

A
COURT
OF
GREED
AND
EXCESS

ZARA DUSK

Zara Dusk

A Court of Greed and Excess

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Neela

I craned my neck to glimpse the ocean. Early morning sunlight glinted off the barrier to the fae realm, catching my attention. It was mesmerizing, shimmering like a gauze curtain hanging from the clouds to the sea.

It called to me.

No human had ever passed through that barrier. Ever. At least none had returned to speak of it. I might be a trashbag orphan from the streets, but I would make it to the fae realm one day, even if it killed me.

A low warning bark snapped me back to the streets around me. My hiding place was an alleyway between overflowing trash cans and a brick wall. The stench was bearable, and the spot was safe for now, but it was time to keep moving.

I peered around the corner to the Docklands' main drag—I owed enough money to enough lowlifes to always check around corners.

The coast was clear, so I sauntered out, putting some height into my walk to give it that jolting gait of every other hardened Docklands native.

The sweet smell of cinnamon and brown sugar slammed into me, and my mouth watered. My belly was full of rice and beans, so I wasn't exactly hungry, but it was always full of rice and beans. Sometimes I mixed it up and had beans and rice, but mostly rice and beans. My taste buds were so bored they were suicidal, so the prospect of that brown sugar and cinnamon muffin put me on high alert.

I slowed to a stroll. The muffins were twenty yards ahead on a collapsible table that a sharp-eyed woman was using as a stall. My timing had to be perfect. I gasped sharply, and as the woman glanced to follow my stare, I swiped a muffin and pocketed it.

My pants were baggy and loose, so they could hide whatever shit I stole.

I rounded the next corner and pulled out my delicious prize, sniffing the cinnamon goodness.

A pair of skinny legs barred my way, almost tripping me over. A small girl, as thin as an anchor, sat on the concrete with her legs splayed across the sidewalk. I cursed, and she pulled her knees into her chest, blinking up at me with wide green eyes.

She looked like she hadn't eaten in a week. But this muffin was mine. I'd been on the streets since I was her age, and nobody had ever helped me or handed me a single damn thing, and I didn't have to help her either.

I was like a ghost. That was how I liked it, watching from the shadows, analyzing, and keeping my distance, with no ties to anyone or anything that could compromise my safety. Solitude made an excellent shield.

The girl hugged her knees tighter and blinked at me again, not asking for anything, just watching the world like I'd done for endless hours.

"Fuck it," I muttered and handed her the muffin. Life sparked in her face as she took it, and a warm glow nestled in my chest...but my taste buds were pissed.

Wandering down the sidewalk, I entered the heart of the Docklands, where piers jutted into the wide bay like broken teeth. From here, the magical barrier to the fae realm stretched over the distant water left and right, as far as I could see.

I sighed. One day.

A rough voice filled with menace shouted, “Oi!”

One of Joey the Bull’s boys had spotted me. My spiky blond hair was too damn recognizable. I broke into a sprint, diving back into the winding streets, and heard the man take chase, his feet louder and closer than I would have liked.

I was small and wiry, good over long distances, but this man had better acceleration, and if he caught me, I’d have to answer to the Bull. That man wouldn’t like my answers.

My heart pounded, and my breathing came fast. For a panicky moment, I felt like my lungs would burst, but I soon settled into a rhythm I could keep up for hours.

The man pursuing me was loud and shouty, yelling that he’d hooked a fish and bringing more pounding feet to join the chase.

But I was in my rhythm now, darting between cars, shooting up alleyways, and diving through the back doors of shops. Nobody knew their way around the Docklands like I did.

I’d also explored every other part of the city, which gave me the advantage. I wound through the streets toward Capitol Hill, where rich people had vast properties and tiny dogs and where the Docklands crews wouldn’t follow me.

I’d lost them, but I’d have to lay low for a few days until they forgot about me and moved on to their next target.

No matter. There were hidey holes all over the city, all stashed with tins of beans—fucking beans—so I’d be fine.

The homes up here had state-of-the-art security systems, so they were rarely worth a look, but I scanned them out of habit. Maybe I’d find a freshly baked cinnamon and brown sugar muffin to steal. And I would damn well

gobble it up before any bloody street urchin blinked at me with her pathetic green eyes.

A large brick home was set back from the road and protected with an ornate wrought iron fence. On a whim, I pushed open the rose-covered gate and entered the established gardens. It felt like entering another world where trees were for admiring, not climbing, and gardens were for afternoon teas, not for hiding.

Something pulled me in, urging me to cross the garden and climb the front stairs.

“What the hell am I doing?” I muttered, but I didn’t stop myself from pushing open the heavy wooden door and walking into the house.

No alarms, no blaring horns, no outraged cries from posh voices.

Perhaps my intuition to enter this place was spot on. There must be a ton of shit in here just waiting to be sold on the black market, and I knew exactly which lowlife would buy which item. Daltona for art, Foster for jewelry, and Joey the Bull for electronics...maybe I’d skip the electronics.

I entered a massive living room with whisper-quiet carpets and stuffy armchairs. I crossed to the mantle over a huge un-lit fireplace and ran a finger along the smooth wood, imagining the fingerprints I was leaving behind but not stopping myself.

I unlatched the hook and flipped the lid on an intricate silver music box, and a tinkling melody filled the room. I should stop. I was better than this. What kind of thief left her fingerprints everywhere and then broke into song?

But something compelled me to keep going in my madness, and I fished out a curious bracelet from within the music box, turning it over in my skinny fingers.

It was terrible but beautiful, intricate interwoven lines of silver that had

tarnished to almost black, with a large emerald gemstone in the center. This would fetch a fortune from Foster.

On instinct, I slipped the bracelet over my hand, and a sense of dread filled my body, trickling up my arm and then splashing down through my torso to my feet. Cold, hard fear, like I'd done something wicked and irreversible.

I tried to tug off the bracelet, but it was shrinking, collapsing around my wrist until it melded into my skin, becoming part of me.

My heart thudded, and my rib cage grew too large for my body, expanding in terror.

I clawed at my wrist, leaving red marks along my skin, but the damn bracelet had melded with me, the huge green emerald eye staring at me scornfully.

“Shit,” I whispered, barely audible over the mocking tinkling from the music box. “Fuck!”

I screamed in frustration, my fingernails drawing blood from my tattooed wrist. I tore from the house, my feet ringing on the treads as I clattered down the front stairs and hurtled across the paving stones.

My left arm tingled where the bracelet had enmeshed into my flesh, intense pins and needles that grew stronger and harder to ignore as I ran through the leafy avenues of Capitol Hill.

What the hell was that thing?

Feet pounding, I fled straight to my nearest hidey hole, an unused garden shed at the back of a villa on Delphinium Drive, and sat my sorry ass onto a saggy beanbag.

My wrist burned, pulsing like a malevolent presence, as though I'd absorbed an evil with a mind of its own.

I hunted around the shed for something to scrape off the tattoo, and the only sharp thing around was an old handsaw, which did not appeal. Not one fucking bit.

The burning grew more intense, and I had a panicky thought that if I waited too long, it would get into my bloodstream and spread through my body, infecting me like measles.

I plonked back into the beanbag and bit on a piece of wood while I rested a single saw tooth against my wrist. I pushed down and scraped away every layer of skin under one jagged tooth, figuring I'd start small.

Pain spiked in my brain, but I pushed it aside. I'd been through worse, and a little self-inflicted wound wouldn't be my undoing. But the experiment failed. I wiped away the blood and saw the blackness had seeped through to the muscle. The only way I'd get rid of this tattoo would be to cut off my hand, which I wasn't about to do.

I tried to settle down to rest, but the burning in my arm intensified, and I couldn't sit still. When I paced the shed, the burning lessened near the door. Maybe if I went outside, the pain would reduce. And who cared if I imagined the relief? I would happily placebo my way out of this and swap my sanity for pain relief.

I headed out the rickety shed door and slinked across the garden. Out on the street, I turned left, and the pain worsened, so I headed right instead, and the throbbing in my wrist abated.

It wasn't until I walked several miles pain-free that I realized the bloody tatt was leading me by the nose like a pig to market. Maybe it really was an evil presence with a mind of its own.

"Piss off, evil tatt," I snarled and took a right, though the tingling in my arm tugged me the other way.

The agony immediately worsened, shooting deep into my bone and throbbing with an intensity that made me cry out.

Shit. Nothing was worth that pain. If the damn bracelet wanted me to return to the Docklands, I would. Nothing Joey the Bull could come up with would hurt more than that.

I had to get the damn thing off my wrist, and scrubbing it off wouldn't work. My only hope was to return to the wrought-iron mansion and confess my actions. Hopefully, the true owner of the evil jewelry, Little Miss Fancy Bloomers, would know how to remove it.

Tomorrow. I'd go tomorrow.

In the meantime, I ducked and weaved through the Docklands. The bracelet didn't lead me astray, never directed me into the arms of one of the Bull's men, and took me through some of the best shortcuts I knew and even one I didn't.

Impressive.

Dusk hit the Docklands, and my anxiety lessened. Low light was where I shone when I couldn't be distinguished from any other street thug, though from my size, most people mistook me for a teenager.

Sometimes the best cover was no cover, so I pulled my hood over my spiky blond hair and walked out into the open and along a pier, following the bracelet's intent. If it led me into trouble, I'd brave the pain and run away, but I was happy to follow its lead for now. It led me to a small fishing boat I didn't recognize, and I found a nook up by the stern where I could sit undetected.

Finally, the damn tattoo left me in peace.

It wasn't until the boat's engines thrummed, jerking me awake to find the little boat was heading toward the magical barrier with the fae realm, that I

began to panic.

Ronan

Moonlight streamed through my bedroom window, turning my golden bed frame pale silver.

My insides squirmed like my intestines were trading places with my stomach. The chair beneath my ass was grown for my body by the most skilled Crafters in the realm, but it wasn't comfortable tonight.

I had hoped to sleep through the night, but clearly, that wouldn't happen. I ran a hand through my black hair, then rose and stalked out of my bedroom door, not bothering to pull on a T-shirt, just heading downstairs bare-chested wearing only my black sweatpants.

It didn't matter. Nobody would see me tonight, at least nobody who mattered.

I went downstairs in the dark, not bothering to summon a globe of light. My parents had wanted me to stay on in their estate, of course, but I couldn't bear to be that far from the center of town, so I'd insisted on moving out. They, in turn, had insisted on purchasing me a stately townhouse fitting for an heir of Mentium and all the trappings that came with it. Marble dinner plates, curtains made of the finest fae threads, and all the staff a prince could need.

A serving fae appeared at the foot of the stairs, but I waved him away and strode past, and he melted into the shadows.

Ordinarily, I didn't mind the fawning and ass-kissing, but I was in no mood tonight.

I pushed out the grand glass doors into the backyard and plunged into the narrowest pathway leading through the ferns.

Tonight marked one year since Sebarah's parents died. This should be the day my best friend ended his mourning, but he couldn't do that because he was dead too.

My intestines crawled up to my throat and formed a lump I couldn't swallow away, so instead, I walked faster, treading lightly over the intertwining roots.

At the heart of the garden, deep and hidden, where even the family Growers never came, was my moonway. A secret path connected my garden to my favorite place in Verda—in Arathay. The Lakehouse.

Five moonways led to the Lakehouse, the other four connecting each of my best friends' homes to our shared hideaway. The one place the five heirs of the Realm of Verda could escape the public's prying eyes and be ourselves.

Under the full moon, the pathway glittered, and I stepped onto it as easily as breathing.

I strode along the moonway, and the world beside me blurred, but I still couldn't swallow my sadness. Tonight should have been Sebarah's night, but he was cold and dead and never coming back. Breaking into a jog to pound away my gloom, the world streaked into light and color around me as my feet ate dozens of yards with every step.

I spilled out of the path behind the Lakehouse into a grove of orange trees that always reminded me of Sebarah. He'd grown them for me a few years ago after I complained there was no juice for breakfast. He'd done it to show me what an arrogant prick I was, of course, but it was still thoughtful, and just looking at them hardened the lump in my throat.

Fuck that. Fuck him being dead and gone, and fuck me never being able to see him again.

I wiped away a tear and entered the Lakehouse through the back door, then walked along the hallway, which opened into a room with floor-to-ceiling glass overlooking our private lake.

My favorite black leather armchair called to me, but I chose instead to step outside onto the deck that overhung the water and pace back and forth.

The only thing that made me feel better about Seb was remembering the promise I'd made him. To never let anybody sit on the Floran throne except him. It was a vow we took long ago that we would fight for each other's places in this world. Never let anybody, especially his sister, return to the realm and claim his spot.

Never.

I would make that promise come true no matter what it took, even if it ripped my soul from my body.

It was the only link I had to Sebarah, the only thing that mattered.

A light shape moved through the water and lunged out of the lake, landing on the deck with an enormous splash. My heart lifted to see the silver fur of a giant wolf. He transformed into his fae form and shook out his long silvery hair, flicking me with water. Leif.

“Get a towel, wolf boy,” I snapped, wiping droplets off my chest.

Leif's moonway emerged on the far side of the lake, so he usually transformed into his wolf form and either swam or ran to the Lakehouse.

Which had the major drawback that he always arrived utterly naked.

“And cover your junk while you're at it. I don't want that thing in my face.”

The wolf laughed as though that was the best joke he'd ever heard and

kept standing there with his dick out. He looked around. “Are the others here?”

I shook my head. If Dion was here, the place would smell of tasty food, and if Gabrelle was here, she’d make sure everybody knew. “It’s just us. I was rather enjoying the silence.”

That was a fucking lie. I’d been wallowing in self-pity and missing the hell out of Seb, but Leif didn’t need to know that.

Leif ran his hands down his chest. “Since we’re alone, do you fancy a quick screw? I haven’t come in hours.” Stupidly, I glanced down and saw his big swinging dick twitch in anticipation.

“No,” I snarled, shining my piss-offiest glare his way. “How many times do I have to tell your stupid hairy ass it’s a permanent no.”

He lifted one shoulder and kept grinning. “Oh well, never mind, it was worth a try.”

“No, it really wasn’t. It was a waste of your breath and a waste of my time. It’s never going to happen. Besides, you made the same pact I did. No screwing amongst the heirs, it makes things too complicated.”

Arathay had six fae realms, and Verda was the only one ruled by committee. Each other realm had a single monarch, but Verda had five thrones, one from each of the five ruling Houses.

So as soon as the majority of our parents kicked the bucket, we would all be propelled onto thrones. In a few hundred years, all of us would be rulers, and if we had complicated sexual backgrounds, that would just make life hell.

Leif shook himself again, and water sprayed across the deck, but I was out of range. “That didn’t stop you and Gabrelle from getting hot and heavy.”

“That was before we made the pact.”

Gabrelle exuded sex, she was a walking bang bunny, and I had fallen prey

to her a few years back. Fortunately, she was also an ice queen without emotion, which made it easier to keep it just friends.

She and I screwing was the reason we forged the deal in the first place. Leif didn't care; he was all about sex all the time, but when Dion found out, he lost his shit and made us swear to stop.

The truth was, Gabrelle and I still had a friends-with-benefits agreement that we occasionally fell back on when we were drunk, but Leif didn't need to know that. He would blab to Dion, who would lose his shit all over again.

"Take a hint, buddy," I said over my shoulder as I walked indoors, then slumped into my armchair. "I'm not interested."

Leif's silver eyes bored into mine for a few moments. "Not yet, anyway," he grinned wolfishly. "But I'm patient."

I growled at him, but in truth, I was happy for this lighthearted banter, glad to be rescued from my thoughts about Sebarah.

Leif pulled on a pair of gray sweatpants from the dozens he kept in a kitchen drawer—which irritated Dion no end. He also produced a tennis ball from somewhere and played with it, tossing it into the air and catching it. "I couldn't sleep," he began, then sprawled along the massive silver sofa he always claimed and tossed the ball from a reclined position. "Because of Seb. Did you know today is his six-month dead-iversary?"

Irritation skittered through me. Seb died six months ago; since then, I'd never had a good mood that stuck. They always dissolved like sugar in hot wine, leaving me raw and burned.

"Of course I know that," I snapped. Sebarah was my best friend, we were closer than any of the others, and I was smarter than Leif by a mile, so obviously I knew the significance of today's date.

Leif barreled on. The only thing that got that wolf down was when you

withdrew physical affection—he could withstand verbal abuse all day and all night. “Talk me through your plan again. I still don’t see why we have to get rid of House Flora. They’ve ruled with us for thousands of years, they probably help keep Gaia pleased and keep things in balance. They’re the House of trees and shit, you know.”

My scalp itched, and heat radiated through me. My knuckles on my black armchair turned pale under my clenched fists. “Of course I know that. But every valid descendant of House Flora is dead and gone.”

“Well, they’re not all dead, are they? There’s that fae chick from the mortal realm.”

Anger edged my voice in steel. “That fae female from Hebes has grown up among mortals. She can’t rule in her parents’ place. We cannot allow her to walk into a position she hasn’t earned and knows nothing about. She will never replace Seb. Never.”

Leif held up his hands. “Sure, if it means so much to you, buddy.”

“Not just me. I promised Sebarah. And we’ve been over this a million times. The others agree with me.”

“I know, I know.” He mimed zipping his mouth shut.

Good. Leif was a top friend. Leif, Gabrelle, and Dion, all of them were the best buddies imaginable.

But they would never be Seb. They could never fill the aching hole in my heart torn open with his death.

Neela

The magical barrier stretched across the ocean, shimmering in the thickening gloom.

The little fishing boat I'd stowed away on continued to motor straight for the barrier, closing the distance between me and the fae realm.

I should be ecstatic. Delighted. My lifelong goal was to be the first dirtbag street orphan from Hebes to conquer the fae lands.

So why did dread coil through my belly, constricting my lungs and squeezing my breath?

The bracelet tattoo on my wrist hummed contentedly, making this whole shitshow creepier.

With every passing second, my horror grew until I was filled with certainty—this was a terrible mistake. No human could pass through the fae barrier and survive. That truth rang through my bones.

I gripped the cargo netting that smelled of fish and pulled myself to standing, shouting at the captain to stop, yelling at the top of my lungs, but my voice was nothing compared to the roaring motor.

“Calm down, bitch,” I told myself. This was probably a defense mechanism constructed by the magicals to prevent humans from entering the realm. They must have spelled the barrier to make people fear for their lives.

It was working. I couldn't cross that boundary. I darted to the side of the boat and gripped the edge, intent on diving into the water and swimming

back to the Docklands, but agony seared through my wrist, and I fell to the deck, clutching my hand to my chest.

The world turned white, and all the oxygen was sucked from my lungs. We were inside the barrier, and I was about to die.

Then we were through. It took several long moments and several deep breaths before my adrenaline subsided, and I realized I was okay. I had passed what ever fucked-up fae test that was and been admitted to their world.

I stood up and looked around, drinking everything in. The night was a clear, penetrating blue the twinkled with more stars and swirling galaxies than I'd ever seen. Even the ocean was a richer, absorbing blue-black.

The land we approached was wild and beautiful. The little fishing boat pulled up at the base of a cliff that soared to untold heights. I slipped over the boat's edge, slid soundlessly into the water, and swam along the coast before approaching the shore.

This was as far from the grimy Docklands as possible. One long elegant pier curved into the ocean, and flowering bushes with large golden and purple blooms lined the cliff's base, with no single man-made building in sight. Perhaps fae homes were invisible to the human eye? That would make living here tricky.

I stepped closer to smell one of the big golden blooms. It appeared to be made of fine metal, though it swayed in a gentle breeze. I touched the flower, and a powerful updraft swept my body upward like a leaf, rushing up the cliff like I was in a freaking invisible elevator.

If this was fae magic, I was here for it.

I laughed, squealed, and had zero poise when I stepped foot on the clifftop, hundreds of feet above the water. Beside me, tree roots intertwined

and formed a small nook with a living desk that sprouted tiny white blossoms.

A tall fae wearing a fluttering jade gown that exactly matched her hair and eyes smiled. “Welcome to the Realm of Indulgence, citizen of Hebes.” She looked at my rounded ears, and I glanced at hers, realizing they were slightly pointed. “We do not see many of your kind here.”

So she could tell I was human from my rounded ears. Probably also from my lack of elegance and intense beauty. If this stunning creature was anything to go by, I would be the pig in the peacock pen.

“You’re wet,” she smiled. “You may wear this.” She handed me a pile of gold fabric that turned out to be a stunning dress.

“I don’t need your help.” I’d made my own way in life and didn’t need anything from anybody.

She faltered as though nobody had ever refused a gown before, then placed the dress on the woven root desk.

I opened my mouth to tell her to piss off, that my own pants were just fine, thank you very much. But I was here to make a life for myself. The damn tattoo had gotten me here, but it was up to me to stay, and the best start would be blending in as much as possible.

You didn’t steal from the Capitol wearing sweatpants, after all—you put on your finest gown.

“Actually, I’ll take it.” I snatched up the dress. “Where can I change?”

The fae studied me and tilted her head, trying to work me out. I figured that folks wouldn’t be too bothered by nudity in someplace called the Realm of Indulgence, so I just turned my back and slipped out of my sodden rags and into the dress.

It hit above my knees and was cut in a superlow V, and I imagined that

with my spiky blond hair, I looked a little bit like Marilyn Monroe, minus the curves.

Not my usual get-up, but I didn't hate it.

I wandered into the streets and saw an outrageous number of buildings constructed from marble and gold. You could peel some paint off a house and buy a damn car with it...although I supposed gold might not work as a currency here. I sighed. I had a lot to learn.

My tattoo was happy for now, but it seemed to be herding me uphill away from the coast.

"You've had your fun, evil tatt," I hissed at my wrist and took a deliberate turning away from where it wanted me to go.

I entered a tavern called the Slippery Silkworm, with a picture of a drunken worm trailing a wobbly line of thread. It was too high-end for its name. Globes of lights hovered above head height, and the cream and bronze decor reminded me of the Avalon Club up on Capitol Hill.

I almost spun on my heel and walked out, knowing I didn't belong, but my Marilyn Monroe dress swished around my thighs, so I stood tall and walked right up to the bar.

"Give me a shot of the strongest thing you've got," I told a tall female with vibrant orange hair and intense orange eyes that made me jump.

Did every fae's eyes match their hair? Maybe I could dye my locks blue to fit in.

The fae poured something pink and frothy into a shot glass and slid it across the marble counter.

I arched an eyebrow at her. "I asked for something strong. This looks like something an eight-year-old would drink at a Disney Princess party."

The fae nodded slightly as though every movement was perfectly planned

and walked away, not bothering to reply.

I scanned the room, looking for a discreet exit because I sure as hell didn't have anything to pay with, and I had to get out of here before my tattoo seared my hand off. A couple of doorways off the back probably led to bathrooms, but if they didn't have windows, my only escape was out the door I entered through.

I knocked back the drink, and the pain in my arm instantly lessened.

A smile landed on my face. "Three more of these," I yelled at the bartender, holding up three fingers and hooking a thumb over my shoulder to show her where to bring them.

A broad brown armchair in the corner of the room had my name written all over it. It was half in shadow and a great spot to survey the crowd, looking for a mark. I had to figure out a way to get money quick smart if I wanted to survive, and observing a bunch of rich drunk assholes in their natural habitat was a perfect start.

After I knocked back a second pink concoction, my head started to swim. My wrist was almost numb, and I grinned to myself. I'd already figured out how to outsmart this tattoo, now I just had to spend the rest of my life drunk, and I'd be sweet. "Fine by me," I giggled to myself. Man, this was strong stuff.

A pair of muscular legs appeared in my field of view as I studied the floor. They seemed intent on staying right where they were, so I trailed my gaze upward. The legs were highly muscled, wearing a light gray suit of the finest quality, so thin the fabric hugged the muscles' contours. My gaze hovered at his crotch, and I couldn't help but notice that fine material also outlined the nice bulge in his pants.

His hands were in his pockets, sweeping his jacket back and showing off

his chest, which was just as delicious as his legs. A fine white shirt pulled across his pecs and showed an ocean of muscle, almost like he wanted me to notice his impressive package and pert nipples.

The scowl on his face wasn't quite as inviting, and his black hair and raven eyes were flat-out intimidating. "You're in my seat," he growled.

I made a show of patting the soft leather cushion under my butt, then I squeezed my own ass. "Oh, is this yours?"

I quirked a smile, but his scowl didn't disappear, so I stood up and stepped aside, gratified when he sat on the still-warm cushion. I knocked back a third pink frothy concoction, then sat my ass onto his lap and slung an arm around his neck. "Now I'm in your seat," I smiled wickedly.

A deep rumble of laughter shook his body, and his grin transformed his face. He was by far the most handsome man I'd ever laid eyes on. He outstripped my imagination, my sexiest dreams, and when his body shook beneath me, I wiggled in delight.

I placed my leg strategically and felt him harden beneath me. I batted my eyelashes and lifted one shoulder. "Do you mind sharing?"

He grinned like a man emerging from a mountain of sadness into daylight for the first time in years.

His mood was contagious. An answering joy welled within me and intensified when he leaned forward and enveloped me in a strawberry scent.

His breath warmed my lips as he murmured, "I'm going to kiss you now."

I leaned in and nipped his lower lip. "I fucking hope so."

Ronan

This human creature was just the thing I needed to keep my mind off Sebarah.

She arrived in my lap like a tomcat, wriggling and moving in a most distracting way.

Everything she said or did made me harden. That dress was sexy as hell—one point for the dick. Her mouth was sassy as hell—another point for the dick. And she bit my lip hard enough to make me wince—game set and match to the dick.

Her kiss was urgent and hungry, and I wondered how long it had been for her. My desire met hers like two starving beasts ravaging each other, and I lost myself in her lips and tongue for long moments.

I came here to drink away my sadness, which had never once worked in the six months I'd been trying it. But screwing away my grief might be what I needed. Maybe a good mood would stick with me for longer than five minutes.

This creature's startling mismatched eyes and hair were so distracting, as was her constant wiggling and moving like she had too much energy to be still. I'd heard humans were like that, lacking the stillness and grace of fae, and I always imagined it would make them seem animalistic and stupid, but that couldn't be more wrong.

This human female was urgent and febrile, demanding every ounce of my attention.

She sat sideways on my lap, one arm slung over my shoulders, her hand clamped behind my neck, pulling me close.

Her leg splayed across my crotch, and it was hard to think of anything apart from how it pressed onto my cock.

I briefly broke away from the kiss to murmur, “Why don’t we get to know each other better?” I wanted to fuck this woman more than I’d ever wanted anything. I longed to sink hilt deep inside her and let her writhe and squirm on my lap. I needed it.

She bit my upper lip, pulsing desire down to the soles of my feet. “I’ve got a better idea.”

“Mmm?” My gaze was locked on her soft full mouth.

She licked her lips. “Let’s not.” She slammed against me, claiming me in a bruising kiss, then she stood up, her heat suddenly gone.

I growled and reached out to pull her down to my lap until I realized what she was doing. She wriggled out of her panties and let them drop to the floor, swishing her hips suggestively, then she turned around and looked down at my straining erection. “You too,” she instructed. I undid my button and fly and pulled down my boxers, and my cock sprang up.

“Fuck, you could hurt someone with that,” she said.

“Oh, I plan to,” I growled, grabbing her hips, twisting her around and pulling her down onto me. She flicked up the back of her dress as she sat, aiming her soft wet pussy directly onto my throbbing length.

Fuck, she felt good. Soft, tight, wet, and like every one of my sexiest dreams rolled into one.

She squirmed and writhed, and every movement made me want to explode. I hadn’t come early since I was a teenager, but I was in serious danger with his intoxicating female dancing on my lap.

She rode me up and down, up and down, until I had to squeeze my fingers into her hip bones to stop her...although I sensed nothing could really stop this creature.

She leaned her back against my chest, her blonde hair tickling my face. I stilled her and muttered into her ear, drinking in her foreign, human scent. "What's your name?"

"I already told you I don't want small talk," she breathed. She ground out a slight circle with her hips, and I nearly blew my top.

We were in a shadowy corner of the bar, and it was a Wednesday night so only a couple of other fae were about. I glanced at them, suddenly aware that we were grinding in a public bar, but nobody had noticed.

I flattened my hand against her belly, pulling her tight and keeping her firmly in place. I had to distract myself. "Have you been in Verda long?"

"Mm." She ground out another tiny circle, and I fisted her short hair to keep her still.

I slid my other hand around her hip and over her smooth thigh, under her dress, and pushed over her mound to her clit. Her moan when I played with it was drugging. I could come from that sound alone. Holy hell, this woman didn't have fae curves or grace, but her muscles were taut with pleasure, and she was a package of energy and sexuality, and I couldn't get enough.

Her clit was divine, a bundle of nerves that sang under my touch. She arched her back into me, and I let her ride me again as I fingered her, allowing the sexual torment inside me to grow and bloom and blossom. Her movements grew wilder, and her moans crescendoed to an alarmingly non-public volume.

She threw back her head and clocked me in the chin as her pussy clamped around me, spasming powerfully and pulling my own orgasm from me.

We shuddered together. I kept my fingers on her clit as she rode out the waves of her climax, holding her tight against my chest and wanting to keep her there. Finally, she lay in perfect stillness, pressed against me, and I hoped the moment would last.

But it passed. Movements crept into her muscles, and she wriggled then stood up, moving away from me.

I watched her pull on her panties then throw back another shot of Fae Fizz.

She slumped into the seat beside me, and I patted my lap. “This seat’s still open if you want it.”

She laughed like I was joking, which I wasn’t. “Thanks, that was nice.”

I frowned. “That was the opposite of nice. That was the best fucking sex I’ve ever had,” I corrected her.

She flashed me a sexy grin, and I was startled at her clear blue eyes that contrasted so eerily with her white blonde hair. Her smile was like a tractor beam, locking me in. “Yeah, it was pretty good. Even better than mangoes.”

She stood up slowly as though reluctant to leave, and I didn’t want her to. For once, my good mood hadn’t dissolved, hadn’t disappeared after three minutes, even when I thought of Sebarah. Unlike most times I tried screwing away my grief, it hadn’t come flooding back after I splattered my cum.

This time was different. I felt oddly at peace with Seb’s death and crazily infatuated with this human woman. “Don’t go.” The words escaped my lips before I could stop them. I was not a male who begged, that was for damn sure. It was the other way around. Females were supposed to chase me... females *did* chase me, often with gifts of creepy soiled underwear...I didn’t chase them.

She hitched a shoulder. “Gotta go. People to see, places to be, you know.”

She paused, watching me carefully as though delaying her departure. “What’s your number?”

My brow creased. “My number? Like my favorite number? Eight, I guess.”

She looked at me and then burst into laughter, sending waves of joy through the room. I couldn’t help but smile back.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

So now she wanted small talk? I folded my arms across my chest, showing off my biceps. “You really don’t know who I am? How long did you say you’d been here?”

She bit her lip, and I wished she was biting mine instead. “Forever,” she finally said.

Then she left. She just fucking left, walked out the door without begging for more, which made zero sense. Nobody ever abandoned me after sex. Never. I was the asshole who ran.

But somehow, I wasn’t annoyed. My happy mood hung around like the scent of lavender in a purple field, clinging to my clothes and skin even as I watched her walk away.

Neela

I wobbled out of the bar, barely keeping myself upright. That was the best sex I'd ever had, period.

Even as I walked out into the crisp night air, I still felt his hands gripping my hips desperately and his fingers working expertly between my legs.

Either that man was magic, or the drink was. I laughed. Given that I was actually in some fae realm of indulgence called Verda, probably both.

Maybe I should have stayed longer, pressed up against his chest. For a long moment, I hadn't wanted to climb out of his lap, but that kind of thinking was for fools who relied on others, and I was no fool.

So I'd eventually climbed to my feet, and it was only when I put some distance between our bodies that I'd been able to leave. I had to get out of there before the bartender arrived with my bill because I had nothing to pay with except panties full of fae cum.

That sexy beast of a male had distracted me so much that I forgot to pat him down for cash. Forgot to scan the room for targets. Failed to think or feel anything except his fingers, his cock, his back, and his warm breath whispering in my ear.

I'd see him again. I guessed they didn't have cell phones here since he told me his number was eight, but I'd find him somehow. Even if every fae in Verda was as sexy as the devil, none of them could possibly match him.

I wandered through the clean streets, heading away from the coast, inhaling the deep floral scent that laced the air, even here in town. Houses

and storefronts were interspersed, though as I wandered further uphill, homes won. Grand stately buildings with delicate lace detailing and modest dwellings in vibrant lilacs and oranges like they were made from the sunset itself.

It looked too good to be true; for all I knew, it was just an illusion. Maybe that fae wine had sent me into a deep hallucination—that would explain the mind-blowing God who materialized out of nowhere and then banged my brains out.

So I kept scanning, trying to remain on alert. I was fooled once, taken in by one of the smaller Docklands crews, who followed me around, stole all my targets, and screwed me over.

Since the day I left their asses, I'd never been fooled again, and I wasn't about to start now.

My tattoo led me steadily uphill, and I let it, following along obediently. Hopefully, it would lead me to someplace I could sleep and stay safe, the way it seemed to evade Joey the Bull's thugs back in Hebes.

The estates grew larger as I walked away from the town center, and I finally stopped outside a dark green hedge dotted with tiny pink flowers.

I talked into my wrist like I was James Bond. "Is this it? You want me to sleep under that hedge? Seriously? Can't you do better than that?"

As I stepped closer to examine a flower, the leaves separated, revealing an elegant archway lined with pink blooms.

I spoke into my wrist again. "Okay, top work. Keep it up."

Might as well stay on friendly terms with my demonic tattoo. Besides, I could inject alcohol whenever I needed to disobey it.

This was no typical hedge. It was yards and yards thick, and a pathway kept opening up before me as I wandered through, then closing behind me.

Part of me wanted to turn around and jump on the nearest boat headed back to Hebes, but I'd craved this adventure my whole life, so I stuck at it, placing foot after foot as I followed the mysterious path. It was light in here somehow, despite being blackest night and the bush being so thick that even bright daylight wouldn't penetrate.

The leaves parted to reveal a beautiful manor the size of an ocean liner but a million times prettier. It was dusty pink, and if I squinted, it looked like a gigantic rose with a door in the center.

A fae girl sat on the stairs outside the front door and jumped to her feet when she saw me. "Excellent, you're finally here." She held out a hand to shake mine.

I smiled. The evil bracelet had led me somewhere I could work with. This flower palace must be loaded with riches, I just had to talk my way past this girl to get to them. Her pale green hair was braided, and her green eyes were so intense I couldn't hold her gaze without blinking.

She wore sensible pants with lots of pockets and a singlet top, which made me like her. Made me wary of her, too, because people who dressed sensibly were harder to fool than idiots who followed fashion.

"Yeah, sure, I'm here," I hedged while I figured out where this conversation was headed.

She shook my hand and then looked me up and down. "You're short for a fae princess."

I withdrew my hand. "And you're tall for a squirrel," I retorted.

She appeared startled momentarily, her pale green eyes widening, then she burst into laughter. "Right, but you *are* a fae princess, and as far as I know, I'm not related to any wildlife."

I tilted my head. "I'm no princess, and I'm definitely no fae."

She was taller than me and stooped slightly to stare into my eyes, then ran a finger along my rounded ear.

I slapped her hand away. “Hey! What do you think you’re doing? Get off me.”

Her gaze snagged on the jewelry tattooed to my wrist with its giant emerald eye. She grabbed my hand and studied it. “The bracelet brought you here,” she remarked.

“Yep.”

“Then you’re a fae princess, heir to House Flora.” She gestured to the rose-shaped building behind her.

I yanked my hand away. “It wasn’t my bracelet. I stole it.”

What was wrong with me? Why was I confiding being a thief to my next target? This girl had a house I wanted to ransack, and I was blabbing about being a criminal. I blamed the tatt—I’d been acting weirdly since it latched onto me.

I braced myself to control the fallout of my stupid runaway mouth, but she just shrugged. “I see, okay.”

What kind of response was that when somebody told you they’d stolen a magical bracelet that had brought them to the fae realm? She was taking this way too casually, and I began to suspect she had her own criminal past.

She turned to walk up the stairs but halted when I called, “What’s your name?”

“Lizabet Frankel, but people call me Liz.”

“And who are you?”

She tossed me a grin. “I’m your companion, *princess*.” She emphasized the title sarcastically.

I folded my arms across my chest and cocked out a hip. “Let me get this

straight. This damn bracelet is tattooed to my wrist so everybody will think I'm the princess." Liz nodded. "And what if I tell them I'm not?"

Liz put a finger to her chin and pretended to think. "Let me see, a human girl turns up and tells everybody that she stole the Floran Bracelet from the true princess...I don't think they'll throw you a party, hon. In fact, I think they'll throw you in the dungeon and roast you slowly until you die."

My heart flooded as my old buddy, panic, welled inside me. When I'd first ditched the orphanage and hit the streets, panic was my closest friend, my constant companion, but I'd become good at squashing it.

I took some deep breaths and tried to think clearly. I had to stay here. I could live in this goddamn flower house if I played my cards right, and people might even treat me like a princess. It was a temporary solution, but I could pull it off while I thought of something longer-term.

I put a hand on the shell of my ear. "But everybody can tell I'm human, can't they? I mean, I could dye my hair blue and get some fake ears, I guess...."

Liz laughed. "Fae are more than just colorful hair and pointy ears, hon. We're also stronger, have better eyesight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, can do spells, and have an inner power we can summon."

Riiight. The temporary plan just got a whole lot more temporary. I couldn't pull off being fae for longer than about five minutes. I slumped onto a step, dropping hard and bruising my ass, and Liz lowered delicately beside me.

She rested her knee lightly against mine, which felt surprisingly comforting. "Nobody will pick it up for a few weeks at least," she assured me.

"Why not?"

“Human technology suppresses fae magic. Nobody will expect your powers to return to you for a couple of weeks. Until then, you’re welcome to stay here.”

I narrowed my eyes and scooted away from her. “Why are you helping me?”

Up this close, I saw that even her eyebrows were pale green. She ran a hand through her hair. “I like living here, it’s much grander than my old house. Dad always told me I had grand aspirations, but I don’t see what’s so wrong with that. So here I am, companion to a princess who doesn’t exist.” She leaned in close. “It’s boring as shit,” she confessed. “I mean, I was glad the mythical princess had finally arrived so I’d be less lonely. Even fine fae rugs grow tedious after months of treading them alone.” She knocked my knee again with hers. “And frankly, I’m even happier you’re not really a princess because I’m sure the real one is as interesting as a dead fly.”

I scrutinized her face with every word she spoke and saw nothing but sincerity. I was an excellent judge of character and always on the alert for a scam, but I saw no treachery in her face.

“Can I ask you questions whenever I need to? Like, will you help me stay?” Man, it tasted like ash asking for help, and if she denied me, I’d run inside and grab whatever I could hold, then find somewhere else to hide out.

It was her turn to examine me, and my heart pounded while I waited for her answer. “Only so far as it doesn’t land me in trouble,” she said, and I nodded my agreement. I could work with that.

We shook hands to seal the deal. I was officially a fake fae princess. Bring it on.

Neela

There was no denying I was a little bit drunk. Either that or the walls in this palace really were weaving and swaying.

“Is there somewhere I can sleep?” I asked the fae royal companion, Liz, who, for some reason, was happy to help me. She’d told me it was because she was bored, and I believed it. Boredom could be a powerful motivator.

“Is there somewhere the Floran princess can sleep? Yes, I think we’ll manage to find a room,” she said, deadpan.

She led me upstairs and into an enormous bedroom. Seriously, you could hold a party there and still have room to sleep.

It was gorgeous, too. Cascading vines of ivy and blossoms twined their way up the pillars of a four-poster bed draped in flowing dusty-pink silk curtains, and large windows let in cool moonlight that highlighted intricate carvings on the wooden walls of tiny winged faeries and pixies dancing.

“Will this do, princess?” Liz asked. Her green eyes danced with mischief, and I couldn’t tell if I despised her or liked her. Time would tell.

“Sure, I guess.”

Liz stood and watched me, so I ushered her away with a shooing gesture, which she accepted far better than I would have—she just scowled but didn’t curse, and she left me alone.

“Holy fuck in a forest,” I declared, sitting on the bed. It was soft and smelled comfortingly of sea-salt spray, which was the scent that had accompanied my entire life. Perhaps it had chosen that aroma just for me.

I kicked off my shoes and wriggled under the blankets, too tired and tipsy to do any more exploring.

But in the early morning, my eyes sprang open, and adrenaline hit my bloodstream. What the hell was I doing, lying about and playing princess? Could I really trust this Liz chick? Maybe she was off calling the authorities right now. I should scope out this palace and start working on my contingency plan—the one where I stole some expensive shit and started thinking about where to sell it.

Bare feet were best for sneaking, so I kept my boots beside the bed and slowly opened my bedroom door. It wasn't locked, so at least I wasn't a prisoner. That was a good start.

Time to explore the Rose Palace. I started at the top and worked my way down methodically. The highest room, where the rosebud would be, had a tall, glass dome ceiling letting moonlight stream in. I could practically picture counts and ladies waltzing with a string quartet in the corner. This must be the ballroom, I decided. But there were no knick-knacks I could pocket, just massive gold-framed portraits of serious-looking fae with an array of colorful hair.

The next level down, the third floor, had my bedroom and a bunch of other rooms. Poking my head into a couple, I saw they were all bedrooms too, but I didn't want to keep prying in case I stumbled on Liz and woke her up. I'd have to save that for when she was out on an errand.

The second floor's layout was different, with the corridors on the perimeter and rooms in each petal that peeled off it. The windows were enchanted, letting in a golden glow as if the sun was always out.

Poking my head into one of the rooms inside the giant petals, I saw the throne room, with large windows letting in the moonlight and a crystal

chandelier dripping thousands of tiny rainbows. Annoyingly, there was nothing I could steal without hiring a forklift or a crane, so I kept moving.

