. As if it’s a lock with number codes, the inner circle spins, lighting up different parts of the outer circle until a click sounds and the circle slides open.

Something is coming up from beneath the ground.

Even more scared now, I fist my hands.

I trust that Nottuza and his lieutenants won’t trick me or hurt me, but this place is really creepy. It’s an undead vampire lair, and I’m the food. My gut knows it, and I grit my teeth, fighting the urge to flee.

A casket emerges.

An actual large black casket emerges and hovers over the opening.

I bend to look under it to see that it's supported by a metal beam and not just magic, which means that Nottuza sleeps deep inside the ground, inside this box. I immediately understand why he's never invited me to his chambers.

I approach the casket and place my hand on it.

Something sharp pricks my finger.

Ouch. I suck on the blood that wells up on my skin at the same time as red magic swirls around the box. It opens, revealing Nottuza.

From the looks of him, he's sleeping deeply, covered by only a single gray blanket, the same kind I've seen our soldiers use as well. Here sleeps one of the most powerful males in the world under a simple blanket in a space he uses for army assembly. The only other space he uses is his office. That's also not his own. In fact, this male has nothing of his own. No lands, no titles, not even a bedchamber. He's still very much the Nightbound Soldier, fighting for the undead magic and his people, and only ever asking for a meal. But he deserves so much more than a life of servitude to undead magic or the night, even if that life is one that makes him powerful.

I run a hand over his perfectly combed and styled hair. "You, my love, shall have a throne."

FLEUR



I squeeze his bare shoulder. It's freezing cold. Nottuza is never warm, but even he's not usually this cold. I remove my coat and climb inside his "bed," then cover us with the blanket and my coat.

I get to watch him sleep. He's done it to me a million times, and I finally understand why he seemed to enjoy it. It's my helplessness while I sleep he's drawn to. I'm the lamb and he's the big bad wolf who can jump upon the bed and bite me any time. And yet he doesn't.

It's an exercise in control.

And trust.

This is his most vulnerable state, the state where he is dead to the world, even if he is the undead, and sharing it with someone else requires trusting that the person will love and protect you.

I use his claw to slice across my wrist, then press my wrist against his lips.

Nottuza's eyes snap open before he pushes my arm away from his mouth. He sits up, taking us both with him. He looks around the room, which grows brighter, and finally, his dark gaze falls upon me. "You breached the undead magic. Again."

"Again," I confirm. "Leroy and Ledger think the wards are fading. They seemed freaked out about it."

"As they should be." He licks my wrist and moans before biting down. He starts sucking, and the euphoria of his bite

makes me want to rip off my clothes. He gathers up my skirts as I straddle his lap, and since he's nude and erect, I sit right on it, burying him inside me to the hilt. Nottuza growls and fists my hair. He pulls it as I start moving on top of him. His cold and large cock fits inside me so perfectly that I moan his name over and over again, begging him to bite me wherever he wants to, begging him to fuck me until we tire.

And Nottuza can fuck forever.

I have no idea how long we stay down here doing just that, but by the time we lie back down, I'm bitten and bruised and fucked so thoroughly that I've lost track of time.

"Fleur," Nottuza whispers. "Wake up, siren. The fate is here."

I rub my eyes and sit up while Nottuza helps me into my clothes. Once we're dressed and presentable, we hop out of the casket and stand before Augusta, who is wearing a transparent black veil. Aamako is at the door. Judging by the angry-looking swirls of red magic blocking his entry, I believe the wards are back up.

The fate holds out a crown made of wood. The writing on it pulses red in the same way as it does within the room. Though I think she's giving it to Nottuza, she hands it to me. "For your king."

I stare at the crown, then back at Augusta, who simply leaves the room without an explanation.

I examine the crown, then glance at the Unseelie king and queen, who watch us from the door.

"You wish for me to crown the vampire king?"

"Yes," Aamako confirms.

I bring the crown to my chest, my eyes filling with happy tears. "I was just thinking that you should have a throne. You're powerful in your own right, and you should claim a throne for your people, the one they'll carry into the future. With me. If you want, I mean."

Nottuza appears confused before dropping to one knee, then the other. He inhales a sharp breath before bowing his head.