From force of habit, I peered around corners before marching out, though I was a long way from Joey the Bull. When I creaked open the door to the next petal room, my breath stuttered. It was vast, with curves and points like we were inside a giant petal, and every wall was lined with books.

I gasped, a literal, out-loud gasp. I'd never seen so many books. They were leather-bound, with gold leaf letters and intricate cover designs. I walked toward one of the shelves, padding across the cold marble floor and running my hand over the spines. They were written in a language I couldn't understand, but the titles were intriguing.

I almost felt guilty being there, like an intruder in someone else's life story. But then again, if the fae were going to make me feel foolish by forcing me here with the enchanted tattoo, they deserved it.

As I made my way to the opposite side, I noticed a small table with a quill and inkpot. How quaint. I picked up the quill and dipped it in ink, and hesitantly wrote my name on the blank page of one of the books. It was a silly thing to do, but I couldn't help myself. I felt like I was leaving a mark, a small piece of myself in this magical place.

Time stood still in that room, and I lost myself in the beauty of the books.

Flipping through the pages, they seemed to be made of enchanted paper that shimmered in the golden light, and the writing inside danced across the page as if it was alive. It didn't stay still long enough that I could read it.

I was so engrossed in the books that I didn't hear the footsteps behind me until it was too late. I spun around to see Liz standing behind me, her arms crossed and a scowl on her face. "What are you doing here?"

I tried for confidence and cocked out a hip. "I live here."

Liz's scowl deepened. "You don't live in the Library of Whispers. You're snooping."

As we spoke, the books around us seemed to murmur quietly, which was probably why this place was called the Library of Whispers.

"That's a great name," I said.

"It's a practical name," Liz corrected. I took in her pajamas, which were just as utilitarian as her day clothes. Pants, shirt, one pocket, no frills. It was a mint green that set off her hair and eyes.

"Same thing," I said, and her expression softened, her jaw relaxing slightly, her brow clearing.

"I suppose it is," she said, her eyes flicking over to the book in my hands. "You shouldn't touch those books, they're dangerous."

"Dangerous?" My eyebrows shot upward. "What do you mean?"

"The enchantments on those books are old and powerful. They can affect your mind, make you see things, make you do things you wouldn't normally do."

"Well, that's not terrifying at all," I muttered, setting the book back on the shelf. It was disappointing, though. The books had seemed so magical, so full of promise. But they were just another danger to avoid. Still, they might make good money on the streets.

"Come on," Liz said, gesturing for me to follow her. "Let's go back to your room. It's not safe to wander around the palace at this time of night."

"How calming and restful," I deadpanned. "I'll be sure to sleep soundly now."

I hesitated, wanting to explore more. But fatigue won out. There'd be plenty of time to discover the secrets of the Rose Palace, but for now, I needed sleep.

At the threshold of my room, Liz turned away. She walked a few steps, then called over her shoulder with a final piece of advice that made me decide I really did like her. “If you steal anything, I’ll track you down and burn you alive.” Her tone was light, but I believed her.

I snorted. Liz was my kind of girl. Someone I could work with.

Ronan

I slept in the Lakehouse because I needed space to think.

My good mood lasted till morning, and I spent the whole night dreaming of that snarling and writhing tomcat who banged like a goddess. I would have Ransto chase down her whereabouts so I could contact her again, but for now, I wanted to keep her private, all to myself, alone in my thoughts and memories.

It wasn't until I weaved through the orange grove to take the moonway home that my mood soured. These were Seb's trees, and this was supposed to be Seb's moment, but he was dead, and it was my fault.

The mantle of guilt sat heavily on my shoulders as I jogged home to change into jeans and a T-shirt. I had promised to be there the night he died, but I was too busy with Gabrelle instead, sneaking around behind our friends' backs, and time had gotten away from me.

I hadn't turned up to the bar and hadn't been there when those Unseelie bastards had ambushed him. I could never forgive myself for that.

I changed quickly, then headed out again. Another private moonway ran from my estate to Rosenia Forest. Having private moonways was one of the perks of royalty because we could summon—and afford—the finest spell Weavers of our times.

As the world blurred beside me while I jogged, my hands curled into fists, remembering that night I'd been rutting with Gabrelle instead of having my best friend's back, and my heat was still high when I emerged near the glade.

In the clearing where classes were held, sunlight dappled the soft forest floor, and vines and flower garlands hung like decorations.

Gabrelle was already here, her soft pink hair contrasting dramatically with her dark brown skin. She wore a deep purple jumpsuit that touched her curves in all the right places. Usually, seeing my friends buoyed me for a few moments, but Gabrelle's nod and the twinkle in her light pink eyes only pressed my guilt more heavily on my shoulders.

She sat with her long shapely legs crossed on a stone ledge that dripped with begonias and was, I knew, far more comfortable than it looked. She undressed me with her gaze. "You look recently pleased," she said, licking her lips. "But so sad. Whoever she was must have been a bore."

My thoughts flashed back to that always-moving tomcat, writhing and snarling and getting me harder than ever before. "It's none of your business," I snapped.

Gabrelle crossed and uncrossed her legs. I knew she wasn't trying to be sexy, it was just a hazard of her powers, a byproduct of her lineage, a trap of the trade. Firstly, she was the heir to House Allura, the house of beauty. Secondly, Gabrelle's mother had Ascended to Lure and her father to Stealth, which meant both those traits ran strongly through her blood, even though she hadn't yet Ascended to her full power.

Technically, fae could choose to Ascend into any power they desired. However, the Ascension was more likely to be successful—and more powerful—if you chose something that aligned with your natural abilities.

And Gabrelle's natural Lure couldn't be clearer. Even without having Ascended, she could entrap susceptible males and females and have them do anything she commanded.

Fortunately, I'd known her for decades, and long-term exposure had

strengthened my defenses.

Gabrelle turned her head, exposing her elegant, flawless neck. “I have news that might interest you.”

I lounged against a thick hedge that flowed around my body to support me. “I doubt it.” I knew I was being surly but was in no mood for idle gossip.

Gabrelle’s thick lashes framed her pink irises perfectly as she blinked slowly. “The Floran Bracelet has been claimed.” I tensed, crushing twigs within my fists. “The princess will join us today.”

Every year, the heirs to the Verdan thrones competed in a series of trials to gain points for their House. The House with the most points would ultimately have the highest rank when it came to ruling.

As far as most other realms knew, Verda was a perfect oligarchy with five Houses ruling equally. But in practice, that didn’t work. Votes of three against two were all very well, but if the stronger fae were in the minority, they inevitably ended up declaring war at some stage.

History was full of examples from the pre-trial era, but eventually, the trial system was developed, and in the thousands of years since, the Court of Verda had been peaceful.

So these trials were important. So far, I was ranked highest, just as my parents were ranked highest among their peers. I intended to follow them into precedence.

These lessons were important for another reason too. Not only did they help us develop the skills needed for the competitive trials, but also for Gaia’s ultimate test.

Gaia, the earth goddess who created the five Seelie realms, balanced out Mortia, the father of death who created the Unseelie realm.

Gaia did not allow any monarch to rule if she deemed them unworthy. In

Verda, Gaia did so via the ultimate test. We could not rule if we failed, even following our parents' deaths.

The usurper to the Floran crown, this so-called princess who'd claimed the Floran Bracelet, would fail Gaia's ultimate test. I would make damn sure of it. Her arrival marked the beginning of my mission to end her.

A crashing through the trees from the northeast told me Leif was coming. He was the least subtle fae I knew and as clumsy as a dog.

He barreled right up to me in his wolf form and sniffed my crotch, so I smashed his big hairy muzzle, hard.

He morphed into his fae form and rubbed his nose. "What the hell, dude?"

"Don't sniff around my fucking dick," I growled.

Leif tugged on a pair of sweatpants that Gabrelle tossed to him, then rubbed his nose again. "It's a standard wolf greeting, you know that."

I leaned back into my hedge chair. "And I'm not a wolf. You might have noticed."

He stepped forward to rub my shoulder, but I smacked his hand away, and he whined. "It's not my fault, dude. I thought you smelled of human, and I had to make sure." He turned to Gabrelle. "And, for the record, I was right. His dick smells of human."

In his wolf form, Leif's nose was unbeatable. Most fae were skilled at picking up scents, but apparently, wolves could smell a trace of human on me even after I'd showered and soaped.

Gabrelle slid down from her perch, and Leif openly ogled her while she did. I was pretty sure the two of them had never screwed, but with her Lure heritage and him being the heir of fornication, they certainly buzzed with electricity.

“That explains how boring she was in the sack,” Gabrelle mused.

The sensation of that human wriggling on my lap burst through me, and if I was alone, I could come from just thinking about her. “Yeah, real boring,” I lied.

The smell of roasted garlic and freshly baked bread hit me, and Dion strode into the clearing, his hair and eyes pale brown this morning.

“Garlic bread for breakfast, dude?” Leif sniffed. “Tell me you brought some for me.”

Dion had Ascended years ago, and nobody was surprised when he chose Magirus. Like every other Magirus, Dion’s hair, eyes, and scent changed to match the last thing he’d eaten. Catching him after he’d eaten fish stew was torture.

“None for you, bud. But damn, it was so good.” Dion flopped onto a plump mattress made of jasmine.

Leif trotted over and sniffed Dion, then licked his arm happily, which Dion permitted. He let that dog get away with hell.

“The new princess is coming today,” Gabrelle said silkily, tossing her long pink hair and drawing Leif’s gaze.

I ripped a twig off my armchair. “Don’t call that bitch a princess. She might look fae, but she’ll never be fae. She was born and raised in the mortal realm, where she belongs.”

Leif settled onto the jasmine mattress beside Dion. “She won’t look fae, dude. She’s been in the mortal realm too long, so she’ll look human. It’ll be super weird to see one up close.”

Damn, he was right. Human technology suppressed fae magic, so she would look like an ordinary woman.

I sank further into my chair as a pounding began in my ears, remembering

last night. Had I fucked this up?

More crashing came through the forest, clearly not a wolf bounding but some uncoordinated creature lumbering along a pathway, unable to walk with the silent elegance of a fae.

Gabrelle was already standing, leaning against the stone ledge, and Dion and Leif climbed to their feet too.

“It’s gotta be the Flora chick,” Leif said, nudging Dion, who licked his lips, and a soft smirk settled on Gabrelle’s beautiful face. All three of them were excited to meet the Floran wench so we could put in motion our plan to take her down.

With leaden limbs, I found my feet when the blundering human came into view.

Spiky blonde hair, startling blue eyes, short, with lean muscle.

My writhing, snarling tomcat. The Princess of House Flora.

Man, I was in trouble.

Neela

I walked through the forest as carefully as possible, trying to proceed like a fae princess and not crunch leaves underfoot. I was doing a damn fine job of it.

After my early morning exploring around the Library of Whispers, I'd slept the night through. The bed was damn comfortable I could have slept for days.

The tingling in my wrist woke me at dawn, rudely ignored me when I put a pillow over my head and told it to piss off, and pestered me until I got out of bed.

I knew my life as a fake fae princess was about to begin, so I put on the frilliest frock I could find in the wardrobe, an explosion of pale blue chiffon that would make Cinderella proud. I matched it with some strappy heels I could barely walk in that made me look the part.

Liz was waiting for me downstairs, and she swallowed a laugh at my outfit. "Do you want some help with that?" She ran a scathing finger through the air.

I bristled. I had spent my entire damn life managing myself, and I didn't need help from some judgey fae chick.

"No," I snarled, cutting myself a hunk from a loaf of bread that wafted with steam and ignoring the toast she had already prepared. "I'm quite capable of picking an outfit myself." I knew what princesses looked like, and I would damn well figure this out alone.

Liz watched me chew for a few moments before opening her mouth. “It’s just that—”

“Just nothing,” I scolded. “Leave me alone.”

She leaned against the kitchen counter and flicked her pale green braids behind her shoulders, wearing a broad grin. “Suit yourself.”

Now, walking through this overgrown forest, I understood. These strappy heels were not meant for sneaking through woods, and rogue branches kept snagging my pale blue chiffon frills. Damn Liz and her damn smirky smirk.

I slowed my approach when I noticed someone in a clearing ahead. A female leaned against an ivy-covered stone ledge, watching me approach. She was the most utterly beautiful and alluring creature I’d ever seen. Soft pink hair floated around her bare brown shoulders, and a deep purple jumpsuit hugged her curves like molten glass. She was stunning. I didn’t normally go for chicks, but I’d make an exception for her.

She watched me with a small amused smile that made me feel that everything I said or did would be for her entertainment. And I was happy to oblige. Something about her drew me in, and I wanted to walk right up and become her best friend or maybe her lover.

It wasn’t just her sexiness or her relaxed stance that exuded power; something else tugged at me, and it took every ounce of my willpower not to cross the clearing and hug her or lick her or do something else I’d regret.

She must be Gabrelle of House Allura. The only female among the heirs.

I threw back my shoulders and tried to look like I belonged. “I’m Neela,” I said. Gabrelle nodded her head a fraction but said nothing.

Beside her were two tall, muscled males exuding masculinity. The taller fae had long silver hair, shining silver eyes, and wore light gray sweatpants with no shirt and a cocky grin plastered on his pale face. From what Liz had

told me, I figured this guy was the wolf shifter from House Caro, the house of sensuality.

Last night over hot cocoa, Liz had given me a quick geopolitical lesson. The Realm of Verda had five ruling Houses, each dedicated to a different aspect of indulgence, and the wolf shifters ran the sex house. The silver-haired male wasn't as beautiful as Gabrelle, but looking at him made my pussy throb with need, and I knew I'd have to keep away from him.

The other male had light brown eyes and hair that framed his face in soft curls, covering his ears. He could have passed for a human if it weren't for his perfect stillness. He had a Mediterranean air, thick eyebrows, and a broad square chin.

I couldn't tell if he was Ronan or Dion. Apparently, Ronan was the hotter of the two, and this caramel curly-haired fae was definitely shaggable.

Then the fourth fae climbed to his feet, and my heart stilled. Blood stopped pumping through my veins and pounded through my ears instead.

Fuck, fuckety, fuck. The male from last night. That fae wine hadn't made me hallucinate, after all. He did exist. The sexiest male in the universe, with his raven hair and endless black eyes. And he was right there.

His white T-shirt pulled against his chest and arm muscles, and I didn't know which part of him to drink in first. He was the hottest of them all. Ronan Mentium. The fae I fucked.

My heart resumed beating, and I remembered how to breathe, so I cocked out a hip, trying to compose a flirty greeting.

But when he saw me, Ronan's face dropped, and my heart plummeted right alongside it.

A deep scowl etched his features, turning his coal eyes into pitiless black holes.

I couldn't look away from him. He had all of the magnetic beauty of last night but none of the friendliness.

"You bitch," he snarled like I'd seduced him, tricked him, and I supposed he was right. Not about seducing him but about fooling him. That was the reason I was here.

I was only pretending to be this princess chick. The damn bracelet didn't belong to me; I'd stolen it. So yes, I deserved his scorn because this was a game of deceit, and he was my pawn.

All four fae checked out my tattooed bracelet with different degrees of subtlety. Gabrelle lingered half a moment longer on my wrist than elsewhere as her gaze swept from my strappy heels over my ridiculous dress to my spiky hair.

Dion licked his lips when his eyes found my wrist like the bracelet was a tasty meal. Leif Caro stared at it and grinned, shoving Dion with his shoulder.

Ronan just blinked. "You didn't have that on last night," he growled.

Who the hell did he think he was? I was happy enough with a simple one-night stand, and I didn't ask for the complication of ending up in the same class or whatever this was. He had no right to be an asshole.

I put a hand on my cocked hip. "Last night, you had your mind on other things."

Gabrelle arched an eyebrow, and Leif let out a whoop that sounded almost like a howl, then he leaned in to whisper something to the dark prince.

I strode into the center of the clearing, refusing to stand on the outskirts a moment longer, and all four pairs of eyes watched me. There were no desks or chairs, just a bunch of beautiful but oddly shaped flowering bushes and dangling green vines strung with flowers.

"What is this place?"

Gabrelle narrowed her eyes. “Interesting that you don’t already know.”

Fuck. “Why should I know? I spent my life in Hebes. I don’t know anything about your fae world...er, our world,” I said, rushing to cover my ass.

My ignorance about Verda seemed to irritate Ronan, and his scowl deepened into outright hatred. He slumped onto a hedge. Hopefully, he’d plunge right through and tumble on his butt in the dirt, but unfortunately, it held his weight. “She’s an ignorant human. She doesn’t know anything.”

Wow, his true colors were shining through bright and fucking clear. “Actually, I’m a fae princess who will kick your ass someday, Ronan. I just need to navigate a few details first.”

If he was a fae prince and also a complete asswipe, I could be a dirtbag and a pretend princess. I didn’t have to put on royal airs or wear stupid chiffon dresses, I could be myself. They wouldn’t know any better.

This group of entitled brats thought they ruled the world and everyone in it, but I wouldn’t take their shit. At least, not for the next few weeks. Then I’d need a Plan B real fast.

Gabrelle and Dion watched me with no emotion, so I couldn’t tell if they bought my princess act, but Leif sniggered when I tore a piece out of Ronan. Maybe that wolf was a potential ally...or perhaps he just got off on conflict.

I moved to sit on a bush covered in tiny orange berries, hoping like hell it would support me and I wouldn’t land on my face in front of these sneering prats. It did, hooray. Not only did it hold my weight, but it rearranged and shifted to support me ergonomically.

Leif came and squatted beside me, his bare chest inches from my face. It seemed friendly at first, but then a sexual pulse hit me like he’d fired a damn lust gun. It started between my thighs and spread along my skin, making

every inch of me sensitive. A wicked gleam lit his eyes that I didn't like. He was using his inner power against me, flooding me with desire, and I bet every one of these fae could smell the arousal soaking my panties.

"Fuck off," I spit out. "Go annoy some other prick."

He bared his fangs at me, and it didn't look like a smile. Leif growled to his buddies, "This one's spicy. You might like to take a bite, Big D."

I spluttered. "Excuse me, did you call Dion Big D?"

Not a single fae muscle moved; they just stared me down. How could they remain so endlessly still?

I took a deep breath. "Isn't his last name Dionysus?"

Silence.

No way on Earth could I out-shush or outlast these guys, so I plunged on. "So that makes him Dion Dionysus. Or Double D."

Leif barked a laugh, but Dion scowled, not liking his new nickname.

I leaned back in my orange berry armchair and hooked an ankle across my knee. "Tell me, Double D, do you prefer V or A?"

Leif barked another laugh and released me from his sexual power, which was a damn relief.

But I hadn't made any friends with Dion. His lips thinned, and he seemed to swell in size. "How old did you say you are, little princess? Twenty-four, right?"

This felt like a new line of attack. First, Leif had sex-tortured me, now it was Dion's turn. But I was pretty sure he came from the house of yummy food and drink, so maybe he would just prepare me a five-course meal.

I tried on a smile. "That's right."

"And your birthday is...?"

"Next month."

That admission got the biggest reaction I'd ever seen from a fae. Every last one of them startled, then grinned, which was the human equivalent of leaping up and down and whooping.

Ronan leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, suddenly interested in the conversation. "And do you know what happens when you turn twenty-five, tomcat?"

Tomcat? What the hell? He'd chosen the shittiest dirtbag of an animal to call me by. Hilarious. He thought he was taking me down a peg because my real birthright was royalty, but he was spot on. I was a damn tomcat from the streets. The joke was on him.

But no, I obviously had no idea why my upcoming birthday was significant. "Humor me," I said.

His soulless black eyes glimmered wickedly. "At the first Ascension Rite after you turn twenty-five, you must Ascend into your chosen power or forever forfeit your magic."

Man, these fae spoke fluent bullshit. "And what does that mean?"

Again, my ignorance seemed to fuel his hatred for me. "You choose your power, and if you succeed in your Ascension, you become stronger."

That sounded awesome. I wasn't fae, but this would hardly be a disaster for me if I was. "I choose my magic, hey? Is there, like, a menu or something?"

Ronan shifted, and dappled sunlight reflected off his sharp jaw. "Oh, you can choose whatever power you want. There's just one catch." I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of begging for information, so I waited him out. He was gagging to tell me, and after a few moments, he did. "To Ascend to the power, you must kill yourself with it."

He let that sink in. All four of these fae dicks looked smug, watching me

reel at that information. If I wanted to wield the magic of water, I'd have to drown myself; if I wanted the power of fire, I'd have to burn myself. To death. What kind of a fucked up place was this?

Thanks, but no thanks. The smug expectation was tangible in the forest clearing, hanging from the vines and soaking up the air. I could almost take a bite out of the pleasure these bastards were deriving from me learning this.

But the joke was on them. Because I wasn't fae, so I would never have to top myself in some weird fae ritual.

A genuine smile shone from my face. "Great, I can't wait."

Leif growled slightly and stepped away from me, and though none of the others showed any emotion, I knew I'd just won a point.

I shifted, loving the way my orange-berry bush grew around me in support. "So, is that why you gathered me here? To tell me the big news of my upcoming death? Or was there something else?"

This fake fae bullshit was kind of fun. These guys were so sure they had the upper hand, with no clue I'd stolen the identity of their precious princess.

"Oh, that's not all," Gabrelle said silkily, sashaying across the glade and plucking a scroll from a tree. "There's also this."

I couldn't help the damn stammer that came with my reply. "And wh— what's that?"

She unfurled the paper with sensual grace and read it, then a carnal smile caressed her plum lips. "This year's first trial." She locked her light pink eyes on mine. "It's time to see what you're made of, princess."

Ronan

I had to take deep breaths to stop infecting the entire glade with my anger. That vile human had no place among us, and her sassy mouth was infuriating.

I stalked over to Gabrelle to snatch the scroll from her hands, but she flicked it aside and shoved me hard enough that I stumbled.

“Behave yourself, moody,” she scolded.

I wanted to know what the first trial would be. Every year the trials were different, either testing physical or magical skills. Hopefully, today’s would be magical, so this humanoid wannabe queen would fail.

Gabrelle stared us all down, enjoying the power of us waiting on her every word. She unfurled the scroll and patted down her purple jumpsuit. “Today’s trial—”

“Wait,” the tomcat interrupted. “The first trial is today? As in now?”

Clearly, she hadn’t known that because she’d turned up in a four-year-old’s idea of what a princess looked like with her spiky blond hair poking out the top. Everything about her radiated ignorance and a lack of belonging. She had no right to rule. Sebarah knew this stuff back to front, and this female dared to waltz in and think she could take his place?

Never. I would never let that happen. My anger toward the usurper princess was deeper, grittier than I’d expected, and more personal than I could have anticipated. Because of last night, I supposed.

I no longer wanted some unknown princess to piss off back to Hebes, I wanted this particular tomcat to piss right out of my life.

She'd fooled me last night. I hadn't even noticed the damn Florian Bracelet melted into her skin because I hadn't expected Seb's sister to look human.

She'd fooled me with her whacky coloring, tractor-beam smile, and wiggly damn ass.

Getting rid of her wasn't just for Seb anymore. It was personal.

Gabrelle watched me through slitted eyes until my focus returned to her, where she always expected everybody's attention to be, then continued reading. "The first trial is a foot race. The heirs will travel twenty miles through the forest on foot, passing a number of obstacles. The winner will be awarded five points, the runner-up four points, blah blah blah."

Gabrelle scrunched up the scroll and tossed it aside, not bothering to read the details we all knew by heart.

Well, all of us except for Neela. First place got five points, down to last, who earned one measly point.

So far, I had accumulated an average of thirteen points every year I'd participated. And Neela, I was pleased to note, had scored precisely zero.

Leif yawned wide, showing off his sharp incisors. "Let's start then, hey?"

He wriggled out of his gray sweatpants and stripped naked. I sighed. The wolf had Ascended last year. He used to come dead last in running races, but now he could shift, he'd outrun us all. Four legs were always faster than two.

Leif shifted into his giant silver wolf form, and we all formed a rough line. Neela was still unstrapping her stupid heels with a look of shock on her face when I shouted, "Go!"

Leif shot off with a taunting tail waggle. Though it stung, I had to resign myself to coming second behind him.

Gabrelle fell into step beside me; I would let her keep pace for the first

couple of miles before I left her in my dust. Dion was always the slowest, and he quickly fell behind.

“This is Dion’s lucky day,” Gabrelle drawled. “He won’t come last for a change.”

The clumsy female tomcat without her fae speed would bring up the rear and earn one lousy point.

But she didn’t deserve even that. “Yes, he will,” I retorted.

Gabrelle glanced at me and arched an eyebrow.

“Because Neela won’t even finish,” I explained. “Let’s make sure of it.”

Gabrelle stopped lightly, and I joined her. Neither of us was panting, although a light sheen sparkled on her brow. “I like the way you think, moody. What did you have in mind?”

I didn’t have anything planned in advance because I hadn’t known what the trial would be. Gaia liked to keep us on our toes, changing the tests every year. Besides, they were supposed to assess our innate ability rather than being something we could prepare for. Plus, I didn’t know Neela would show up today.

But I had to stop her somehow. She didn’t deserve a single point.

I ran through some options in my head. Only one made sense. I shrugged. “She can’t run on broken legs.”

Gabrelle’s jaw clenched, but she didn’t say anything against my plan, for which I was grateful. Leif would’ve whined about that being unfair and suggested we try to rule with her. Actually, he probably would’ve suggested we all have sex with her.

Even Dion would have tried to talk me out of breaking a princess’ legs. But Gabrelle was an ice-cold bitch, and sometimes I loved that about her.

“Fine,” she said. “What do you need me to do?”

This alliance between me and Gabrelle was temporary. We both knew that when we neared the race's finish, we'd trip, fight, and scratch to beat each other across that line. But for now, we had some breathing space. Dion had zero hope of passing us, so we had a few minutes to plan.

Gabrelle's dusty pink eyes sparkled with mischief. "If we want to watch her fall, we'll have to set something up here. Any further down the track, and we'd have to stand around waiting for hours."

"You're a devious bitch, beauty queen."

She blinked slowly. "Thank you."

We worked together to make the trap.

Sebarah would've done a better job. He could have used his powers to dig a beautiful deep pit and cover it with leaves, and Neela would've tumbled right in.

But he wasn't here, and that was why we had this human-sized problem in the first place.

We had to make do. We dragged a massive log across the track on a long downhill section, and Gabrelle used her limited Stealth powers to disguise it. If you looked closely, you could still see the fallen tree, but hopefully, our target would be focused on sprinting instead of watching her footing.

Dion appeared first, and we worded him up, so he ran around the trap. I still wasn't bothered about overtaking him when the time came.

Neela turned up sooner than I expected, not far behind Dion—he should take a good hard look at himself for letting a human lag on his heels. She'd be damn fast once her exposure to human tech wore off.

When she came panting around the corner, the evil bastard inside me rubbed his hands in glee.

She sprinted downhill, urgency lining her face, her spiky blond hair

plastered to her forehead, and I had to admire her determination despite the fact she was inevitably coming last.

But it worked to our advantage. She barreled right into the near-invisible log and tumbled ass over tit. Her ankle broke with a spectacular crack, and I came out of hiding.

Gabrelle blew us both a kiss. "I'll leave you two lovebirds alone." She waggled her eyebrows and then ran off along the path.

I waited a few moments, looking down at my victim in victory, watching the lines of pain etched into her face.

She wouldn't finish this race, not with a broken ankle. I could summon a Healer, but I wouldn't. I needed her down. I needed to keep Seb's promise and ensure she never sat her writhing ass on his throne.

So why did my victory taste like burning oil and line my gut like molten steel?

She looked up at me, determination still shining from her damn face.

"Why don't you just give up?" I hissed. "You'll never take the throne. Go back home to Hebes. We don't want you here."

Determination burned in her startling blue eyes. "I'll never leave. You'll have to take me down, asshole."

I forced my lips to curve, but I wanted to weep. "With pleasure, tomcat."

I turned to walk away, but she called out, her mud-streaked face showing the first sign of fear I'd ever detected on it. "You aren't going to just leave me here, are you?"

Noticing the odd angle at which her left foot hung, her heaving chest and her grim expression, I stared at her for a long moment.

Seb's face hovered before me, the sting of our promise still tingling on my palm. "Yes," I growled. "That's exactly what I'm going to do."

I turned and sprinted down the hill, needing to overtake Dion and Gabrelle, needing to finish this race in second place. Needing to get as far away as possible from Neela.

Neela

Pain lanced up my ankle, searing and undeniable. My left foot hung off my leg at an odd angle, and I couldn't even look at it.

That asshole Ronan had left me in the mud, miles from anywhere, with a broken ankle. I wanted to say I couldn't believe he'd stoop so low, but I could believe it. The Ronan I'd met in the bar was a fake—the real one was coldhearted, calculating, and apparently did not welcome the Floran Princess with open arms.

All four real heirs wanted to get rid of me, probably so they could rule Verda alone. Typical power-hungry political move that would have been right home among the street crews in the Docklands.

They wore fancier clothes and had fancy colorful eyes, but these fae were just as lowlife as anybody from back home.

That made my life much easier because I knew what I was dealing with. If they'd been kind and welcoming, I'd have been out of my depth...but rude and murderous? That I could work with.

I shifted, and agony lanced through my ankle. I must have run about two or three miles through the forest, so that was two or three miles I had to hobble back on a broken foot.

No way would I try to finish this race. I didn't care if I won or lost, I didn't care about their stupid point systems, and I didn't care if I didn't gain the skills I needed to Ascend.

None of that mattered because I wasn't fae, so I would never sit on their stupid throne or kill myself to receive my full powers.

None of it mattered. But I couldn't admit to that and get these assholes off my back because they'd know I'd stolen the precious Floran Bracelet from the actual fae princess.

Fuck my life.

I winced through the pain, pulled myself to standing, and grabbed a long stick to use as a makeshift crutch. The track was muddy and wet, and I hobbled up the slimy slope, struggling not to slip on the slick surface.

Each step was agony as my dangling foot wobbled, and my nerves screamed. The sole of my good foot was scratched to shit from my barefoot sprint through the forest.

If I was fae, I could glide as smoothly as they did and my damn ankle wouldn't jar. That would be nice.

I wanted to give up. Wanted more than anything to lie down on the mud and be still, but I couldn't.

"*Just give up,*" he'd said. Well, I wouldn't give him the bloody satisfaction.

Nobody got the better of me.

He might think he was in a position of power and could bully me into submission, but he didn't know I was a fake, that I had the upper hand and was just toying with him while I figured out how to stay in Arathay.

The fire in my ankle burned hot, but the fire in my belly was even hotter. I would get revenge on Ronan for breaking my ankle and leaving me to die. I'd get revenge on the whole entitled gang of them, but especially Ronan.

He was the one who stared me in the eyes and then walked away, abandoning me with a broken leg. He's the one who gifted me that mind-

blowing orgasm last night. What kind of a man screwed your brains out one night and left you to die in the morning? Worst one-night stand ever.

My tattoo tingled, and I glanced down, spotting a ripe fruit that looked like a pear but was deep purple. I was beginning to trust my tattoo, and I spoke into it. “Should I eat that pear thingy?”

It tingled again, which I took as a yes. Since when did I take advice from a demonic tattoo? I sighed. Since now.

When I took a bite of the juicy fruit, the agony in my ankle lessened to a dull throb. “Fuck me.” I gobbled down the whole thing.

The pain didn’t disappear, but it subsided to a tolerable level.

This whole shitshow reminded me of when Randy’s crew had beaten me senseless and then dumped me in the woods outside of town with a twisted knee, and I had to limp back to civilization. I did it once, so I could do it again. I didn’t even have a magical fruit that time.

I grabbed another pear and stuffed it into my bra to carry, in case the numbing effect wore off, then hobbled along the path again, still using the crutch and hopping but going much faster since my ankle didn’t scream with every step.

A stream tinkled beside me, filling the air with a sweet dewy mist, and I couldn’t resist scrambling off the path and collapsing beside it. I drank greedily from the flowing water.

Only it wasn’t water but a slightly sweet wine that quenched my thirst and sent a joyous mood buzzing through me. Man, I could love this place.

Minus the evil princes and princesses who wanted me dead, of course.

I drank my fill, then stood again, balancing precariously on my one good leg while I got my makeshift crutch in position. I stabbed the crutch onto a large tuft of grass and heaved my weight onto it.

A pained squeak came from the grass tuft, and it unfurled, revealing sweet paws with sweet little toe beans and a sweet little face with big brown eyes. It was a creature that looked like a teddy bear and kitten rolled into one, and I would have oohed and aahed if it hadn't been leaking organs and spraying blood from a gaping wound.

"Oh shit, I'm so sorry." I bent down to pet the creature's head when a second not-a-grass-tuft unfurled and lunged at me. As it attacked, the soft teddy bear features morphed into a tiger's head, its muzzle growing and sharp fangs appearing, which would have taken off my hand if I hadn't fallen back on my ass and shimmied away.

I bum-shuffled and scurried along the creekside as fast as possible. This thing could easily kill me. But it shrank back to its normal size and returned to its mate. A high keening sound filled the air, turning my skin to gooseflesh.

The creature licked its injured mate, its grief-stricken cries piercing the woods. The smaller, bloodied animal's gentle whimpers ceased.

I backed away, turning to leave. Nobody helped me, and I helped nobody; that was my rule. I didn't owe these creatures anything.

Except I did. I owed them both. I'd javelined one right through its belly, and it was bleeding out. The high-pitched keening continued. My carelessness hadn't only ruined one life but two.

"Fuck it."

I bit into the second purple pear, then held out the fruit segment to the two creatures. The healthy one, larger and a darker green than its injured mate, snarled at me and bared its vicious fangs.

Still, I approached. Slowly, damn slowly, while keeping one eye on the growling beast. When I got within range, I squeezed pear juice into the

bleeding mouth. The whimpering stopped, and the darker animal watched me carefully, intelligence gazing from its large brown eyes.

I'd stopped the pain and could leave with a light heart. Creatures died all the time in the wild, that's why it was called the wild. They didn't call this place *the gentle* or *the safe*, did they? It wasn't my fault if a beast sustained an injury and then died.

I turned and crawled away, and the second creature let me go, but it wailed again and licked its mate, and the sound of its grief coated my skin.

"Fuck it. "I shimmied back down to the creature and swept it into my arms, eyeing its vicious protector warily.

"Fine, you stupid thing," I told the injured creature as I cradled it against my chest. "I'll take you home. Liz will find you a doctor. Or a vet." I sighed as I wedged my crutch into my armpit and hopped onto the path again. "You and me both, buddy."

I hobbled home on my bare, bloodied foot, going as fast as possible and holding the blood-soaked bundle of fur against my chest. Its mate followed me every step of the way, growling quietly but making no attempt to stop me.

After an eternity, I made it back to the moonway that led to the Rose Palace. Thank God Liz had told me to look out for the pile of stones that marked the entrance to the magical path, or I never would have found it.

I emerged at the back of the Rose Palace with the two teddy bear tigers in tow. I called for help and collapsed onto a bush, which kindly caught me.

Liz sauntered outside with a sassy expression, probably coming to mock me for my tattered and muddy chiffon dress, but when she saw me, her face fell. She stopped a dozen feet away. "Why is a snuffle tuff following you? Actually, my real question is, why hasn't that snuffle tuff killed you yet?"

I was too tired to be scared of that question. Besides, I already knew it

was dangerous, but it hadn't hurt me yet. I wiped a muddy hand across my brow. "It isn't following me. It's following this." I held up the bloodied bundle in my hands, and Liz backed up a pace. "Can you fetch a doctor for it?"

She looked at me like I had asked her to fetch me the moon. "You want a Healer for a snuffle tuff?"

I nodded. "And for me."

She couldn't argue with that, so she agreed and ran inside to summon one.

"Hey!" I called after her, and she paused to hear me out. "You were right about the dress," I admitted, primly patting down my torn and grubby chiffon rags.

Her pale green eyes lit with mischief. "Of course I was. I'm right about everything." With a sassy little curtsy, she turned and dashed off to find a Healer.

Ronan

I finished the foot race trial in second place behind Leif, so I was second to make my way back to the Lakehouse.

Dion had been easy to pass. I'd flown past him a few minutes after leaving Neela in the dirt. Gabrelle was a more challenging target, and she pushed her advantage hard, making me chase her down with everything I had, but I passed her at the fifteen-mile mark and came in an easy second.

By the time I reached the Lakehouse, Leif was already showered and changed into a fresh pair of gray sweatpants, lounging on his huge silver sofa with a massive smirk, throwing a tennis ball against a wall and plucking it out of the air. "Finally decided to join me, did you?"

"I'm still the fastest fae," I pointed out. "You're the fastest dog out of, let me count...one."

As usual, insults breezed off Leif, and if anything, his smugness deepened. "I beat you fair and square, dude. You're just jealous that I've Ascended and you haven't."

I perched on Gabrelle's glass chair, not wanting to put my dirty butt on my own. "I'm not jealous of anything about you."

Leif licked the tip of his finger, traced it down his bare chest, and played with his nipple. "Are you sure you aren't jealous of all the sex I get?"

Leif's House represented debauchery and fornication, and his pack certainly lived up to the name. Every single one of them would bang males, females, non-binaries, anything that moved. He proudly described himself as

megasexual, so I supposed his desire extended to cardboard boxes and warm apple pies. He didn't even deny it whenever I tried to rib him about it.

"I get as much sex as I want," I retorted.

Every female in Verda wanted a piece of my ass, and plenty of them got it. They ranged from fake coquettishness with batting eyelashes, hoping I'd ask them out, to the other end of the spectrum with straight-up stalking or begging.

Except for Neela. Somehow last night, she had control. She had me watching every one of her moves and practically begging her to stay. *Don't go*, I'd told her, and shame swept through me at the memory. If I'd known she was Sebarah's sister, I wouldn't have gone near her.

So yeah, I got all the sex I wanted...and usually on my own terms.

Leif grinned. "You still don't get as much as me."

"Nobody gets as much as you."

He stayed on the sofa, smirking in victory while I showered and changed. By the time I returned to the main room, Gabrelle had arrived. Even with her jumpsuit torn, she managed to look beautiful. The rips and tears seemed strategically placed to reveal flashes of light-brown underboob and deep-brown thigh.

She was beauty personified but somehow seemed icier and more heartless now I'd met Neela. Neela was movement, life, and emotion, the opposite of Gabrelle's perfection and control.

"Just three points for you this time, Gabrelle," Leif smirked, man-spreading across his huge silver sofa.

Gabrelle swept past us to go shower and muttered, "Ascended," somehow making the word sound like *Cheat*.

Half an hour later, she emerged with her hair freshly washed and falling

in soft pink waves around her flawless face, wearing a white sheath dress that was tailor-made for her. “Good job with the usurper princess,” she said to me, sitting on her glass chaise longue and stretching her shapely legs along its length. “Zero points is exactly what that human-lover deserves.”

We explained to Leif what we’d done. How we’d pulled the log across the path at a steep downhill section, then Gabrelle had glamored it using the traces of Stealth she’d inherited from her father.

“I did a shoddy job, I’m afraid,” she admitted, trailing one tapered finger along her glass chaise.

“You made the log damn near invisible,” I countered. The beauty queen had done well.

She blinked up at me coquettishly. “Imagine what I’ll be able to do after I Ascend.”

Leif caught his ball and watched her every move. “Are you going to choose Stealth? I thought you’d pick Lure for sure.”

She shrugged lightly. “I haven’t decided yet, and I still have a few years before I need to.”

Leif Ascended last year, and Dion and Sebarah several years before that, but Gabrelle and I weren’t yet twenty-five. I was pretty certain I’d follow in my parents’ footsteps, and Gabrelle would definitely choose Lure—she was just playing coy.

“Well, Neela won’t last five minutes with you two on her case,” Leif said.

I growled. “With the four of us on her case, you mean.”

Leif shrugged. “Tripping her over and breaking her legs...I’m not sure I’m up for that. She’s not in my pack.”

Gabrelle uncrossed and crossed her legs, deliberately drawing the wolf’s gaze. “We are all in this together, end of story,” she said firmly.

Gabrelle and Leif had a special connection I didn't fully understand. It stemmed from the natural pairing of their Houses, sensuality and beauty. So he took Gabrelle's word more seriously than anyone else's.

He shrugged. "Sure, of course. I always have your back, guys. You know that."

He'd better.

Hours later, Dion turned up looking exhausted. Nobody said a word about him being last because we all knew it was inevitable that he'd get his two points in the physical trial and try to do better in the magical ones. Even Leif limited his smugness to a minimum, and after Dion had freshened up, he joined us in the main room as the sun set across the lake.

After sitting in his beanbag for half an hour, Dion climbed wearily to his feet. "Nobody is bothered to cook anything, I suppose," he grumbled.

Leif snorted. "If I cooked, you'd whinge about the flavors for the next six months, dude. I fell for that once, but never again."

Dion liked to complain about us never helping with the cooking, but the truth was he loved that shit. After an hour of whipping up a gourmet feast in the kitchen, he was in a much better mood, and we all sat down at the table to enjoy it together.

Gabrelle ate carefully and deliberately, the same way she did everything. "What was she like in bed?"

Leif whipped his head around, flashing his gaze between us. "Oh, that's right! You screwed Neela. That's a plan I can get behind. I'll bang her too, then break her heart."

Rage swept through me, violent, uncontrollable fury. I stood and shoved the table hard, knocking into Leif's belly and toppling his chair backward.

His tennis ball flew through the air. He hit the floor hard with a howl, and the fire inside me burned hotter.

I rounded the table and stood over him, growling, “Don’t lay a finger on her, mutt.”

The room was shocked into silence, and Leif looked up at me from the floor with wide eyes. I didn’t care. If he didn’t agree to leave her alone, I would rip his throat out, friend or not.

He held up his hands in surrender. “Sure thing, okay, no screwing the newbie. Geez, I didn’t know the boring no-sex pact extended to her.”

Right, the no-sex pact. That was the problem.

Whatever the reason, I couldn’t have that fae lay a hand on her, the idea was intolerable.

Not just Leif, but any fae.

Nobody touched Neela except me.

Neela

The dark green snuffle tuff snarled and bared its oversized fangs, so I placed its injured mate on the grass beside me and shuffled away a few inches. I wanted to get as far away as possible, but that was all I could manage in my exhaustion.

The wild creature came warily closer and settled beside its mate, licking her and whimpering quietly.

The next thing I knew, Liz was shaking my shoulder to awaken me, and I blinked sleepily. A fae with long silver and black hair peered into my face, his silver eyes flecked with onyx.

I turned my head. “Treat the animal first.” I had a broken ankle, but the creature was near death and needed urgent help. I hoped this doctor could heal wildlife as well as fae. And, er, humans.

Liz looked at me like I was a softhearted fool, but altruism had nothing to do with it; my motives were selfish. I would feel like shit forever if this thing died because I’d stabbed it with my tree branch, and I didn’t want its death on my conscience. Plus, its mate might rip my arms off.

When it was my turn, the Healer placed his hands over my ankle, and a warm tingle suffused my injury, like water bubbling through my limbs. It spread along my bones, knitting them together, healing my flesh, clearing away infection. The sensation bathed me in warmth and left me feeling whole.

Before I could do more than thank the Healer, Liz carried me upstairs to bed.

“I can walk,” I insisted, though I wasn’t sure that was true.

“The Healer said you needed to rest overnight since you’re still suffering the effects of human tech.” She winked, knowing as well as I did that human technology had nothing to do with me not appearing fae. “You can resume dancing and stomping your little feet in the morning.”

Her arms felt like slender iron bands. “Aren’t I too heavy? How can you carry me so easily?” Liz was taller than me, but I was all wiry muscle.

She snorted. “You’re an undersized runt. A child could carry you up these stairs.”

The two snuffle tuffs followed us upstairs at a wary distance, not used to being indoors but unwilling to leave my side. I didn’t know what they expected of me...had I become their mother now? Were we imprinted or something? Would I spend the rest of my days with two wild creatures on my heels?

I settled into my super comfortable bed, and the snuffle tuffs made a nest of blankets and cushions in the corner of my bedroom. They curled together like two large tufts of grass, bringing a faint forest smell to my room. The sounds of their gentle snuffles lured me to sleep.

The next morning, the wild creatures followed me downstairs and sat just outside on the threshold to the kitchen while Liz and I ate at the kitchen counter.

“We can eat in the breakfast room if you want,” Liz said through a mouth full of buttery scones. “I always ate here when it was just me, but technically we’re supposed to use the proper room.”

I shook my head. “Too stuffy in there. I prefer it here. Besides my snuffle

tuffs can see the garden here.”

Liz raised her green eyebrows. “*Your* snuffle tuffs?”

I shrugged.

Liz asked about the trial, and I told her every detail. How the princess and princes were entitled dicks and deserved to die. How they orchestrated my demise, and how they’d looked me in the eyes while I was writhing in agony and simply walked away.

Liz’s mouth dropped lower and lower as I told my story. “Wow. Imagine how awful they’d be if they knew you weren’t really fae.”

I shivered. That hadn’t occurred to me. I’d let myself be smug in the knowledge I was fooling them and chosen to ignore the danger.

I had to work on my Plan B. I bit into a breakfast meringue, which was as delicious as it sounded and apparently also nutritious, then caught sight of the snuffle tuffs shuffling in the doorway. I broke off some meringue and tossed it at them, but they just watched it thud on the floor like it was a dead rat, then stared at me in disdain.

I shrugged. “Sorry. I don’t know what you guys eat.”

Liz eyed the beasts suspiciously. “Are they your pets now?”

The larger, darker snuffle tuff, whom I decided to call Herb, morphed its tiny cute muzzle into a giant terrifying snout and bared its fangs at her.

Liz backed away so hard she fell off her stool and landed on her ass on the black-and-white tiled checkerboard floor.

I laughed. “Nope. They’re definitely not my pets.” I turned to them. “You guys go forage some breakfast for yourselves in the garden if you’re going to be fussy.”

They scampered off, and I was pleased to see how well the smaller one looked, seeming for all the world as though she’d never met the wrong end of

my walking stick.

I stretched my ankle in a lazy circle, searching for lingering pain and finding none. “Amazing.” I took another bite of meringue. “I could get used to this place.”

If I wanted to stay here, I needed a Plan B, fast. Soon the whole realm would realize I wasn’t fae. I’d already been here almost forty-eight hours, and I only had two weeks until my fae abilities were supposed to appear, so I had to figure out where I would live before then. “Is there a human town here?”

Liz picked herself up, righted her stool, then sat. A scowl had settled on her features, probably related to my new leafy friends and her bruised ass. “What are you talking about?”

“Back home, we have Chinatown and Little Italy. Do you have anywhere like that for humans? A place where we all hang out? Human town.”

She sipped a mouthful of juice, studying me. “No, and we don’t have a zoo for humans, either. Don’t talk like that, or fae will think you’re nuts.”

I didn’t buy it. If there were any humans in this realm, they would find each other. Strength in numbers.

People who didn’t belong ended up in the worst part of the city. I chewed my lip and thought. “Where do all the lowlifes hang out?” Her face was blank, not appearing to understand the question, so I rephrased it. “Where is the scariest part of town? The one place you wouldn’t want to go. Back home, it’s the Docklands. Where is it here?”

“If you promise not to bring your new friends—”

“Herb and Doug,” I informed her, having just decided on Doug’s name.

She paused. “Which one’s the girl?”

“Doug.”

“Okay. If you promise not to bring Herb and Doug, I’ll take you to the

worst place in Verda.”

I grinned. “Rockstar.”

Neela

This was nothing like the Docklands. It was dark and terrifying in a way no human place could ever be.

I led the way because my trusty fae guide was shaking like a leaf in a thunderstorm, and somebody had to be brave. But it was all for show. If she wasn't here, I'd be running and hiding.

Dread infiltrated my body, emanating from the stone walls around us. Moss grew from cracks in the old buildings, all light and joy sucked out of the world.

“What is this place?” I whispered, tugging Liz's hand.

“Thousands of years ago, the mood masters ruled Verda all alone. Their reign ended in a terrible war. This was their castle if you can believe it. Apparently, it was magnificent.”

“What happened to it?” It was hard to picture this place as anything but desolate, dark, and dreadful.

“The mood masters' reign ended in a terrible war that decimated the fae population. This was thousands and thousands of years ago, and the destruction prompted the five current Houses to rule together, so we would never suffer such a terrible and brutal war again. Our population is so small that our realm wouldn't survive another one.”

“Holy shit.”

“As their last living action, the mood masters imbued the castle walls with dread and horror so their enemies could never live here in peace.”

I took another step into the castle as the walls closed above me, imagining monsters staring from the walls as I passed, feeling like I was walking to my death.

“It feels like when I crossed through the barrier from the human world. I thought I was going to die.”

She squeezed my hand and pressed closer to me, so we walked shoulder to shoulder, stumbling forward. “The ancient mood masters spelled that barrier too,” she whispered, her voice barely audible above the pounding of my heart.

I couldn’t take another step forward. I knew I wouldn’t die—I hadn’t when I passed through the barrier between realms—but the feeling was unshakable. If I took another step forward, I would never take another breath.

We turned and fled, and the dread lessened as we moved away from the center of the crumbling castle, but we didn’t stop running until it was a distant speck on the horizon, and I could finally breathe easily.

“That would be the perfect place for humans to hide,” Liz said. “They’d be safe from the fae. Nobody goes in there.”

I shook my head. “No way. Humans would never live there. It’s bloody awful.”

I had this all wrong. Humans wouldn’t live in the worst part of the fae world, they’d live in the most boring part. Somewhere that nothing ever happened. No magical rivers filled with delicious wine, no friendly bushes that caught you when you sat down, and definitely no dread-imbued ruins.

“Where’s the most boring part of Verda? That’s where they’ll be.”

Liz knew exactly where to take me. It took us hours of walking and navigating moonways to get there, but we finally emerged into a broad grassy field of nothing.

“It’s perfect,” I beamed. We explored on foot and finally saw some houses in the distance. A town. A run-of-the-mill, houses-made-out-of-bricks-or-wood village. No color-changing walls, no mood-altering furniture, it could be a town in the middle of Hebes.

It was like entering a medieval village but with a few fae luxuries. And these were definitely humans. None of that eerie fae stillness and the wild-colored eyes. These were my people.

I relaxed for the first time in days. This was my Plan B. I would build a little cottage on the outskirts of town and make new friends here. This was the life I’d planned.

A gravelly voice snarled, startling me. “What are you doing here?”

I whirled around. Ronan. Ronan fucking Mentium. He wore a black T-shirt that hugged his torso, and I had to grit my teeth to stop myself from checking out what he was wearing down below.

I kept my gaze planted firmly on his scowling face. “I’m exploring my new world.” This was bad. Ronan had caught me looking for humans. This had better not blow my cover.

His black-hole eyes stared into my soul, assessing and calculating my words. “Is that so?” he said slowly, suspiciously.

Shit, I had to turn the tables and get his attention away from why I would come to the most boring part of the fae realm. “What are you doing here?”

The question hit home. The tall male faltered, then ran a hand through his raven hair. “I was curious about humans after...the other night.”

The other night. Was he referring to our evening of intimacy? Our public fuckfest? That was probably a first for him, bedding a human, another notch for his bedpost.

I cocked out a hip. “Are you upset you didn’t actually bag a human?” I

played the fae card for all I was worth.

He stepped forward so he was in my face, his broad chest blocking my view and forcing my neck to crane up to meet his gaze. His coal-black eyes blazed with anger. “No. Nothing about you is surprising or interesting,” he snarled. “And it never will be. Your family was always the weakest among the ruling Houses, and you’re even weaker than them.”

He flicked my shoulder with his forefinger with enough force that I staggered backward and landed on my ass in the dirt. I grazed my palms, and a shock rang up my coccyx. That bloody hurt.

Rage filled me, and I clambered to my feet, feeling like a damn fool. I hated that. Nothing was worse than being made a fool; this male had now fooled me twice. Broken my ankle, then shoved me into the mud.

Looking around for support, I realized every human had scuttled indoors. Bloody cowards.

I dusted the dirt off my hands and shoved Ronan’s hard chest, but he didn’t move an inch. “Such a big man, picking on me when my fae powers haven’t returned. You better watch out because when I’m at full strength, I’ll bring you down.”

He snorted.

“Who Ascends first, asshole?” He blinked twice, making me smile. I was getting to him, so I pressed on. “You used to be stronger and faster than your buddy Leif until he Ascended, right? My Ascension is next month. I will be stronger and faster than you, and I’ll kick your ass all over town in front of all your buddies. Until then, stay out of my face.”

I stalked away, heading back toward the moonway we’d arrived through, and Liz trotted along behind me.

When she caught me up, I turned on her. “Thanks for your help back

there,” I hissed sarcastically.

She wasn't fazed by my venom. “Ronan Mentium comes from the strongest fae family, there's no point interfering. You guys need to work out your hierarchy bullshit among yourselves. That's the fae way.”

“Well, I'm not fucking fae,” I bit back.

She shrugged and walked beside me in silence while I thought obsessively about ways to take Ronan down.

Ronan

The human village had none of Neela's wild restlessness, her writhing tomcat energy.

It was dull and uneventful, filled with uninteresting people whose hair and eyes were mismatched but not distracting the way Neela's were. Every last one of them scurried away when they saw me, displaying none of the tomcat's fierce determination and courage.

I'd never given much thought to humans. A few dozen lived in Verda, and occasionally one popped up in the city streets, but I didn't give them a second glance.

Until that night in the bar when Neela had taken me so by surprise. Part of her attraction had been her supreme humanness, the constant motion, the desire and emotions written plain across her face.

That sparked my curiosity. So I came here to investigate, to see if I'd been overlooking a source of pleasure and intrigue my entire life, but I was disappointed. Neela was different from all these humans, perhaps because of her fae nature mixed with her mortal upbringing, a mere fluke of circumstance.

Then she was there, right in front of me, standing in the human village.

I'd thrown her some shade, but she'd thrown it right back and then walked away, leaving me angry and aroused. Damn that female.

Thoughts of her followed me all the way home. When I finally reached my front door, a spellbird hovered patiently above the threshold. A letter, a

piece of paper folded into a bird shape and spelled to fly to its intended recipient.

I put out my hand, and the spellbird landed gently on it and stopped moving. The spell was complete.

My heart rate picked up as I unfolded the paper.

Common fae are gathering outside the Rose Palace. Come fast.

Shit. Word had gotten out that the Floran Bracelet had been claimed and the last remaining descendent of House Flora had returned. Double shit.

I made my way to the Rose Palace, using the familiar moonways I'd walked so many times. Sebarah and I had spent so much time together. His palace was like my second home.

The guardian hedge caught me off guard. Sebarah had Ascended a few years back when I was only twenty, and to nobody's surprise, he'd chosen to Ascend into Grower. He immediately got to work growing protective shrubbery around his family estate that would only part for family or welcome guests. Otherwise, it remained thick and thorny, impenetrable.

He'd spent months growing that hedge, imbuing it with the perfect mix of Grower magic and spells to get the right effect.

I'd been the one to come up with the name guardian hedge, and he loved it. He never got the flowers just right. He'd always wanted blooms that changed to reflect the visitor's intent.

"You just want it to show red roses when Gabrelle visits," I'd joked, and maybe I was right. But he never admitted to loving Gabrelle and never got that part of the plant working. The spellwork was too complex for him, and he didn't want to engage a Weaver; he wanted it to be his personal masterpiece. So the blooms remained stubbornly small and pink and never changed.

When I arrived, the hedge was wide open, and fae were pouring through. The courtyard and the grass beyond were packed with a throng of fae, with tiny winged faeries fluttering overhead.

Neela appeared on a second-floor balcony, looking startled. Good, she was uncomfortable with the attention, so she wouldn't seek it. Hopefully, she'd be stupid enough not to realize the common fae's love could be her greatest weapon.

A cheer erupted at the sight of her, turning her confusion into a surprised smile.

Gabrelle appeared beside me, her black dress flawless. "This is an interesting turn of events," she remarked mildly. If ever there was a time to show emotion or disappointment, this was it, but the beauty queen was her usual icy cold.

"We need to stop her."

"Yes, but how?"

Leif and Dion soon found us. The four of us were among the tallest fae, not hard to spot in a crowd, and Dion's long curly hair was bright orange today, making him even more distinct.

"Orange juice after lunch, dude?" Leif asked.

Dion nodded. "The real question is, what will we do about this?"

The whoops and cheers continued, and when they died down, Neela, if she had any sense at all, would make a speech. Something about how pleased she was to see everybody, how glad she was to be back, and how much he looked forward to learning everything she could about Verda and leading it to a prosperous future. Blah, blah, blah.

"We need to distract her," I whispered urgently.

Leif bounced up and down. "I've got this." He bounded away into the

crowd before I could grill him on his plan. He'd better come up with something decent—his strategies weren't always foolproof. One time he'd tried to catch fish in our lake by blasting the latest Fanged Five album, and Seb and I had sneaked up on him and pushed him in. He didn't catch anything but seaweed.

Leif's silver head weaved through the crowd, then he let himself in the front door and moments later appeared on the second-floor balcony behind Neela. This was a rare moment when the wolf wasn't bare-chested, and his light gray T-shirt and sweatpants, topped with his flowing silver hair, made him look like a glowing column of silver.

I knew that was her bedroom balcony, and the thought of Leif passing through her most intimate space made my teeth grind.

Neela turned around at his sudden appearance behind her, frowning, but he motioned her to return to the crowd and begin her speech.

"Hi, everyone," she began, and I could see she had that sweet-curious newcomer vibe going on that the crowd would lap up. I hoped she would accidentally show her true brutal self, the determined bitch who never did as she was told—that would turn the common fae against her in an instant.

Hopefully, Leif had something good up his sleeve. She turned to him, distracted, and I scented her arousal from across the space. I knew that smell, human musk laced with vanilla, but that scent was for me only. Mine.

He was using his sexual magic to distract her, and it was working. She could barely string two sentences together, and she was losing the crowd fast.

It was a genius plan, and I fucking hated it. I hated her dilated pupils, her fluttering heart, and how she kept glancing over her shoulder at Leif.

"E-excuse me," she stammered to the assembled fae and turned indoors, fisting Leif's T-shirt and tugging him in behind her.

I roared. My fingernails drew blood from my palms, and I plunged into the crowd, scattering fae left and right. I sprinted indoors and swallowed the stairs three at a time, then burst into Neela's bedroom with an angry bellow, expecting to find them entwined, embracing, passionate.

But they weren't. Neela had clearly slapped Leif and was lecturing him to "piss off and leave me the hell alone."

Her blue eyes blazed when I burst into the room. "You're not welcome here either, princeling," she spit at me, and I glanced at the space between their two bodies, my anger abating.

It wasn't jealousy. No way. She could bang whoever she wanted as long as my buddies kept to our no-sex-among-the-heirs pact. She was an heir, so technically, she was part of the deal too, and I had to make sure Leif realized that.

That was definitely it. Nothing to do with the way her writhing ass had felt so damn perfect on my lap.

Neela

The forest classroom was garlanded with flowers and dripping with ivy. I'd arrived early, and now that I had the luxury to look around by myself, I noticed how beautiful it was.

The relics of ancient stones dotted the glade's perimeter, and I wondered if this used to be a place of magical power. The stones were barely visible through cascading ivy, which also covered the forest floor.

I'd leaped out of bed the instant my tattoo buzzed me awake. I didn't want to be caught out like before, the last to arrive and already on the back foot. So I made sure to get here early.

Herb and Doug followed me every step of the way, Doug lumbering at my feet and Herb keeping a wary distance but not letting his mate out of sight. They settled down at the edge of the clearing, indistinguishable from the foliage in the dappled dark.

I walked around the clearing, touching leaves, smelling the ivy, and investigating the crumbling ruins. The trees around us were ancient and tall, with rough wood interwoven through smooth.

This place was whack. Those crowds last night were whack. I'd heard some noises outside, ventured onto my balcony, and seen a horde of fawning fae. These guys must really like their royalty.

I hadn't known what to say or do, so it was almost a relief when Leif interfered, and I could escape indoors.

The last thing I wanted was to be recognized throughout the realm. After all, I planned to sneak away to the human village and live out my life anonymously, which would be difficult now that half the population of Verda City had seen me.

I'd have to grow my hair, dye it, and maybe get some contact lenses. No, stuff that, I was in a magical realm—I could probably buy a potion for that.

A fae appeared in my peripheral vision—I hadn't heard the fucker creep up. Damn these fae and their silent feet.

Ronan looked me up and down, his gaze resting on my hips for a long moment before returning to my face. Man, he was sexy. He wore a gray marle T-shirt that emphasized his biceps and denim jeans that I knew were softer than they appeared. His cut jawline was tense. Even his dead black gaze was attractive. I could eye-fuck him all day long if he wasn't such a prick.

A lazy smirk spread across his face. "Well, well, the sex-crazed princess graces us with her presence."

I knew it. I knew Ronan had put Leif up to that trick last night and made me look like a sex addict in front of half the fae population.

"Well, you'd know, wouldn't you," I said, trying to embarrass him by referring to our first night together.

But he didn't show any emotion, typical damn fae. At least nothing that wasn't carefully crafted in advance and strategically placed on his face.

I took advantage of his gaze being locked on mine in what he supposed was an intimidating manner, and I stalked across the clearing and sat on the bush he'd chosen last time, hoping like hell it was his favorite.

Of course, I couldn't tell from his crafted expression if I was right, so I hammed it up and wriggled my ass into the molded leaves. "Man, this is even

more comfortable than that one.”

It might have been my imagination, but I thought I saw his jaw tic, so I chalked it up for a win.

Leif bounded into the clearing in wolf form, a giant silver creature that gave me the shock of my life. The massive dog walked right up to me, and I would've toppled out of my bush if it hadn't quickly grown a branch to support me.

In an instant, Doug was at my side, transforming into her monster self. She wasn't as large as the wolf by a long shot, but her mouth was bigger and her fangs longer, and Leif backed away and whined.

The wolf transformed into his fae form, buck-ass naked with his big dick swinging, and a pulse of sexual desire beamed through me.

“Get some fucking clothes on,” I snarled and was surprised when Ronan chuckled. “Hear, hear.”

Leif ignored me, still staring at Doug. “You have a freaking snuffle tuff? Do you know what that thing is?”

Nope, but I knew she was my friend. “Of course I do.”

Doug shrank, and her muzzle disappeared, and she tried to leap onto my lap but didn't quite make it, so I scooped a hand under her butt and helped her up. She rotated in a full circle before settling down to nap. She was like a hedgehog with the same cute soft belly and tiny paws but with grass tufts instead of spines.

I patted her grassy back, and she snuffled contentedly. “If you think she's scary, you should see her mate.”

Satisfaction hummed through me when Leif scanned the clearing, trying to ID the second snuffle tuff. Thank God I'd befriended this creature; she might be my only real weapon against these fae.

Gabrelle swanned into the clearing, wearing a strappy white dress that made her hair and skin glow. A male I didn't recognize tagged behind her. He had curly pink hair and vibrant pink eyes like hers, and for a moment, I thought he might be her brother.

It wasn't until he spoke that I recognized him as Dion. He tossed a foil-wrapped package to each of his friends—excluding me—and grinned. “That’s the best strawberry mousse you’ll ever eat.”

Leif was already tongue deep in his, somehow making it look sexy.

Gabrelle pouted. “Didn’t you bring one for our princess friend?”

Dion shot me a hard stare. “No point befriending her. She won’t be here for long.”

“Couple of thousand years, max,” I retorted. I had no idea how long fae lived, so I was taking a wild guess. “Long enough to show you how much better I am than you. At everything.”

Gabrelle shook her head sadly. “What a shame you only have one month to get to full power before you Ascend...or die.”

I was aware of Ronan’s hulking presence behind me, where he hadn’t moved to take a seat, aware of his gaze on the back of my neck. So it was a relief when he joined the conversation, and I could use the excuse to swivel around and see him.

Yep, still hot.

“And then she’ll still have to pass Gaia’s ultimate test if she ever wants to rule,” he said. “And without a lifetime of training like we’ve had, that will be almost impossible.”

Yep, still an asshole.

“Fine, I’ll bite,” I said on a sigh. “What’s Gaia’s ultimate test?”

Ronan’s fists clenched at my ignorance. “Five Houses govern the realm.

They are trained in groups of five. My dad trained with Gabrelle's mom, D's dad, Leif's mom, and Seb's mom. Er, your mom. They trained together, competed in their yearly trials together, and they rule together. That's what keeps the realm stable."

"And when a majority of them die, their heirs take over," Leif added.

I wrinkled my nose. "How morbid."

"How practical," Gabrelle interjected. "I believe things are done the same way in the mortal realm? At least they used to be. A queen dies, and her daughter takes her place."

"Yeah, but you said a majority of them have to die. So three out of five die, and the other two get booted out of their jobs?"

The royal brats shared a look. "Not quite," Gabrelle finally said. "They get killed. Otherwise, they can cause difficulty and make the realm unstable."

I stopped patting Doug. "Like I said, that's morbid. You fae are a fucking morbid race."

My slip of the tongue, referring to *you fae*, didn't go unnoticed. Ronan snarled. "I told you she doesn't belong."

Doug nuzzled my hand to make me keep patting her, which I did. Her fur was softer than grass, and the motion was soothing. At least with her on my lap, I had a friend nearby.

This fae system of government was freaking awful. Five trained together, competed together, sat Gaia's ultimate test, and then ruled together. And as soon as three of them died, the other two were murdered, so they all died together. Brutal.

Thank God I wasn't actually one of them. I didn't want my lifespan to depend on any of these pricks.

I decided to get up and go back to the Rose Palace. I didn't want any part

in whatever was happening here today. It didn't seem like we had another trial, and I didn't plan on hanging out here just for the conversation.

I scooted Doug onto the ground, and she leaped down clumsily with a cute little snuffle, then I climbed to my feet. I didn't need to explain myself, so I marched to the edge of the clearing without saying a word, but my tattoo began burning. I kept walking out along the path through the forest, but my wrist grew hotter until the searing pain was unbearable, and I was forced back to the clearing.

Gabrelle watched me return with a satisfied smile as though my life was a performance for her enjoyment. "Today is a demonstration of Lure," she said, and I realized with dread that she was our teacher, and my demonic tattoo wouldn't let me get away.

"No, don't go," she said as I moved to return to my seat, flicking a perfect pink lock of hair behind her shoulder. "You'll make an excellent subject for my demonstration."

I knew Gabrelle hadn't Ascended yet, so she wouldn't have full access to this Lure power, whatever that was. Hopefully, that meant she couldn't actually cause me too much harm. I cocked out a hip and tried to take up as much space as possible. "Fine."

She smiled coyly. "Good girl. Now come closer."

I didn't need to obey. Checking in with my tattoo, it was happy to let me disregard that command. But then my feet walked toward the ice bitch without running the idea past my conscious brain.

My breath caught, and my mouth fell open briefly before I slammed it shut.

Gabrelle's sultry smile was all white teeth and plum lips against her perfect brown skin. "Lure gives me power over others' actions," she

explained, beckoning me closer.

My feet didn't stop moving until I was an inch from her face and could smell her...passionfruit notes—she even smelled beautiful. “And what do you do with people when you have them under your control?” I asked warily.

Her smile broadened, and she lifted a bare shoulder sensually. “Whatever I want.”

I shuddered. This was a danger I had no defense against. Doug and Herb didn't perceive her as a threat, so they weren't baring their teeth. And she hadn't even Ascended yet. I dreaded to think how powerful she would be once she had—maybe she could hypnotize dozens of people at once or over a more extended range.

“Now,” she said, licking her lips, clearly trying to scare me. “What shall we have you do next?” She put a finger a manicured finger to her full lips. “Walk over to Leif,” she commanded.

No way. I imagined a mental barrier between my mind and her, a protective dome that would stop her commands from leaking into me. I was in complete control of my brain and my body, and there was no way I would walk across the clearing and—

My feet marched across the ivy-covered ground until I stood before Leif, staring into his left nipple. Thank God he'd pulled on some sweatpants, but his chest was bare and muscled and right at the tip of my nose.

“Lick him,” she instructed.

No fucking way—

I ran my tongue up his chiseled body, over the swell of his pectoral muscle, and around his nipple in a slow circle. His dick popped up between us, tenting in his sweatpants, even more impressive than it had been flaccid.

Ronan growled loudly behind me, probably pissed that Leif enjoyed this

so much. He wanted his buddies to go total bully all the time, and Leif was not giving off bully vibes.

“Stop,” Gabrelle commanded as Ronan’s growl became a roar. She looked at Ronan, and her white skirt swished around her knees. “You want a turn, moody? Fine. Take a seat.”

He obeyed instantly, flopping into the same bush I’d sat in earlier, and I wondered if she was using Lure on him too.

“Kiss Ronan,” she commanded.

I put every ounce of energy I could muster into my mental shield, willing her commands not to affect me. I felt lucid, not hypnotized or drunk or unaware of my surroundings, so I should be able to stop myself from locking lips with the biggest asshole I’d ever met.

I happened to know he was a kick-ass kisser, but he was also the last creature on earth I wanted to smash.

I definitely would not—

My feet skipped across the clearing, and I straddled him, then pressed my mouth to his.

He grabbed my hips hard, reminding me of that night we first met, only this time, I was facing him. He slid me forward until his hard cock kissed my panties, my wet panties, and his soft salty lips drank me in.

Damn Gabrelle and her Lure, it was so powerful. I devoured his kiss, smashed my lips against his, sucked and nibbled and licked, and my entire body responded.

Was Leif pulsing me with his sexual magic, adding to the Lure? No clue, but suddenly I didn’t want to be anywhere else. My mind and body were as one.

My hands gripped Ronan’s neck, and he grabbed my hips, and we kissed

each other like people drowning. I ached for him, dripped for him, wanted him.

I was lost in this male's body, pressing and writhing against him like he was a lifeline in a storm. The fabric of my panties was soaked, and his fae-denim pants were so thin that his hard cock penetrated me slightly.

A soft moan escaped me, and his fingers tightened around my hipbones, demanding more from me, and I wanted to give him everything.

I ran a hand around his thick shoulder, squeezing his rock-hard triceps as he grabbed and ground my ass.

His lips hummed out an inaudible moan, making me feel wanted, desired, urgent.

I ached with need for him and tried to angle myself for full penetration while he brought a hand up to the back of my head and squeezed my skull.

His chest was so broad and firm. All of him as hard as steel and as vital as oxygen.

My hips ground, and I kissed him harder, then let him splay his hand across my back and pull me close.

Some powerful fae magic was at play, and I was helpless under its power. Somehow the Lure had gotten inside my brain, inside my thoughts, and had made me want this male, and I was too lost in the moment to even care.

“Stop,” Gabrelle commanded, and I instantly climbed off Ronan's lap, still aching and dripping with need. I stared, panting, at Ronan, who was still sprawled and lazy with lust. His dark eyes were hooded with desire as they stared back at me, peering into my very being.

I didn't want to crawl back onto his lap; of course I didn't. Why would I want that? Why would I want to close the gap between us and turn up the

heat when I was no longer commanded to? Why was I imagining straddling him again and pushing my panties aside?

Similar thoughts seemed to flow through Ronan's head if the expression in his eyes was anything to go by. Then it hardened from hooded lust to cold calculation, making it easier for me to step away.

Shaking away the effects of the Lure demonstration, I walked over to where Doug and Herb were digging in the grass for worms.

Leif whistled. "Whoa, she is one spicy chick. A red hot chili pepper."

I rolled my eyes. "Suck my kiss."

Leif licked his lips. "Anytime, sweetheart."

Ronan growled something about an heir pact, and Gabrelle scoffed.

My legs were shaky, so I put a hand against a smooth-barked tree for extra support. "So, is that the end of the demonstration? Can I go now?"

They frowned like I was an idiot, and I supposed that was fair because they didn't know I was only here because of my stupid bossy tattoo.

"You can leave anytime you want," Ronan said slowly. "All the way back to Hebes."

"What a gentleman," I snapped.

I stalked off, and my tattoo buzzed happily, so I could continue my stalk all the way home. Doug trotted at my feet, and Herb followed a yard or two behind. "Thanks for your help back that there, guys," I muttered sarcastically.

I had zero clue why I'd snapped that remark about Ronan being ungentlemanly. It didn't bother me that we had a one-night stand. That he screwed me and then broke my bones. That he kissed me and then told me to go back to Hebes.

I didn't care at all. So why did the heat of his touch repeat in my mind, and his cut-glass jawline haunt my dreams?

Because revenge. I was obsessing over him because he kept getting one up on me, and I needed to end up on top. I would get my revenge on him and all his entitled pals, and then I would disappear and live a perfect life in the most boring part of Verda.

But first, revenge.

Ronan

As I passed the wrought-iron streetlamp, the hovering energy globe spilled yellow light down my front, casting lunging shadows with every step I took.

The roads of Verda City were well lit, with more street lamps going up every night, pushing the darkness aside. The Cleavers who manufactured our energy must be hard at work.

I walked the streets where Sebarah and I had partied last year after the first trial. It was a ten-mile swim along Foster River and was supposed to be the physical test, although the real trick had been not swallowing too much river water and getting drunk.

I came in first. I always scored five points on the physical challenges—at least I had before Leif Ascended into a damn wolf. Dion and Seb constantly battled for last place. Last year, Sebarah had reached the waterfall that marked the end of the race a couple of minutes ahead of Dion, so we hit the town to celebrate.

We passed this furniture store—We shape wood—which I remembered because of Seb's crude joke. The dull ache where I always missed him sharpened and stabbed.

He wasn't the strongest or fastest of us, but he made up for it with his inner power. He consistently scored four or five points in the inner power trial. He'd Ascended into a Grower, as we all knew he would, and he was uncommonly powerful, outstripping even his mom. He'd grown that orange

grove overnight on a whim to tease me about being a soft prince who needed fresh juice every morning.

If it wasn't for him, I'd be even more of an arrogant prick than I already was. I smiled, but it was pained and probably looked twisted and terrifying.

I was up in the Sensory Quarter, where all the best nightlife was and the place Seb and I always headed to celebrate. It was late, but the Ogre's Nose was still open, so I went inside.

Dark wood, low lighting, and a lot of background noise. Perfect. I ordered a shot of the hardest liquor I could think of and a tankard of ale. One for Seb, one for me.

I downed the shot of hell juice, shivering from the burn, then nursed my giant beer.

That's when I saw them. The tomcat was talking animatedly in a booth with some green-haired lesser fae. I tuned into their conversation and heard the female say she was leaving.

“Are you coming? Let's go.”

Neela shook her head violently and knocked over a glass of water with a wild hand movement. “No, no, no. I need to stay here and explore my new world. It's very important,” she slurred.

Her companion said something I couldn't hear, then turned to leave. As soon as she was gone, I'd get out of there too. I didn't want to face the tomcat today. In the mood I was in, she'd probably end up dead, and I couldn't be bothered dealing with that.

I downed the beer and turned to go, but Neela yelled at me across the room. “Hey! Hey you, princeling. Come here and explain yourself.”

Fuck it. If she wanted me to go over, then I would. Maybe I'd teach her some manners.

I stormed over, but when I saw her, I softened. She looked so relaxed and happy, her limbs loose and her eyes shining with that tractor-beam intensity I remembered from that first night we met.

“Siddown, loverboy,” she said with a slight slur. I slid into the booth opposite her. The background music was even louder here, an insistent drumbeat overlaid with guitar.

What the hell was I doing here? I should walk away, but something about her drew me in. I might as well stay and hear her out.

“Before we start, I have a secret.” She righted the toppled glass and held onto it for dear life.

Was she about to confess to some crime that would give me leverage over her? That would be super useful.

But I didn’t want her to. She was so vulnerable now that it seemed ruthless to take advantage. When facing each other in a fair fight, I could dish out anything, but she was in no state to confess secrets.

She leaned in conspiratorially. “I’m a little bit drunk.” She held her fingers an inch apart to show how very slightly inebriated she was.

A chuckle bubbled out of me. “Yes, I know.”

She looked affronted. “Do I look drunk?”

“Yes.”

“I mean, if you really look at me, like look at my hair and eyes and hair and face and stuff, does it look like I’m drunk?”

“Yes.”

She squinted at me like I must be mistaken. “So I look look drunk?”

“Very.” I sipped my beer.

She leaned back in the booth and almost slipped down it into a puddle under the table. “Interesting. Your fae senses truly are spectacular.”

I laughed, surprising myself and snagging her gaze, and she shone that magnificent smile at me again. Even a drunken blithering mess, she was still magnetic.

“Isn’t Gabrelle mean.” The tomcat pouted, sticking out her lower lip suggestively, and I had an impulse to bite it, but I didn’t. Of course I didn’t. I owed it to Seb to keep my distance from her. Actually, to get rid of her entirely.

“Gabrelle is just doing a job,” I said flatly, working hard to keep any emotion from my voice. The last thing I needed Neela to know was how difficult it was becoming to torture her, how much I wished I could forget about my blood debt to Sebarah. Even that thought had guilt descending on my shoulders like a hammer blow, and I sagged.

The tomcat was oblivious to my emotional turmoil, of course. She could barely sit up straight. “She’s mean. She magicked me to kiss you—”

“She Lured you.”

Neela nodded vigorously. “Yes! She Lured me to kiss you, and she Lured you to kiss me. Doesn’t that make you mad?”

Gabrelle hadn’t done any such thing to me. I’d kissed Neela back out of wild passionate and demanding desire, not because the beauty queen had done anything to me. As soon as the opportunity arose, I’d grabbed the tomcat’s hips and shoved her onto me hard, not caring if the others were watching us, not caring if a million fae were sitting in the trees around the glade.

I just wanted her, so I took her.

“No,” I said flatly, staying well away from admitting the truth. “I’m not mad at Gabrelle.”

Neela took an unsteady sip of her drink, putting it down with a crash.

“Aren’t you going to be all, *oh, Neela, you shouldn’t have any more alcohol, you already look drunk?*” She put on a terrible falsetto while she imitated me, and I couldn’t help but smile.

“You’re a grown-ass woman. You can make your own decisions.”

“Exactly. Thank you. That’s why I’m here.”

I watched her face carefully, drinking her in. She wasn’t aware enough to notice, so I didn’t have to feign disinterest. I could soak in every inch of her dappled skin and startling blue eyes. “That’s why you’re here in this bar?”

She leaned back. “No, I’m in this bar because my bracelet brought me here.” She talked into her wrist for a moment. “You’re a very naughty tattoo,” she said like a wild woman.

Was she Lured here? “Did you come to meet Gabrelle?”

Neela shook her head again. If she had long hair, it would fly all over her face, so just as well for the spiky pixie cut. “Nope. My lovely evil bracelet brought me here.” She wiped a hand across her lips. “You’re really handsome.”

Shit. My cock twitched at that comment, and it was all I could do not to slide in beside her and kiss those perfect pouty lips. “Like not just handsome, but super hot sexy. Even for a fae. You’re the most fuckable man I’ve ever seen.”

Damn, she was killing me here. “You’re not too bad yourself,” I said lamely. I wanted to say she was intoxicating, mesmerizing, dazzling, so unlike the poised fae females I surrounded myself with, that she was spectacular and wild.

But I didn’t say any of it.

She waved her hand dismissively. “You’re sexy because you’re fae.” She lowered her voice to a whisper I could just hear above the Fanged Five song

playing from the enchanted ceiling. “I have a secret.”

I smiled. “Is it as good as the secret that you’re drunk?”

“I *look* drunk,” she corrected me. “And this is better. Waaay better.” She glanced around like someone might overhear us, then she slid out of the booth and joined me on my side. Her thigh rested against mine, burning through me, and I could barely concentrate on her words.

“I’m not fae,” she whispered, then put her finger on my lips as though it were my secret.

Her finger was cold on my mouth from the icy glass she’d been cradling, and between that and her warm thighs, I barely had a thought in my brain.

“You were born in Hebes, I know,” I said, speaking through her finger.

A spark lit her eyes, and she nodded excitedly. “Yes! You get it. Exactly.” She moved her finger to her own lips and stage whispered, “Shhh.”

Neela smelled of vanilla musk and Fae Fizz, and I wanted to sweep her into my arms and carry her home with me. She made me forget my grief. Even as my enemy, she sent me into a joyful mood that lasted and lasted. She was harsh and strong and determined but also vulnerable and soft. And I wanted every piece of her.

But I couldn’t have her. Ever.

She allowed me to walk her home to the Rose Palace, which wasn’t far from the Ogre’s Nose. She held my hand and leaned against me, even rubbing my bicep at one point, really testing my restraint. I couldn’t remember who was torturing whom.

We walked in happy silence punctured by the occasional non-sequitur, like “Dolphins are prettier than paper planes, don’t you think?”

It gave me time to think. About how wrong it was to walk her home. About what I owed to Seb. About our blood pact and how a few days with a

magnetic female couldn't erase years of friendship.

Seb's hedge parted as we approached, and Neela waggled a finger in my face. "You can't come in," she slurred. "I hate you."

"I know," I said softly. "I hate you too."

She nodded firmly. "Good."

I wanted to follow her, and if she had asked me, I might not have had the strength to refuse, so it was a relief that she'd ended the night this way.

"You know," I began, "this doesn't change anything. I still need you to leave. I promised Seb."

She grabbed my lapels and stared at me. "Why?"

It was a terrible idea to tell my enemy the reasons for my actions, but she was so pissed she wouldn't remember in the morning, so I took a deep breath. "Seb came last in almost every trial. He averaged less than five points total every year, and it got to him. He was always self-conscious about it."

"He sounds like a dickhead."

"No, he was my best friend, and he was awesome. It wasn't his fault he wasn't quite as fast, strong, or skillful at spells as the rest of us."

She rested a hand on my chest, and I wanted her to leave it there. "Hold on," she slurred. "I'm confused. It sounds like you're being nice."

I couldn't help it. I ran a hand through her spiky hair, feeling her delicate skull underneath. "I'm not always a bastard, you know."

She thought about that, really considered it for a while. "Yes, you are. Anyway, go on. Sebarah sucked at all the fae stuff, and then what happened?"

"About a year ago, he found out about you."

Neela's jaw dropped. "Seb knew about me? A trashbag orphan from Hebes?"

Her hair was soft beneath my hand, silkier than I expected. “You’re not always this stupid.”

She nodded a little. “Thank you.”

“Seb found out he had a secret sister hidden in the mortal realm. You.”

“Oh, his sister. Me.” She gave a stage wink and stumbled into me.

I held her up, feeling her heart beating against my chest. “Seb was scared you’d come for his throne. He felt vulnerable because he always scored so low. You could have fought him for his position if you’d been stronger than him.” I sighed into her hair. “So I promised him I’d never let you sit on his throne. We made a pact using blood magic, which is unbreakable.”

Neela tilted her head up and slitted her tomcat eyes. “I knew it. You *were* being nice!”

She shoved off my chest and stumbled back, then saluted me. “But you’ll always be an asshole to me,” she said like a promise. “Until next time, sexy enemy.”

I watched her cross the border to her estate, where she would be safe.

I wish I hadn’t made that promise to Seb. Now that he was dead and gone, it made perfect sense for his sister to take his place on the throne. But I swore to him using blood magic that she never would. And blood pacts lasted forever.

Neela

It was a miracle. A straight-from-heaven, thank-you-sweet-Jesus miracle. I woke up in the morning without a hangover.

“What’s a hangover?” Liz asked, and I danced a little jig as I explained how human booze made you feel like shit for hours—sometimes days.