I place the crown upon it.

He looks up and says, “I am bound by night and undead magic. I cannot kneel before the living.”

“Are you unbound now?”

“Those bindings keep me alive.” Standing, he pulls me to him. “You are carrying undead magic.”

“No, I didn’t bring my purse or anything from upstairs. I came as is. I’m not carrying anything.”

“Oh, Fleur,” Augusta says from the door.

“What?” I look from her to him and Aamako in the back. They seem to know something.

Nottuza says, “You’re carrying undead magic in your belly.”

“It is a boy,” Augusta says.

Nonsense.

“We’re having a child, siren.”

My heart starts beating loudly in my ears and the world starts spinning, darkness closing and taking me under.

NOTTUZA



When you're going through something you never believed possible, you cling to the old beliefs for a while before the new reality sets in.

I've lived more than a few millennia and have seen the world change and reshape into what people who lived back in the span presumed impossible, and yet I still can't believe when the fate who sees all that will come to pass tells me we shall witness a birth of two undead babies.

One of which is mine.

Mine!

I am having a child.

I was certain this was something that could never happen. I'm not a living fae, though I am undead, which means not dead either. A creature that's something in between, some sort of a freak the fates decided to toy with if only to see if it were possible.

I hold Fleur in my arms, waiting for her to come to, but instead of coming to, it feels as if she's slipping further away into sleep.

"What's happening to her?" I ask the fate.

"She's entering a deep sleep from which she may not awaken."

"Is it because she's carrying a child with undead magic?"

"Yes."

“Does toying with Fleur make you laugh, Fate?”

The Unseelie queen shakes her head. “Fleur is my friend.”

I walk toward her to confront her, then think better of it and lay Fleur inside my bed first. I cover her with a blanket, then uncover her. The gray blanket doesn't fit her. She ought to sleep in fluffy furs and feathers and comfort.

“You give me a child and then you take my siren away.” I grip the edges of the casket so I don't grip the fate's little neck and snap it. When anger threatens to make me lose control over my faculties, I hum.

From the outside, Aamako joins me and whistles along with my humming.

“I'm so sorry, Nottuza,” Augusta says, “but know that this hardship shall pass.”

I hear her leave, and once she's gone, I unleash my power with a roar, striking every living and unliving thing within my mental reach. In my head, people start screaming as I dig inside their memories, collecting everything I can get, feeding my power endlessly, wishing the void would put me under so I could connect with Fleur.

Another power lashes out. It strikes my mind like a bright whip.

My head snaps back, and something warm trickles out of my nose.

Using my thumb, I wipe away the blood and turn slowly, my fangs bared. “You,” I say to the Summer king. I lash back at him, punching the walls of his *voca* mind.

His head snaps back, and blood trickles out of his nose as well.

A blond fae walks up and hands the Summer king a handkerchief. The newcomer is the male version of my siren. He's an uncommonly handsome male, even for a fairy.

“I hear your dick is perfectly straight,” he says. “Not a single curve. Like a pole. I love poles. Wanna show me yours, and I'll show you mine?”

Tension leaves my body and my fangs retreat. Wait a moment. I sense foreign magic intruding on me. While I can shield from a *voca* such as the Summer king, this magic isn't anything I've encountered before. The prince's magic feels... intimate, inviting me to tell him all my secrets.

"Stop this or die."

He snorts. "If you touch me, I'll tell my sister."

Good point. "What do you want?"

"We wanted to meet you. Duh."

"What have you done to her?" the king asks, his magic strong and pounding at me even from a distance.

"I seeded her."

There's a moment of silence and confusion on their end, but saying it somehow removes the disbelief from my mind. So I say it again. "I seeded her. Fleur is having a baby boy, and right now, she's...having a nap."

The king opens and closes his mouth several times before saying, "I need to speak with my queen." He spins on his boot and leaves.

The blond sits on the floor with his back against the doorjamb. "I have no queen, so I'm free to linger here for as long as it takes." Using his two fingers, he points at his eyes, then at me. "You're on my watch, lover boy."