“So why do you drink it?”

“For fun.”

My good mood didn’t last long because snapshots of memory dropped into my lap. Had Ronan walked me home? Had I held his hand and stumbled into his chest like a damn idiot? Yes, yes, and yes.

“Fuck.”

Liz shoved a plate of eggs and puffer muffins at me. “Something wrong?”

I put my head in my hands, refusing the food. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Liz scraped out a stool and sat at the kitchen counter. “My highly developed fae senses are telling me something is wrong,” she joked.

“I told Ronan I wasn’t fae. And when he told me how Seb was my brother...I think I winked. Oh, shit.”

Liz was practical, like a rock in a storm, while I was a damn origami bird tearing apart in the torrential rain. “He probably didn’t believe you. Your only move is to carry on as though nothing happened and hold your head high.”

I groaned and lowered my head all the way to the table.

My wrist tingled, and I slapped my other hand over it. “No, no, no. Not today. I’m not your Lady Fancy Bloomers, I’m just the bitch who stole you, and I want a day off.”

The bracelet ignored me. It really was evil. The tingling got painful, and I plunged my whole hand into an ice-cold glass of orange juice, but it didn’t relieve the burning.

“Fine.” I scraped my stool back with my butt and shouted into my wrist. “I’ll go. Is that what you want?”

The agony immediately disappeared, and I growled at my arm, “Stupid demonic tattoo.” It pulsed a warning tingle in response.

Before leaving for the forest glade, I checked in with Liz, who gave my outfit the nod of approval. Soft silk slippers that were tougher than boots, blood-red leather pants that looked rockstar, and a comfy loose black tank that never seemed to smell.

I tried to remember Liz’s advice to hold my head high as I walked into the forest classroom, but I think I overcompensated. I was practically staring at the canopy when I set foot in the clearing, refusing to fix my gaze anywhere near Ronan.

“You’re late,” Gabrelle snapped.

“And you’re a bitch,” I retorted.

A rumbling voice had me instantly on edge. “I thought you weren’t coming, tomcat.” I couldn’t avoid him any longer, but when I looked at Ronan, I wished I hadn’t. I’d never seen someone look so thoroughly disappointed at my arrival. His full lips were pressed tight into a grimace, and he rubbed at the back of his neck.

Our conversation last night was a mosaic missing most of the tiles, but even I could piece together that I must have said something to piss him off

and make him hate me even more.

Relaxing my stance, I cocked out a hip. Hatred, I could work with. It was way better than shame. “Sorry to disappoint, princeling.”

He just stared at me with those fathomless black-hole eyes, which I couldn’t read to save my life, his cut jaw clenched.

I stepped back and almost tripped over Doug, who was crowding around my ankles. She always accompanied me to the forest, although she was happy enough to let me go into the city streets alone. Perhaps she sensed more danger here than anywhere else.

I collapsed onto a bush under the deep shade of a tall tree, hoping to disappear into the dark. If the thick scent of leaves and flowers could swallow me whole, I’d be a happy lady.

Leif and Dion were already here. Leif was bare-chested, wearing gray sweatpants that highlighted his silver hair and eyes—his usual uniform. Dion had milky hair and eyes that did not suit his Mediterranean ruggedness at all. He held a paper scroll, making me sag further into my bush.

It was the day of the second trial. Shit.

I slumped so deep I almost folded in two. “What’s this one? If it’s another twenty-mile run through the bush, I’m fucking walking.”

Ronan sneered. “This one has to be spellwork or inner power.” He didn’t need to add the silent word: *idiot*.

Dion read from the scroll. “Today’s trial shall test the heirs’ skill in spellwork.” Leif groaned, Gabrelle smiled softly and cocked out a hip clad in fawn leather, and Ronan nodded.

“Gaia will summon five demons, one for each of you to defeat. You have sixty seconds to prepare.” Dion looked up with a grin. “Battle skills.”

Ronan glanced at me and then away, probably hoping I’d die in whatever

fight was coming.

Adrenaline hit my bloodstream, and I jumped to my feet. “A demon? Your bitch goddess is summoning a demon?”

Leif rubbed his hands together. “Just minor demons, nothing serious. We should be fine.”

“*You* should be fine,” I shouted. “You’ve been learning spells your entire lives. What about me? I don’t know a single one. What am I supposed to do, just stand here and die?”

It was a rhetorical question, but it landed seriously, and the heirs glanced at each other, looking smug. Gabrelle gave Ronan a loaded look, and he finally met my eye. “Yes. That’s exactly what you should do.”

I looked around for a weapon and picked up a long stick just as five columns of smoke grew from the ground. The smoke columns solidified, forming five terrifying beings, one for each of us.

Mine was a massive cat with sharp fangs and fire instead of a mane that swished around as it moved. It smelled of ash. “Stay the hell away from me, fire lion,” I shouted, brandishing my stick.

The other heirs formed an outward-facing circle, their backs to one another so they couldn’t be attacked from behind. I was left on my own.

The fighting began. Each heir began mumbling incantations, and for a few hopeful moments, I tried to tune into what they were saying so I could repeat the spell, but it was no good. They spoke over the top of one another with rising and falling volume, speaking in a language I didn’t recognize and had no hope of reproducing.

Their four demons circled, a towering ogre, a dog-sized dragon, a warrior with horns, and a battalion of wasps that swooped and attacked Gabrelle as a single unit.

My fire lion lunged, snagging my attention and sprinkling sparks at my feet. I ducked as a sharp claw swiped through the air. My mind was blank. I couldn't think of any way out of this. The other heirs were muttering and moving their hands, and all I had was a rotting stick.

The lion roared again, and flames shot out its mouth, so I hit the ground and rolled, just clearing the inferno. My heart was ratcheting out of control, hammering inside me, and my hands were sweaty. I'd lost my stick while rolling away from the flames, so I scanned the ground, desperately searching for something else I could use as a weapon.

The fire lion stalked me, and I somersaulted beneath another powerful swipe and picked up a rock, which I pelted at the creature to no effect.

I spared a glance at the others, hoping they'd come to help me once their own demons were defeated. The swarm of wasps was spinning in a cyclone that Gabrelle was controlling, and she siphoned them off one by one. Dion ducked as his warrior attacked and knocked his concentration, halting his spell. Leif didn't seem to be faring much better, but Ronan had already defeated his ogre.

Ronan wasn't coming to help me, though. Or anyone else. He leaned against a tree with a smug look on his stupid chiseled face, his bulging arms crossed over his broad chest.

I could sense him watching me. He knew exactly how much trouble I was in, but his face was expressionless, and he didn't lift a finger to help.

The fire lion pounced and pinned me to the ground, its claws snagging my tank top on either side of my body. Its breath was like a furnace, searing, painful, and stank of the acrid pits of hell.

"I've got you now, faeling," the lion snarled, startling me.

"You can speak?" Perhaps there was hope for me after all. "You're not

going to kill me, are you?”

“I’m going to slice your fragile neck in two,” the creature roared. “You woke me from my slumber.”

Now that was a sentiment I could understand. “But…” I racked my brain desperately for an argument that could save my life. “If—”

Two fierce creatures with fangs even longer and sharper than the lion’s growled from behind and pounced on the demon.

My heart leaped into my throat as Doug and Herb rolled and fought against the hellcat.

They were a blur of grassy green fur and searing fire as they tumbled and wrestled, each creature fighting for its life. My heart was in my mouth, and my lungs were frozen in fear.

Finally, the lion snarled, “Enough!” It pulled away from the snuffle tufts, growling and dripping flames onto the forest floor like blood, which singed every leaf they touched. It looked exhausted and wounded, and with one final growl, it disintegrated into smoke, dispersing into the ivy-strewn earth.

I sprinted to Doug and Herb, checking them over for wounds, hoping all that dripping blood belonged to the lion, not them.

They were singed but would be okay, with surface injuries that would heal. I crooned and petted them until they reverted to their grass-tuft forms and snuggled together under a tree.

Then I whirled on Ronan. “You would really just watch me die?”

He watched me with his unreadable damn eyes, still leaning against the tree, not moving a muscle.

Balling my fists in rage, I whirled around to see how the others were faring. I hated all of the sniveling prats, but I would help them defeat their hellish opponents rather than stand around watching them die.

But nobody needed my help. All the demon creatures were gone, and the heirs were standing about, panting. Except for Gabrelle, who looked composed and neat, with her pink hair flowing over her shoulders and her fawn leather pants not even showing a smudge of dirt. She was watching me with an orchestrated smile.

“Glad I’m entertaining you,” I muttered to her.

A silver number appeared above each heir’s head, shimmering in the dappled sunlight. A five for Ronan because he defeated his demon first, four for Gabrelle, three for Leif, and two for Dion. I glanced above my own head and saw a shimmering number one.

I felt lightheaded. I’d scored a point? I’d scored a point! Me, a trashbag orphan from the Docklands, I’d participated in a fae trial and scored a damn point. I rounded on the others. “Sucked in. I scored a precious point and didn’t die.”

I looked around, searching for the smug grin on Ronan’s face but finding him stony and expressionless instead. “I didn’t want you to die,” he gritted out. “I would have intervened.”

My hands flew to my hips. “Oh yeah? Before or after the lion bit off my head?”

The silver number five disappeared from above his raven head, and his jaw ticked, but he said no more.

Leif trotted over and threw himself onto the jasmine mattress. “Suck it, big D. You’re definitely gonna be below me in the final rankings.” He glanced up at me. “Fae gotta do shit themselves, babe. We’re not allowed to help each other. That would influence the rankings.”

Gabrelle crossed the clearing and pulled herself onto the stone ledge, making it look effortless. She crossed one leg silkily over the other. “No fae

can sit on a throne who hasn't won her place." She cut me a hard-edged glance. "That means you win your own way, you don't have it handed to you. If you can't tell by now you don't have what it takes, you never will."

"You know, I actually agree with you," I said, rounding on her. "I don't need help from anybody. Never have. My whole life, I've done everything by myself and for myself. I didn't even need your help to score a point in the spellwork challenge when I don't even know a single damn spell."

I was overjoyed to see a flicker of displeasure cross the ice queen's brow. That was the human equivalent of laying down and weeping. But she smoothed it over fast. "You scored one point and only because of your grassy friends."

Doug and Herb growled from the corner.

"And who scored the single on the spellwork trial last year? One of you must have."

Discomfort simmered through the glade, and I bloody loved it.

Ronan broke the silence. "Last year, Sebarah scored the single. That's where House Flora always finishes. Dead. Last."

"He got one point, I got one point, so I belong here just as much as he ever did."

Dion was chewing on a bar that was turning his hair dark green, starting at the roots and flowing down. "Flora didn't come last in our parents' cohort."

Ronan snapped his head. "Yes, they did. House Flora is ranked bottom among our parents."

Dion crossed and sat heavily on the mattress beside Leif, offering his friend a second muesli bar. "Flora chose that position. They came in second

behind your parents but elected to take last place. Seb's mom didn't want the power, didn't want the responsibility or something."

That information obviously meant a lot to Ronan. His tanned face darkened, reddened, and his entire body went rigid. "So why was Sebarah so weak?"

Leif took a bite of the muesli bar and groaned appreciatively, speaking with his mouth full. "Because most of their power went to someone else, dude."

Every pair of eyes in the clearing landed on me, even Doug and Herbs'. I tried my hardest to channel fae stillness and not move a muscle, but I shifted uncomfortably under their attention.

The funny thing was, they thought this information was meaningful to me, that it somehow made me more powerful and likely to kick their asses. Because they didn't know the truth.

I wasn't fae. I stole the damn bracelet, and their dead friend had nothing to do with me. The only decent news was that Ronan hadn't believed me last night when I confessed I wasn't fae. He'd just thought I was a drunken fool... which was hard to deny.

I scooped Doug and Herb into my arms and headed home. But I had to have the last word. "I guess you guys will rank below me." I locked eyes with Ronan. "I include you in that, princeling. I'm coming for you."

I loved the ringing silence...but not the fact I had no way to back that up. I was all mouth and no action, as usual.

Ronan

My belly grumbled as I strolled along Piccolo Street, so I nodded to Leif, and we ducked into a deli.

The lunch crowd was big, and I was in no mood to wait. My impatience infected the group, who began jostling and muttering about how long this was taking. Leif snarled at a female at the back of the line, and she whimpered and dropped her bag at the ferocious sound.

Leif had a strong alpha side to his personality, and it was always shocking when I saw it. Among the heirs, he was fun and games, all licking and laughing, but when his position in a hierarchy was challenged, he saw red. The poor fae probably pissed her pants at how he growled all up in her face, his lips curled in a snarl, exposing his razor-sharp canines, looking every inch the alpha.

The rest of the crowd parted in an instant to let us through.

“Two beef wraps,” I ordered, “and whatever he’s having.”

The owner of this place was a competent Magirus and made the best faeyonnaise I’d ever tasted. I didn’t care what else was on the sandwich as long as it came with sauce.

Our food was made first, and I took up the warm package with a nod to the serving fae, then we made our way through the crowd to eat outside while we strolled.

Leif was literally salivating with how good the food was, and a big gross globule of spit splattered onto my shoe.

I shoulder-charged him. “Watch where you’re dribbling, wolf,” I snarled.

He grinned back happily. “Sorry, dude. But this is some tasty shit right here.”

I paused when a short female with spiky blonde hair exited a Crafter’s store, but it wasn’t Neela. In fact, she barely looked like the tomcat, so I don’t know why I mistook her.

I sighed. Neela inhabited my thoughts too often for my liking, and I had to evict her.

“Let’s get some training in,” I suggested. The best way to erase the tomcat from my thoughts was to clear my mind altogether, which meant swordplay.

Leif agreed. He was a good friend and great to have around when I didn’t want deep conversation but quiet camaraderie. He was probably my best friend in the world now.

The quickest way back to the Lakehouse was via Leif’s house, which wasn’t far from the Sensory Quarter, so we went via his monstrosity of a marble palace to the dirt patch beside the Lakehouse where we usually trained.

“Broadswords today, I think.” I selected the heaviest, meanest weapon from the open shelving, and Leif groaned but chose a broadsword too.

We parried lightly to warm up, then I lunged without warning and knocked Leif’s blade from his hand.

He grumbled as he bent to pick it up. “You know I have claws and fangs now. I don’t need to practice with this shit anymore.”

I let him retrieve his weapon, then jabbed again. “And what if a Weaver casts a spell to immobilize your inner power?”

He was ready for me this time and deflected my blade with a clang, then

returned his own parry. “If some Weaver douche neutralizes me, I’ll neutralize him back. I’ll rip his balls off.”

Ducking around to the left, I circled my quarry, my feet light on the dirt. “Not if he pokes a big sword through your belly first.” I feinted left, then brought the heavy blade swooping in from above while I leaned forward and kicked his knee, hard.

Leif crumpled to the ground, and his weapon clattered beside him, kicking up a plume of dust. “That’s where you come in. You’ll have my back and remove his head with your over-compensatingly-large sword.”

I grinned. It felt good to parry with blades and words. “Hey, man, I don’t need to compensate for anything.”

He checked out my groin for an instant. “True.”

His leg must hurt like hell where I kicked it, but he kept fighting, limping around me and getting in a few blows. Leif and I always trained together on swords. Gabrelle, Dion, and Sebarah always favored the bow and arrow, but I liked being up close and personal and reading the fear and anticipation in my opponent’s eyes.

Leif’s alpha side came through the longer we parried. He was getting frustrated and beginning to growl. His pale skin went bone white, his jaw was grinding, and his muscles bulged with power. The rage in his burning silver eyes would have made anybody else melt in fear, even Gabrelle or Dion, but I was used to it on the training field.

He and I were pretty evenly matched, though I was getting the better of him today. His comment about friends having each other’s backs made me angry, for some reason I couldn’t pinpoint, lending venom to my strikes.

Neela’s face floated through my mind, looking as it did during the second trial. She had no reason to believe we would help her, but she’d still look

wounded when I hadn't come to her aid against that fire demon. But I wasn't her friend, so I didn't need to have her back. I didn't owe her anything.

"Gaia-be-damned." I folded over, resting my hands on my knees and panting. This wasn't getting the usurper princess out of my head. "Let's take a break."

Leif darted forward and knocked my weapon from my hand, finally erasing his alpha anger with a light grin. "Last point wins."

"Cheat," I muttered, but with a smile. We returned the swords to the open shelving, and a satisfying ache washed through my shoulder and arm. Good—that would take my mind off the tomcat.

Damn, I was thinking about her again.

Leif looked at the sky, using the sun to tell the time. "I should head off. Mom will leave anytime now, so I can go home and find a Healer for this knee."

I arched an eyebrow. "Are you avoiding your mom?"

Leif grinned. "Just avoiding hard work. She's all amped up about the Shadow Walkers, and I don't want to get involved. I just want a shower, a feed, and a fuck. Is that too much to ask?"

Shadow Walkers were real, but they couldn't live in the fae realm. Beyond the Omber Strait, a narrow waterway off the east coast of Verda, lay an island that was always cloaked in darkness. The Isle of Shadows was home to a race of night dwellers who could travel through the dark and whose touch was living death.

Rumors swirled among the fae. They spoke of Shadow Walkers reaching the villages along the east coast of Verda and feeding from fae souls, leaving behind walking husks—fae bodies without fae souls.

"Shadow Walkers can't cross water." I wiped my brow of sweat. "The

rumors of them zombifying fae in the east are just that. Rumors.”

Leif shook his hair, and sweat droplets flew off. “No, dude. Some idiot fae sailed his ship across the Omber Strait, and they reckon some beasties returned in the ship’s hold. They’ve been sneaking across the realm at night, and now they’ve reached Verda City. A family of bear shifters was killed last night—well, turned into walking husks that had to be put down. The shifter communities are getting together to figure out what to do.”

I looked at the sky. The sun was nearing the horizon, so the night wasn’t far away. If this Shadow Walker threat was more than a rumor, then come nightfall, they could go anywhere...and kill anyone.

My muscles tensed. “I have to warn Neela.”

Leif gave me a weird look but didn’t say anything except goodbye. Then he stripped off naked, ran to the lake, and dived in, heading home for a good night’s fuck.

I turned toward the orange grove. I had to find Neela before any Shadow Walkers did.

Leif

Mom left the den, and two minutes later, I walked in. With the news breaking about the Shadow Walkers reaching Verda City, she'd go all alpha on me and try to organize me into helping with the response.

I couldn't think of anything more boring. She had a bunch of betas who could do that for her, all jammed full of strategy and crap, so I'd leave it to the experts while I did something more fun. Like wrestling with my friends.

Our den was carved from marble, some rooms black veined with gold, others pure cream. Walking into the place made me relax. All that constantly-alert wolf awareness disappeared when I was surrounded on all sides by comforting, hard rock.

Our den was the classiest I'd ever visited, as the Queen's home should be. Mom was the alpha of alphas, the head wolf in all of Verda, and our home was the bomb. Soft furs were everywhere in case of an emergency fuck, and the furniture was all low, large, and luxurious.

My first order of business was to summon a Healer to fix my screaming knee. I hated that Ronan had got in the first blow during our swordplay, but I got in the last. Winner, winner. Our Healer was skilled and quick, so I was back to a hundred percent awesome after a couple of minutes.

I was sweaty, so I ducked upstairs and took a shower, then trotted into the bedroom I shared with the younger betas—no one aged over a hundred or under twenty was allowed, and nobody who was mated. We were the beta cubs, and most nights, our massive heap of furs became a lovely fuckpile. I

sniffed around hopefully, but nobody was nearby, so I loped downstairs, looking for someone to hang out with.

Grayson, one of my roommates, was snacking on a chicken leg in the orange-veined dining cave. “Want to play ball out back?”

I nodded. “Sure, right after I finish off your drumstick.”

He snarled and kept the chicken bone. He should have thrown it at me the instant I asked, signaling his submissiveness, but the dickhead kept nibbling.

Anger rose in me, hard and hot. The only thing that could rattle my relaxed outlook on life was a submissive who didn’t respect the hierarchy. Being the alpha’s son, I ranked higher than anybody except her, and Grayson fucking knew it.

I growled and leaped across the table right for his throat. He held up a forearm to protect his neck from my teeth, but I swatted it aside and latched onto his skin. With my wolf-sharp incisors, I ripped a chunk of flesh from beside his Adam’s apple, snarling wildly, letting my rage loose. His blood tasted warm and salty and like power incarnate.

I spit out the chunk of his flesh onto his cowering form, now lying on the kitchen floor in a curl. “Don’t ever disrespect me,” I growled. I might be easygoing, but our society was founded on hierarchy and respect, and as a future alpha, I had to ensure it was upheld. I refused to be the alpha who let our world crumble because I didn’t enforce discipline.

Plus, the rage was hard to control.

“Go get yourself healed, then wait for me in the dungeon.”

Grayson tried to mutter but just gurgled. He nodded, though, and scurried off with his head down and his posture inert, showing all the signs of submission he should have earlier.

I would deal out more punishment to him later in the dungeons. The kind

of punishment I could derive great satisfaction from...my cock twitched at the thought. I wouldn't hurt him too badly, and if I was feeling kind, I might even let him come too.

I scooped up the fallen chicken leg and polished it off, letting my anger subside, not wanting to go outside with the rest of the pack until I was under complete control. I splashed cold water over my face and washed away Grayson's blood and taste, then took some deep breaths before heading for the back door.

Outside, the sun shone, and half a dozen fae were already in wolf forms. I stripped down and transformed, panting in excitement, ready to release the last of my fury by running until I dropped.

It looked like Luwan was the thrower, so he stayed in fae form, his orange eyes glinting in excitement. "Ready, go!" He tossed the ball in a high arc using every ounce of his fae strength, and it screamed through the air. I accelerated after it, my muscles bunching and releasing, the thrill of flight coursing through me as I chased down that ball.

I might be slower than the other heirs on two legs, but I'd always been faster than the rest of my pack, and bounding along on four legs, I overtook every last one of them and pounced on the ball, snatching it up between my jaws and growling in victory.

I trotted back with my tail high, and the other wolves watched me pass. The only thing better than the thrill of competition, the excitement of the chase, was the glory of a win.

I dropped the ball a few yards from Luwan's feet to prove my dominance over him, and he swallowed a sigh as he walked to retrieve it.

"Ready, go!" Again, we chased down the ball, trying to be the fastest, the strongest, the best. Again, I clenched the sphere between my fangs, snarling

in victory.

This was more than just a fun game. It helped us figure out our hierarchy and let us know where we fit in with the pack. Racing, wrestling, fighting, and birthright all factored into our position in the group. Even the lowest and slowest wolves liked the game because the certainty of knowing your rank brought comfort.

Especially to me. Because I was the best.

After we were spent, we transformed into fae form and lounged around, panting and chatting.

Taal, a wiry brown female with small, pert boobs, flopped onto the grass beside me. “Sometimes I’m jealous of the wild wolves. Those guys get to play games all day and never have to go to work.”

Wild wolves were technically the same species as us—fae who shifted into beasts. But their lives were opposite. They lived in shitty dens made of tree branches or some crap and followed their own crazy-ass rules. I’d heard they spent most of their time in wolf form. The untamed packs didn’t recognize Mom as their ultimate alpha, which pissed her off no end. I’d definitely make the wild dicks submit when I became king.

I shuddered. “You wouldn’t catch me more than a hundred yards from the nearest fae silk suit,” I quipped, and the pack laughed.

Hanging out with the pack was much more fun than droning on about Shadow Walkers. I’d never been happier to slink around behind Mom’s back.

Ronan’s face when I’d mentioned the Shadow Walkers was pure gold—he looked like his left arm had been shoved up his ass. And his first instinct had been to rush off to check Neela was okay.

He clearly had it bad for that female. I’d never seen anybody so lost in love and so deep in fucking denial. I just hoped she’d let him down gently

when he finally figured it out and confessed his love to her because she sure as hell didn't reciprocate, from what I could tell.

I wouldn't go anywhere near her. I'd always been kind of scared of her mom, though I'd never admit that to anyone, and definitely not Ronan. Those Floran dudes were a force to be reckoned with, and the last thing I'd do was put my dick inside its heir, no matter how hot she was.

My dick hardened at the thought, and looking around at my naked pack, I noticed a few other erections and some lustful scents from the females.

Taal crawled closer, her little boobs jiggling beneath her body. "Want to screw me, alpha?"

I wasn't her alpha—not yet—but it made me hard as steel when she called me that.

Other fae were kissing, running their hands along each other's fevered skin. This lazy afternoon ball game was turning into an orgy, and I was here for it.

"Turn around, baby," I grizzled, and Taal showed me her tight brown ass, still on all fours.

I plunged into her and locked eyes with Brandon, who was hilt deep in Benji's ass.

I fucking loved my pack.

Ronan

Sebarah's hedge would either let me through or scratch me to bits, depending on whether it recognized me as Seb's friend or Neela's enemy.

It parted when I approached and even blew me a jasmine-scented kiss on a gentle breeze by way of welcome. Seb's friend, then.

I crunched along the gravel path and up several stairs to the front door. I hesitated with my hand on the knob. The Rose Palace used to be my second home, and I came and left without knocking, though I'd lost that privilege when I lost Seb. But knocking felt too formal for a house I knew as well as my own.

I stood on the stoop like a fool, and before I made up my mind, the door swung open.

The green-haired fae who'd been with Neela at the bar that night she got drunk and told me I was sexy narrowed her bright eyes when she saw me. "She isn't here."

"Who are you?" I asked.

She tilted her head. "I am a fae of House Flora. That's all you need to know."

I didn't want to get this female offside. I'd had enough of enemies. I only wanted to find Neela and warn her about the Shadow Walkers. She had every right to know. Even if she returned to Hebes, she didn't need to go back in a body bag.

I sighed impatiently. "What's your name?"

The female considered ignoring me, I could tell by the hesitation. “Liz Frankel.”

“Well, Liz, I need to find Neela. Where is she?”

They’d obviously discussed me because Liz was less than forthcoming with her reply. She clasped her hands behind her back and stood to block the doorway. “Like I said, she’s out.”

“Where?” I refused to explain myself to this serving fae, but I needed to know where Neela was before nightfall. “Tell me where she is, dammit. It’s important.”

The green-haired fae dared to close the door in my face. She was a strong-willed female with a rebellious streak too wide for her station...I could see why Neela liked her.

I walked the perimeter of the Rose Palace, trying to figure out where the tomcat might have gone.

Where would I go in her shoes? Several moonways branched from this estate, but I had no idea if Neela even knew about them. She’d certainly never appeared at the Lakehouse, so that was at least one she hadn’t discovered.

She’d had a rough couple of days, so maybe she’d gone somewhere for comfort...But where did a wild tomcat go when she needed a hug, far from home?

By a lightning-struck tree stump in the garden, I spotted two out-of-place tufts of grass and gave them a super wide berth. I didn’t need Neela’s pet snuffle tufts to attack me. I didn’t want to have to slay them and remove Neela’s only defenders in this dangerous world.

If those little green guys were still here, Neela hadn’t gone into a forest—they always accompanied her into the woods.

So where was she?

Perhaps somebody raised in the mortal realm sought humans when she needed comfort. There was safety in the familiar, and I had bumped into her once in the human village, so she knew where it was.

It was the only lead I had.

As far as I knew, there wasn't a moonway that led directly to the human village from here, so I took the one to Playta, then moonway hopped until I was close.

It was frustrating. Dusk was falling, and with it came the danger of Shadow Walkers, which Neela knew nothing about. I had to warn her.

Just because she couldn't sit her ass on Seb's throne didn't mean she deserved to die.

My palms and forehead grew clammy at the thought, and I upped the pace of my jog, breaking into a sprint as I imagined dark beings coalescing in the deep shadows behind her.

The human village was filled with noisy life, and I pulled my hood up to cover my head as I approached. They didn't need a fae prince to ruin all their fun, and I didn't need the fawning attention. At least, not right now.

I spotted Neela on a park bench, and the tension drained from my body. She was watching kids in a playground with squeaky metal swings and a long curving slide. Laughter and shrieks filled the air, and I couldn't hold in my relieved smile.

But Neela wasn't smiling. Her face was drawn and pale. A tear slipped down her cheek as she watched a human father comfort his crying child. A father comforting his child was the most natural thing in the world, yet the sight of it made Neela cry, transforming her from a snarling tomcat into a vulnerable kitten.

What must her life have been like to make her tear up at such a commonplace moment of affection? Harder than I'd ever imagined.

My eyes burned hot, and a lump formed in my throat. Neela told me she'd raised herself, hadn't needed anybody and never had help from anyone, and I'd always believed it.

But now I understood it. For the first time, I had an inkling of how that must have felt. Lonely, sad, scary.

She never had a mother to comfort her, to kiss her bleeding knee and tell her everything would be all right.

She never had a friend to have her back, protect her in a fight, or go to battle in her defense.

She never had anybody.

Then she was dragged away from the world she knew and dumped into ours, and I'd done everything I could to make her life miserable.

At that moment, my feelings about this female tipped upside down, and my whole world inverted. I'd done everything I could to harm her when I should have protected her.

Guilt slammed into me, more ragged and visceral than anything I'd felt over Seb's death. That had been a trickle of remorse compared to the savage emotion that drowned me as I thought of what I'd inflicted on this poor, hurting female.

Because my role here was more direct. For Seb, I'd been absent. For Neela, I'd been very fucking present.

I was immobile. I had no words, could never find the words to atone for the shit I'd pulled. It didn't matter how much I wanted to.

Neela sat on the bench watching the children and families, tormenting herself, and I stood in the bushes watching like a perv. Dusk deepened into

night, and the families left, but Neela sat on her bench. I wouldn't interrupt her. I would stand here all night and ensure she was okay, but I wouldn't intrude on her privacy and torture her with my presence.

A human male approached her, and my hackles raised. I snarled quietly, ready to rip out his throat if he said a word against her.

He stopped by her bench, and they exchanged harsh words I couldn't quite make out. The growl in my throat was unquenchable, and I dug my fingernails into my legs, tearing holes through my jeans.

She dealt with it on her own. She remained seated, casual, but I could see the tension through her shoulders and neck as she dispensed with the threat, and he walked away.

She was competent, majestic, formidable. When she came into her powers, she would be the strongest of us all. Her upbringing on the streets had forged her into a diamond, imbued her with a strength my coddled childhood never could.

Me and the other heirs, we never had a chance against her. And I didn't care anymore. I didn't fucking care.

Night's shadows crept from the bushes and took over the playground. No pockets of light remained in which to hide. The Shadow Walkers could be anywhere.

I was startled by a deep breath beside me, a vibration in the air that alerted me to danger.

Neela still sat on the bench, but I couldn't watch her in peril for a moment longer.

I crunched through the leaves toward her, deliberately making noise so she could hear me approach. She looked up, and the sadness in her eyes hardened into anger. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Something moved toward us from the dark, a deeper shade of night than the surrounding air. I muttered a spell to cast a weak light around us, but it wasn't strong enough to last long.

“There is danger in the shadows. Evil creatures called Shadow Walkers are crossing the realm from the east. They have reached Verda City, so it isn't safe to be out at night.”

I wanted her to freak out, panic, and at least acknowledge my warning. But her anger was directed at me. “What do you care,” she spit, standing to face her latest threat—me. “You've done nothing but try to hurt me from the moment I arrived. I didn't ask to come to your precious realm, you know. I was dragged kicking and screaming by this damn bracelet, and I'd go back to Hebes in a flash if I could. But it won't let me. So just leave me the hell alone, and you can have your precious throne. I don't even want it.”

The lump in my throat made my voice hoarse. “I'm so sorry, Neela. For what I did to you. I was an asshole.”

Her expression was perfectly readable, as always, like her heart was laid on a plate for me to pick at. She thought I was lying, didn't believe a damn word of what I said, and I couldn't blame her.

But I kept trying. “I know it's hard to understand. I just did all that for your brother. For Seb. I made a blood pact with him to never let you sit on his throne, but it was a mistake. A big fucking mistake and I never should have done it.”

She was on her feet, on full alert, checking the bushes behind me to see if the other heirs were there and this was some kind of practical joke. Every moment of her disbelief had remorse tearing another piece off my heart.

She spoke through gritted teeth. “You broke my legs.”

The image of her lying in the dirt, covered in mud, with her ankle

dangling off would never leave me. Worst of all was her was the horror in her voice. *You aren't going to just leave me here, are you?*

I had left her. I had just fucking left her when I should have helped her. Seb's flesh and blood. My tomcat. I left her in the dirt, and I would never forgive myself.

I wouldn't grovel for anyone, not even her, but I would explain. "I did it for Seb."

She whirled on me. "And what about now? You still have that blood pact, right? So what are you doing here?"

The words just flowed out of my mouth. "The blood magic means nothing. I don't care if Gaia plucks my head off and pisses down my throat for eternity, I will never stand in your way again."

My heart had never beat so many times, my breathing had never been so ragged. She toyed with me, not responding, just staring and blinking while my soul splintered. This moment, this torturous anticipation of her response, was the worst kind of torment. I'd take broken legs over this any day.

She slumped back on the seat and spread her arms across the backrest, looking every inch a queen. "Piss off, princeling. I'll never forgive you."

I stood guard, unmoving. "Okay," I murmured. "I deserve that."

And I did. I hadn't earned absolution or comfort, not after what I'd done to her. All I could do now was stand nearby and keep her safe.

Neela

Like a day-long hangover, Ronan followed me home and then watched over me until I fell asleep.

I lay awake half the night thinking about his complete about-face. His mind-warping one-hundred-eighty-degree turn.

He seemed sincerely sorry for what he'd done to me. I'd never seen so much emotion on a fae, and it seemed genuine, coming from the depths of his heart. I was a good judge of character, which is why I liked so few people—because most of them were dicks. And I could tell when somebody was lying.

Ronan wasn't lying. He was genuinely sorry for all the shit he'd pulled. But that didn't make him a decent person. It made him an emotionally unstable prick with a massive guilt complex. That sounded a lot like his problem, not mine, and he'd better leave me out of it from now on.

Hopefully, he'd shift his vindictive princeling routine onto the next victim, and I could get on with finding a new life for myself in Verda.

I woke with Doug snuggled into my armpit, snuffling cutely. Her wide brown eyes popped open when I moved, and I rubbed her soft warm belly and told her to go back to sleep. She lumbered off the bed and over to Herb, who lay curled under the window sill, then they settled down together and snuffled off to slumberland.

My bracelet seemed to be giving me the day off, and I would make the most of it. I'd survived the Docklands by knowing the streets and laneways

better than anybody, better than any thug chasing me, and better than the cops.

I had to do the same here. I would spend the day walking the streets, diving into alleyways, and figuring out this place. I accosted Liz in one of the downstairs living rooms, the one with green wallpaper and sofas shaped like leaves. Her hair blended into the decor.

“Do you want to come exploring with me? I’m going to walk the city until my feet blister.”

She side-eyed me. “Sounds amazing, but I think I’ll pass.”

I shoved my hands in my pants pockets. I’d found a pair of dark blue pants that looked a lot like jeans but were a million times more comfortable, made from some kind of fae fabric that was stronger and softer than spiderweb. “What could possibly be better than going on an adventure with me?”

She cocked her head. “And walking until my feet bleed? Literally anything.”

“Suit yourself, bi-atch.”

She grinned. “Oh, I always do.”

I knew the main drag of the Sensory Quarter, which was lined with bars at night and stores during the day. I wasn’t sure whether they transformed through magic or the classic magician’s trick of changing your focus, but I intended to find out. That, and everything else. Like where the cobblestone alleyways led, the best places to hide from pursuers, and the quickest way from point A to point B.

I dived down a narrow alleyway and took a few turns, expecting to land back on Piccolo Street, but I was somewhere else entirely. This would be harder than I thought—geography wasn’t playing fair.

After a few hours, I started getting the hang of it. This was just like the Docklands, but without the dirt, without the thugs, and without the danger. So nothing like the Docklands, really.

Every spare moment, I would come here to learn the ins and outs of the city. I'd only explored one small area today, and I still didn't quite understand how three right turns didn't bring you back to your starting point.

I sighed. The light was fading, so now was my chance to study how the stores turned into bars, but I was down some backstreet, far from anywhere I recognized. A less brave person would call herself lost, but not me: I was adventuring.

My senses had been on high alert all day, watching out for the lowlifes and thugs who skulked around the Docklands, but I hadn't sensed any. Until now.

Darkness was thickening, and a shadowy figure was definitely following me. It had fae stealth, but I had trashbag awareness, so I could see it flitting between shadows, keeping a careful distance from me but not letting me out of sight.

Adrenaline hit my bloodstream, and my senses sharpened. This was familiar. The type of scenario that used to send me into a panic when I first hit the streets, but after years of exposure just made me slicker.

I wasn't a stand-and-fight kind of girl, I was run-and-hide all the way.

But I didn't know where I was. This was why I needed to learn my damn way around.

I ran blindly down the street, not caring that I was giving myself away. Predictably, the figure sprinted after me. My heart hammered, but I forced slow, regular breaths while I dashed around corners, hugging the walls, evading, dodging, and running for all I was worth.

It was no good. I was being hunted by a fae with better sight, better hearing, a better sense of smell, and better legs.

I couldn't outrun this creature.

Where was Doug when I needed her? Although she couldn't run fast. Ronan, then. I was desperate enough to wish Ronan was with me. He was the one who warned me about Shadow Walkers who drank from their victims at night. Is that what was following me? A Shadow Walker?

Ronan would know. Plus, he had the fae strength to defend me and the fae speed to help me hide. If he was here, I'd breathe easier.

Home. I had a home to run to, which was something new. With a final burst of speed, I rounded a corner, saw lights ahead, and heard the thumping of music and an eerie rush of air behind me.

Two more corners, then I'd be fine. My legs pumped manically, and I finally rounded the corner onto Piccolo Street. I'd never been happier to see drunk dudes stumbling and singing.

The Rose Palace wasn't far, and I could do the whole stretch under streetlamps, but I ran anyway and didn't stop until I passed through the pink-flowered hedge.

Liz was waiting for me in the kitchen with a scowl on her usual resting bitch face. "Have fun?"

"Yeah, I had a ball." I rested against the table, panting, heaving.

She waved around a squished piece of paper that looked like it had been used in an Origami competition, then handed it to me. "A spellbird arrived for you."

It was a note from Ronan informing me we had an inner power class the following day.

I scraped out a stool, hoping Liz had manifested a meal somehow. My

stomach squeezed. “Great, another class with the royal bastardry.”

Liz slid me a bowl of steaming stew that smelled rich and delicious. “They’re sending you notes now? Letting you know when the classes are? That seems unusually civil. For them, I mean.”

I leaned over the bowl of stew and let the steam dampen my face. “Ronan decided he’s super sorry for being so mean in class, and can we please kiss and make up.”

“I see. And can you?”

I paused with a spoonful of stew halfway to my mouth. “No! When was the last time somebody broke your leg, and you forgave them? Or sat around watching you battle a demon, knowing you would die, and didn’t lift a finger to help? Are you in the habit of forgiving people who try to murder you just because they said sorry? I will never forgive any of them, especially Ronan. Nothing he can do will make me accept his apology. Nothing.”

Liz watched me eat silently until I couldn’t stand it anymore.

I slammed my spoon onto the table. “What? Stop staring at me so judgmentally. Do you think I should just bat my eyelids and be his BFF?”

She rested her elbows on the counter, her chin in her hands. “It would make your life a lot easier.”

“I don’t do easy. My life has never been easy. Easy isn’t what I want from life.”

But saying the words aloud made me wonder how true they were. Wouldn’t an easy life be the most luxurious and wonderful thing ever? Days where I didn’t have to worry about my future, worry about being in danger, worry about where I would get my next meal, where I would be sleeping in a month? Wasn’t an easy life the hallmark of success?

It didn’t matter. I couldn’t forgive Ronan because what he did was

unforgivable.

Neela

I arrived early at the forest glade the next morning and settled onto a bush with Doug on my lap, Herb watching from the trees, and a stern expression on my face.

I didn't know what to expect from Ronan's mood today, and I didn't want to show him any vulnerability. Thank fuck he hadn't seen me crying on the park bench in the human village—that would have been one intimacy too far.

Ronan strode into the clearing with a regal air, his white T-shirt making his face look extra tan, and we looked at each other for long moments before he spoke. “Good morning, Neela.”

“So formal, princeling,” I retorted. “What happened to calling me tomcat?”

He scanned the glade until he saw where Herb was stationed, then crossed to the other side. “I thought you didn't like that nickname.”

I shrugged. “If the shoe fits....”

The truth was, tomcat was a more suitable name for me than he could ever know. He still thought it was an insult to a princess, but it was actually a practical description of a trashbag thief.

He approached from my left, keeping a wide berth around Herb, and handed me a ripe, juicy mango.

I looked him a question.

“You said you liked mangoes,” he explained with a sheepish grin.

I didn't like mangoes; I bloody loved them. I tasted one when a farmer visited the orphanage and brought several trays for us all to share. It was the best mouthful of anything I'd ever eaten.

"You can't bribe me with tropical fruits, princeling. This doesn't make up for the ankle. Or the demon. Or the kiss."

He blanched at that last one, a rare outward display of emotion, so it must've gotten to him. Good. I wasn't above needling him for all the shit he'd done to me, even if he brought me delicious fruits.

Gabrelle swanned into the clearing wearing a floating dusty-rose dress that lovingly kissed her breasts and hips. She really was the most spectacular creature on the face of the planet, and her resting bitch face was even better than Liz's. Perhaps in another universe, I could have been her friend, although she was far colder and icier than Liz, and I suspected she didn't have friends so much as toys.

She and Ronan exchanged words I couldn't hear, and both laughed. Their friendship seemed genuine...maybe I was a little bit wrong about her. Just a squidge.

Leif bounded in as a giant silver wolf and licked Gabrelle and Ronan, who patted him good-naturedly, then stalked toward me. With his tongue lolling.

"Don't you fucking dare, wolf." I picked up Doug and held her out like a protective shield, but she just stared at Leif and yawned, then wriggled her little paws to protest being woken.

Leif looked between my green tufty friend and me, then he ran his long wet tongue along Doug's grassy fur, and the treacherous snuffle tuff wriggled happily.

"Stupid mutt," I murmured. "And naughty Doug. You're supposed to hate

him as much as I do.”

Leif transformed into his fae form right in front of me, with his big dick swinging at my eye level, then he bent down and licked my face with his soft fae tongue. “You don’t hate me,” he whispered, then danced out of the way before I could slap his slimy ass.

Leif was the least hateful of the lot, and it was probably true that I didn’t detest him, but I still didn’t like him. He sprawled on the jasmine mattress in full glory, only pulling on his gray sweatpants when Gabrelle chucked them at him and Ronan snarled.

“Fine, fine,” he grizzled, wriggling into the pants.

Dion was last to arrive and marched into the glade carrying a large sack. His hair and eyes were caramel, and I noticed a distinct burnt sugar smell when he appeared.

He glowed like a pregnant woman. “Best day of the year,” he declared. “Food day.”

Ronan tried to explain that Dion would demonstrate his inner power and cook us a meal, but I cut him off as soon as I got the gist. “I don’t need your explanation.”

Ronan scowled at the ivy-covered ground, and I could tell he wanted to say more, but he had the good sense to keep his trap shut.

Dion babbled on about fresh produce, something to do with his great-great-great grandmother’s recipe, and how the most important ingredient was the chef’s magical intent.

I only half listened while I thought about that creature that had chased me through the winding cobblestone streets of the Sensory Quarter. Had he been a Shadow Walker? He was certainly fae or something just as fast, but I had no idea how quick Shadow Walkers were. I needed to learn more about them,

but I didn't want to give Ronan the satisfaction of asking him. Maybe Liz would know.

If that creature was a Shadow Walker, why didn't it attack? It had every opportunity to kill me or turn me into a walking zombie husk or whatever they did.

Perhaps Shadow Walkers couldn't consume humans? That thought lit a bubble of joy inside me—possibly, my humanity could be an advantage, not the constant disadvantage it had been so far.

Dion laid out his meals with an enthusiastic “Ta-da!”

He'd crafted one especially for each of us. Mine was white goo served in a bowl. It smelled like the feeling you have when you open a tub of freshly bought ice cream and lick the lid. Heavenly.

It tasted just as delicious. It was nectar sweet but not cloying, and I wanted more. I took a second bite, then a third.

“Tell me this is good for me,” I moaned.

Dion nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, it's all nutritious and healthy. You could eat as much as you wanted and would only fuel your body.”

I wanted to eat it until I died, and maybe I would. It was so good I kept shoving it into my mouth.

At one point, I became distantly aware of the others looking at me, but I remained intent on the food.

It really was magical. I could taste it in the air now, like its essence had floated out of the bowl and transmuted its surroundings. I stood up, vaguely aware of Doug squeaking in protest as she fell to the ivy-strewn floor. I gulped the air in massive bites, tasting the creamy sweetness, but it wasn't enough.

Not dense enough, tangible enough, I needed more. I picked up a rock

and licked it. Yes, it tasted just as sensational as the dessert. I bit into the rock, maybe breaking a tooth, maybe not, I didn't care, I just wanted more of that flavor.

The world around me was losing focus, but I couldn't bring myself to pay attention. There were sounds of fae talking, even some shouting and pushing, but I didn't mind. They could do whatever they wanted.

That nice chef had told me I could eat this until I died, so that's what I would do. I bit harder into my stone and managed to pry off a tiny piece, which I ground between my teeth, moaning in pleasure.

The noise around me was deafening. Ronan shoved Dion, snarling something about "Mine," pushing him to the ground—maybe he wanted more food. Perhaps he didn't get the same meal I did and he was jealous.

But I couldn't share. I needed it all for myself. I gobbled down as much stone as I could. When I tried to bite another mouthful, somebody ripped the rock from my hands and threw it away. I turned and snarled.

Ronan. He took away my special meal.

He was trying to talk to me, but I could only pound my fist at his stupidly hard chest and demand my dessert back.

He swept me into his arms and sprinted through the bushes, refusing to return my meal. I always knew he was my enemy, but now I had proof. I tugged his white T-shirt with my teeth and tore a large, delicious hole in it. It was just as tasty as the stones. I scraped my teeth along the skin of his chest, coating my tongue in his taste, letting his blood pool in my mouth before swallowing it.

Then we were at the Rose Palace. Home. Something nagged in the back of my head about the word home, and I remembered I shouldn't think of the palace as home because it wouldn't be for long.

But now, it was welcoming and familiar, and the growling hunger in my belly reduced.

Ronan and Liz were talking around me and through me, and I hoped Liz was telling Ronan what a meany-pants he was and to give me my food back, but I couldn't be sure. He took me to my bedroom, laid me on my four-poster bed, and gave me something to drink.

It didn't taste good, didn't taste like my special meal, and I wanted to spit it out, but Ronan held my nose until I swallowed.

I opened my eyes. My mouth was bleeding and raw, and I felt with my tongue that several teeth were missing. My lips and throat were cut from the stones I'd eaten, and my fingernails ached from where I'd raked Ronan's flesh. My belly was filled with lead—no, rocks.

I was in my bed, and Ronan was too. But he was sitting, I was lying, and we both had our clothes on.

His coal-black eyes were darker than ever. "Feeling better?" He placed a hand on my forehead, and I didn't shirk it away.

Fucking Dion. It wasn't difficult to piece together what happened. Dion had cooked me a special fae meal that sent me into a frenzy. It was so different from Gabrelle's spell, where my mind had been clear but my body had obeyed her commands instead of mine.

This time, my mind had been infected. Way scarier.

"I ate you," I mumbled, looking at the wound on his chest that dripped red blood down his white T-shirt.

He smiled lightly. "I forgive you."

"I'm never eating again," I croaked, every word ripped from my torn and bloody throat.

Ronan ran his hand through my hair, and I didn't have the energy to stop

him. “Don’t speak. Liz is fetching a Healer. You really should have one on staff, you know.”

I would have laughed if my throat wasn’t on fire. On staff. Who did he think I was?

Oh yeah, he thought I was one of them.

I pieced together some more. The shouting, the shoving, Ronan standing over Dion. He must have stood up for me after Dion enchanted me. He took my side over one of his precious heirs. I hadn’t asked for his help—I never would. But I’d needed it.

I would have kept eating until I died. I was sure of that.

Words of thanks gathered on my tongue but didn’t leave it. I couldn’t thank the fae who’d done such terrible things to me.

As I fell asleep, I spotted the mango Ronan had gifted me on my bedside table. I would never accept food from the fae again, so I must remember to throw that out.

Ronan

The Shadow Walker threat was real.

The shifter communities were working together—a miracle in itself—because they seemed to be targeted first. A squad was deployed every morning to find any victims and “put them down.” That meant salting and burning the bodies so they stopped walking around.

Entire families were wiped out in a single evening, and the rumors were beginning to extend beyond the shifter community into the broader fae population.

Neela still didn't believe it, so I'd stationed shifts of guards to watch over her every night. They were under strict orders to keep her safe but follow from a distance and keep out of her way. After one guard told me he followed her while she ran in circles in the Sensory Quarter, I even instructed them not to report what she did to maintain her privacy.

That was the hardest command to issue.

With one simple question, I could find out exactly where she was and what she did, but I resisted.

I took over from the early morning shift and knocked on the front door at the Rose Palace.

Liz greeted me with a scowl that said I'd woken her and a cup of tea that said she forgave me. After turning up yesterday with Neela in my arms, her mouth dripping in blood, I guessed I'd earned some brownie points with the fierce green-haired fae.

I sipped the tea in the kitchen. “Don’t you have any other staff? A royal house needs more than one...Wait, what are you?”

“A royal companion,” she said and dipped a sardonic curtsy.

Neela spoke from behind me, and I jumped. She’d somehow managed to sneak up on me; perhaps her fae abilities were returning. She’d been away from human technology for a week, so the effects would soon wear off.

“We don’t all have bucketloads of gold to shower over the common people, so they perform services for us,” she said snidely, then accepted a cup of tea from Liz with a very regal air.

I shared a look with Liz, who squirmed. “Er...actually, you do.”

Neela spluttered hot tea all over the black-and-white checkerboard floor. “What?”

“Of course you do,” I scoffed. “You’re the heir to House Flora. The sole surviving heir. You control the entire fortune.”

I could watch the tomcat’s lack of composure all day. Her face wriggled and writhed with all the emotions, and her whole body radiated joy. I’d never seen somebody so excited to learn they had money, but I supposed that was because of my upbringing.

What did the tomcat call me? An entitled brat. That sounded about right.

I waited patiently for her to have breakfast, a single piece of toast and a strong coffee to wash down her tea, then I blurted out my plan. “I have something to show you. Please, will you come with me? We have the day off classes, and I promise I’ll make it worth your while.”

I’d planned a surprise for her and had initially wanted to wait until it was finished to show her, but I couldn’t. After Dion almost fucking killed her yesterday—which I paid back by nearly killing him—I needed Neela to have a good day.

She reluctantly agreed to join me. “But only if you promise to compliment some random fae at some stage during the day.”

“A lesser fae?”

She grizzled. “They’re not lesser just because they aren’t rich pricks.”

She could call me names all day, I didn’t care. I had a lot of atoning to do for my sins, and I wanted to start immediately. I didn’t expect her to agree to come, but I supposed I’d earned some credit by saving her life yesterday.

I yanked her down Piccolo Street, impatience bubbling in my gut.

She lagged behind, watching the fae watching us. “How do you stand it?”

“Stand what?”

“The constant staring. Everywhere you go, folks stare and stare.”

I smirked. “Well, I am the sexiest fae alive. That’s what you called me, wasn’t it?”

She scowled and pretended she didn’t remember saying that when she was drunk off her tits, but from how she reddened and winced, I suspected she recalled every word.

“You are nowhere near the sexiest fae I’ve ever seen. You’re not even sexy for a human. You’re average at best.”

I clutched my heart. “I’m wounded.”

A small smile tugged her lips, threatening to derail her firmly planted scowl. “But seriously, doesn’t it get old? Having these people gawking nonstop would annoy the hell out of me.”

I glanced at the crowd, who were gawkier than usual. “Everything annoys the hell out of you,” I commented.

She whacked me in the chest playfully, and my heart lit up. Our relationship was finally turning less antagonistic, and I hoped she felt safer.

I pulled her into a moonway that was barely visible in the weak daylight,

and she literally jumped when the world started blurring around us. I would never tire of her emotional openness, even though she tried to keep herself so guarded.

“Where are we going?”

“I told you, it’s a surprise.” I cocked my head. “Do you like surprises?”

She thought about that for a while, walking in step beside me, her blonde head bobbing at my shoulder. “I don’t know. I’ve never had one.”

We stopped, and the world stopped blurring. She tugged my arm. I was reminded again how hard her life had been and how different from mine. No surprise parties, no unexpected gifts. No gifts at all, I supposed.

She tugged my hand. “Come on, princeling, show me your thing.”

I glanced down at my dick, which wiggled with a naughty idea. “Maybe later, baby.”

She almost laughed, a strange chuckly gurgling noise, and my heart soared again, my good mood buzzing out around us and making the blurring wildflowers bloom as we passed.

The moonway spilled us into the middle of a wildflower field, a riot of colors and floral scents. Anxiety creased Neela’s forehead. “It isn’t a bad surprise, is it? You’re not going to break my fingers or something?”

The wildflowers drooped as her question hit home. It was a fair question, too, not asked through malice but through genuine concern. She had every right to be worried. I’d broken her fucking ankle, hadn’t I?

My mountain of hatred from the past week had overturned and changed into a mountain of something else entirely. A strong, overpowering emotion I didn’t have words for. All I knew was that I needed her to feel safe, so I could forgive myself for what I’d done to Seb’s sister.

I swept up her hand in mine. “I will never harm you again, tomcat. I will

die before I let any harm come to you. You have my word...for what it's worth."

Odd that I would declare I'd rather die than hurt her. Even odder that it might be true. The idea swirled inside my head even as I said it, turning over, letting me examine it from every angle.

It was true. It was fucking true. I wanted to protect Seb's sister even more than I wanted to protect myself.

She chewed her lip, and I imagined kissing it, smooching away her worries and fears, and cradling her in my arms. I folded my arms across my chest to keep a barrier between us. The last thing I wanted to do was lunge at her when she wasn't open and willing.

Her blue eyes glistened, and vulnerability spread her open. "What about the blood pact? You said blood magic lasted forever, and you made that promise to Sebarah."

It was true. No spell or inner power could unravel a blood pact once it was made, so there was no way of undoing the promise. But I didn't care. I didn't fucking care.

"I still want House Flora gone," I began carefully, ensuring I told her the whole truth because she deserved nothing less. "But I want you more. Gaia can curse me, tear me limb from limb, rip my magic right out of my body, and I will still stand by you. You are my...you are my everything, and I will protect you with my dying breath."

My voice rang with ragged sincerity. Was this how humans felt all the time? Exposed, vulnerable, weak. Like they might die at any moment, like their centuries-long lifespan had been whittled down to mere years. Like they've just realized they're in fucking love.

A tear spilled from her bright blue eye, trailing over her freckled cheek

and landing at the corner of her full mouth. “I have to tell you something. I... I’m not really a...” Whatever she planned to confess went unsaid, and instead, she shook her head firmly and stepped away from me. “Where to now?”

We weren’t far from the big surprise. Man, I hoped she liked it. On the outskirts of the human village, I was building Neela her very own home. Construction was still underway and wouldn’t be finished for several weeks, and I figured once she Ascended, she could grow her own trees and flowers to complete the landscaping.

I explained everything, waiting for her tractor-beam smile, but it never came.

“I just thought because you like humans so much and keep coming here, you could have a house here. You don’t have to live here always if you don’t like it. Maybe you could just visit occasionally.”

Her face was crinkling, collapsing in on itself, and I couldn’t figure out why.

“What’s going on? Do you hate it? You hate it. Don’t worry, pretend this never happened, I’ll tear it down.”

She crinkled completely and wept. It was like watching a fortress cry, so unexpected and wrong. Neela was a tomcat, writhing and snarling and always ready to face the world, and I was supposed to be protecting her and cheering her up, but I’d brought her to tears.

“I don’t hate it,” she said, wriggling out of my embrace when I tried to comfort her. “It just ruins everything.”

“Why?”

She shook her head, backing away. “I was going to come and live here in the human town to hide, but it won’t work if you know I’m here.”

I wanted to step forward, reach out, and cup her cheeks in my hands, but she kept backing away. “Hide from who?”

She locked me in her intense blue gaze. “From you. I’m...I’m not a fae. I know you think I am, but I’m not. I’m human. This bracelet doesn’t belong to me. I’m a lowlife thief, and I just broke into this mansion and stole this bracelet from its true owner. So I’m not Seb’s sister, I’m not the missing princess, I’m not even fae.”

I studied her face for a long moment, my heart thudding in my ears.

She was so distraught at this confession, and I could see she believed every word she was saying. But instead of comforting her, I stepped away, opening a gulf between us.

Neela

Sound bubbled up from within Ronan and erupted like a volcano, his stunned emotion spilling all over. “One of us is about to be fucking surprised.”

“What?” I expected anger, not whatever this was. He’d stepped back and looked at me with an intense, unreadable expression.

“You’re the Floran heir, Neela. Stop lying to me. Stop lying to yourself.” Ahh, there was the anger I anticipated, lacing his words in steel.

“You don’t understand.” I twisted my hands together and then started walking down the hill toward the human village, away from the massive house under construction that nobody wanted. Away from Ronan.

I don’t know why I just fucking told him the truth. My only protection from him and his evil friends was my deception, and I’d blown the whole thing. I was a damn fool, after all. One day of kindness from the dark prince, and I blubbered everything.

I had to get away. And disappear even further this time. I couldn’t go back to the Rose Palace, not ever. But first, I had to escape the powerful fae prince I’d just admitted to deceiving.

Sure, he’d promised not to hurt me when he thought I was a Floran princess. But now he knew I wasn’t even fae, he wouldn’t hesitate to kill me. I had to get away before he thought that through.

He came after me, laughing like he’d lost his mind. “I understand perfectly. The Floran Bracelet only melds with its true owner, the Floran heir.”

I whirled around to face him. Uphill of me, he was even taller, and I had to crane my neck so I wasn't speaking into his black-clad belly button. "That's exactly it. I'm not its true owner, I'm a thief. I stole the damn thing."

I should shut the fuck up, but not being believed was even worse than being a bloody idiot who spilled truth beans like lousy coffee.

His black eyes danced with merriment. "I can't believe you thought you were human this whole time."

His bubbling good humor was contagious, and my spirits lifted slightly just by looking at his happy face. I bit my cheek to keep my growing happiness in check.

"Don't be dense," I snapped. "The bracelet belongs to its true owner, right?"

"Yep."

"And I'm not the true owner. I stole it. Therefore it doesn't belong to me, Captain Thicko."

He grinned. "That's Prince Thicko to you."

I couldn't understand why he was taking this so lightly. I just confessed I'd been fooling him all this time, and he gave zero fucks. I nicked a priceless artifact from his best friend's family, and he was chuckling.

Maybe he wouldn't kill me after all. "So...you'll let me live in this house and not harass me? Let me lead a normal life here, out of the way?"

He grinned. "Not a chance, princess."

I grizzled and opened my mouth to object, but he cut me off.

"Tell me exactly what happened the day you took the bracelet."

I thought back to that day. "I was in the Docklands when a couple of the Bull's guys spotted me, so I scarpered up to the rich part of town. Cased out a few joints while I was there."

“I literally understood about half of those words.”

I looked at him like he was an idiot. Which he was. “The Docklands is the shittiest part of town, the Bull is a dangerous guy I owe money to, a lot of money, and—”

“The Bull?” he asked threateningly.

I waved it away. “It doesn’t matter. So, I walked around for a bit, looking for something to eat. Or steal. Then I wandered into a house.”

“Why that place?” he interrupted. “Why that particular house? Had you seen it before?”

I tilted my head. “I don’t know. Something about it drew me in. It was weird, I just went straight in through the front door. I didn’t even check the windows first. Still freaking out about being chased, I guess.”

“No,” he corrected. “You were being drawn to the bracelet. Go on. How did you find it?”

I sighed. Everything I said he took as evidence to support his wild theory instead of what it was—plain dumb luck. “I just walked up to it. It was in a jewelry box on top of the mantelpiece, and I went over to check out the goods, then I put it on, and it attached itself to my wrist.”

Ronan swept up my hands in his. “Don’t you see? It was calling to you. It was Luring you because you were its true owner.”

Golden happiness pulsed through his hands into mine, and I couldn’t help the spark of excitement that lit inside me. Could it be true? Could the bracelet have called to me, the true heir of House Flora? Could I be a true fae?

I dropped his hands. “Do you really think so?”

He nodded enthusiastically. “Of course.”

“But—”

“But nothing. You’re a fae.” Realization dawned on his face. “You

wench,” he accused, but his tone stayed light. “You’ve been toying with us this whole time? I thought I was the one toying with you.”

He sounded so happy that I didn’t know how to respond. Yes, I’d been fooling him...or so I thought. Maybe I’d been fooling myself.

I caught sight of his pointed ears and felt my own round ones. I still looked and felt entirely human, and I’d been away from the mortal realm for over a week. It didn’t add up. I would know if I was fae. Deep down in my bones somewhere, I would know.

Exhaustion wound through me, sudden and dragging. Enough of this bullshit. I started walking away again, heading back toward the moonway. No point dragging out this conversation any longer. I’d just wait a week or two, and when my fae powers never turned up, Ronan would have to accept I was human.

Although I’d be gone long before then. Not back to Hebes, but to some part of Arathay where I could hide. Probably best to leave the Realm of Verda entirely and find some other land to live out my days.

He snatched up a leaf from the ground and called to me. “Do you see this?”

I put my hands on my hips and glowered. “Humans can see leaves. Even from twenty feet away.”

The leaf was yellow and looked tiny in his outstretched hand. “Can you smell it?”

I sniffed and picked up an earthy scent. “Yes,” I said slowly. It didn’t seem right that I could smell a single leaf from so far away, but maybe all humans could. This was like one of those meditation drills where focus made you detect more details.

The mischief died from Ronan’s eyes. He was taking this seriously. “Can

you smell how long ago it fell from its tree?”

“Of course not.” I turned to leave.

“Just try. Humor me on this one thing.”

I scoffed dramatically to show him how annoyed I was but sniffed anyway. Just a leaf. An earthy smell like a handful of dirt threaded through with week-old compost. I sniffed again. A faint odor of decay sweetened the underlying muddy scent.

That leaf had been on the ground for a week. Looking up at him, I saw the wonder I felt reflected in his gorgeous face. “Holy crap.” I looked up at the heavens where God would be, then down into the earth where I imagined Gaia lived, then back at Ronan. “Am I fae?”

His face turned full smug, and I immediately wanted to slap it, but his joy was so infectious that I laughed instead.

We began testing my abilities. I picked up a fallen log that looked way too heavy for me and found I could hoist it over my head. I sprinted around the construction site of my new house—never thought I’d say those words—and felt like I was flying. And Ronan assured me I would get even faster. Much faster.

I attuned my hearing to the sounds around me and picked up the scuttling of tiny insects in the undergrowth at my feet. This changed everything. I wasn’t a trashbag orphan from the Docklands, I was a fucking fae princess.

I dashed over to where Ronan sat on the grass watching me with a pleased smile. “You may call me milady,” I said grandly. “Or Your Royal Highness. Or Your Awesomeness. You’d better practice bowing.”

He grabbed my wrist and pulled me onto his lap. “I bow for no one,” he snarled. I kicked to get free, but he held me firmly in place. “No one.”

I stopped struggling and slung an arm around his neck. His chest was

warm, his black T-shirt soft, and he smelled of grass and strawberries. It felt like a nice place to spend a few minutes. When had I stopped hating him? Some time between when he tore me down and when he built me up, I supposed.

But he was wrong if he thought he'd never bow to me. I thinned my lips. "Oh, you will. You just don't know it yet. When I reach my full powers, I'll be unstoppable. You said so yourself."

He glowered again, but I could tell he wasn't really pissed because I felt him harden beneath my leg, thickening and growing, fast. Fae denim was sturdy but soft, and it did nothing to hold him down.

It was my turn to grin smugly. "Oh, you like it when I dominate you, do you?" He growled. "Good. Because I'm going to dominate you for the rest of your life."

Whoa, that sounded a lot sexier than I'd intended. I'd meant it as a jab at me outranking him as a queen, but as soon as I said it, his cock jumped, and wetness pulsed between my legs. I could smell my own musk pooling between my thighs. Stupid, traitorous body.

This was getting way too complicated, way too fast.

I pushed off his broad chest and skipped away from him. "Don't get ahead of yourself, princeling. You're still the asshole who broke my ankle. And you always will be."

In fact, when I thought about it like that, it wasn't complicated at all. I was a princess with kick-ass fae skills, and I would be a damn queen. I didn't need anything to do with him.

He sat for a few more minutes, and we both knew he was waiting for his erection to soften, but I was gracious enough not to mention it.

"You still have to Ascend first."

The smirk on my face froze. Damn. Being fae didn't assure me of becoming queen. First, I had to Ascend to my full power, which had to happen at the first Ascension Rite after my twenty-fifth birthday, or it would never happen. If I missed that date, I forfeited my powers for good.

I was twenty-five the next week, and the ceremony was ten days later.

The bubbles of joy in my chest grew brittle and shattered, forming a panicky sludge in the pit of my belly. "What do I do? I don't know how to Ascend. I don't even know what my inner power is. I don't have an inner power."

He climbed to his feet. "Calm down, we'll figure it out."

I clutched his T-shirt, fisting it tight, shouting into his chest. "What's my inner power?"

He put his hands on my hips. "That's between you and Gaia."

"Gaia ain't talking. You tell me."

He chuckled. "We'll figure it out."

His hands on my hips were somehow comforting, and my grip on his T-shirt loosened while I took some deep breaths. I'd survived the streets since I was a kid, I could damn well survive being a fae princess.

He took me by the hand and led me along a path. "Descendents of House Flora usually Ascend into Growers. Your mom was a Grower, Seb was a Grower, so you probably will be too."

"What was my dad?"

Ronan was in the lead, walking along a path between loosely grouped trees. He turned his head to profile, and his chiseled jaw ground slightly. "Your father wielded War."

Despite the warm sun on my face, a cold shiver ran down my spine. My dad was a warmonger. An expert at strategy, a God of death. I didn't want his

heritage. I liked the flowers, trees, and plants, but I detested violence and loathed that his blood ran through my veins.

“Don’t hate him,” Ronan murmured. “He’s why you survived in the streets. The instincts that make someone wield War are the same instincts that kept you alive. So don’t hate him, just try to...understand him.”

That made a lot of sense. That was a thought I could take home and examine in solitude while I tried to come to terms with who I was. Words of thanks gathered on my tongue, but I didn’t say them. I couldn’t.

My thoughts raced as I followed Ronan’s tight butt along the wooded path. This was all too much to take in. I wasn’t scum, I was a princess. I wasn’t an orphan, I’d had parents and could find out as much as I wanted to about them when the time came. My head was swimming with information, so I clung to the one thing that mattered right now.

I had less than three weeks to figure out how to Ascend.

I blinked back to reality. We stood in a sea of color, a field of wildflowers. The nearest blooms craned in toward us like cats seeking pats. “It’s pretty, but...why are we here?”

Ronan stepped back a few paces, leaving me space among flowers. “If you’re a Grower, you might feel an affinity with these little guys. Just relax, open your perception, and see if you can sense their life force.”

I couldn’t believe I was doing this. Standing in a magical field, trying to connect with my inner power. But Ronan had been right about everything so far, so I gave it a shot. I shut my eyes, and the sunlight turned the world deep red through my eyelids, the sun warmed my face. I thought about the flowers at my feet, then the ones further away, and then even further, trying to sense them within myself, putting every ounce of my concentration into finding a spark of life out there.

“It’s no good. I can’t do it.”

Ronan sensed my impatience and went all soothing on me, which actually worked. “It’s fine. We’ll try another day.”

I whirled on him again, frustration making me mad at him all over again. “Why are you helping me?”

He looked at me, bright sunlight setting golden sparkles in his raven hair. “Because I have to, tomcat. My soul won’t let me make any other choice. It chooses you.”

Zero words. I had nothing to say in reply, especially because I sensed how genuine he was. I respected his honesty, I really did, but what the hell was I supposed to say to that? A smartass comment like *Thanks for not trying to kill me anymore* hovered on my tongue, but it didn’t feel appropriate, so I swallowed it.

I glanced around, getting my bearings, making sure I knew the quickest route to the moonway home—down the valley, around the copse of purple trees, and behind that massive orange rock.

“Race you home?”

He stood still, his feet planted, his expression still solemn, but it softened at my words. “How about just a leisurely stroll h—”

“Last one home is the Bull’s bitch,” I roared, then I dashed down the hill, pumping my legs, feeling my new muscles bunch and release, thrilling at my speed.

I might not be faster than him, but I soon would be.

Neela

The Rose Palace looked beautiful at sunset, with the pinks and oranges playing off the enormous petal-like roof.

The run home had drained me, and I didn't let Ronan inside. I sent him away with a smile, though, so that was something.

Liz was waiting for me inside with a glass of not-Dionysus red, which I took gratefully.

We headed into my favorite sitting room, which was cozier than the grand reception halls. The walls and ceilings were lined with thousands of enchanted rose petals, so it always smelled like a late summer afternoon.

I settled onto a cream sofa and pulled an oversized cushion onto my lap. Liz waved a hand and muttered a spell, and a comforting fire started in the brick fireplace.

"How do you do that?" I asked, marveling at her skill. Suddenly, the ability to start a fire with nothing more than a thought and a gesture seemed even more impressive, now that I knew I should be able to do it too.

Liz took a swig of wine. "Magic," she said with a grin.

"About that..."

"Yes?"

"I have news."

"Yes?"

"Like, really big news."

"Okay."

“Are you ready?”

Liz gave me an irritated look. “Are you going to share this amazing news or just keep hyping it up?”

I downed a gulp of wine, building up the courage to say the ridiculous words out loud. “I’m fae.”

Liz crossed her legs under her butt like a school kid. “Yeah, I know. You’re a fae princess,” she said with a stage wink. “And I’m the Dread King of Brume.”

My lips twitched, but I held my friend’s gaze steady. “I’m fae.”

She tilted her head. “Liar.”

“I’m not a liar. I’m a truther.”

“Nope.” She sipped her wine. “That’s not a thing.”

“It is now.” I kicked off my shoes and tucked my legs under me.

“Truther? It’s not even a word.”

“Babe, you’re focusing on the wrong thing here. I’m fae.”

“Wait, you’re serious,” she said, her voice dropping.

I nodded, and Liz’s jaw fell.

“But...how? I mean, this morning, you were human...”

I shrugged and took another sip. “I *thought* I was human. I was wrong.” I held up my tattooed wrist. “This thing only latches onto the true heir. That’s me, baby.”

“How do you know?”

I squeezed the cushion tight. “Ronan told me.”

Liz gave me a look that told me exactly how far she trusted him. “How do you know it’s not the latest booby trap? He’s not exactly a truthteller of Fen.”

I squeezed the cushion so tight it tore. “I can feel it inside me, Liz. It’s fucking surreal. Today, I just started feeling...I don’t know, stronger. More

alive. I can hardly believe it's real, but it is."

Liz's eyes glowed. "So you can use magic!" She exclaimed, pointing a finger at me as if to prove her point.

I paused for a second before answering. It was strange to think that I'd lived my life ignorant of this secret power inside me. Now it felt so obvious. The soft hum of energy tingled through my body and seemed to follow every movement I made; it was like being connected to an infinite source of power and possibility.

Yesterday I thought I was a regular human girl... today, I found out that I was descended from faerie folk. It was a real mind-fuck, to be honest.

Not all joy and roses, either. A bunch of darker emotions were in the mix, too, like sadness, confusion, and anger. My real family must have known I was fae, but for some reason, they chose to keep me in the dark about it and banish me from the fae realm. The rejection stung; it seemed so unfair that they would not accept me even though I had done nothing wrong.

I sighed heavily and took another sip of wine, trying to push away the feelings of rejection.

"Stop moping, mopey pants. You're a freaking fae princess! You can do anything."

Liz was right. Who knew how powerful I was? How much potential was locked inside me? There might be no boundaries or limits on what I could do.

I quirked a smile, letting the excitement build within me. "I can't fly."

Liz jumped to her feet and pulled me up too. "You bloody can if you want! Just Ascend into Hover or whatever else you want. You can do anything!" She let out a whoop and danced around me, and I let her joy infect me.

I was fae, and with that came the power of magic. A world of possibilities

opened up before me; I could explore the paths set out by my ancestors and discover more about my true identity. And learn some rockstar spells.

“What do you want to learn first?” Liz clasped my hands. “I’ll teach you. Man, your head must be spinning!”

The fact that this secret had been hidden for so long was wild, yet here we were, discussing it in the most matter-of-fact way possible.

“Ah, crap.” I slumped back onto my sofa and retreated under my lap cushion. “I’m almost twenty-five. I’ll have to Ascend in a few weeks. I’ll probably die during the Ascension rite. I don’t have enough power to make it through, and I don’t even have an inner power.”

Anxiety bubbled in my stomach, making it turn flips. As quickly as it appeared, my excitement turned to sour fear.

“Of course you do,” Liz replied, her voice full of reassurance. “You just need to find it. You’re the Floran heir. Oh crap!” Her hand flew to her mouth. “That means I really am a royal companion.”

I tipped an imaginary hat. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” She dipped a small curtsy, “Princess.”

I laughed. “Knock it off. I answer to bitch or not at all.”

Liz threw back her head and laughed. It lightened my mood. My parents might have abandoned me, but I wasn’t alone anymore.

“You’ll ace the rite, babe. Just focus. Head down, bum up.”

I looked at her. She was right; I had been so focused on the fear of dying during the Ascension rite that I hadn’t stopped to think about how much I still had to learn and understand about my inner power. And how amazing that would be. There were whispers of ancient spells and rituals, tales of fae who could fly and create rainbows in the sky and use glamours to make themselves completely invisible; all these things were possible for me, too, if

I tapped into my inner power and ascended. The thought was thrilling...and overwhelming as fuck.

Liz's grin widened as she continued talking me through the different types of Ascensions possible and the powers that came with each. Her enthusiasm was contagious, and by the time she finished, I was itching to get started. Already, I could feel the power humming inside me, waiting to be unleashed.

"Okay," I said, standing up and brushing off my lap cushion. "I'm ready to learn."

Liz clapped her hands together. "First things first. Let's start with something simple. Levitation."

I spluttered. "What the fu—?"

"Joking! Even I can't do that yet. Let's try this."

She gestured toward the fireplace and muttered under her breath. I watched in awe as the flames flickered and grew stronger, seemingly at her command.

"I thought only Flames could control fire. How are you doing that? You're not even Ascended yet."

Liz turned to me, her expression serious. "I can only start a fire or stop it. Flames can control it perfectly, summon it anywhere, make it dance like tiny winged faeries or form into any image you like. But most fae can do basic fire spells."

"Okay. What's the spell?"

"Ignis ardeat, flamma surgat! It means fire ignite, and flames arise. That's the basic spell, they get more complicated, obviously."

I sagged. "That's the basic one? Really? I thought it would be *lumos* or something. I can't remember all that."

She talked me through the words, syllable by syllable, correcting me on my atrocious pronunciation until I could finally recite the whole thing.

“Good. Now let’s try it for real. Focus on the flame,” she instructed. “Concentrate all your energy on it. Picture it growing bigger and brighter, and speak the incantation.”

Squaring my shoulders, trying to tap into the hum buzzing through my body, I stared into the flames and focused all my attention on the fire.

“The fire’s already there, it’s super easy to make it bigger,” Liz assured me. “Just concentrate and say the words.”

“Ignis ardeat, flamma surgat!”

Nothing happened.

“Keep repeating it, keep concentrating, it will come,” Liz said.

She took my wineglass from me so I could focus completely, staring into the fireplace, muttering the spell. For a few moments, nothing happened. Then, after a few minutes, nothing kept happening. And finally, after half an hour of intense concentration, absolutely sweet fuck all happened.

“This sucks. I suck,” I muttered, scowling at Liz.

“Yeah,” She grinned wickedly, “you do.”

I rolled my eyes. “You suck too. At teaching.”

She grinned and passed me back my wineglass. I was lucky to have her by my side.

“You can learn spells later. You should probably focus on your inner magic for now.”

I groaned. “Isn’t that what I said before?”

Liz just hummed noncommittally. “You’re probably a Grower. Let’s go outside and play with some plants.”

Exhausted from the failed exercise, I flopped onto the sofa. I was drained.

All my adrenaline had turned into sleepy-time hormones, and I suddenly felt like I could nap standing up.

“Just one more glass of red. Then a long sleep. Then tomorrow...” I mumbled.

Thankfully, Liz didn’t fight me on it but let me sag on the couch while she topped up my wine like a good royal companion.

Tomorrow I would begin my life as an actual fae princess.

Neela

I was a hunk of raw chicken thrown to a group of starving alley cats. I wouldn't last long.

The next morning rolled around, and I didn't want to leave bed. Ronan had invited me to his evil lair, where he hung out with his buddies, and for some reason, I'd agreed to go.

Somehow I fell into shorts and a T-shirt and waited for him out front.

"Your bratty friends hate me," I complained as a greeting. "They're not gonna want me soaping their backs and braiding their hair in your secret clubhouse."

Ronan squeezed my shoulder, his onyx eyes soft, and his full lips curved into a smile. "Your hair's too short and spiky to braid."

"Not the point," I grumbled as he tugged me into the lavender maze in my backyard.

"The moonway starts in the maze's heart," he said, taking lefts and rights through the sweet-smelling lavender. "You have to memorize the way through for next time." He tugged me along at a jog. "And they don't hate you. They just want you to leave Arathay or die."

I scowled, but he missed it. "That would be funny if you were joking."

He turned and grinned back at me, his face much freer and lighter than when I'd first met him. "Don't worry, princess. I'll protect you."

I snatched my hand out of his grasp and slapped his wrist. "I don't need your protection," I hissed.

“Trust me, I know.”

The moonway started in my purple maze and finished inside a large arch formed by a living tree that towered magnificently above us. I walked out into the sunshine and stared up at the impressive tree. It must have stood for a thousand years, a witness to my ancestors who’d used this moonway before me.

“How long has your secret clubhouse been around?”

He frowned. I was getting better at reading his emotions as my fae senses improved, and I saw the minute twitch in his forehead that indicated his displeasure. “I keep telling you it’s not a secret clubhouse. It’s the Lakehouse. Every cohort of heirs uses it to relax away from the scrutiny of the common fae, it—”

“I love how you say common fae, making it clear you’re so much better than them,” I deadpanned.

He flashed me a glance. “That’s what they’re called.”

I dismissed him with a wave. “Just something else I’ll fix when I’m the highest-ranked queen.”

A growl rumbled from his chest. “Do you want to hear this or not? The Lakehouse is used by every generation of heirs.”

“To keep you away from the grubby paws of the commoners.”

“To give us time and space to bond so our reign will be peaceful when our time comes to rule,” he growled.

“So, it’s some ancient stone castle?”

He led me around the base of the magnificent tree. “See for yourself.”

This was no secret clubhouse—it was magnificent. A modern architectural marvel balancing on the edge of a crystal blue lake. Every line and curve of the building perfectly balanced with the surroundings.

“It changes and morphs as it gets to know us, altering to reflect the personalities and needs of the current group of contenders.”

“Is it...growing?” The wooden deck overlooking the water was as smooth as polished stone, but it grew directly from the earth.

Ronan smiled proudly. “Yep. After Sebarah Ascended, the wooden elements of the house grew stronger and more beautiful. He was a very talented Grower.”

I had six days until my twenty-fifth birthday and only ten days after that to determine whether I was a Grower. Oh, and to learn how to wield my inner power. Otherwise, I’d be stuck as a low-powered fae until I died.

We wandered closer, and the intricate details of the building grew clear. I ran my fingers over the front door, which was covered in soft fur. “You said this place reflects each of the five Houses?” He nodded. “I’m guessing the wolves installed a killer sex room.”

Ronan laughed, and his contagious joy removed some of my anxiety at entering my enemies’ lair.

Inside, Leif was lounging on a large silver sofa, but he scrambled to his feet and bounded up to us, tying off the knot at the waistband of his gray sweatpants. “Did somebody say sex room?”

“You wish,” I muttered, then stalked past him.

None of the others were there, just the three of us. I tried to read the room and figure out exactly how awkward my being here was. Leif must’ve figured out Ronan was no longer against me after he’d thrown Dion to the ground for enchanting me with his food, and the wolf didn’t seem too pissed at me.

In fact, he sneaked up behind me and licked my neck, giving me goosebumps. I shoved him hard.

He grinned wolfishly. “I told you we were friends.”

I walked the room slowly, taking it all in, the sleek lines, the quality finish. At a glance, I could see which armchair belonged to which heir. A chaise longue made from glass that was surely more comfortable than it looked had to be Gabrelle's.

The long silver sofa was clearly Leif's, and I would bet my life that the formal-looking black leather armchair was Ronan's.

Which left the beanbag that smelled of fresh mint for Dion.

I stood awkwardly, not wanting to claim another's seat. "You never said we were friends," I corrected the wolf. "You told me to fuck off and die. There's a slight difference."

He sidled closer and tried to nuzzle my neck. "But I knew we'd end up buddies."

I pushed him away, but a string in my heart pulled tight. I'd never had a buddy, never wanted one. But maybe friends weren't so bad after all. It had to be an improvement on mortal enemies.

Ronan wandered off somewhere, probably trying to give me and the wolf time to bond. But as soon as the princeling left the room, my mood plummeted.

It was hard to remember why I'd agreed to come here. I'd vowed revenge on these pricks, and now it felt like I was begging for their attention by turning up on their doorstep and smiling.

"Where's Sebarah's chair?"

Leif didn't answer, he just sprawled on his long white couch and motioned around the room. "You can sit anywhere." He patted the sofa beside him. "Come snuggle here with me."

Unlikely. I chose the beanbag and found it just as supportive as the bushes in the forest classroom.

My mood sank lower thinking about Sebarah. Yesterday had been a mind fuck but in a good way. I'd discovered I was fae and felt my fae senses emerging. Ronan had spent the whole day grinning at me like a fool, and I'd ended the day feeling giddy with joy, then confused, then just plain exhausted.

The happy mood had lasted all evening, but it couldn't last forever.

The reality was sinking in. Not just about my Ascension but about my exile in the mortal realm.

I'd had parents. A brother. A complete, smiling, wholesome family, and they rejected me. Booted me out of their lives, out of their home, out of their entire realm.

What was so wrong with me? Why keep Sebarah and toss aside his younger sister?

Had they sensed an unworthiness inside me? Had they looked in my eyes and seen my humanity, my snarling trashbag self?

Sinking lower into the beanbag, I hugged my knees to my chest. This was worse than being an orphan—at least I'd known why I was alone. Having parents who despised me was worse than having dead ones, and I couldn't ever ask them why.

Leif whined. "Can I come and hug you?"

I rested my chin on my knees. "No." The last thing I needed was a mutt who knew nothing about me, the true me, the trashbag from the streets, and only wanted to befriend the fae princess.

That fae princess didn't belong here. I'd been right all along—I was a fake.

He whined again. "Why are you so sad?"

I squeezed my calves. I hated being sad. Anger was way better. "Because

my parents didn't want me. They dumped me in the mortal realm to get rid of me. What kind of parents do that?"