My internal sense of time is bound by night, which means that even underground, I know that sunlight is arriving, and I'll be dead to the world soon. Trouble is, Fleur is asleep in my bed, and judging by her breathing, she's as deep asleep as anyone who is not undead.

Moreover, since she requires air, I can't get in the coffin with her, close it, and bury it back in my slot underground either. And since her brother El'jah set up pillows, trays, and

half the bar right outside the open doors, I must also accept the fact he'll stay nearby while I'm sleeping.

During the span, I'm almost unconscious and would be unable to defend myself if he tried to murder me. And he might.

I tap my claw on the wood. Leroy or Ledger should already be here. Where are they?

"Sleepy, sleepy, nocturno," Prince El'jah says, his voice a caress over my private parts. I shiver, and he winks, continuing, "Go on, lover. I'll still be here when you wake up." He blows me a kiss.

Leroy walks up and starts closing the doors. The Summer prince protests, but Leroy slams the doors closed, and I hear them arguing outside, their voices fading as the sun ascends, pressing down on my mind.

I arrange Fleur so I can also fit onto my bed, then hop in, immediately regretting I didn't commission a larger bed back in the span when I could have. I can't now. The spells protecting me while I sleep are ancient, and, as such, long lost.

I prop my head on my elbow as my eyes start closing, the last image for the span of her radiant beauty.



Fleur has been asleep for over seven spans. Since she's alive and breathing, and Augusta offered us some reassurance about Fleur's well-being, her brothers are less worried than they were at the start, but they haven't departed for the Summer Court.

The Summer king, who's been visiting his sister several times over the course of a single span and using his *voca* magic on my mental walls many more times (persistent little shit), is becoming restless. He is needed at court and wants to take his sister with him.

I won't let her out of my sight or room or bed, so we're quarrelling all the time.

Aamako is entertaining at the court. People are returning and asking for audiences with him. He even held a reception once, but I hear it was to show off his new regiment made entirely of gargoyles. Not something the courtiers of the Unseelie Court wish to see, though I can hardly wait to see how his magic animates them in battle. Not that there will be a need for battle.

There won't be. Unless the Summer king takes my siren.

Which, according to the fate, won't happen even if it looks that way now.

Just to be sure everything remains peaceful, Augusta is staying in the Ice Princess. She's the only living person who can walk in and out of this room, thus the only one both the living and the undead trust.

I miss Fleur.

Particularly her life force. The radiant smile, her energy and sensuality that makes my body come alive when I'm around her. She is my sun. I miss her so terribly that sometimes I want to claw at my chest from the pain.

Alas, that won't wake her.

It's been forty spans since Fleur fell into sleep.

During this time, her belly has grown into a visible bump, and that's the only sign that she's well.

Augusta reassures everyone that everything is fine, but it's no longer enough. Not when I'm aware that any event can change the future the fate sees.

I'm at the edges of my sanity.

El'jah insisted I make his sister more comfortable, and by that, he meant changing the bedding, so now I wake up on a large, pink, fluffy down-feather pillow that runs the length of the box. We're covered in a light blue comforter with real seashells sewn onto the hem, and they jingle when I move.

He even made me decorate the room with dry flowers so it can look pretty in a space that doesn't allow living things.

El'jah is still sleeping in the pillow fort camp he set up when Fleur first fell asleep. I can't bring myself to tell him off because he reminds me of my little brother, the boy who didn't let me die through the sheer force of his magic. Unknowingly, but still, it was the undying love of my brother that brought me back to life. If it takes brotherly love to wake up Fleur, then El'jah stays.

This evening (morning for me), Ledger opens the door and pauses in question the way he's done every evening. I shake my head no, telling him she's still sleeping. Behind Ledger, El'jah sighs. My lieutenant leaves, and Fleur's brother leans against the doorjamb.

The uncombed hair, piled on top of his head reminds me of a nest, and he's wearing a plain white sweater and black sweatpants with unlaced combat boots that are part of the uniform of one of my males. An empty bottle of bourbon lies on the floor next to his pillow bed just outside in the hall.

Ledger wants him to live at the Winter Beauty, but I won't order the removal of the prince, although I could. The Ice Princess is the undead stronghold, and he doesn't belong here.