I was hurting my leg, so I fisted the beanbag instead and accidentally tore a hole through it.

Leif relaxed. "Oh, that. That's just because of Gaia's curse."

The beanbag repaired itself, knitting back together and erasing the evidence of trauma. "What's Gaia's curse?"

"We call it the Spare Curse. Fae couples usually only have one child. Or at least no more than one every few hundred years. That's how it should be."

"Okay..."

"If a royal family has two children, the younger one always dies mysteriously. They say it's to keep the realm stable because two heirs can fight for power and start a war. But I say it's because Gaia is a jealous bitch without any brothers or sisters, so she doesn't want anyone else to have them either." He pulled a tennis ball from his pocket and started tossing it and catching it. "So parents have to hide the second child before it dies. Usually, they ship them off to the mortal realm."

I watched as he tossed the ball so accurately that it just kissed the high ceiling before plummeting to his waiting hands. He'd obviously spent way too much time on that. "So my parents didn't hate me?"

Leif snatched the ball out of the air. "I didn't know them well, but I guess they wouldn't have bothered protecting you if they hated you."

Ronan returned to the room, wearing black pants and a marle-gray T-shirt that showed off his muscles. My spirits lifted at the sight of him—or maybe at learning that my family had loved me after all.

Well, my parents had. Sebarah had formed a blood pact to ensure I never showed up.

Dion and Gabrelle trailed in behind Ronan with large bows slung over their shoulders, wearing leather outfits that wouldn't be out of place in a hunting party.

Leif bounded over to greet them. "Have you guys been shooting pointy sticks at things again?"

Gabrelle slapped him on the nose like a naughty dog. "We've been honing our already excellent skills with a bow and arrow, yes."

Her gaze snagged on me, and she started slightly, an expression I would never have caught a few days ago.

Dion was less subtle. He glared at me. "Get out of my chair. Why are you always trying to sit in someone else's place?" A not too subtle bard about me wanting my brother's throne.

My brother. I had a brother. My throne—I could potentially have one of those too. But I had to get through these assholes first.

"Smells like shit anyway." I climbed out of the mint beanbag as gracefully as I could and crossed over to Ronan.

He put an arm around my shoulders, which was warm and comforting. But tension ran the length of his bicep and held him rigid. "Don't talk to her like that, D. I already told you the deal's off. We're not getting rid of House Flora."

Dion ignored his beanbag completely and stormed closer, then shoved Ronan in the chest.

The raven-haired prince stepped forward and pushed his friend, making Dion stumble several paces with his superior strength. "I rank higher than you, D," he growled. "And I always will. So my word goes."

Dion didn't back down but came chest-to-chest with the larger fae. "The rankings aren't final yet, mood boy. Your word doesn't mean shit."

I backed away. Two huge fae, overflowing with muscles, getting all up in each other's faces. This was the part of a conflict where I usually found somewhere to hide, but that wasn't the look I was going for among these pricks, so I settled for giving them more space.

Gabrelle had already slid onto her glass sofa, looking regal and elegant despite wearing training leathers. She uncrossed her legs, her voice commanding and smooth. "That's enough, boys. Your machismo is entirely boring." The two males eyed each other, but the tension subsided as Gabrelle continued inspecting her fingernails. "I don't give a damn about House Flora, but I do care about you, Ronan."

She turned the full intensity of her dusty pink stare on the dark prince, and her beauty was terrible to behold. "You used blood magic, Ro, which cannot be taken lightly. What were the exact terms of the pact?"

Ronan slung his arms around me again, this time more relaxed. I shuffled his arm off my shoulders and stepped away from him.

He gave me an odd look but continued. "Sebarah and I were standing right out there on the deck when we decided to do it. We summoned Gaia as our witness and invoked blood magic. That was it."

"What words did you use?" Gabrelle asked.

Ronan folded his arms across his chest. "I, Ronan, the heir to House Mentium, will die before I allow Neela Flora to sit on the Floran throne." He glanced at me. "Sorry."

Holy hell. That didn't leave any wiggle room. I hadn't realized how binding—and fatal—his oath was. I sidled further away from him. "You have to get out of it."

Gabrelle's voice was smooth, but I detected the slightest tremor I would never have noticed a week ago. "It's blood magic, Neela. It cannot be

reversed. He has vowed his life. If you sit on that throne, he dies.”

Now it made sense. I understood why these guys wanted me gone so desperately. They were trying to save their friend’s life.

I’d spent the last twenty-four hours imagining myself as a proper fae who truly belonged, sitting on the throne, hanging out with Liz in the Rose Palace, and maybe getting a Healer on staff. A life filled with pleasure and friends... an easy life.

I sighed. “Easy come, easy go. I don’t need the throne. I can live out my life as a regular fae, I don’t need all the fancy houses and crap.”

Disappointment threaded through my hair and spread its bony fingers across my scalp, but I pushed it aside. A small part of me asked why I would sacrifice my future for the fae who’d broken my ankle and left me alone to fight a demon, but I ignored it. I understood his reasons, even if I wasn’t a huge fan of his methods.

If I expected an outbreak of applause and thanks, I was disappointed. Everybody looked at me in silence, and I realized that, once again, I was the only one in the room who didn’t know what the hell was going on.

“What?” I demanded.

Ronan took up my hand. “You can’t stay in Verda if you fail Gaia’s ultimate test. She does not take failure lightly.”

I didn’t need to ask what that meant. Another one of the bitch goddess’s curses, I supposed.

I shrugged. “I’ll just go to another realm. I heard Caprice is nice this time of year.”

“No. You cannot remain in Arathay.”

I stepped away from Ronan. For him to live, I had to leave the fae realm, give up my fae powers and return to Hebes? I didn’t know if I could do that.

Return to the streets, go back to being a trashbag orphan preyed upon by every damn crew in the Docklands.

I stumbled backward. No, I couldn't leave; that was a death sentence.

I straightened my spine.

The choice was clear. Ronan or me.

Gabrelle

Home is where the heart is, right? Well, not for me.

I lived in the Mirror Palace, where every wall, inside and out, was reflective, a place of such cold beauty that no heart could survive.

I approached at sunset, and the palace façade reflected the vermillion, orange, and pink from the setting sun.

Mother awaited me inside the Peacock room where vibrant green and gold animals strutted among plush velvet furniture. This was Mother's favorite room—it probably reminded her of herself.

“You look beautiful, Gabrelle.”

Never in my life had Mother greeted me with anything other than a comment on my appearance. I crossed to the cocktail bar and poured myself a considerable measure of gin with a drop of nectar. I'd need it.

“Have a seat, Gabrelle. There is something I'd like to discuss.”

I gulped my drink and swallowed my annoyed response. If there was something my mother had taught me well, it was to hide my emotion. People called me an ice queen, and I was proud of it—the name was hard-earned.

I reclined on a chaise longue and glanced at myself in the wall. The mirrors in the Peacock room reflected the most beautiful version of the fae who entered. Some visitors were entranced by their reflections and had to be physically dragged from the room. I never saw anything but myself: my soft pink hair, brown skin, and hourglass curves. Everything that made my mother proud.

I sighed and waited for her to begin.

Never one for small talk, she dived right in. “What do you and the other heirs think about the Shadow Walker threat?”

Shadow Walkers were taking more shifters every night, and nobody knew why. Why target the shifting communities? Why infiltrate the capital of Verda when there were easy pickings in the rural areas? Why now?

“Not much.”

“You and your colleagues must learn to operate as a team. That’s why you are trained together and given so much leeway at the Lakehouse.”

Mother must have spent many hours hanging out with her pals at the Lakehouse. I’d never known her as anything but a poised and graceful queen, but she must have been young once.

Did she ever miss the Lakehouse? I dreaded the day I’d have to vacate it for the next generation of heirs; perhaps she had too. Perhaps her emotionless mask was so perfected that it hid a turmoil of longing and loss.

“Leif thinks of nothing but sex and balls,” I said dismissively. “Dion and I have discussed it, but there’s little we can do.”

“And Ronan?”

Mother knew as well as I did the Mentium contender was the most sensible of the bunch. He was the logical and reasoned heir with whom I could have a productive conversation.

He and I would win the top two ranks when our time came to rule—we just had to fight for the order. We would share the heavy decisions, giving Dion the time to cook and Leif the freedom to goof off.

But at the moment, Ronan thought of very little besides his Floran pet. He certainly hadn’t mentioned the Shadow Walkers to me or shown the slightest

interest when I brought them up other than asking whether I thought Neela would be safe.

If he continued down this path, he wouldn't be among the highest rankings. As long as he kept his head in the game and continued to perform well at the trials, I supposed it didn't matter.

Frankly, it was odd he was helping Neela at all. She was fierce and determined and looked set to become a competent fae and would probably make an excellent queen. But at what cost? I would never trade Ronan's life for hers, and I hoped his pigheadedness would blow over before our time came to make that choice.

But Mother didn't need to know any of that. "I will discuss it with them. I have everything under control."

Without my peers' help, I devised a plan I intended to implement that night. I gulped the rest of my gin and excused myself while Mother watched me leave, probably assessing my gait.

I spent the rest of the afternoon in my room, running over my plan, then I changed into black pants and a shirt with a black hood.

When the night was at her darkest, I crept out of the palace to put my plan into action, pulling up the black hood to cover my hair. I followed moonways to a lion shifter community on the city's outskirts and settled in to wait among a thicket of trees.

Tonight, I was flexing my Stealth. Everybody assumed I would Ascend into Lure, like Mom, especially since I was already quite accomplished with that magic, but I wasn't so sure.

My father had Stealth, and that power intrigued me. He could sneak up behind a transformed wolf shifter, and they never heard him coming. My little trick in the forest obscuring the log so Neela couldn't see it was nothing

compared to the glamors he could cast. He could even throw them over himself and become invisible.

I was fascinated by the line between truth and lies. Beauty was a kind of lie, a promise of goodness and virtue that didn't necessarily exist. In storybooks, the wicked witch was always ugly and the heroine beautiful, and these ideas of beauty and goodness were inextricably linked in the fae psyche.

But it was a lie. Beauty was nothing but a trap—nobody knew that better than a Lure.

Stealth also played between the boundaries of falsehood and truth but approached it from the other side, the dark side. The one that attracted me.

Recently, I'd begun testing spoken lies to hone my craft, make sure I could speak falsehoods without a flicker of emotion. It seemed the perfect arrow for my quiver, which was so full of tricks of deception.

I wouldn't become the beauty queen. I'd be the obscuring queen.

The thought made me smile. Alone here in the dark, crouched among trees and shrubbery, nobody was here to see my emotion.

Tonight I would practice Stealth. I didn't intend to use my powers for evil. It was another storybook lie that the truth was good and liars were evil. They were nothing but skills, and the goodness or evil lay in the fae's intent.

My intent was good. I was here to observe the Shadow Walkers and seek weakness. So far, the only move against them had been to *put down* their victims, but what kind of defense was that? Salting and burning walking corpses made no difference to the Shadow Walkers themselves.

We needed more information. Rumor had it the creatures flitted between shadows and couldn't survive in the light, but was that even true?

I didn't plan to fight. I just wanted to observe, watch how they moved,

attacked, and how many there were.

Even my cold dead heart picked up pace when a cool breeze tickled my bare arms. Dread stopped me, and I sensed a threat nearby. It had to be the Shadow Walkers.

Why had I chosen to hide in the darkest shadow? I was a damn fool, but all I could do now was stay as still as death and hope to go unnoticed.

A single shadow, darker than black, seeming to devour the light around it, flitted to the lions' cave mouth, then inside.

I heard nothing. No shrieks, no screams, not even a scuffle, and the night was suddenly so cold that the hairs on my arms stood erect.

After ten minutes, the shadow emerged from the den. No, two shadows. Had that thing just reproduced?

The creatures blew through the night like smoke, then they were gone.

I hid behind my thin cover of trees until the cold in my bones had gone, then I nocked an arrow on my bowstring and crept toward the den.

"Hello?" I hoped to hear an answering growl from a pissed-off lion.

Nothing.

I called again, but there was no point in waiting, so I walked into the cave mouth and looked around. Four bloodied bodies lay on the stone floor, one female fae, two young faelings, and an enormous lion in beast form. All dead. They smelled like fresh meat, like a trip to the butcher instead of the grisly stench of death I'd feared. But that was revolting too.

These bodies were still, not the empty walking husks I'd heard about. Perhaps that hadn't been a Shadow Walker but a regular beast.

But as I watched, the lion's eyes flicked open and fixed me in their golden stare.

Ronan

The day of the third trial arrived.

I'd spent the last few days with Neela, trying to teach her how to reach her inner power. Honestly, my control over my own inner power was bad enough, but hers was nonexistent.

I might've been the worst teacher possible, but I was the only one she had. None of the others would help her because of my blood magic death sentence.

The question hovered behind Neela's blue eyes at all times. Why are you helping me? Why are you trading your own life for mine? She didn't voice it. Not after the first time I'd rounded on her and shouted in her face, "Because I don't have a choice, I fucking love you."

Not the most romantic way to declare my love for the first time, but it shut her up.

And it was the truth. She had a determination and strength I'd never match, forged in the hothouse of trauma. She hadn't let her rough upbringing defeat her but had clawed her way to survival at every turn.

She was the sexiest, most alarmingly beautiful woman I knew, with her constant movement and flickering micro-expressions. She was in my thoughts all the time and had been right from the moment I met her.

I had no right to keep her sexy, writhing ass from the Floran throne. I never should have made the stupid pact. I'd been so worried for Sebarah's future that I'd made it out of fear.

But still, that question hovered behind her eyes—why are you helping me?

The truth was I hadn't examined my reasons too closely. I'd fallen so hard for this female that all sense had left me.

The hard line in the sand wouldn't occur for hundreds of years. Before she sat her ass on the throne—or not—so many things had to fall into place. The majority of current monarchs had to die, all of us had to pass Gaia's ultimate test of leadership, Neela and I both had to successfully Ascend, and we had to survive the never-ending yearly trials.

Each was an opportunity for Neela to fail and take the question out of our hands. But until then, I chose Neela. Time and again and forever, I would always choose Neela.

I would wither if she left Arathay, so my death was scheduled either way.

No point dwelling on it, so I focused on what I could control. We'd spent days trying to find Neela's inner power, whatever it might be. But so far, no luck.

I trudged into the forest with a heavy heart. The inner power trials were always the most dangerous, and Neela had every chance of getting badly hurt.

My sword was slung at my hip as a last resort in case my inner powers failed me.

Neela was already in the forest clearing, and she threw me a sassy smile to hide her nerves. It also made my dick jump, but that would have to wait. She hadn't kissed me since Gabrelle Lured her, and the last thing I wanted to do was rush her.

Well, no, the thing I most wanted to do was rush her and sink myself into her, but I restrained myself. For now.

The others were here too, more subdued than usual. Leif wasn't even playing with a ball.

Dion smelled like a Gaia-be-damned cesspit and looked like he'd been dragged through the ocean. "Really? Kipper for breakfast on the day of the trial? Are you trying to put us off our game?"

Dion smirked. "It only puts you off if you let it, Ro."

He and I had found an uneasy peace. He didn't understand my actions, why the hell I would put a stranger's life above my own, but he accepted them. Or so he said.

I padded across the ivy-covered ground and kissed Neela's cheek, right on the corner of her mouth, just enough to satisfy my need for intimacy without imposing on her privacy. "Give them hell," I whispered.

She bit her lip and nodded, brimming with determination. "I'll whip your ass, princeling."

Her confidence was utterly unearned, but it made me grin.

Dion read the scroll. "Today is the third trial. Each contender for the throne will be allocated a section of forest. Your task is to remain in your section for one hour. Points will be awarded based on your conduct. Exiting the section before the trial's end will result in a forfeit."

Relief shone on Neela's face, and the dappled light made her tractor beam smile even brighter. "That's it? I just have to stand in one spot for an hour? I'm excellent at standing still. I'll ace this."

"You are woeful at standing still," Gabrelle corrected smoothly as she leaned against a stone pillar, looking ready for an evening out in a fine purple pantsuit. Polished, with none of Neela's raw sexuality. "And trust me, this won't be as easy as it sounds. We will all face our inner power."

A slight scratch above the beauty queen's right eye caught my attention,

and I gave her a questioning glance. That was a fresh injury, and it must have been deep if it still hadn't healed.

"I'll tell you later," she mouthed, putting a hand to her scarred forehead.

House insignia appeared, hovering above different sections of forest. White fangs on a gray shield for House Caro, crossed silver knives on a red shield for House Dionysus, a setting sun over a pink-and-orange ocean for House Allura, and a skull over a checkerboard of yellow and blue for me. Lastly, a pink flower on a golden shield for House Flora.

"A pretty pink rose for the pretty pink princess," Neela joked. She was the precise opposite.

I squeezed her shoulder as she turned to leave. "Just walk out of the section if it gets too much. There's no shame in that. You just have to make it through."

She shook her head. "If I can't channel my inner power here, I have no hope of surviving my Ascension. I have to stay and figure it out."

She was right. Dammit, she was right, and I knew she would stay in her section of the forest no matter the danger.

I grabbed my heavy sword and bush-bashed through to my allocated section of the woods. The family emblem was overlaid on the ground, a checkerboard of yellow and blue grass, clearly marking the border of my territory.

As soon as I stepped foot inside, my worrying intensified. The hour had already begun, and each of us was fighting our own battles. Dion and Leif would be fine. They'd already Ascended into their full power. Dion always aced these trials, and now that Leif had gone full werewolf, he was probably having a ball, chasing rabbits or digging holes, or just rutting away in a ditch.

Gabrelle would be fine too. She was already a competent Lure even

though she was a few years shy of twenty-five, and she'd sat these trials enough times to know what to expect.

But Neela was another story. Seb had told me the sorts of things he'd had to endure, and he'd barely struggled to live through a couple of his trials, even with years of training.

Neela didn't have a chance.

I wandered deeper into my section, looking for whatever threat I was supposed to defeat, but my mind was always on Neela and whether she was coping.

A picture of her in a Shadow Walker's jaws popped into my mind, as perfectly formed as if I was witnessing it. The black creature sank huge fangs into her neck and drained her soul while she kicked and screamed, desperately trying to escape.

My feet were sprinting before my brain caught up, hurdling logs and darting around brambles.

I swept past the boundary of my section, smashed through twigs and branches, sprinting so fast my lungs burned.

I thrashed, bashed, and hurtled in the direction of the rose floating above the trees, and finally, the forest floor turned pink beneath my flying feet.

"Neela!"

No answer. The lifelike image of her being attacked by a Shadow Walker had faded, but its memory remained, and I searched frantically.

"Tomcat!"

"Over here." I pivoted and sprinted, following her muffled voice.

"Where are you?"

"Here." Her voice was louder and seemed to come from inside a mass of twisted vines wrapped around something like a boa constrictor.

No Shadow Walker, then. That was a relief...although this thing could kill her just as dead. I raised my sword and hacked at the vines, releasing every ounce of adrenaline from my coiled muscles into each swing.

I chopped and whacked, and the vine finally paid me attention. One tendril snaked away from the central mass and coiled around my blade, whipping it out of my hands and flinging it through the trees.

I sprinted after it, but the grass at my feet wrapped around my ankles and tripped me, bringing me to the pink forest floor with a thud.

“I’m okay.” Her voice was muffled and small. “Just go do your own thing.”

Like hell I would. I kicked out and broke free from the snaking grass, then darted through the forest to retrieve my sword. With it, I resumed cutting into the massive vine with long slices of my sharp blade.

Neela appeared at my shoulder. “Don’t hurt it,” she scolded. “It’s just doing Gaia’s bidding.”

I stared at her for a second, trying to figure out what had happened, before pulling her into a hug. “I thought you were inside that thing.”

She grinned. “I was.”

“How did you get out?”

Her smile was so intense it almost split me in two. “I magicked my way out. I was just sitting there, quietly suffocating, you know how it is, when I closed my eyes like you taught me. I imagined a ball of light, only instead of trying to sense the life force around me, I forced spears of attention into the vine like I was attacking it with my mind. And it worked! I told it firmly to lower me to the ground, and here I am. I’m a magician!”

She threw herself into my arms and planted the sweetest, softest kiss on my lips, nothing like the passionate ones we shared in the bar and while she

was under Gabrelle's Lure, but gentle and giving.

My heart thudded, and I wanted to kiss her fully, deeply, but before I could jolt myself out of my surprise and muster a response, she slid down my body and danced away.

She kissed me. Neela Flora kissed me. My knees wobbled, and a grin split my face in two.

The leaves beneath my feet turned from pink to green, signaling the trial's end. The clever fae had found her inner power and succeeded in this trial without my help.

Like she said, she didn't need anybody's help. She was learning this fae shit a whole lot faster than I expected, and I was damn proud of her.

I followed Neela and returned to the clearing just as our scores were allocated. A shimmering silver five hovered over Dion's stinky fish hair and a four over Leif's.

Leif shoved Dion playfully. "Next year, big D. I'm coming for you."

A shiny three shimmered over Gabrelle's head, which she seemed proud of. Rightly so—she'd come top of the non-Ascended.

Neela looked up at her own shimmering number two. "Suck it, you entitled pricks. Two points for the human."

"Not a human," I noted.

I drew the most attention. Everybody stared at the big fat zero over my head, then looked at me like I'd thrown the trial deliberately. Gabrelle's perfect plum lips were parted, and I read the intense disappointment in her lovely brown face. She crossed her arms across her chest and cocked out a shapely hip, staring at me like I'd killed her last surviving relative.

She and I were slated to rule together. That had always been an unspoken pact between us. I would finish top, Gabrelle would rank second, and we

would lead the realm together. I turned to face her, knowing I owed her an explanation. “I...left my section. Not on purpose, I was just worried about...”

Neela wouldn't appreciate me saying I did it for her, and I didn't want to blame her, so I trailed off lamely.

I'd failed the third trial. I'd never failed one before. My grand total for the whole year was nine measly points...I was really losing it.

It didn't mean I was giving up. I would do everything I could to help my tomcat get whatever she wanted out of life, including the Floran throne, but my inner fae wouldn't lie down and die. I still intended to top the rankings, even if I never became king.

But the joy on Neela's face made my failure worth it—even though she hadn't even needed my help. Hell, I'd do it all again just for another peck on the lips.

I never thought I'd be one of those saps who enjoyed another's success more than his own...but Neela's tractor-beam smile was something else, and I would do anything to see it shining from her face. Even be happy for her beating me in a trial...just this once.

Neela

After the trial, Ronan turned to leave the forest clearing, but I grabbed his wrist as though he were mine.

I liked the sound of that. “Mine,” I whispered, my fingers tightening around his thick wrist.

He turned startled black eyes on me, the dappled sunlight of late afternoon slanting across his tanned face.

He stared at me, licking me with his gaze, while the others departed, leaving us all alone among the trees.

He didn’t move a muscle, just stared at me with smoke in his eyes. “What did you just say to me?”

I’d spent the past few days worrying about accepting his help and trying to solve the equation of his life versus mine, but I was done with analyzing.

The intensity in his gaze sent warmth flooding through me, and his wrist was damn near burning my palm. “I said, you’re mine.”

This male had haunted my dreams since I’d first laid eyes on him in the Slippery Silkworm, fucking with my mind, messing with my body, and infiltrating every waking thought.

There was no point in resisting him any longer. It didn’t matter if he had to sacrifice his life for me, or if I had to offer my future for him; all that mattered was his muscled chest heaving a foot from mine and his hungry gaze.

I yanked him closer with growing need, urgency making my movements ragged and uncoordinated. I jumped, and he caught me, so I wrapped my legs around his waist, hooking my ankles together.

I leaned forward to kiss him, needing to taste him, to feel his lips, to be closer. I wanted to meld with him like I'd melded with the damn bracelet.

But he pulled back, teasing. "Say it again," he growled.

"You're mine." Louder this time, insistent, demanding that he give in and kiss me.

His perfect lips quirked. "Good girl." He claimed me then, his mouth pressing, moving, and devouring, and I claimed him back, urgent and needy.

Desire coursed through my body and made every inch of me ache. I pressed against him, chest to chest, but it wasn't enough.

"Take your shirt off," I managed to say between kisses, and he whipped his T-shirt over his head in a smooth motion, then slid my shirt off, too, leaving me in only a black bra. He growled, and I pressed forward, eliminating the space between us, squashing my breasts against his hard broad chest.

He felt even better than I remembered, and I let my hands roam over the ridges of his body, curling around to the smooth skin of his back, pressing my lips into his, overwhelmed with sensation but still needing more.

My pussy ached, and I bucked against him but couldn't get the friction I needed.

He grabbed my ass and squeezed, drenching my core with desire and need, but still, it wasn't enough.

Frantically, I reached down to unbuckle his belt, letting my knuckles brush my pussy as I did.

With one hand on my ass holding me up, he brought the other forward

and stilled my fumbling fingers. “I wanted our first time to be slow and special.”

I guided his hand to press against my wet panties, and his breathy moan was so sultry I could have climaxed on that alone. “We already had our first time, remember? It was not slow. It was fantastic. Let’s just do that again.”

He resisted for half a second longer before diving for my mouth again and pushing the crotch of my panties aside with one finger and caressing me.

“Harder.”

He smirked. “Yes, ma’am.” He walked forward and slammed my back against a rough tree trunk, then kept enough pressure to hold me up while unbuckling his belt and sliding down his jeans.

I had to watch. His cock was reaching, eager, long and thick, and throbbing with desire. Perfect. I had to get it inside me, I needed every inch of it buried in me so I could ride him. My prince.

“Now,” I demanded, and he guided his tip inside me and rose to his full height, pushing every inch of himself up into me.

He was agonizingly slow about it, but I was so lost in the throes of sensation that I couldn’t complain. Every nerve ending was alive, dancing in fucking joy as he slowly pushed into me.

When our bodies met, clamped together, I bit his lip in reprimand for teasing me, then I began to grind.

For a moment, he threw back his head with a look of agony on his perfect face, exposing the muscle column of his neck, which I licked. He groaned and bucked, and I ground my hips. The rough bark scratched my back, and his hand squeezed my ass, and I kept grinding and riding and moving while his cock found all the magical places inside me.

This felt better than anything, just as good as when my inner power burst

from me during the trial.

This felt like home. “You belong inside me,” I said, voicing my wild thoughts, not caring, feeling intimate enough with him that he wouldn’t laugh.

“Yes,” he snarled, biting my lip in return. “And you belong on my dick.”

That tipped me over the edge. I crescendoed. Every cell in my body had coalesced to a single point, and it shattered. I came apart in long pulsing waves.

My release gave Ronan permission, and he followed me to climax, holding me close against his chest, wrapping his arms around my back and squeezing so hard it hurt.

He stayed inside me while I rode my orgasm to the end in long, pulsing waves, and he held me tight the whole time. Then he raised me gently off him and lowered me to the ground.

“I love you, tomcat.”

I stood on the ivy, still wearing my skirt and bra, and looked up at him, waiting for him to take it back, act ashamed, or look away. He’d shouted it at me before, but this was thrown out like a simple fact.

He just stared at me, blinking calmly, not expecting anything in return.

Generally at this point, I would run away and hide—my usual go-to solution. I’d make some smart-ass comment, then get the hell out of there and ghost his ass.

But I didn’t want to. I didn’t even want to leave. I wanted to stay by his side and face the world with him.

I leaped into his arms, and he caught me again, this time sideways like a bride. “Good.” I planted a soft kiss on his lips. “Then you won’t mind carrying me home.”

He laughed, and joy suffused the entire forest, soaring through my spirits. He scooped to retrieve our shirts, which he stuffed in his jeans pockets, then he sprinted through the woods, holding me tight.

Neela

My eyes flew open in the early morning before the sun was up. Bright yellow flowers had bloomed among the twisted vines that formed the canopy of my four-poster bed. They definitely weren't there yesterday.

“Are you flowering because I slept with Ronan?”

I didn't often address my furniture directly, but I was happy to make an exception. After all, a lot had changed in my world lately. I kept peering at my bed, waiting to see if the vines would move to spell out 'YES,' but I was disappointed.

“Maybe next time,” I said to my bed, patting the mattress kindly.

I couldn't remember my dreams except for the general sense they'd been anything but sweet. Sinful was a better word. It was all naked Ronan, hard muscles, and his hand splayed across my lower back. Mmm, I would definitely do that again.

I closed my eyes and let my mind wander back to yesterday. The way Ronan's hands had felt on my body, the taste of his lips on mine, the way his muscles had flexed beneath my touch. My body hummed with pleasure at the memories of our passion.

I stretched my arms above my head and sat up, feeling the warm sheets slide down my naked body. My eyes were drawn to the large windows that framed a breathtaking view of the Rose Palace's gardens, with the hedge maze glowing a pale green. The sky was still dark, but the first rays of sunlight were just beginning to seep into the horizon.

It was remarkable to think this really was my ancestral home. The palace was mine, all mine. I didn't need to ransack the rooms for gold to sell on the streets or stuff silverware into my oversized pockets.

I didn't even need to worry about the Ascension rite anymore. I padded to the window and looked out, and warmth coursed through my veins, similar to the sensation of unleashing my inner magic yesterday. The air had crackled with electricity as I had let loose my power. It was exhilarating, and the thought of doing it again made me tingle with anticipation.

I got out of bed, feeling energized and ready to take on the day. As I walked around the Rose Palace, I noticed that everything seemed to be glowing with a soft aura. It was as if I was seeing the world through new eyes, and I couldn't help but smile at the beauty of it all.

I decided to take a walk in the gardens. The morning air was crisp, and the dew drops on the flowers sparkled like diamonds in the sunlight. I breathed in the scent of the blooms and smiled contentedly to myself. For the first time in a long time, everything was perfect. I had a beautiful home, a lover who left me breathless, and a growing power inside me.

Some of the flowers were wilting. I frowned and reached out to touch a chrysanthemum, and a jolt of magic surged through me. The petals were soft against my skin, and the scent was overwhelming. I could sense the inner workings of the flower, the way the energy flowed through it.

And then, as suddenly as it had started, the experience was over. But something had shifted. I felt a connection between myself and the plants in a way I never had before, not even yesterday when I'd dominated the carnivorous plant that was trying to eat me. I could almost hear the flower whispering to me, telling me its secrets.

My mind flicked to the Library of Whispers, which I hadn't dared to enter

since the night I first arrived in Verda when Liz caught me snooping around and warned me of the dangers.

But this morning, I felt invincible. Besides, it was my library, and it might have answers about my parents. Like why they hadn't fought against Gaia's Curse but had chosen to give me away.

My feet carried me to the Library of Whispers inside one of the large petals of the palace. As soon as I pushed the heavy wooden door open, a tug in my chest pulled me toward a book. It had a gold spine and a title that danced, looking more like whispers than words.

Without thinking, I reached out and touched it, feeling a deep sense of connection as if something within me had known this was exactly where I should be. The moment my fingers touched the book's cover, a surge of warmth washed over me, and I was transported to a different room, to a different time.

My mother stood tall, her slim figure draped in a green velvet gown and a coronet of wildflowers resting atop her lustrous dark hair. In her arms, she held a tiny bundle wrapped in white muslin and swaddled in a blanket of soft petals. Her face was illuminated by a gentle smile, eyes sparkling with love as she looked upon her baby. Me.

The nursery was filled with a rainbow of colors, from the soft pastel tones of the curtains and bedspread to the vibrant hues of the toys scattered around the room. The furniture was made of pale wood and the walls were painted a cheerful sunshine yellow with white accents.

Birdsong drifted through the open windows. My mother's voice was low and melodic as she spoke, her words gentle and filled with hope for the future.

A small child with a mop of dark curls and a runny nose sat in the corner,

playing with miniature horses. His eyes were wide and curious as he looked up at me. With a jolt, it clicked—this was Sebarah, the brother I'd never met, the fae I'd wasted my time hating just because he was accepted and I wasn't. But Seb was just a toddler when I was born, a tiny faeling, and my banishment from the fae realm wasn't his fault.

My mother looked up at a sound, and my father entered the nursery. He was tall and broad-shouldered, looking exactly how I imagined a War Wielder to look, except that his eyes were soft, twinkling like stars as he smiled at us both. His hair was blue and wavy, slightly disheveled as if he had just come in from a walk in the woods. He wore hunting leathers with a blue belt that brought out the deep blue tones of his eyes. They were the exact same shade as mine.

“We can't keep her,” he said sadly.

My mother's eyes filled with salty tears, and she held me close to her chest as though she could protect me from the Earth Goddess herself. “Gaia can't have her,” she sobbed. “I won't allow it.”

My father placed a hand on my mother's shoulder, offering comfort. “We have to send her away for her own safety. It's the only way.”

Mom shook her head and held me closer. “I won't give her up. I won't.” Her knuckles were white across my tiny back.

A shadow passed over the nursery window, dark and foreboding, then an eagle swooped into the room and lunged at my mother, trying to peck at me, feathers brushing against the walls and overturning a colorful mobile.

My father picked up a child-sized wooden chair and swung it at the attacking bird, shouting and screaming, while Sebarah huddled in the corner. Eventually, the eagle swooped outside, and Father closed the windows, leaning his back against them and panting.

The room sat in heavy silence for long moments. Even little Sebarah was quiet.

“That was Gaia’s third attempt on her life, and she is only three weeks old,” my father said in a low voice. “If you love her, Celeste, you have to send her away.”

My heart ached as I watched the scene unfold. I had never known my parents, never accepted why they had given me away. But as I watched them now, I understood.

My mother nodded, tears streaming down her face. “But where will she go? Who will protect her?”

“We’ll find a mortal family to take her in,” my father said. “Someone who will love her and keep her safe. And we’ll make sure she’s always watched over.”

My mother gave a slight nod, but her eyes were still filled with tears. “Promise me you’ll find her a good home. Promise me you’ll make sure she’s safe and happy.”

“I promise,” my father said, his voice heavy with emotion.

The memory faded, and I was back in the library, tears streaming down my face. I finally understood how they had made the decision to send me away. My mother’s salt and my father’s weary face strengthened me, even from so many years in the past.

But I still felt a sense of loss, of longing for the parents I had never known. And for the safe childhood they’d planned for me in the mortal realm that never came to pass. My human parents died young, and my fae parents too.

I wiped away my tears and took a deep breath, reminding myself that I had a new family now. The Rose Palace was my home; Liz and the other

heirs were my friends. And maybe, just maybe, Ronan would become my lover.

I closed my eyes and focused on my connection with the plants outside the window, letting their energy flow through me, feeling my emotional well refilling.

Peace and forgiveness settled into my heart. I closed the book and realized it was the one I'd signed on my first visit to the Library of Whispers. I traced my finger over the ink. Perhaps this was always meant to be.

Neela

“Why do I get the feeling you’re throwing me to the wolves again?” I asked as Ronan led me up the pearlescent path to his parents’ estate. He wore black jeans and a black T-shirt, completing the whole dark prince thing he had going on. I was there for it.

“Again? When did I ever do that?”

“So you don’t deny you’re taking me into the dragon’s den?”

The prince snorted. “Dragons don’t exist.”

“That is completely and entirely not the point.” I stood still, forcing him to stop too. “Are you certain I should be here?”

Ronan’s family estate was a palace straight out of a faerybook. Tall, slender towers reached toward the sky, their spires crowned with intricate sculptures that came alive in the sparkling sunlight. The palace walls, adorned with delicate ivy and vines, gleamed with a pearlescent sheen. It even smelled delightful.

“Of course. I’m sure my parents would love to meet you.”

“You’re sure?” My voice rose in a squeak. “You mean you haven’t asked them? I thought they knew I was coming.”

“Relax, princess,” he said, closing the distance between us and laying a gentle hand over my denim-clad pussy. “They’ll love you.”

“You’re a big fucking liar, princeling.” I stepped away. “I’m not going in there. Just take me straight to this enchantment ceremony. House Mentium

runs it, right, so your parents will be there. I'll bump into them and say hello."

He shifted his weight uncomfortably as though I'd said the wrong thing.

"What?" I demanded.

"You'd be better off groveling than tossing them a hello."

My chest tightened with the familiar sense of not being good enough. "Why the hell can't I say hello like a normal fucking person? I'm a princess, right? I'm just as good as them."

Ronan smirked. "Do you remember how you used to call me arrogant?"

"Used to?" I spluttered. "You, princeling, are the most arrogant being I've ever met. And I'm including all fae and all humans in that."

"Well, where do you think I get it from?" he asked with a light grin.

Some of my tension disappeared just by chatting with him, but I definitely didn't want to meet his parents now. I tugged him away from the stupidly opulent castle with its sprawling gardens and twinkling pools. "Let's go straight to the ceremony."

He allowed himself to be pulled behind me out of the wrought iron gates, but not without complaining about it. "The ceremony doesn't start for an hour. What're we supposed to do until then?"

Wicked images filled my head, ones where Ronan had to stay completely still while I did whatever I wanted to his body. "Oh, I can think of a few things."

He squeezed my hand so tight it almost broke my fingers, and his voice was husky. "Yes, please."

Heat pooled within me, and I scanned the surroundings for a hiding spot. "Maybe we should take a swim?" Perhaps we could get away with some underwater fondling, and nobody would see a thing.

Ronan looked thoughtful, like he was making a life-or-death decision. “Not here. But I know a place...”

He led me along a series of moonways, and it felt like we were crisscrossing the entire realm. “Where are you taking me?”

“I told you, I know a place.”

I harrumphed. “Yeah, well, I know a bunch of places, like the Docklands, Sewer City, the underpass, but most of them would be terrible locations for a date.”

“A date?” He looked at me, then swooped in and picked me up and whirled me around. “I wasn’t sure that’s what this was.”

“Well, I mean, it’s got hand-holding and talking and kissing, I’d say that’s a date. Oh, plus some kind of object enchantment ceremony—”

“Nope, we’re not going there anymore.”

“We’re not?”

“The spot I have in mind is way better.”

“Oh.”

Ronan must have sensed my disappointment. “Trust me, the Imbuing Ceremony is boring. It’s just a bunch of bored fae sitting around watching experts imbue objects with emotions.”

I gripped his arm, feeling the thick muscles underneath his fine shirt. “They make objects feel emotions?!”

“No, no,” he laughed. “The objects don’t have feelings. But whoever is touching them gets the emotion that’s imbued in it. Usually happiness, but sometimes sadness or guilt or whatever.” He shook his head. “Some fae have crazy-ass taste. Anyway, at the end of the ceremony, they sell off the artefacts to the highest bidders.”

I frowned. “Sounds like rich fae getting more shit.”

“Exactly. You’d hate it.”

We exited a moonway halfway up a huge mountain that seemed to be made out of solid honey. It was a dark golden color and stuck to the soles of my shoes with every step, and smelled of wattle. I bent down and scooped my finger in the ground-honey and sniffed it. “Is this honey?”

“Sort of.”

I went to lick it off my finger, but Ronan grasped my wrist before it got to my mouth. “Better not.”

I twisted my lips. “Do I want to know why?”

He shrugged. “Apparently it’s a killer high, but you won’t come down for a month. But if you want to, I’m game. We’ll do it together. But we should get some food supplies first. The biggest problem is that if you get hungry and eat more honey, your month-long high resets. A lot of people spend years here.”

I wiped my sticky finger on my fae denim pants. “If I was out of it for a month, I’d miss my Ascension. Nice try, asshole.” I didn’t really think he was trying to sabotage me, not anymore. In fact, I tried not to think too hard about what he was doing and how we would solve the unsolvable problem of him versus me, life versus life, the prince versus the tomcat.

He just laughed. He didn’t rise to my teasing anymore, he just chuckled and joined in. Perfect company, really. And a perfect cock to go with it. “How much further is it to this place you know?” I complained. My panties were wet from thinking about his body, and walking so far with them in their current state was uncomfortable.

Ronan ducked into yet another moonway, which took us through the inside of the honey mountain and emerged right inside it. He stepped out, and his voice echoed in the small space. “We’re there. Ta-da!”

I looked around, thoroughly unimpressed. “It’s pitch black.”

“Yeah, isn’t it great!”

I tried to see if he was kidding, but I couldn’t make out his features in the blackness. “Um…”

He summoned a light globe in the palm of his hand, revealing rocky walls and a shimmering dark pool. “This is my cave.”

“Yeah, your man cave. Literally.”

“It’s my favorite place in the world.” He definitely wasn’t joking. The globe of light flickered off his square jaw, showing his full lips set in a wistful expression and intensity in his coal eyes. “I stumbled across this spot while I was exploring moonways, right after I turned eleven. It always felt so calming. And after that, whenever I needed to defuse my emotions, I came here.”

A joke about his favorite place in the world being a featureless black cave was desperate to come out of my mouth, but I wrestled it into submission and kept quiet. The truth was, there was so much more to this prince than I ever realized. He was kind and sweet. He’d cared so much about my brother and was helping me even when it hurt himself. He was at the top of the rankings among the heirs, so damned skillful at everything he tried. Handsome and sexy, too, the male desired by almost every fae in the realm, but even among all those amazing qualities, what mattered most was his heart. And it was pretty damn good.

I swooped up his hand and kissed his knuckles. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

He blinked back to the present, and his coal-black eyes squeezed in a smirk. “Shall we?” He nodded to the inky pool, then pulled off his shirt,

displaying his sculpted chest and that delicious V that beckoned the eye down.

My nipples tightened as I traced the outline of his muscles with my gaze. “You are beautiful,” I breathed.

His smirk was maybe the sexiest thing about him. “You can talk.”

He yanked me closer and peeled off my shirt. As he tossed it aside, my small breasts jiggled, and I felt his gaze on them. He let out a low growl and pulled me to him, pressing his bare chest against mine, my jeans pushed into his. The warmth of his skin sent shivers down my spine, and I ran my hands over his back, admiring the ridges of his muscles.

He lowered his head and nibbled at my ear, then whispered, “You don’t know how long I’ve wanted to do this.”

I laughed. “About a day. Pretty sure we screwed yesterday, although you’re not all that memorable, so maybe I’ve got that wrong,” I teased.

His mood was intense, his black eyes fathomless. “I mean before that. I wanted you for so long, Neela. Ever since you first writhed on my lap. I’ve thought about you every fucking moment.”

Those words sent desire screaming through me, the idea that he dreamed about me, thought about me, even while he hated me. All those times he’d tormented me, he’d really wanted to touch me. Every time he’d barked out an insult, he’d really wanted to lavish me with praise.

“Every moment?” I asked.

“Every fucking moment.” His breath was hot against my skin, and I felt myself getting even wetter. “You were born to rule me, Neela. And whenever I look at you, I want to drop to the ground and worship you. Your body,” he planted a kiss on my neck. “Your mind,” he licked down over my shoulder, then murmured into the Y at the front of my armpit. “Your soul.”

I let out a low moan as he trailed kisses down my arm, his hands roaming over me with a hunger that left me dizzy.

He dipped his head lower, nipping at my stomach before sliding his tongue into my belly button. I arched my back, lost in the sensations coursing through me.

The prince looked up at me through thick lashes, eyes blazing with desire. “I want you,” he growled, his voice sending shockwaves through me. “And I always have.”

His fingers trailed lower, unbuttoning my fae denim jeans and slipping inside my panties to find my clit. I gasped as he circled it, my back arching in pleasure. He pulled away from my stomach to watch me, his desire evident in his eyes. “You’re so beautiful,” he whispered.

I wanted to tell him I loved him, to utter those magical words that would be my undoing, but my words were lost in a moan as he pushed two fingers inside me.

He felt my depths for only a moment before removing his finger and placing his hands on my hips. He carefully lowered my jeans while I wriggled to be free, wanting to return to the part where his body was entwined with mine.

When I stood before him, completely naked, he got to his feet and stared at me.

“Your turn,” I said, looking at the V that dived beneath the waistband of his jeans. The chill of the cave air sent shivers over my skin, and he saw my shudder and pulled me close to him. “Take off your pants, princeling,” I demanded, but I made it difficult by leaping up and wrapping my legs around his waist, and he carried me to the pool. When we reached its edge, he set me down gently and stepped back.

He looked at me briefly, his eyes smoldering with heat, then dove into the water. His body cut through the blackness like a knife, and he disappeared beneath the surface.

I held my breath as I waited for him to resurface, shivering in the cool air and the lack of his body warmth. He stayed under the inky blackness for ten seconds, then twenty. “Very funny,” I called out as he remained under for thirty seconds, then forty.

How long could fae hold their breath? I searched for signs of movement in the black water, small bubbles of escaping air, any current or ripples. Nothing.

Surely he’d been down too long. Anxiety crept through me, ripping away my lingering desire and turning my skin to ice. I jumped into the pool and kicked out, slamming my leg into something warm and hard.

Ronan surfaced, and I slapped him. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

He looked genuinely confused. “Swimming.”

“Why did you stay under so long? Were you trying to scare me?”

I was shaking, although the water was surprisingly warm against my icy skin. Ronan’s light globe hovered above the pool, casting flickering light in the small space.

Ronan saw me shivering and pulled me close. “It’s okay, I’m alright. Fae can hold their breath for minutes. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Man, I was shaking a lot. An uncool amount. An I-care-about-you amount, and Ronan noticed. He smirked. “Were you worried about me, tomcat?”

I pushed away from him. The pool was shallow enough to stand comfortably, with my breasts just covered. “Of course not. I just didn’t know

what I would do with the body. You're a big bloody male, you know. Heavy as fuck."

He grinned and pulled me against him, causing a wake of water behind me. "You don't want me to die. Sucked in," he teased, muttering into my hair.

I rested against his chest while I recovered from my shock. Of course fae could hold their breaths for minutes, it was foolish to think otherwise. What couldn't they do? Er, we. What couldn't we do? I had a lot to learn about this place.

The dark cave and warm water were soothing; I could see why Ronan liked it here. He said he came here when he felt emotionally overwhelmed as a teenager, and it made perfect sense. The lapping warm water, the lack of sensory input, and the total calm were all utterly relaxing.

After I stopped shaking and my adrenaline subsided, I came back into my body and remembered I was naked and close against the prince. Ronan's big cock pressed into me, still clad in fabric. I jumped up, and he caught me, then he ground me against it. Fae denim may be softer than the human equivalent, but it wasn't as smooth as flesh.

"Can we lose the jeans?" I asked.

He grinned. "I thought you'd never ask."

I floated away and admired his bunching shoulders and angled chest as he wriggled out of his wet denim pants. "I did ask. Repeatedly. You're just not very good at following orders."

He held the jeans and swung them over his head so water flicked everywhere. "I never have been."

"We'll have to work on that."

He laughed and stepped toward me, water sluicing down his body. "Yes,

princess.” My eyes hooded as I took in his long, powerful limbs, chiseled abs, and broad shoulders.

“Come here,” he said, pulling me into his arms. His skin was hot against mine, and my temperature rose as I pressed into him. He bent his head and kissed me, and all thoughts of fae cockiness and disobedience flew away. We were just two people in a dark cave, lost in each other’s embrace.

We kissed and explored each other until our fingers were wrinkled from the water. He lifted me out of the pool and laid me on the edge, covering me with his body.

“This is perfect,” he murmured, brushing his lips against mine.

We stayed there for hours, talking and caressing. He gifted me three orgasms, only claiming two for himself, and we finally fell against each other on the flat stone floor, looking up at the rocky ceiling.

“Did you come here with Seb?” I wanted to know more about my brother and about his life. I hadn’t managed to muster any actual grief at his death, but the sadness of a life taken too young swirled around me.

Ronan leaned his head on his hand, propped up on one shoulder, and pressed a gentle kiss to my cheek. “I’ve never brought anyone here,” he said softly. “I’ve always kept it apart, the one place I can come to when I need to be alone. A place just for me and my deepest thoughts.”

I ran a hand in lazy circles down his chest. “But now you’ve brought me here.”

“Yes.” He kissed my temple. “Now I’ve brought you.”

Neela

“I told you the frilly blue dress would have been perfect,” Liz hissed as we sipped our wine and spied on the fae arriving at the party across the street. “Pity you ripped it to shreds because you wanted to look pretty for your first trial.”

I shoved her playfully. “I love how you reinvent history. That is not what happened.”

She grinned.

I was glad I’d taken her advice this time, though I’d hesitated when she suggested the strapless pink gown. It floated down my body like an overblown rose, trailing the floor behind me, its asymmetrical petals clinging to my waist and hips.

“Maybe Ronan will rip this one to shreds tonight,” I said, imagining him clawing it from my body.

Almost two weeks had passed since my inner magic emerged during the third trial, and Ronan and I spent nearly every minute together. He’d made good on his promise to make long slow love to me, and I’d made good on my insistence for fast and furious fucks. Plus, there’d been a bunch of talking, which was almost as fun.

“Slap that stupid smile off your face,” Liz said, rolling her eyes. “Stay focused on the mission.”

I had insisted that Liz bring me to a bar where we could watch fae arrive at the party before we had to go in ourselves. This was the pre-Ascension

party. My twenty-fifth birthday had come and gone, and my Ascension Rite would be the following week. Every realm in Arathay sent representatives to witness and congratulate the newly Ascended, and this was their welcome celebration.

I liked to think of it as a fancy twenty-fifth birthday party for me, too.

I sipped my wine. I was staying off the Fae Fizz tonight. “Who’s that?”

A tall slender female with a posture so straight you could use her in math class strode up the red carpet and into the marquee where the function was being held. Her silver-gray hair was swept back in a tight bun, making her look severe.

“That’s Arrow from the Realm of Fen. That’s the truth-telling realm.”

A spark of mischief bubbled inside me. “So this Arrow chick can’t lie? Imagine the possibilities. Imagine the information I could get out of her. I have to meet her!”

“Nobody can lie inside the borders of Fen, but out here, she can lie as easily as you and me.”

“Boo.”

“It’s not all bad. Fen fae have a habit of truth-telling, which they usually stick to. Arrow’s a direct bitch, though, so I’d steer clear if I were you.”

“Is she the Queen of Fen?” The female was elegant and regal, so I figured she probably was.

Liz put down her drink. Her green hair was styled in an outrageously high do that defied gravity, and her body had been squeezed into a tight red sheath dress that looked rockstar. “Nope. Most realms send heirs to the Ascension parties, not ruling monarchs. Every realm has one Ascension yearly, so it’s a lot of work.”

“A lot of partying, you mean. Do these guys ever do any actual work?”

Liz snorted a laugh. “Not as far as I can tell.”

Next to arrive was a couple with linked arms and a natural ease that spoke of decades of loving companionship. The male was tall, with dark hair that swept his shoulders and was shaved on one side to show off a lightning-bolt tattoo that glowed bright silver. She looked much older, like an aged movie star, still gorgeous, with sleek black hair.

Remarkably, their hair and eyes didn't match. The male's dark hair contrasted with his striking silver eyes; the female's eyes were vivid green.

I leaned closer to ask and almost toppled off my stool. This wine was strong stuff. “Are those guys human? Who—”

“They are the King and Queen of Caprice. Bastian and Bree of House Athar. She's human, he's fae.”

“The king and queen? I thought these guys only sent their kids.”

“Bastian and Bree don't have any heirs,” Liz said thoughtfully.

I was enjoying the show, and the display of flesh wasn't too bad, either. Next to arrive was a handsome male wearing a flowing shirt and trousers with so many cutouts that there was more muscle on show than material. I couldn't stop staring at his porcelain white skin and lavender hair.

I looked at my informant with wide eyes. “And who do we have here?”

Liz was caught in his mesmerizing presence too. “That's Prince Jayke of House Sansett from the Realm of Caprice.”

“He's hot.”

She nodded enthusiastically, still ogling him. “Yep. I wonder how flexible he is....” She tilted her head like she was trying to get him into a particular position.

“But not as hot as Ronan.” I wished my male would sneak up behind me, snake a muscled arm around my waist and carry me off to the back room for

a quickie. But I was also glad to be here with Liz, who I could no longer doubt was, in fact, a friend. Who would have thought? I had a friend—that was weirder than discovering I was a fae princess.

Liz and I were peering so intently out the plateglass window that we both jumped when a head appeared between us. “Boo,” he whispered, and I turned around—but it wasn’t Ronan.

The hair between us was a vibrant blue, and the male it belonged to had tanned skin and a square jaw. “What are we looking at?” he whispered conspiratorially.

“Who the hell are you?” I asked.

Liz grinned. “Prince Colzan from House Blunt in the Realm of Ourea, meet Princess Neela of House Flora from the Realm of Verda.”

“So many damn Houses,” I muttered. “How do you remember them all, Liz?”

She dipped a little curtsy from her stool. “I’m a royal companion, remember. It’s my job to know this stuff.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Colzan said with a cheeky grin, reaching between us and grabbing Liz’s drink before she could stop him.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Do you always sneak up on people and eavesdrop on private conversations?”

He threw back the drink and banged the glass on the counter. “Of course not! Only when the conversations look interesting.”

I grinned. This dude didn’t seem too uptight, so perhaps tonight wouldn’t be a fizzer after all.

Liz pried herself from her stool and stumbled against Colzan, who caught her, admiring her tight dress. “Time to face the lion’s den,” she said.

We crossed the street and walked the red carpet. Inside the marquee was a

rich girl's quinceanera on steroids. It was hosted by House Dionysus, so enticing food and wine were everywhere, but I'd already eaten—I wasn't going near anything Dion's House had prepared.

This was not an uptight party. Most folks looked already half-tanked, and sweaty bodies bumped and ground all over the place.

Ronan stood out despite all the fancy frocks and fabulous fae flesh. Tall, dark, handsome, with fuck-me eyes that I couldn't get enough of. He leaned against an archway that led to an outside patio, and I beelined for him and smashed my body against his, not caring if it hurt. He wore a jacket and pants, and I ran my hand inside his coat and over his soft silk shirt, feeling the contours of his hard body underneath. "Yum," I murmured.

He looked me up and down, his gaze lingering on my breasts before turning to my mouth. "Yum yourself."

He'd been waiting for me, and he pulled me aside to a small courtyard that lent a measure of privacy. Colzan and Liz followed us, so I supposed a screw was out of the question, but I settled down on Ronan's lap, and he rested a hand casually over my hip. Man, I liked this one. I really, really liked him.

Dion and Leif joined us, bringing the lavender-haired hottie, Jayke from Caprice. Jayke frowned at Colzan and took a seat as far away from him as possible, making me wonder if Caprice and Ourea were enemies. I still had so much to learn.

Amazingly, Leif had opted for a suit instead of gray sweats. He was even wearing a shirt. "Looking good, wolf," I said, and he tossed his long silver hair and winked.

Dion had dressed up too, wearing shimmering black leather pants and a button-up shirt, looking like a lothario.

I looked around for the missing heir. “Where’s Gabrelle?”

Ronan hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “Busy.”

She was across the far side of the marquee in an exquisite white floating gown that exposed her lower back and hips while somehow covering her important bits. She was chatting with a slimly muscled, golden-haired male with onyx skin dressed all in black and standing at the edge of the crowd radiating piss-off vibes.

“She has a thing for bad boys,” Leif explained. “That’s why she won’t suck me.”

Colzan threw back his head and laughed. “She won’t go near you because she’s miles out of your league, dude.”

Leif leaned across and stole the Ourean Prince’s bubbling drink, which he downed in one.

The party wore on as smoothly as Ronan wore his suit. Nothing boring about it. It turned out I didn’t have to meet a bunch of dull diplomats, just this handful of heirs who didn’t want to talk bullshit politics; they just wanted to drink.

A small winged faery flew out from the archway to the main party, cartwheeling through the air, and tumbled right into the back of Jayke’s head.

She apologized profusely, then whizzed away again, cackling merrily, and Jayke looked after her with a scowl. “Who let *her* in?”

His scowl turned to a grin, which made me think he was joking. Either that, or he was a paid-up member of the Asshole Club.

“You’re just kidding, right?” I asked.

He leaned back, oozing charm. “Of course.” I wasn’t sure I believed him.

I spied Jayke staring longingly at Gabrelle, who was still chatting up the terrifying golden-haired fae in the corner. I couldn’t blame the guy—I wasn’t

into tits and clits, but I might make an exception for her. That floaty white anti-gravity dress took my damn breath away.

Leif had brought a tennis ball, of course, which he tossed lazily in the air while the heirs swapped gossip about the different realms. Who had Ascended to what power, who was screwing who, and whether the Unseelie Fae would ever relax about their Father of Death stuff and come party with us.

Colzan snatched the tennis ball out of the air and bolted away, darting into the marquee and swerving through the crowd. “Come get it, wolf boy,” he taunted.

Leif licked his lips and then sprinted after the Ourean Prince, rushing into the crowd with a hungry expression.

Liz started chatting to Jayke, and I wished her luck—he was straight-up hot. They wandered off to refresh their drinks, and Double D, finding himself alone with Ronan and me, made some excuse to disappear too.

I slid off Ronan’s lap, landing on the bench beside him with a thump. I was drunker than I’d realized. I’d stayed away from the Fae Fizz, but apparently, the wine from House Dionysus was just as potent.

“Hey, tomcat. Don’t leave me.”

“I’m not! I just had to get off your lap because there’s something important I need to tell you.”

He leaned forward, and I got a whiff of his sexy strawberry scent. “Is it another secret? I know how you like to share when you’re drunk. Those perfect plump lips of yours just can’t stop talking. I adore it.”

I kneeled on the bench so our faces were at the same level. “Yes, it is a ssecret.” That last word came out slurred, so I tried again. “A ssecret.” Not much better, but it would have to do.

He placed a hand on my thigh. “Perfect. I love your secrets. Let me guess...You’re a fae princess?”

“Shush. It’s my secret, not yours.” I leaned forward and licked his jaw bone from chin to temple. “I want to have sex with you,” I whispered into his ear.

“Me too. That’s not a secret.”

“I’m getting to it,” I protested. “I like you.”

He laughed, a throaty rumble that vibrated through my hip. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“No, I really, really like you. I might even love you.” Shouldn’t have said that, but it was probably true. Still, I had to reel it in, so I put a finger over his lips and said, “Shh.”

He pulled me close. “Just as long as you don’t hate me, tomcat. Because I know I love you, and I’ll never let you doubt it. You’re mine. I’ll do anything for you from now until the end of time.”

He clutched me to him, dragging me onto his lap, and pressed his lips against mine in an act of worship.

Neela

Fae failures and success in the Court of Greed and Excess. The book lay open on my lap, a history of the noble houses in the Realm of Verda. Liz lent it to me when I complained about not knowing enough about my new world.

It was from the Library of Whispers, and I'd been scared to take it—after all, those books were dangerous. But Liz assured me she had whispered the correct spell to make the book harmless for a day, and another spell to stop the words from dancing so I could actually read it. “But you have to return it within twenty-four hours,” she said. “Promise.”

I promised, and was trying to read it, but I couldn't concentrate.

I just stared across the vast lake, sitting on the Lakehouse deck, captivated by the water.

With my new fae eyesight, I could see all the way to the distant shore. What I'd previously thought was as large as an ocean was clearly just a massive lake.

Over the past few weeks, the Lakehouse had grown me a chair. Not inside with the others but outside on the deck, which suited me perfectly. I was a street rat at heart and always would be, so being cooped up indoors was not my idea of a good time.

The chair grew directly from the timber, an interwoven pattern of woody stems softened with plush foliage, and it was the most comfortable thing I'd ever sat on.

Gabrelle was nearby, practicing with her bow and arrow, trying to hit a tiny target on the lake's far shore and occasionally succeeding. Her pink hair was pulled back in a loose braid, and she wore a bespoke black training suit with light leather armor. She stood on the boards with a wide stance, her arrow pointed up into the sky at forty-five degrees, looking every inch a warrior.

I wanted to be her when I grew up.

The silence between us was neutral, not exactly friendly, but relaxed. Dion was in the kitchen cooking something that smelled delicious that I had no intention of eating. I didn't think I could ever eat Magirus food, although the smell was mouthwatering. Literally. Saliva dribbled at the edge of my mouth, and I had to wipe it away.

The contenders for the thrones tolerated me. Better than that, they were friendly. Maybe even becoming my friends. When the Lakehouse had grown me this chair, they'd finally accepted me as one of the heirs.

The issue of Ronan's blood bond was a lava ball we kicked along the road, scorching our toes but delaying any decisions.

The front door slammed, and Ronan and Leif's banter floated through the house. They must be finished with their swordplay session.

"You can't shift into a wolf halfway through the fight and use your fangs, it's cheating," Ronan grumbled.

Leif whined. "It's the only way I can beat you these days. Besides, if you're ever in a real fight, your enemy won't play by your rules."

I grinned, instantly happy at hearing my lover's voice, waiting for him to spot me. As soon as he did, he beelined toward me, plucked me out of my vine seat, and threw me over his shoulder, leaving my ass wiggling in the air.

My skirt was short, which was unusual for me, and meant my red panty-

clad ass would be on full display.

“Close your eyes,” Ronan commanded Leif, who completely disobeyed and instead watched my butt travel right past his face.

Ronan carried me inside, sat on his black leather armchair, then plonked me onto his lap.

I scowled. “I am not some toy for you to throw around, princeling. I am your equal in every way.”

“Sure, you’re my equal,” he conceded. “But you’re pocket-sized, and you belong on my lap.” He squeezed my thigh, and that intimacy erased all my anger.

“Fine. But remember, I’ll be your superior after tomorrow.”

One more sleep until my Ascension Rite. I had no idea what to expect, and Double D and Leif refused to tell me.

“I don’t remember, babe,” Leif said, lounging into his huge silver sofa with one hand down his sweat pants.

“Liar,” I accused.

The wolf spread his arms wide. “Would I lie to you?”

I nodded. “Definitely. Repeatedly. I can list out the times you have if that would jog your memory.”

He grinned, produced a ball from somewhere, and tossed it above his head.

Dion called out from the kitchen. “I need parsley.”

The Magirus was my least favorite of the heirs. Leif had a cheekiness about him that was endearing, and Gabrelle was sexy and powerful and competent, and exactly who I wanted to be when I grew up. Ronan was delicious and perfect in every way. I couldn’t get enough of those black eyes,

that cut jaw, the muscles, and the contours. Even that arrogant smirk made me hot these days.

But Dion? He and I had never spent much time together, and he was the angriest about Ronan ignoring his blood pact. I didn't know if I'd ever feel relaxed around the Magirus after what he did to me. The good in our relationship didn't outweigh the bad, at least not yet.

Ronan scooped me into his arms and stood up. "We'll go get some. Come on, little Grower."

He put me on my feet, and I followed him outdoors. Not because I wanted to help Dion by fetching his parsley but because I wanted to be alone with my hot prince.

We wandered around to a fertile patch of soil so black I could have used it as war paint.

"Do you think you can grow some?"

I looked at Ronan uncertainly. "I can try."

I'd never grown anything from scratch. I was getting better at sensing the plants around me and could probably hunt down some parsley if it was growing wild in the forest, but I didn't know if I could create it from nothing.

Still, with my Ascension the following day, it was worth getting in every bit of practice I could.

I knelt in the soil and grabbed a handful, letting some rich earth trickle through my fingers. It smelled so good, like nature, forests, and potential rolled into one ripe package.

"Gaia, stop sniffing this stuff and get on with it," Ronan teased. "You're going to make me jealous."

I grinned and placed both hands flat on the ground, fingers splayed, closing my eyes. I speared my thoughts into the soil, seeking any potential for

growth, seedlings, or pockets of energy that I could coerce into a herb, but finding none.

Perspiration pooled on my lower back, and awareness of it made me extra uncomfortable because Ronan was standing right behind me, smelling my stinky sweat.

The sun beat down on my head and shoulders, and I just wanted to get inside.

“Forget it. It’s not working. Double D can make do without his precious parsley.” I picked up another handful of the lovely soil and played with it.

“But it won’t taste as good without it.”

“I don’t care, I’m not eating any. I don’t want him to enchant me with his food. The only thing that tells me what to do is my bracelet.” I waggled my wrist in the air.

“And me,” he joked.

“Definitely not you. Just the bracelet.”

He grinned cockily. “And who do you think controls it?”

My head snapped up. “What do you mean?”

He beamed. “Gabrelle imbued the Floran Bracelet with Lure, then we sent it to the mortal realm to find you.”

He was still grinning like this was some hilarious joke, like I was in on it and wouldn’t care.

I scrambled to my feet and wiped my dirty hands on my thighs. “You trapped me with the bracelet and forced me to come here?” My thoughts were swirling, and I felt outside of my body for a moment as though I would fall apart emotionally but had a few precious moments to prize information out of him first. “Why?”

He radiated cockiness with every broad gesture, still thinking I was in on

the joke. “We knew the Floran artifact would find you eventually, and we wanted to catch you off guard before you Ascended.”

I stepped around him so the sun wasn't in my eyes. “But if I was in Hebes I wouldn't Ascend anyway.”

He shrugged, his coal eyes sparkling. “Maybe, maybe not. We weren't sure, so we wanted to get you before you had a chance of coming into your full power.”

My emotional whirlwind tightened into a hard line of fury that pulled my insides. I stepped back a pace. “You played me for a fool.”

For a moment, I was back in the Docklands, blabbing to Randy's crew about my sources and contacts, then having them go behind my back and sever every one of them, then beat me and dump me in the forest outside the city.

I vowed then I would never be fooled again, never fall prey to another scheming crew.

But I had. These entitled princes and princesses were nothing but a gang dressed in fine clothing, and they'd played me for a damn fool.

My anger was showing now, I was practically vibrating with fury, and Ronan was beginning to catch on.

His brow furrowed, and he moved toward me, those large hands that had pulled me close so many times, now trying one final time.

I shoved him away. “I...I need to think.” I stopped backing away and stood firm, holding my chin high, my chest out, radiating fuck-off vibes that he was definitely catching.

“I—”

“Don't tell me you're sorry. You were grinning like a bloody idiot when you told me. You think this is all some elaborate joke. That you can pluck me

from my life and treat me like a Goddamn doll? Well, I've got news for you, buddy. I'm not your doll. I'm your enemy."

The word sounded wrong. Enemy. That couldn't be right. But I was too angry to analyze it anymore, I just needed to get home and be alone.

I turned to walk away, then remembered Liz's book. I'd promised to return it to her tonight, and given that she might be my only friend left in the world, I wouldn't break that promise. Plus, her ominous warning that the book had to be returned within a day was hard to ignore, since it was from the dangerous Library of Whispers.

I stormed away from Ronan into the Lakehouse, with him on my heels shouting and demanding forgiveness.

The others were seated around the table, Dion smirking like the demented chef he was, Gabrelle poised at the dinner table with her loose pink braid still perfect, and Leif slouched, all looking up at me in shock.

Gabrelle was first to regain her composure. "What did you do to her this time, moody?" she asked Ronan.

I snapped my head to look at her. "Why do you call him that?" I always assumed it was because he was such a moody bastard, but my assumptions about this gang were unraveling fast.

She didn't cower at my anger like Leif and Dion did, she just narrowed her eyes and studied me. "Answer my question, and I'll answer yours." I nodded. "What are all our Houses?"

My lips thinned, and I stabbed a finger at each heir in turn. "Allura. Dionysus. Caro. Mentium." I hooked a thumb at myself. "Flora."

"No, I mean, what do the Houses represent? Verda is known as the Realm of Indulgence, and each of our five Houses represents a different element of excess. So tell me, what does each House represent?"

I started with myself this time. “Plants and nature.” I pointed at Gabrelle. “Beauty.” Then at Dion. “Taste.” At Leif. “Sensuality.”

Leif yelped excitedly. “Sex!”

I turned to Ronan. His hair and eyes absorbed every atom of light in the room. I jabbed a finger at him but glanced away, not giving him the honor of my gaze. “Power.”

Their reactions were subtle, but my heightened senses picked them up. I got that last one wrong, so I tried again. “Ronan is from the House of Assholery.”

Leif barked a laugh, but Gabrelle just kept studying me. “House Mentium represents mood. The realm of excess is not complete without a strong dose of good mood.”

Leif nodded. “Really helps at orgies.”

I turned to Ronan accusingly. “You affect fae’s mood?” Why the hell didn’t I know that? I’d been so caught in a love bubble I hadn’t bothered to learn the basics of my realm.

A love bubble manufactured by him manipulating my mood.

I really was a fool.

He nodded, and I could see he still didn’t understand why I was so pissed.

“So when I hated you at first sight, that was partly because you hated me?”

Leif interjected. “Well, at first sight, you guys didn’t exactly hate each other, from what I’ve heard.” He made a crude gesture with his hands, poking a finger in and out of a circle.

“I mean, when you first figured out who I really was,” I spit out.

Ronan chewed his lip. “I guess that was probably part of it. Me hating you would have influenced your mood too.”

The picture was becoming clear, the pieces slotting into place. “But you so loved pulling me to pieces, tormenting me, that you got hard and happy, right? And because you were happy, I was happy around you, and then I started liking you more too.”

“Maybe...”

I dug my fingernails into the tops of my thighs, trying to keep a semblance of calm while rage built white-hot inside me. “And then you started really liking me, so I started really liking you. None of this is real. Every step of the way, you have told me how to feel, forced me to fall for you, and it’s all been a fucking lie?”

I could see the moment it hit him. That every word I said was true. That I had never fallen in love with him, I’d only been coerced and manipulated by him. That none of my emotions were real, they were just reflections of his own.

“Fuck. I—”

“No more words. The only words I ever want to hear out of your mouth again are *Yes, Princess Flora* when I’m ranked higher than you and giving you a damn order.”

I crossed to the deck and snatched up Liz’s book from where I’d left it, then I stormed back through the kitchen and out the front door, burning with rage.

As I made my way to the massive tree and through the moonway home, my tower of anger disintegrated, crumbled into dust, leaving nothing left to hold me up.

I had found a family. A place to belong. I had even found love.

But none of it was real. The people I thought were my friends had manipulated me, used the Floran Bracelet to Lure me to the realm, and

delighted in it.

The fae I thought I loved had manipulated my emotions, my hatred, my love, my lust. None of it was me.

Tears streamed down my face and dripped from my chin as I entered the Rose Palace. Thank God Liz wasn't here to see this Goddamn mess. I could barely see as I stumbled upstairs and flopped onto my bed, where I disintegrated utterly, my body wrenching with loud sobs.

Doug and Herb watched from the windowsill.

Ronan

I stared after Neela, listening as her footsteps receded into nothing and inhaling until her scent mingled with whatever Dion had cooked us for lunch.

Every muscle in my body tensed, wanting to spring after her and hold her down until she stayed forever. But she didn't want me to follow her. She didn't want me, period. And after all the things I'd done to her, the least I could do was respect this one last wish.

"Go after her, dude," Leif whined. "Set her straight. Tell her she's wrong."

"But...she's right." I'd had no idea Neela didn't know my House affected mood, but that didn't make it any better. I knew my joy at seeing her was affecting her response to me. I fucking knew it, yet I let it happen.

I never suggested she guard herself against me, never taught her the basics of defense, but let my love for her infiltrate her own feelings, masquerade her indifference toward me. Her hatred.

A part of me had always known that was happening and wanted it. I wanted her to fall for me the way I was falling for her, so I let my feelings influence hers in ways I never should have.

Gabrelle swirled Dionysius wine in a clear crystal glass. "She had a few valid points," she agreed.

Dion didn't say a word. Just as well, because if he'd said a syllable against Neela, I would have ripped his face off, and I was tempted to do that

anyway. I stared at his stupid hand-cut face, his salt-and-pepper curls and speckled eyes, and I wanted to punch him in his aquiline nose.

He'd never liked Neela, never supported me ignoring the blood magic, never wanted her to survive.

It would be so easy to let anger overpower my guilt, but the energy flooded from my body, and I sagged onto a dining chair with a thud.

Dion served me a plate along with everybody else, and talk turned to tomorrow's Ascension Rite. Leif and Dion gossiped about which friends and acquaintances would Ascend into which power, placing bets on a few contentious ones. Gabrelle piped in occasionally with her silky smooth voice, but I couldn't follow their words.

I took forkfuls of Dion's food, which tasted like ash. Maybe his salt-and-pepper hair was because he added ash to the meal. No, that was a foolish thought.

Just as foolish as me believing that Neela could fall in love with me on my own merits. I'd treated her like crap, been an arrogant prick from the start, and tricked her into coming here in the first place.

No wonder she dropped me like trash the instant she found out the truth.

I felt the ghost of a grin on my face, the ridiculous expression I'd pulled out by the vegetable patch as I told her how I'd fooled her with the Floran Bracelet. A stupid grin on a stupid fae. Neela was proud and powerful, so why had I ever expected her to laugh when I explained how we manipulated her?

My companions were all looking at me, awaiting a response to some question they must've asked. "Sure," I said, with no clue what we were discussing.

It seemed to do the trick. My companions ignored me again and went

back to discussing whatever.

I excused myself and left, wandering out to Seb's orange grove. The citrusy tang of those fresh plump oranges almost undid me as I pondered how I'd ruined my best friend's legacy.

First, I tried to uphold that stupid pact we made out of fear. Then I stuffed around his sister so badly I didn't think I could ever fix it.

The moonway home was a blur, of course, but so were the steps into my townhouse and up the stairs to my bedroom.

Neela would Ascend tomorrow with hatred in her heart directed at me.

The Ascension Rite would harden that hatred into a permanent wall I could never hope to undo. I'd lost her forever. With every atom of my being, I wanted to go to her and layer explanations over her. But she didn't want me. I had to respect that.

The evening was hot. I didn't bother summoning a Weather wielder to cool my room, I just tossed and turned like a Gaia-be-damned coal in a stove.

Dark figures crept along the walls and ceiling of my bedroom, Gaia's demons sent to punish me for breaking a sacred blood bond. They snaked closer, converging on all sides, melting into one as though sent from the Shadow Walker King himself, blending and merging in their attack until I couldn't breathe.

It was stifling hot, and my lungs constricted in fear, my body coated in sweat as Gaia's vengeance lunged at me.

I woke in a sweating mess, my sheets sticky and my brow hot. Even a long cool shower didn't ease the terror lodged in my heart. I had never truly faced the reality of what I'd done by turning my back on that blood magic. Making that sacred bond had been a foolish boys' trick, but I would live to regret it until I died. And beyond.

I had to be there for Neela's Ascension. I had to lock eyes with her before she killed herself, knowing she might never return to life. It settled into my bones as superstitious certainty, and I rushed my dressing, throwing on the same clothes I'd worn last night and stumbling out the door, clammy and anxious.

The love of my life would die today. Gaia willing, she would return, but the hatred etched in her heart might be engraved permanently during the rite, and I had to see her one last time before that happened.

I ran to the Plains of Forgetting, with the image of Gaia's demons still burning in my memory.

Neela

Today was the day I would kill myself.

Whoever invented this way of coming into your full power ought to be kicked in the nuts—or the flaps, depending on their biology.

I had barely slept all night, tossing and turning and trying to get Ronan out of my thoughts. Trying to forget about all the blossoming friendships snatched from me. Trying to get some damn sleep.

Now I stood on the Plains of Forgetting, preparing to kill myself. I stared at the dense fog swirling with colors and gave myself a pep talk. “I’ve been alone my whole life, I don’t need anyone. I can do this.” Shit pep talk.

Liz stood beside me and was uncharacteristically solemn. “Your Ascension is one of the only things in life where you must be alone. But when you come back, we’ll be waiting for you.”

Doug rubbed against my ankle, her soft green fur a comfort. I bent down and patted her, tickling under her chin. “Thanks for being here.”

Doug and Herb had trundled after Liz and me when we’d left the palace this morning. It was unlike them to leave the forest or the Rose Palace, so they knew something was happening.

Even Herb let me pat him, and I hoped it wasn’t farewell forever.

“Ready?” Liz asked.

Definitely not. How could I be ready to kill myself? I straightened my shoulders and nodded. “Let’s do it.”

A familiar, deep, rumbling voice called my name, but I didn't look up. The last thing I wanted was to complicate my emotions with Ronan—I had to focus on my Ascension. So I ignored the tug of his call and tried to peer into the fog.

The mist swirled with different colors and obscured the center of the plain. I had to step in—it called to me. I took a deep breath.

Fuck it.

As soon as I set foot inside the fog, I wanted to keep going. The smoke called to me with every promise from the realm of greed and excess.

My mood swelled, the air tasted of honey and strawberries, and my skin tingled with sensual awareness.

I breathed deeply in the scented air, working up the courage to take the plunge. I pulled the deadly larkspur sapling from my pocket. How could such a beautiful purple flower cause death?

This moment had played through my mind a hundred times, but picturing suicide and actually going through with it were two very different things. I stared at the bloom, the light green leaves, the strip of white along the inside of the petal.

“It's just eating,” I told myself. “Just open your mouth and chew on the damn flower.”

I shoved the whole thing in my mouth, stalk and all, and chewed. It tasted bitter, like broken dreams, and every instinct begged me to spit it out, but I kept chewing and eventually forced myself to swallow.

The pain hit. I doubled over as a thousand knives stabbed into my gut, and spit bubbled around my mouth, trying to rid my body of the toxin.

Too late. I fell to the ground, my body wracked with agony, shaking uncontrollably. My legs spasmed, and my arms curled into my chest. I tried

to move but could only twitch. Paralysis hardened every one of my muscles while the agony intensified. Death would be a relief.

I pissed myself, urine leaking around me, snot streaming from my nose, and pain, such pain, everywhere and forever.

I tried to feel my inner magic, but my focus couldn't stick. I was too consumed by agony, the poison that leaked through every cell of my body.

The swirling smoke turned inky, and the world went black.

The pain stopped, and I knew I was dead. This was the part where I should come back to life, but my body remained inert, the darkness all-consuming, and panic wormed its way through my limbs, snaking up to my center and making my heart hammer.

I had to get up. Had to beat this death. A handful of fae didn't survive their Ascension, and I didn't want to be one of them.

The fear was overwhelming, and suddenly I was up and running through the dark, hearing scuffles of footsteps in pursuit. Why were the Shadow Walkers in my deathscape?

Would Ronan mourn me? How real had any of it been? He'd taken me for a fool, and he'd been right. He influenced mood, so I couldn't trust anything between us—not his emotions, and certainly not my own.

I stopped running, and the pursuing Shadow Walker stopped too. This was fear. This was House Mentium. This wasn't real, I just had to master my emotions. To Ascend, I had to pass a test from each House.

I pulled out every trick of relaxation I'd ever used on the streets, telling myself that tomorrow would be better. I thought of Liz and Herb and Doug, my true friends. Even if this shitshow went south, no one could take away the fact I'd made such pure friends.

My breathing slowed.

An arm snaked around my waist, and I realized I was naked. Another arm cupped my ass, then a tongue licked my breast and circled my nipple.

Bodies were everywhere, soft, firm flesh on display, breasts and dicks and legs and tongues. This was easy. Trust House Caro to be so transparent. I ignored the sizzling on my skin and strolled away.

Rounding a bend, I saw the most magnificent sunset I had ever seen, orange and pink with slashes of gold across the broad horizon. The beauty was mesmerizing, the test from House Allura. I wanted to sink to my knees and stare at the sky forever, but I knew I had to keep walking.

House Dionysus had no hope of trapping me because my vow to never taste Magirus food carried me even through death. I raced through the banquet hall that materialized around me and was quickly out the other side.

My mother stood as I'd seen her in the vision in the Library of Whispers, in a green velvet gown with a coronet of wildflowers around her lustrous dark hair, but she was in a field of grass and blooms. My father stood beside her in the same hunting leathers I'd seen him wearing before, and Sebarah was there too, not the toddler from my vision but a full-grown fae with the same dark hair as our mother and a broad smile on his face.

All three were beaming. My mother looked radiant and joyful, and my father looked relaxed and confident. I was glad to have this moment with them. It was a vision to replace the grief-filled one from the day they gave me away. My family pulled me into a four-way hug, and a sense of belonging and peace settled over me that I knew would stay with me forever.

"Go," Mom said. "Go and be everything you can be. We'll see you in the meadows when you're ready."

"I'm so proud of you, honey," Dad murmured in my ear.

Seb squeezed my upper arm. "Go get 'em, sis."

Dozens of flowers bowed their heads before me and let me pass without challenge, and I walked on with power thrumming through me.

I opened my eyes, coughing, and found myself back in the Plains of Forgetting. The colorful mist had dispersed, and a ring of fae surrounded me. They applauded when I stood up. How much of that had they seen?

Power flowed through me, and I sensed every blade of grass in the field around me. Every single one.

Liz rushed up to me. “What was it like? Quick, tell me everything before you forget.”

I would never forget that experience. “First I was afraid, then....”

The memories jumbled together, a sensation of pain, fear, and beauty, then just power, oceans of power. Plus, an unshakable sense of peace and confidence and the feeling that my family was proud of me, wherever they were.

“I can’t remember,” I confessed.

She stamped her foot. “Dammit. I thought if I got in fast enough, you could tell me.” She beamed at me. “Anyway, you Ascended, bitch.” She pulled me into a tight hug which I didn’t return because I was overwhelmed by the millions of blades of grass around us.

Ronan was there, a shit-eating grin on his face which I didn’t repay. His pals were there too, my puppet masters, Gabrelle, Leif, and Dion.

I was more powerful than any of them now, and they would regret ever tormenting me.

Now was the perfect time to fulfill my vow and get revenge. The anger I’d taken with me into the Ascension Rite had solidified into granite, hard and unbreakable. The magical ritual had made my fury permanent.

I stalked the heirs as we left the plains, knowing we had to pass by a

forest. Ronan lagged behind the others, and I lagged behind him, keeping his black head within sight.

As soon as we were within range of the forest, I sent my feelers of awareness in among the trees and found a long sturdy liana curling around a tree and summoned it to my will.

The thick vine responded immediately, snaking out of the forest and around Ronan's ankle, snapping it to the side before he could move a muscle.

With my new fae hearing, the cracking bone was loud and very satisfying.

Anger lined Ronan's face, and he stared at me with no trace of love, just pure venom. The vine whipped him upside-down, dangling from his broken foot.

Pushing down my emotions, I ignored him and focused on Dion, who was several paces ahead and had already rounded the next bend. I trotted to catch up, keeping my awareness of the living, breathing forest around us. I snagged the Magirus's feet in tree roots so he couldn't move, then stuffed a vine down his throat so it coiled slowly in his stomach, instructing the liana to keep feeding the chef. Forever.

"Choke on that," I snarled.

Somebody would probably help him, stop him from actually dying, but if they didn't, that was on him. He was prepared to let me feed on rocks until I died, and returning the favor felt awesome.

Gabrelle was next. She sauntered along loftily, swishing her hips in those perfect fawn leather pants, believing herself so superior. Happy to treat everybody in the world like her toys, including me.

I couldn't control her body the way she'd handled mine, accessing it directly, but I could use roots and branches as my puppet strings. I captured

her head and smashed her lips against Leif's, reveling in the mess of pink hair and her shocked gasp.

I kept her there, immobilized by the trees and vines, vulnerable to any fae who wanted to kiss her. With her beauty, they would probably be lining up. She deserved that and worse.

Leif broke away from Gabrelle's kiss, then winked across at me. Trust him to enjoy my torture. He was the least bad of the bunch, so I let him get off with just a long lick from a slimy creeper, which left a trail of grime up his bare chest. He wiped it away with a disgusted grimace.

Liz trailed behind me with a massive grin, gobbling up my platter of revenge as greedily as Dion gobbled that vine. "You are freaking awesome. Did I mention how awesome you are? Entirely. Fucking. Awesome."

I felt it. Power thrummed through my body as I strode ahead, my friends by my side and my enemies strewn along the path behind me. If this is what it was to be an Ascended fae, I was here for it.