Lying next to Fleur, I prop my head on my palm and look at her beautiful face framed in golden strands of hair and think about what I'll do if she never awakens.

"I don't pray often," I say in an old fae tongue. "Or believe in prayer or even the fates. Shhh," I press a finger over her plush lips. "Don't tell them that and don't begrudge me for it. Your brother told me you're a devoted fate follower, so if you can hear me, pray. I want to wake up next to you..." I pause because I have no idea what I'm saying, but I need her to hear me and come back to me. "Siren, let me into your memories again so that I can see you, so that I can smell you, touch you. I miss you, Fleur." I lean in and whisper, "And if it's the choice between you being alive and well again and our baby, I will choose you. I will choose you every time until the end of

our time. I love you, Fleur. Wake up so I can tell you that.” I give her shoulder a shake.

Her flesh feels colder than mine, and that scares me. I’ve not felt fear in so long, but I remember it well. I remember touching my mother, my siblings, the people in my village. I remember running around helpless, not knowing what to do, how to fix what had happened.

“Wake up,” I command her, then press my lips to hers, close my eyes, and pray in my head, *Wake up, my love, wake up.*

When I open my eyes, her eyelashes flutter.

“Fleur?” I leap out of the casket. “Fleur, can you hear me?”

“What’s going on?” El’jah asks from the door.

“Her eyelashes fluttered,” I tell him.

“Maybe she’s dreaming.”

Damn it! No. I press my lips to hers again and pray as if that will wake her up. I feel stupid and childish and helpless and humbled against this magic called love that’s brought us together and keeps us believing in its power as if it’s a cure. As if it can perform miracles.

Her eyelashes flutter again, and I smell the ocean, hear the siren call to me. I lower all my shields and let her inside my mind.

I’m sitting on the shore, feet stretched out before me, the sea washing up and wetting my military uniform. I watch the horizon, a place where the night sky meets the sea, and I can feel that Fleur is near.

“Fleur!” I shout.

She pops her head out of the water. This is not a memory. This is her now.

“Fleur.” I stand on the shore. “Come with me.” I stretch out my hand, fully aware that sirens are the summoners and not the other way around.

Fleur swims toward the shore. Blue seashells cover her breasts, and she rubs her pregnant belly. As she rises out of the water, her golden tail re-forms into legs, and when she reaches me, I snap open my eyes.

Blue eyes meet mine, and they crinkle at the corners when Fleur, fully awake, smiles and cups my face. “You saved me, my Nightbound King.”

EPILOGUE



Fleur

I t's been a cycle since I woke from the deep sleep Augusta prophesized. She'd said I wouldn't be able to awake from it, but I think she meant I wouldn't wake on my own. I needed Nottuza.

He reached out and rescued me from the world I'd created in my own mind, the world the siren part of me has lived in ever since I was a little girl.

Near dawn, alone in the common area, I perch at the edge of the pool, swinging my fin in the blue water, watching the long, dense filaments that make up my siren tail thread through the water while the golden scales across the length of my fin reflect the subtle lighting in the room. I stroke my belly as I sing a Br'ar song, this one, a lullaby about a drunken sailor named Hor, whom Br'ar entrapped and used for her pleasure.

The flapping of leathery bat wings and the refined thud tell me Nottuza has landed on the terrace behind me. The silver stag that's been hanging out with me for the past few nights huffs in annoyance. The stag keeps threatening to stab Nottuza with his horns, but Nottuza insists on trying to pat the animal. He can be persistent that way.

I love his persistence.

I love all of him.

In the way a night predator comes upon his prey, Nottuza creeps up and crouches behind me, then places a hand over my big belly.

“How are my people today?” he asks in his deep, raspy voice.

“We’re active. I think the baby is ready.” My pregnancy progressed much faster than a normal fae pregnancy, and we aren’t sure when the baby will come. Augusta foresaw the fate who sees all that happens in the present arriving right before I go into labor, so I will take her arrival as a sign of impending delivery.

Nottuza nudges the crook of my neck, the coolness of the tip of his nose making me shiver. He brushes his lips over the pulse on my neck. Hopelessly addicted to the pleasure of his bite, I lean back and tilt my head to give him better access.