And no power on heaven or earth could make me leave.

Ronan

The vine was wrapped so tightly around my ankle that my foot was turning blue. Good. Hopefully, it would fall off and stop the pain from my broken bone.

I was dangling by my broken foot, head down and about a yard off the leaf-strewn ground.

I folded up, straining up to reach my ankles, and snapped the vine holding me up, then plummeted to the earth and banged my coccyx with a loud thud.

I untied the vine from my ankle, which may have been a mistake—blood rushed into my damaged limb, bringing a tidal wave of pain. The agony was overwhelming, and I nearly blacked out, but I placed my palms flat on the cool leafy ground and breathed through it.

Neela had come through her Ascension rite with more power than anyone in years. And she wasn't messing around. As soon as I'd set foot beside the forest, she summoned a plant to restrain and attack me with a mere thought. It had taken Sebarah weeks of practice to control his power like that.

She was a formidable force.

I opened my eyes and looked down at my foot, swelling fast. A few fae scurried past, none offering to help—nobody wanted to get between two squabbling heirs.

The slender form of the next in line for the Realm of Fen appeared around the corner, so tall, thin, and straight that she looked just like her name.

“Arrow,” I called, and she came closer with a stern expression. “Can you have someone fetch me a Healer?”

Despite my pain, I worded the question carefully. I couldn’t demand an act of service from another realm’s heir, nor could I be seen pleading for help.

She assessed the situation, taking in my blossoming purple foot. “I see you have been bested.”

My hackles rose, and a retort formed on my tongue, but it would have been lame and pathetic to attempt a denial. “Will you find me a Healer or not?” I snapped.

“I will.”

She returned a few long painful minutes later with Jaykey boy from Caprice. As soon as he saw me lying in the dirt, covered in leaves, he cast a mischievous grin. “Trouble in paradise, moody?”

Only Gabrelle called me that, and I didn’t like the reminder of my fight with Neela. “Are you going to help me or not?” I barked.

Jayke had already Ascended and was a decent Healer, or so he said. I guessed this would put him to the test.

“Calm down, moody.”

I swallowed a growl. Jayke had been staring too much at Gabrelle; now, he was copying her speech. The Caprician Prince kneeled beside me and placed cool hands on my bloated foot. I winced at the touch, but soon his healing magic flowed into me like a fountain of warm water, flowing into every screaming nerve ending and repairing the broken blood vessels, knitting together my bone and healing my flesh.

“Thanks. You’re good at that.”

Jayke rocked back on his heels. “Of course I am.” He winked. “And

you're welcome."

I tested my foot, rolling my ankle and flexing my toes. As good as new. My entire body felt rejuvenated. Jayke stood up, reached out a hand, and yanked me to my feet.

"There's a place for you on my staff if you ever need a job," I joked.

Jayke growled quietly, not enjoying the jest.

We walked around the forest, squelching through the moist undergrowth. We passed beneath some torn-up trees, which could be more evidence of Neela's powers.

"She really has it in for you, hey?" Jayke said. "Or is this foreplay for you guys?"

Jayke didn't need to know the details of our sex life, so I hummed a chuckle without replying.

Around a bend, a curly-haired fae with bright green hair knelt on the forest floor. For a second, I thought the fae was praying, then I realized it was Dion, whose only prayers were for five-star meals.

"He's choking." Jayke broke into a run.

Damn. A large green vine was stuffing itself into Dion's throat, coiling further and further inside him. His eyes looked panicked, and his belly was distended. Jayke and I sprinted to help him. We yanked on the vine, fighting to pull it out of Dion's mouth.

When we finally had it out, Dion pitched forward onto his hands and vomited.

"Neela?" I asked.

Dion couldn't speak, so he just nodded, still retching but not bringing anything up—his stomach had no more to give.

Jayke pulsed Healing magic into Dion, repairing whatever damage the

vine had done to his stomach and organs, patching his injured throat and mouth together.

“She detests you guys. I always thought the Verdan Five got along perfectly. You’re famous for how well you work together. Or is that all for show?”

“We got along perfectly until that bitch arrived,” Dion spit.

My shoulders tensed. “Don’t call Neela that.”

“I’ll call her whatever I want.” Dion stepped ahead, walking in front of us, ignoring my command.

I darted beside him and stuck out a foot so he tripped, face-planting into the moist undergrowth. “Don’t call her that,” I repeated.

Dion rolled over and yelled up at me from the ground. “She almost killed me, Ro, and she will kill you one day. Do you expect me to just lay down and take it?”

I stepped forward, my feet on either side of his hips so he couldn’t get up. “As the highest-ranking heir, I expect you to do whatever I tell you.”

Jayke chuckled like he was enjoying the show. “I’d say the human will rank higher than both of you.”

He was right. All signs pointed to Neela being the most powerful of the five. She was unstoppable.

But having an outsider from Caprice witness our disagreement made me remember that the five of us were supposed to present a united front. Hell, we were supposed to *be* united.

I looked down at Dion and sighed. Eventually, I offered him a hand, then yanked him to his feet, and we stared at each other for a moment. “Are we good?”

“We’re good.”

We clapped each other in a quick hug, then headed home.

Jayke's words stayed with me even after I bid him farewell and long after I had settled into my leather armchair at home. Neela would be the strongest of us. She was inevitable, like the change of seasons. There was no point trying to stop her from reaching the Floran throne, even if I wanted to—which I didn't.

She belonged there more than any of us. Her inner strength was forged through fire, through her crappy childhood, and she would always be stronger than the rest of us.

I sipped on a whiskey and stared at the flames of a roaring fire. I'd had my staff light a cooling fire since the day was so warm, so the flickering flames wafted a cool breeze toward me, and I slouched back in my black leather armchair.

The Prince of Caprice had also called us out on our internal squabbling; he was right about that too. We were heirs, and heirs of Verda worked together.

The word heir echoed through me like a gong, and I sat bolt-upright in my leather armchair.

Blood pounded in my ears.

I summoned my family's Secret Keeper.

Neela

Liz popped a bottle of Fae Fizz to celebrate my Ascension, but she ended up drinking both glasses she poured. After one sip, I shoved my glass aside. I didn't want to dull my new connection with nature.

It thrummed through the world around me, like a million cotton threads connecting me to the leaves and grass, and I loved the feel of the strings humming along my skin.

I even insisted we sit outside instead of at the kitchen counter. I made myself a cup of tea and joined Liz at a fancy white iron table beneath a sizeable flowering plum.

From here, we could see the lavender maze and the overgrown forest behind it. I could smell, taste, and touch the lavender flowers from here, each one an individual sensation of awareness. I reached out and sensed a lavender plant at the maze's heart, making it grow across the moonway's entrance. I had no intention of returning to the Lakehouse.

"You kicked butt." Liz clinked her two glasses together and then sipped from one.

I grinned, leaning back against the wooden bench. "I really did."

"And you got even with the royal pricks."

I had paid them back and then some, but I wouldn't call it even. We would never be even—not until I was the high-ranking queen and Ronan was dead from blood magic.

My heart squeezed at the thought of his death, and the flowering tree above us wilted.

Liz narrowed her eyes, taking in the drooping petals and withering plums. “What’s going on?” she asked suspiciously.

“I don’t want Ronan to die,” I admitted. “But he deserves it.”

Liz clinked her two glasses together and took another sip. “Why does he deserve it? I know he was a prick, but I thought you guys sorted that out.”

“It turns out he and Gabrelle sent the Floran Bracelet and Lured me to it so I would be forced to confront them.”

Liz clinked her two glasses together again, sloshing some pink frothy liquid onto the wrought iron table. “Sounds like you should be thanking them.”

“For plucking me out of my old life and hurtling me headlong into danger, then trying to kill me?”

Liz’s brows knitted together while she thought that through and came to a conclusion. “Yes,” she nodded emphatically. “Definitely, yes. If they hadn’t brought you here, you’d still be scooting around the mortal world without showering. Coming here sounds like an upgrade to me.”

I blew on my hot tea. Took a sip and it tasted tame, so I grabbed one of Liz’s glasses of bubbles and drank that instead.

“Good girl,” she said, nodding seriously at my choice of beverage.

“It gets worse,” I confessed. “It turns out he was affecting my mood all along. So when I thought I was falling in love with him, it wasn’t my own true emotions.”

I waited for Liz’s face to show the appropriate outrage, but she just shrugged. “Well, der. He’s House Mentium. And,” she leaned in and

whispered behind the back of her hand like she was sharing a secret. “Apparently, he sucks at controlling his inner power.”

How could she take this so lightly? The manipulation of my entire life and all of my feelings were like nothing to her.

I switched back to tea, any festive mood gone. We sat in the garden as dusk fell, descending over us like a blanket but not dimming my connection to nature. In fact, as I relied less on my eyes in the deepening gloom, my awareness of the plants around us grew.

An unusual flapping noise sounded from around the corner, so faint I was surprised I could detect it. It got closer, rounded the corner of the house, flew right up to me, and landed in my outstretched hand. A spellbird.

A scrawled message from Ronan on the crumpled paper made my heart clench.

Leif’s den is under attack. Shadow Walkers. Come fast.

I jumped to my feet, tipping over the bench I’d been sitting on.

“What is it?”

I explained hurriedly, then tried to think how to get to Leif’s house, but I’d never been there. “Where does he live?”

“Come here.” Liz held my hands and closed her eyes while I wriggled in impatience. Even the blades of grass under my feet squirmed restlessly.

Flowing from Liz’s fingertips and directly into my brain, a mental map of the city formed in my mind, including the route to Leif’s den. This must be another perk of being fae.

My eyes widened as the map embedded into my memory. “Whoa.”

“Useful, hey?!”

I mapped out the fastest route to his house, then sprinted around the Rose Palace to a moonway near the front hedge that would take me close. Leif was

my friend, and I needed to save him. There was no question of vengeance or payback, I just wanted to get to his side and do everything I could to help.

If it had been any of the other heirs, I might've thought twice. But not Leif.

Panic lent speed to my feet, and the world blurred beside me as I dashed along the moonway, then followed my senses to his pack's den.

Chaos reigned. Wolves sprinted outside a black marble mansion, snarling and snapping at shadows, the hair on their backs rising like hackles. Teeth bared, yellow eyes wide and furious. The air was ripe with their musk and fear.

Shifters in fae form swung their blades, hacking and slashing at the shadows to no effect. Others hurled spells across the clearing, which smashed into the smooth black marble palace.

A chorus of howls, screams, and spellcasting filled the air, and the ground shook with the weight of charging wolves.

My adrenaline spiked as a huge brown wolf snapped at a sliver of pure darkness, but his fangs did not affect the creature of shadows. After snapping his jaws again and again, the wolf fell still and stared blankly while the darkness overtook him, completely coating the wolf's fur, and the shifter just stood still and let it happen.

Fuck. Fangs were useless against Shadow Walkers, and from the look at the rest of the battle, blades were too.

Trees surrounded the property, so I reached out and sensed a robust young tree, which I commanded to grow and batter the Shadow Walker coating the young shifter's fur. Perhaps it would be vulnerable to attack while it consumed its prey.

The night creature didn't flinch as I struck it again and again with the

branch, trying to scrape it away, defeat it, distract it, anything to stop the horror of it engulfing the paralyzed fae.

My attack had no effect. Cuts were appearing on the wolf's body as the Shadow Walker fed. Finally, the Shadow Walker detached from the wolf, leaving a lifeless heap of bloodied fur sprawled on the ground.

Spells flew through the air, exploding into the ground and spewing grass and dirt skyward in a plume of soot and fire, pockmarking the side of the black stone mansion. Among the chaos and screams, I couldn't tell if the spells affected the Shadow Walkers. I could barely see a thing among the darkness and flying debris, and all I could smell was fear and blood.

My heart squeezed when I saw Ronan, his ankle fully healed. He stood in a spotlight before the house, his voice booming all around and echoing off the marble building. "Get some lights out here, dammit. I don't want to see a speck of darkness anywhere around this den."

Fae rushed to follow his demands, some producing globes of light on the spot and others running off to fetch more help.

Soon the area was floodlit, and hopefully, the danger had passed. The stone mansion was black and forbidding, but it was bathed in a warm light that wouldn't allow any more Shadow Walkers in or out.

The roar of battle ceased, and all that was left was a hazy silence. Fae stood in silence, their chests heaving as they tried to take in what had just occurred, watching the dust motes in the bright light from the globes. Everybody surveyed the destruction and loss of life, counting the fallen who would never rise again.

A section of the manor creaked and collapsed, having been hit by one too many spells.

Ronan stood in the path of the falling wall beneath the plummeting stone.

He didn't have time to move out of the way.

I acted on impulse. Nobody and nothing had the right to take Ronan away from me—he was mine to do with as I pleased, and I was his.

Adrenaline whipped through me, and my breathing slowed to a deadly calm. I lashed the sapling still under my power toward Ronan as the massive stone block plunged. He barely had time to glance up before the falling rock kissed his hair, but my tendril was faster, wrapping around his waist and yanking him to safety.

His eyes found mine in an instant, and I began breathing again, sucking in lungfuls of oxygen as I stared into those raven eyes.

The threads from nature, from the sapling still under my command, from the forest, clamored for my attention. But the connection I felt with Ronan was stronger.

He was with me instantly, crossing the space between us while I was locked in his gaze.

His voice hitched. “You are formidable.”

I pressed my finger to his lips like I always did when I shared a secret with him. “You did me a favor bringing me here.” That was a remix of Liz’s words, but it was true. “I’d rather be here battling wits with you than running away from Joey the Bull.”

He tugged me further into the light, pulled me close to his chest, and splayed his fingers on my lower back. “Really?”

“Definitely.”

He held me tight, and we breathed each other in. He was strawberries and dust and blood.

“Did I mention that you’re a gutter-born tomcat who doesn’t know shit about our realm?” he grinned.

I melted against his chest, pressing my cheek against his hard planes. “And you’re an entitled brat who wouldn’t recognize a good thing when he saw it.”

He whispered into my hair. “I recognize you, tomcat. And you’re the best thing.”

I wasn’t vulnerable anymore. I was strong, powerful, and protected by friends. No longer alone. Didn’t need to claw my way through every hour just to survive a day. So being fooled didn’t sound so scary, and I knew that whatever came my way, I could handle it.

I turned and nipped his nipple, then pushed away from him. “We need to find Leif. Have you seen him?”

Ronan placed his hands on my shoulders and looked down at me. He leaned down and pressed his lips against mine, hard, possessive, claiming.

Then he pulled away. “I think he’s inside. Let’s go get him.”

We turned to the darkened house and started walking, not knowing what carnage would lie within.

Ronan

I didn't bother telling Neela not to come inside Leif's den with me because she would make up her own mind no matter what I said.

She came. Someone tossed us each a lightning globe to carry so we would never be in the dark. I was thankful for it because I was too tired to summon my own light globe for long.

The first room of the entrance hall was a war zone. Several fae lay sprawled on the black stone floor, lifeless. It smelled of iron blood and lingering fear and urine. Several shifters in wolf form were among the dead. One pure white wolf lay motionless while a small gray wolf licked her, whining pathetically. She must've been her mate.

A knot formed in my throat. How many mates had been separated by tonight's slaughter? How many wolves would mourn this night for the rest of their long lives?

I stepped around the silver wolf, having no words to say, nothing that could lessen her loss. I was just glad it wasn't Leif. He wasn't here among the bloodied corpses and splattered furniture.

I sprinted into a hallway calling his name. His place was equal parts cave and house, so this hallway was a tunnel carved through black marble.

Neela was on my heels, by my side, carrying her lightning globe as a talisman against evil.

We looked in every room we came to. Some were slaughterhouses, caverns of the dead, where the shifters hadn't been able to summon a light

before they were immobilized by the Shadow Walkers. Gruesome.

I had to hold back my nausea to keep going. I had to find Leif.

Other rooms were unscathed. The fae inside had simply produced light, and the Shadow Walkers had disappeared.

“Does light kill them?” Neela asked.

I shook my head. “That would be too easy. Light just sends them to the nearest shadow. We don’t know how to kill them.”

For the first time, the enormity of that statement hit home. Shadow Walkers were an evil threat that was growing exponentially, and we had no clue how to kill them.

All we could do was keep the lights on.

We kept sprinting through the tunnels, slamming every door open and scanning the faces, shocked and shaking and whimpering and howling. The whole palace reeked of fear and death. How could House Caro ever recover from this?

Finally, Leif found us. His silver hair was ruffled, and he was completely naked, clearly having shifted during the fight. Blood smeared his face and chest, but at least he was alive. He was alive.

Neela wrapped her small arms around his broad chest, sobbing against him. She’d been worried about him, maybe almost as much as I had.

I joined the hug, my right arm slung around my best friend’s broad shoulders, my left around Neela’s slight frame.

“Don’t ever leave me.”

I was talking to both of them. Sebarah had left me, and his loss would remain with me forever. But if I had Leif and Neela, I could endure anything.

Leif was shaken to the core. He looked like a different fae, his eyes blazing with fury and every one of his muscles bunched and coiled.

“Somebody in my pack fucked up, and I’m going to find out who and make them pay. The Shadow Walkers never should have been able to get inside undetected.” The rage in his voice made my skin tingle and my heart rate pick up. I’d never seen him so dominant and enraged like he would strip the flesh off every one of his enemies, outside the pack and within.

Neela somehow saw through his fury and pulled him tight. “We’ll get through it together. I promise we’ll do it together. Ronan and I will always be here for you.”

I squeezed his shoulder, holding on tight, needing him to know how much I loved him. “And we will get the bastards who did this.”

His silver pupils focused on me, rage dripping from his words. “Do you swear?”

I had to steel my spine to stay in place, otherwise I would have backed away under the intensity of his stare. “I swear. We will get vengeance for every fallen wolf and won’t stop until we wipe the Shadow Walkers from Arathay.”

* * *

Gabrelle and Dion were waiting for us downstairs. Gabrelle still wore the same fawn leather pants and a strappy white shirt from earlier, but Dion had changed into jeans and a blue shirt, probably because the stomach had ripped out of the clothes he’d worn while that vine distended his belly. Relief plastered their faces when they saw us alive.

Leif had gone to be with his pack, to huddle with the survivors and mourn their massive losses. This was a time for pack—we would comfort him in our own way later.

“Where’s Leif?” Gabrelle demanded.

“He’s safe. He needs to be with his pack now.” The memory of the rage in his face, in every line of his body, made me worry for his pack, whether he would comfort or punish them. He was a complicated fae with more to him than just a mischievous grin, and his self-restraint must be pushed to breaking right now.

Plenty from his pack had died tonight. I just hoped the rest would survive Leif’s wrath.

Gabrelle and Dion had already summoned serving fae to help with the clean-up. The serving fae were happy to do it. They devoted decades of their lives to service, to serving one House or another, and when they’d had enough, they moved on to something else. Another career. Another lifestyle. But for now, every fae here wanted to help and do everything they could to show their support for the shifter community.

I grabbed Neela’s hand and squeezed. I wouldn’t ever let it go again.

Gabrelle glanced at our clasped hands, then raised an eyebrow. “I see you’re doing *this* again.” She punctuated her sentence with a swish of her finger.

I was about to jump him when Neela spoke. “Yes, we’re doing *this*.” She looked up at me and launched her tractor-beam smile on me, making my heart melt, but she looked away again just as fast. “But I’m never going to sit on the throne.”

“What?”

“I’ll still be one of the contenders, going through the trials, rankings, and whatever else Gaia throws at us. But I will never sit on the throne. You only need a majority to rule, so you can rule with just four. When the time comes, I’ll watch from the sidelines. Or I’ll go back to Hebes. But there is no way in

hell I am risking Ronan's life. So you can all just get off my bloody back, okay?"

Gabrelle's perfect face radiated joy without her having to move a single muscle. "Fine," she agreed silkily.

Neela turned to Dion, practically daring him to call her out and tell her to go home now. But she was the more powerful fae, so he didn't really have a choice. Eventually, he nodded. "All right. But I'll hold you to it."

Neela nodded back. "I'm counting on it."

I couldn't help it. I placed a hand behind Neela's back and knees and whisked her off the ground, smashing my lips against hers, before returning her to her standing position.

"Hey!" She protested. "You're really messing with the powerful-fae vibe I've got going on here."

I grinned sheepishly. "Sorry, I couldn't help it. Emergency kiss."

"Well, save it until you're king, princeling. Until then, as an Ascended, I outrank you."

I released her shoulders and swept up her hand again, needing to keep a physical connection between us. "Actually, you might outrank me even then."

My friends' heads all whipped to me, and I was delighted to catch Gabrelle so off guard that she flickered a beam of surprise.

I grinned. "I figured out how to break the blood magic."

Dion snorted. "No, you didn't. It's unbreakable. Whoever said you could get out of it is feeding you a bunch of lies."

I ducked aside to let a fae carrying a mountain of blankets pass by. "I came up with the idea and ran it past my family's Secret Keeper, who agrees I found a loophole."

Neela started jiggling on the spot, constantly in motion even though she was now full fae and even more energized by my declaration. “How?” she squeaked.

“The wording of the pact was *I, Ronan, the heir to House Mentium, will die before I allow Neela Flora to sit on the Floran throne*. I spoke to my parents, and they’re on board. I am no longer the heir to House Mentium.”

Several long beats of silence followed my statement, then Dion shook his head. “No, your dad would never agree to that.”

“It’s amazing what parents will agree to when the alternative is their son’s death,” I said.

Anger showed in Gabrelle’s pink eyes, which had brightened with fury. Perhaps she hid a richer emotional life behind that beautiful mask than I realized.

“But you and I were going to rule together,” she snapped. “Me ranked first and you second.”

Dion snorted. “Hardly.”

“The other way round, you mean,” I said.

Neela harrumphed. “Yeah, right.”

But Gabrelle wasn’t finished. “You can’t just abscond from your duties and run off to play boyfriends and girlfriends. You owe it to the realm. You owe it to me.”

I grinned when she said boyfriends and girlfriends and squeezed Neela’s hand.

“Stop playing the fool,” Gabrelle snapped, then she turned on her heel to walk away, but I grabbed her wrist.

“Hold on, beauty queen. I’m not finished.” She speared me with her gaze but kept her mouth shut and listened to what I had to say. “I am no longer the

Mentium heir, so I won't inherit their fortune or property. But I am still the contender for the Mentium throne and eligible to rule in the House's name."

I looked over their shocked faces. Here, among the debris of a battle where we'd lost so many valuable members of the fae community, was not the best place to break this news, but it was boiling to get out of me, and I couldn't hold it in.

"My family's Secret Keeper assures me there is a real difference between an heir and a contender for the throne. We use the terms interchangeably, but the heir just refers to the standard inheritance rules for property. And that was the only part that I tied to the blood pact. I can still be the contender for the Mentium throne. I can still be king, but..." I swept a deep bow. "I am now officially penniless."

Neela's hands flew to her mouth while Dion and Gabrelle stared in stunned silence.

Neela leaped into my arms. "You're very clever."

"Don't forget extremely powerful and sexy."

"You can be my toy boy. Oh, this is perfect! Whenever you're a good boy, I'll give you some pocket money."

She was teasing, but something about her proposal sounded fucking enticing. I kissed her, then she wiggled to get free, so I placed her back on her feet.

Dion had started grinning, beaming like an idiot. "That works for me." He clapped me on the back. "Even if you outrank me as a king, I'll always have more money than you."

A catlike smile spread over Gabrelle's face, and she leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek. Then she turned on her heel and stalked away.

"Hey! Where are you going?"

She called over her shoulder, “I don’t mix with paupers.” But she said it with a glorious grin that told me she didn’t mean a word of it. She would always be one of my best friends.

But Neela was number one. She had just offered to give up her throne for me—even though she didn’t have to. And I would give up anything for her. I pulled her close and mumbled into her spiky blond hair. “Anything.”

She knew what I meant. She wrapped her little arms around me and squeezed tight, and her hum of agreement vibrated through my chest and into my very soul.

Neela

We left Leif with his pack to lick their wounds and mourn their dead. We would be there for him as soon as he needed us, but right now, he needed his wolves.

Gabrelle, Dion, Ronan, and I returned to the Lakehouse without saying a word. It was the place that belonged to all of us and the place we needed to be, together. There was no question of going to our separate homes and spending the night alone, not after what we'd been through.

The Lakehouse was lit up like a star when we arrived, as though it knew we were all collectively, suddenly afraid of the dark. Gabrelle put her hand to the softly furred front door but didn't push it open. "I saw the Shadow Walkers attack a lion family a few weeks back." She paused with her hand on the door, not patting it, not pushing it, not even turning to look at us but speaking as though in a dream. "I saw one Shadow Walker enter their den, feed for about ten minutes on the family of four, and then two Shadow Walkers came out."

I shifted my weight to my right leg, only now realizing my left leg had a long scratch that was starting to throb. "Wait, one went in, and two came out? How is that possible?"

"It multiplied. It fed on the shifters and then split in two. I should have told somebody, but I was pissed at you guys, and Mom isn't exactly approachable."

Dion touched her shoulder, his voice softer than I'd ever heard. "It isn't your fault, Gabrelle. You couldn't have stopped what happened tonight even if you'd taken out an ad in the Verdan Bulletin to broadcast what you saw."

The beauty queen turned and smiled weakly, though I could see it was just painted on. "Thanks, D." She pushed open the door, and we followed her into the brightly lit house.

Dion moved to the kitchen area and began pottering, soothing himself through cooking. Gabrelle slid onto her glass chaise longue, and Ronan pulled me onto his lap as he plonked onto his black leather armchair.

His embrace was precisely what I needed, and I snuggled into it. "Hey, isn't this armchair a little bigger than it used to be?"

Instead of a single-seater, the black leather had stretched and grown, now more like a single-and-a-half.

"The Lakehouse knows you belong together," Gabrelle said, looking at us serenely. "I guess you have its blessing."

That felt right. The Lakehouse had accepted me as one of the heirs by growing me a chair outside on the deck, but it also had a place for me here at Ronan's side.

Ronan squeezed me tight against him, and I leaned against his broad chest. I felt safe here. Maybe I was due an easy life after all.

Gabrelle crossed and uncrossed her legs. "Where are you going to live now, Ronan?"

His reply rumbled through his chest and straight into my body. "My parents aren't kicking me out of the townhouse just because I'm no longer technically their heir."

Gabrelle paused. "But they'll have to eventually. You can't keep living in someone else's property forever."

I nuzzled into his pecs. “You can live with me.”

He pulled me off his chest, and I squeaked in complaint. “Really?”

“Of course. I’m just rattling around in that big old palace with Liz and the shrubs, I—”

“Do the snuffle tuffs know you call them shrubs? I wouldn’t be saying that to their faces.”

I shrugged. “Don’t be silly, they’re harmless.”

“Hardly.” Happiness pulsed through me, and I knew it was my own mingled with Ronan’s, and I didn’t mind. It was another thing we shared.

“Anyway, you were saying something about me moving in with you....”

“Yeah. I’ve got a lot of rooms and—”

“I don’t need a lot of rooms,” he growled. “I’ll be in yours.”

Desire sparked through me, and I pressed my lips to his, drinking him in, licking and tasting, nibbling, and feeling desire grow between my thighs.

Dion was suddenly in our space. “Ahem.” He handed us each a mug of steaming soup, and I sheepishly pulled away from devouring Ronan and accepted the cup.

It was orange and smelled of pumpkin with wonderful spices I couldn’t name. Dion’s hair had turned bright orange, so I assumed he’d tasted it, but that didn’t mean he hadn’t added some extra poison just for me.

I tried to hand it back. “No thanks, I’m not hungry.”

Dion pushed the cup back toward me. “Please accept this. You’re one of us now. The Lakehouse has accepted you, Ro’s figured out how to escape his blood curse, and even the ice queen seems to like you.” Gabrelle smiled coolly. “I’m sorry for feeding you those rocks. I promise not to use my power against you ever again...If you can promise the same.”

His orange eyes blazed with intensity, pleading with me to take this peace

offering.

I didn't want to. I was happy to broker peace between us, but I never wanted to taste Magirus food again. But Ronan squeezed my thigh, so I took a leap of faith and put the cup to my lips. Still, I hesitated. "If this kills me, I will set my big bad prince on you."

"Verdan heirs work together, not apart," Gabrelle said, and that finally convinced me to take a sip. She really was very persuasive.

The soup tasted like winter, snow storms when you're cozy inside, and nutmeg at Christmas time. It was so delicious that at first, I thought it must be enchanted...then I realized it was. But not in a bad way. It was filled with Dion's magical intent and provided comfort and a sense of community on this horrific night.

"Thank you." I locked eyes with Double D's orange ones, and he nodded in return.

The soup brought me solace. Leif's pack must have lost a quarter of their members tonight, but they would regroup and recover. Leif's mom was a strong alpha, and she would lead her family group back to power and strength.

I placed the cup on the coffee table, alert again. "What happened to Leif's mom? Is she all right?"

With my parents dead, only two more rulers could die before Gaia killed the rest and put us on the thrones. I wasn't ready; none of us were. We had so much to figure out before then, plus we would have to pass Gaia's ultimate test. Gabrelle and Ronan hadn't even Ascended yet.

Dion collected the empty mugs and took them to the kitchen. "Stella is fine. Shaken, obviously, but physically fine. She was already issuing orders and comforting her pack before we left."

I curled up in Ronan's lap, and he held me tight. My whole body moved with each one of his breaths, and his arms were tight around me.

I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Ronan

“We really should get a Healer on staff.” I crunched into a piece of dry toast smeared with plumple preserve. “And a Magirus.”

Liz clanged her glass of orange juice onto the kitchen counter. “Are you criticizing my cooking?”

“Trust me, I wouldn’t dare.”

Neela scraped out the stool and sat beside me, smelling of vanilla and strong black coffee. “What do we need a Healer for?”

Liz snorted. “He’s probably sore from too much sex.”

I bristled. She was partly right, but my dick health was none of her business.

Neela squeezed my knee. “Healers are expensive. Stop trying to spend all my money, toy boy.” She grinned.

I instantly relaxed and cupped her ass, resting my hand on the back of her stool. “Oh, I’ll do anything for money,” I said hungrily, smelling the pulse of desire that my words sent through her.

“Enough!” Liz dramatically snatched up her orange juice and spilled a few drops down her cream top. “If I’m not getting sex, I don’t want it shoved down my throat.”

Neela leaned close and whispered in my ear. “You can shove it down my throat anytime, toy boy.”

Fuck, she was sexy, with a sassy mouth that I wanted all over my body.

Louder, she said, “I’ve been thinking about something. I’d like to make some kind of testament to Sebarah. He was your friend and my brother, and I feel kind of bad about all the terrible things I used to think about him. So I’d like to Grow him a memorial.” She locked her blue eyes on mine. “Do you have any suggestions?”

I beamed. “Is the independent trashbag asking somebody for help? Liz, catch me, I’m about to faint.”

Liz guffawed a snort.

Neela smacked my arm away from her ass and shoved me playfully. “If you’re going to be like that, I don’t need your h—”

“I have the perfect idea. You could complete Seb’s guardian hedge.”

Neela and Liz exchanged a glance. “The what now?”

“After he Ascended, he grew the hedge out the front. It parts in welcome to let through family and friendly visitors, but remains closed and impenetrable for unwelcome visitors.”

“Yes, we know.” Neela tossed a strip of bacon to Doug and Herb, who nibbled on each end, reeling each other closer. They were kind of cute for terrifying predators.

I kept a wary eye on the snuffle tuffs. “But he never finished it. He wanted the flowers to change to represent the visitor’s intent. Like red roses if a lover arrived. Or larkspur for murderers. That sort of thing.”

The tomcat wriggled with excitement, practically bouncing in her seat. “I love it! I can do the Growing part, but I’ll need your help with the spells.”

Hearing her ask for my help was bliss, and I grinned like a fool. We walked out to inspect the hedge to figure out how much work was involved. I sent some feelers in to try to unravel the spell work and understand what was

going on, and Neela opened up to the plant itself, trying to understand how she could encourage the flowers to change.

The hedge opened for me, and I wandered and paused in the middle, looking up at the archway of greenery over my head. “I think we’ll need a Weaver. The spellwork is too complex for me.”

Neela joined me inside the hedge and squeezed my bicep. “What, a big strong fae like you needs help?”

The hedge closed around us, leaving a tiny, private clearing just for us. “Everybody needs help sometimes. Even a big strong fae like me.”

A wicked smile crossed the tomcat’s lips. “Take off your shirt so I can see those muscles better. I need to see just how big and strong you are.”

I slipped it over my head, instantly hard for her.

“Good toy boy.”

I growled and pulled her close, spun her around and bent her over, then slapped her ass hard. She protested, so I slapped her harder. “I’m not your toy boy,” I snarled, getting harder and harder with every slap of her ass, watching how it jiggled and moved. “You’re my queen. To do with as I please.”

She moaned, and her musky aroma was heady and arousing.

“Grow me a branch so I can lean you over it and fuck you,” I demanded.

She complied, and a branch extended from the hedge at hip height. I bent her over it, slipping up her short skirt and exposing her orange panties. I ripped them off, and droplets flew through the air. “Are you wet for me, my queen?”

“Yes,” she breathed.

I unbuttoned my fly, and my cock sprang free. The cool air teased my sensitive skin, and it was all I could do not to plunge to the hilt inside my tomcat and take her hard, fast, senseless.

“Slap me again, prince.”

My lips quirked. “You like that, do you?”

“Please,” she said, and I slapped her hard, leaving a red mark on her cheek and watching as it wobbled, growing even harder for her.

I eased my tip into her entrance, barely penetrating her hot wet pussy. I eased my tip up and down along her, tickling her clit with my broad head.

Fuck, she was wet, so wet, and I couldn't wait a moment longer.

I eased into her deliciously slowly, filling her inch by inch, delighting as she tilted her ass toward me, trying to take more of me, faster.

“You're perfect,” I purred as I filled her completely, my body flush against her ass.

She ground her ass, trying for more friction, wanting more of me, and my cock pulsed in response. But I was in control, and I pulled out of her slowly, agonizingly slowly, torturing myself as much as her.

Then I slammed into her hard, rocking her whole body over the branch, watching her spiky head recoil, our flesh slapping as I pounded her.

“Harder,” she cried, wiggling her ass and moaning, and I went harder for her, pounding and pressing, needing her like I'd never needed anything.

Before I came, I flipped her over so her ass rested on the branch, and I supported her upper body as I leaned forward over her, sliding in and out and kissing her passionately.

She moaned again and again, and I knew her well enough to sense her release building, so I kept my pace the same, letting her ride out her ecstasy.

She hooked her ankles around my waist and screamed my name as she came, and I let myself explode inside her, filling her, feeling her muscles clenching around me, needing her, wanting her, and knowing I would never get enough of her.

We breathed together, panting, holding each other tight.

I held her close while I straightened up and slid out of her, then placed her on her feet, and she staggered against me.

“You’re very good at hedge work,” she murmured, making me grin.

“Anytime you need a hand, baby.”

Anytime she needed anything.

Epilogue

Two months later, my hair had turned completely blue to match my eyes. I still got a shock whenever I looked in the mirror, but I loved it. It marked me as truly fae, not some outcast human girl who didn't belong.

I patted my hair as Ronan and I walked along Piccolo Street to the Ogre's Nose to meet the others. "Do you think I should grow out my hair?"

He shook his head. "I like your pixie cut."

"Faery cut," I corrected with a grin.

We were heading to the tavern to celebrate our official cumulative rankings, which Gaia had just released. It was some kind of average of all the trial results over all the years, and I hadn't been sure how my score would be calculated. Obviously, I'd gotten zero in all the previous years...or did I inherit Sebarah's scores?

Ultimately, my average annual score was three out of fifteen, putting me at the bottom of the pack. But since then, I'd Ascended, was getting better at spell work, and getting stronger and faster every day, so next year's trials would be a different story. I had every expectation of coming near the top.

Ronan was still ranked first overall, though he'd dropped some points after scoring zero in the third trial this year. Still, his average was a respectable twelve, with Gabrelle close on his heels on eleven. Leif and Dion were third and fourth, with nine and six. And I was dead last—but not for long.

We pushed into the Ogre's Nose. Low lighting, dark wood, and some jazz funk playing from the enchanted ceiling. The place smelled fruity, like someone had painted the walls in Fae Fizz.

The others were already here, grouped around a marble table and perched on barstools. Leif wore silver and gray, as usual, though his face was drawn. Dion wore simple jeans and a shirt, but Gabrelle looked stupidly beautiful and coiffed, with her pink hair piled effortlessly on her head and a white jumpsuit outlining every curve.

Dion called out a welcome. "Hey, the winner and loser are finally here."

"Enjoy it, Double D," I grumbled, climbing onto a bar stool beside Gabrelle. "This is the only time I'll be last. I'll be whipping all your asses next year."

They booed and slid me and Ronan a couple of shots of whiskey. "You're behind," Gabrelle said firmly. "Drink up."

Why not? We'd earned it. It had been a shitter of a year, and we deserved a little fun.

Leif was in better shape than when the slaughter was still fresh, but he wasn't back to his old self. He occasionally grinned, his cheekiness shining through, but it always faded fast.

I imagined that was how Ronan looked following Sebarah's death. He told me he never had a smile that stuck until he met me.

We got drunk and stupid, reliving the trials from this year and laughing at the stories from previous years. I cackled my ass off when Gabrelle went into great detail about a time Leif had ended up stranded and naked in the middle of the Hebes town square after a failed navigation trial.

Leif joined in sometimes, laughed once or twice, but his resting face was no longer a wolfish grin but a solemn mask, and my heart pained every time I

looked at him.

I told the story of how I got the Floran Bracelet, and somehow it made everyone giggle and snort.

“How’s your evil tattoo overlord now?” Dion asked with a grin.

I held my wrist to my ear and pretended to listen. “It says if you don’t buy me another drink, it’ll make me hunt you down and pour dirt in all your cooking,” I lied. The tatt mostly left me in peace these days. It hadn’t buzzed, burned, or bullied me in weeks, and I had grown to like the thing.

Dion got to his feet. “Well, I’ll definitely have to buy Ro a beer since he can’t afford one himself.”

Ronan flicked a paper coaster across the table and got D right in the mouth. “Eat that, Double D.” We all doubled over at the nickname, and even Dion laughed.

A spellbird whizzed through the front door and landed in Gabrelle’s wine. It was battered and had probably been banging at the tavern door for a while.

Gabrelle was looser than usual, and her genuine, free smile made her even more beautiful than usual, which was fucking unfair. She fished the spellbird out of her glass and handed it to Leif. “It’s for you.”

Leif read the soggy message, his silver eyes narrowing and his pale skin turning pure white. He read the spellbird several times until it ripped under his whitening knuckles.

“Whassup, Leif?” Dion asked.

The wolf ground his teeth and bunched his muscles, completely ruining the mood, lacing the air with tension. His pale face was lined, solemn, his jaw tight. “Mom is dead.” His voice was flat and murderous. “She was killed by a Shadow Walker while visiting a pack on the east coast.”

“Oh, shit,” Dion said.

Gabrelle gasped. "I'm so sorry."

Ronan frowned, his black eyes glassy. "Oh, Gaia."

I slid off my stool and leaned against Leif, pressing the side of my body against him as a measure of physical comfort. If there was one thing I knew, it was that wolves got more comfort from physical affection than from words.

He leaned into me momentarily, then took a deep breath and pushed me away.

My wolf friend rejecting physical comfort was unheard of, and that alone shocked me to the core, driving home the enormity of what was happening. I reached for him again, but he slapped my hand aside with a feral look.

"Leave me," he barked.

"I'm sorry," I said lamely and kept my hands to myself. Leif hadn't looked so wild, so fucking furious since the night of his pack's slaughter. But this arguably hit the pack even harder, losing their esteemed leader, the one fae who held all the packs of Verda together.

Dion's beer-colored hair curled around his ears, and his thick eyebrows knitted together. "Shit, Leif, you're the alpha now."

We all stared at Leif, who stood tall among us all dotted on barstools, looking like the only adult in the room. He dripped anger and determination, and not a single line of the light-hearted joking fae I knew was visible.

His personality was erased.

"Yes," he snapped at Dion. He looked around at us all with his lip curled in a sneer. "I have to go now."

We watched him march from the room. I always thought he'd be a relaxed alpha, probably one who delegated the actual ruling to a beta while he ran off to have sex. But Leif was turning into a darker, scarier fae, one I barely recognized.

What sort of alpha would he make?

We discussed his mom, her leadership, and the crazy-ass fact that our good friend was now the leader of all the Verdian wolves. None of us voiced our concerns about his mental state, but we must all have felt them.

Leif was going off the rails, and now he had all the power in the world.

“Only one more of our parents can die before we all become rulers,” Gabrelle said quietly.

Holy crap. I was not ready to rule. I’d only just arrived in this realm and found my place here, found my friends, found Ronan. I wanted to spend time messing about and enjoying myself before the mantle of responsibility weighed me down.

“Let’s assign them all some damn bodyguards,” I said, then downed another shot.

Everybody joined in the cheers and skulled a shot. I locked eyes with Ronan, seated across the table from me. His black hair framed his chiseled, tanned face perfectly, and the soft smile on his face was just for me. He was too far away, I wanted to be on his lap or beside him, touching him somehow, but a longing gaze would have to do.

Besides, there was no hurry. We had the rest of our lives together.

* * *

Hi, I hope you enjoyed *A Court of Greed and Excess*!

The second book in the series, [A Court of Fur and Fangs](#), features a very cranky Leif battling wits with a badass wolf shifter—she might be way down in the pack hierarchy, but she doesn’t let him get away with anything.

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xxx Zara



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My captor intends to keep my mind and body under his complete control with his snaking magic of temptation. Unfortunately, the other males who are fixated on me and my power don't care for my safety. Soon I will have to choose whether to shelter under my dark Angel's wing or wreak my revenge.