Before he feeds, his glorious leather wings, wings a male fairy receives once he finds his fae-ated mate, wrap around us, enclosing us in darkness.

The next evening, I deliver a healthy baby boy with blue eyes, a patch of black hair at the top of his head, and a strong, steady heartbeat. We name him Aiske. It means miracle.

Hi, Milana here :)

Six times.

That’s how many times I’ve started and scraped the beginning of this story because Notuzza was an incredibly particular, orderly and dominant character, and I couldn’t quite make him do what I needed him to do. Heck, I had no idea who this male was or what he was doing on the page until Fleur came around and he stated obsessing over her. Then sparks flew and here we are, at the end of their story.

I wish to write more in this world, and hope Commander comes next. To hear what I'm releasing, please visit my website. I have goodies there and my newsletter is infrequent but super fun and you get to see pretty cover designs first.

If you wish to read more in this world, read a sample of *Savage in the Touch* on the next page.

SAVAGE IN THE TOUCH TEASER

Seven houses hardly even counts as a village, but since our tavern, which also serves as a bed-and-breakfast, is the last stop before the mountain that travelers must scale on their journey to the capital city, Lyan, we get busy.

The inn is strategically located right at the exit to the valley, and we made sure we put up a sign that says: *No fluffy bed or pillows for another two moons*. Sixty spans is a long time to spend in the forested mountain living in tents. Not to mention, one never knows what kind of criminals lurk in the bushes and what kind of trouble awaits in the mountains.

The road to Lyan is paved with dangers.

Yet that doesn't stop the refugees passing through our little village. They escaped the horde that's been plowing through the south of the kingdom. They say the horde devours everything in its path. They say its hunger can't be tamed.

They say it's coming.

It's all a myth. The "horde" is nothing more than a gang of rebels, or at most our southern fae neighbors looking for trouble. And trouble they shall find, since half a moon ago, the king's army passed through the village on their way south. This means they must already have reached and defeated the horde and are on their way back now.

"Hey, Mag." I greet my sister as I tap my fingernails on the bar, reminding the drunk in front of me to pay up and call it a night. At thirty-seven, I've spent two decades behind this very bar, and I know when the next pint of ale will topple a man.

The man isn't chatty, and the ominous threadbare black cloak he wears obscures most of his face, which gives me an impression he came in to drown his sorrows undisturbed. Here's to hoping I won't have to carry his ass up the stairs to the third floor.

Although, if I have to, I will. Third-floor room and board runs at eleven silvers, so a little extra legwork for the guy is included in the price.

"Hey," my sister says and dumps a large bag of potatoes at my feet. "Here you go." She wipes her hands on a dirty white apron fastened to our father's old belt around her waist. Her brown pants will need a wash, as will her white shirt.

I wet a bar towel and wipe dirt from her rosy cheek and neck. "Don't tell me Mike called in again."

"It's past twilight, and I haven't seen him, so..." She shrugs. "Guess he's not coming."

I tuck her golden hair behind her ear and wipe away the dirt over her earlobe. Mag takes after her mother, who might've been a fairy because no other creature in all the lands could be this beautiful, with a pixie nose, smooth skin, perfect round eyes with long eyelashes, and shiny hair that never seems to get damaged or dry, not even in the winter winds.

"Rock, paper, scissors?" I ask. I hate peeling potatoes.

"Sure," Mag says, and we play.

I lose and will have to peel the potatoes early tomorrow.

She winks one pretty green eye. "How did we do for the night?" Mag opens the drawer that holds our coins. A few silvers slide over the wood. Not as many as we need to keep the lights on since the southern rebel problem has cut into our business. Most travelers aren't on their way to Lyan for vacation or business. Instead, they're seeking refuge there, and since most of the south is plagued by the same rebellion that's been going on for over a turn now, the king increased the taxes for the rest of us midlanders and northerners. The tavern and the few rooms we offer upstairs that make up our inn aren't covering the extra cost.

I rub her shoulder. “The soldiers will return.”

The drunk lifts his head, showing chapped lips in the shadow of his cloak. He snorts. “They did return.”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“I’m it.”

Giggling nervously, I hold out my hand. “Pay up and go rest. Breakfast is served early.”

He snorts again. “You and I will be breakfast, and the horde serves itself after dusk.”

Mag rounds the bar and sits next to the man. She yanks back the hood of his cloak, and it falls open to reveal the tattered red uniform of a soldier. A lieutenant, judging by the stars on his pocket.

“What happened?” I ask, a tingle of fear making my heart beat faster.

The soldier downs the pale ale and wipes his mouth with a sleeve, rests one foot on the floor, and wobbles as he stands. “The question is what *will* happen.”

“What will happen?” I lean over the bar, and my sister leans in too, practically touching him.

He kisses her forehead. “The horde will come. They will consume. They will leave.”

I lean back. “What do you mean, consume?”

“They’re predators.”

My sister and I laugh. We’ve heard the myth a million times, but our father, the king’s historian, has been searching for these creatures for over ten turns, well before anyone ever mentioned them. He kept returning empty-handed, and as punishment, a few turns back, the king chopped off his head.

Now, whenever anyone talks about devastated villages, devoured corpses, and ravenous creatures, they say it’s the horde. But if our father found nothing, despite the threat to his life, they don’t exist.

“There’s no such thing as the horde or predators,” I say.

“I saw them.” He points to his bloodshot blue eye, and I note the crusted blood under his fingernails. “A creature with teeth the size of my fingers, claws, fur, bright red eyes, ripping through my buddy’s guts...and eating.”

“Gross,” Mag says.

The soldier stumbles toward the stairs. “The horde is coming.”

“If they’re coming, why are you still here?” I ask. He’s full of shit.

“Nowhere to run. The king will kill me anyway. I’d rather my family think I died in battle than have them watch my beheading in the square.”

The soldier’s footsteps echo in the now-silent bar. The last patrons, a family with a small boy, throw silvers on the table and rush out the double doors.

“Hey,” Mag shouts as she runs after them. “Hey, come back! He’s crazy. Don’t listen to him.”

“The horde is coming!” the boy yells, and with that, the refugees passing on the road before the inn scramble. Screaming and yelling ensues as people start trampling one another, surging toward the road that leads to the bridge.

Mag waves her arms. “Stop, stop! There is no horde. It’s just people like us playing dress-up.”

Grabbing the tray, I start clearing the table, knowing Mag can’t stop the madness. The word “horde” throws people into a frenzy. That’s because they don’t know the king like we do. Our father told us of the king’s ruthlessness and that the king would protect his land, if not his people. He wouldn’t allow the horde to pillage and seize his land, not after he conquered it with blood and magic.

Besides, the king commands medeisars, creatures of magic nobody can defeat. The predatory horde, even if they weren’t a myth (and they are) are no match for those creatures or for the

king, who is said to be able to kill thousands with a single sweep of his hand. Father has seen it, and so I believe it.

Despite the danger to his life, my father couldn't find the horde.

They don't exist.

"They're a myth," I say out loud into an empty tavern.

Mag returns, grabs a bottle of our cheapest whiskey, and sits at the bar. She pours a pair of shooters.

We down them, then slam the glasses on the bar top. Whiskey burns down my throat, and I chase it with water.

"Let's clean up," Mag says and starts unraveling her messy braid. "You wake up early and peel the potatoes, and I'll cook breakfast."

"For our one guest?"

She smiles. "And us."

I smile back. "And us."

She presses a warm callused palm over my cheek and pecks my nose. "Me and you, sister," she says. "We keep going no matter what. Right?"

"Right."

"The horde is a myth," she says.

"The horde is a myth. The monsters are a myth," I repeat. No, really, they are.

... until they're not. [READ MORE...](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Milana Jacks grew up with tales of water fairies that seduced men, vampires that seduced women, and Babaroga who'd come to take her away if she didn't eat her bean soup. She writes sizzling fantasy romance with take charge heroes from her home on Earth she shares with Mate and their three little beasts.

• She entertains readers on her mailing list as they await for books in the series. Join other readers at <http://www.milanajacks.com/newsletter/> •



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