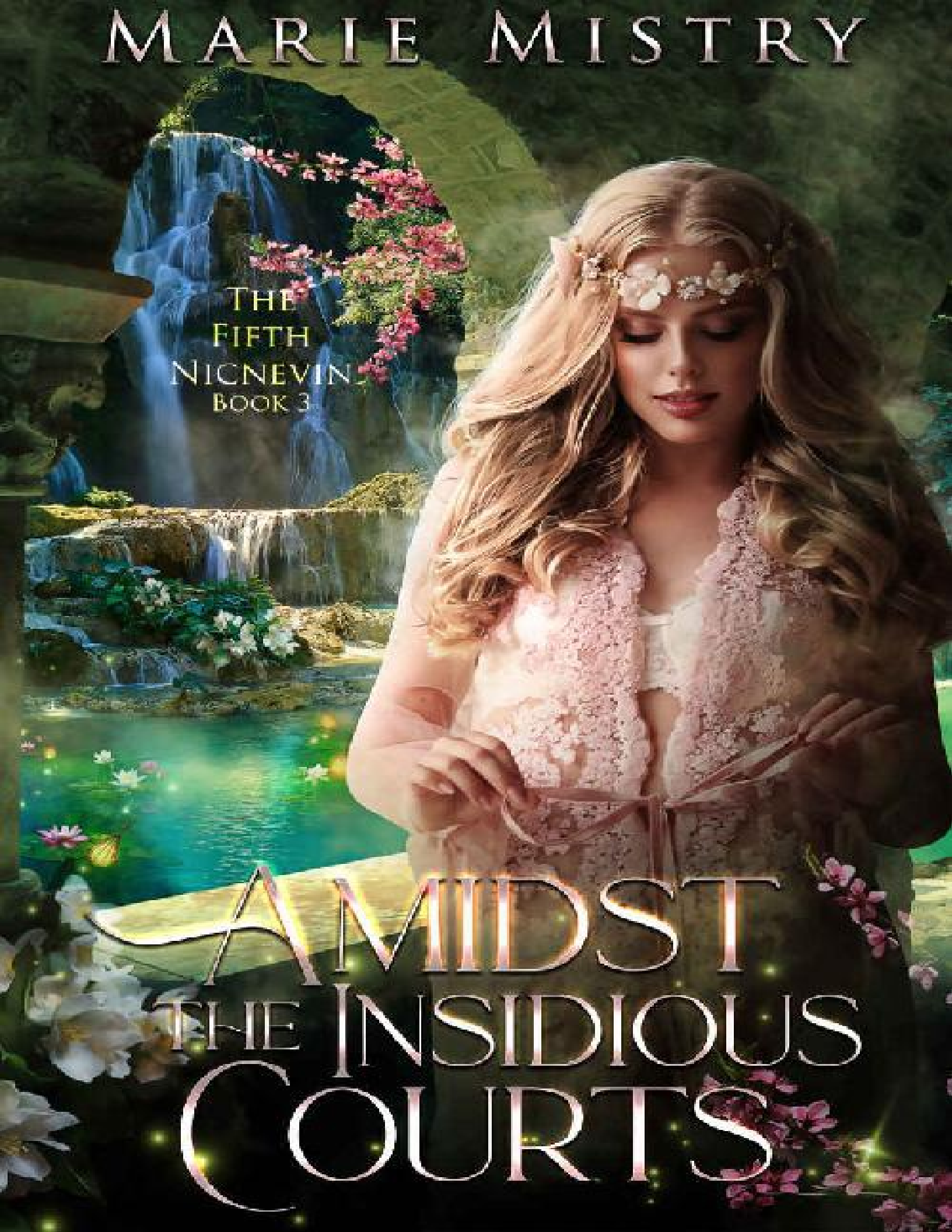


MARIE MISTRY

THE
FIFTH
NICNEVIN
BOOK 3

AMIDST
THE INSIDIOUS
COURTS





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THE FIFTH NICNEVIN

BOOK THREE

MARIE MISTRY

Amidst the Insidious Courts (The Fifth Nicnevin #3)

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ISBN: 978-1-915066-25-1

www.mariemistry.com

Cover art and design by Nichole Witholder of Rainy Day Artwork.

www.rainydayartwork.com

Edited by Kaye Kemp Book Polishing.

I was supposed to dedicate this to my new brother-in-law. However, weirdly, he didn't want the book with the 'weird peen accessories'.

Therefore, this book is dedicated to my beautiful baby sister. Not just because she's the shameless one in their marriage, but also because she's my rock.

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FOREWORD

Amidst the Insidious Courts is a Fantasy Reverse Harem novel containing sexual situations. It contains scenes featuring multiple consenting partners over the age of 18 and is written in British English. Content includes, but is not limited to: foul language, descriptions of torture, fantasy violence and other triggers including mention of/threat of rape, sexual assault, and suicide. For a more detailed list, please visit my dedicated [website page](#).

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Fellgorha

FOMORIAN MOUNTAINS

ENDLESS SEA



AUTUMN COURT

WINTER COURT

ELFHAME

SUMMER COURT

SPRING COURT

RIVERLANDS

FAIR ISLES

Saracil's Plateau

Calimnel

Illidwen

Wimer's Fork

Elfame City

Oratha

Lake Orvendel

Marion

Renfaw

Pavellen

Siabetha

Apchurch's Portal

Londel

Eyslin

Silley's

Apposa

Wells

Redwell

Wells

GLOSSARY

BEASTS

Barghest

Giant, monstrous, black hound which roams the wild places of Faerie. Has large, bat-like ears, and survives by eating the souls of other animals and fae. Notable for being part of the Wild Hunt.

Cat-sìth

(Plural: cait-shìth) Giant feline with pointed ears and a white star on its chest. Native to the Winter Court.

Drake

Wingless dragon, native to the Fomorian Mountains.

Kelpie

Horse-type creature which can be bargained with for passage across bodies of water. Will drown its riders if they're not careful with their wording.

Nathair

Enormous venomous snake. Its venom has no cure and sentences its victim to an incredibly painful death.

Tunnel Wurm

Large burrowing serpent with a mix of feline and snakelike features native to the Fomorian Mountains. Has paralysing breath and venom. Afraid of fire and chickens.

Valravn

(Plural: valravne) Highly intelligent, carnivorous birds who fly alongside The Wild Hunt. They are far larger than any normal bird, but closely resemble a raven with teeth. They eat the bodies of the dead, and despite being able to talk, are distrusted by most fae.

Will-o'-the-wisp

Small creatures which manifest as glowing balls of light and emit a soft, chiming sound. Generally playful and can be found around graveyards. Believed to keep young spirits entertained while they wait for The Wild Hunt to take them to the Otherworld.

PLANTS

Bitterblue Mushroom

Phosphorescent blue mushroom, native to the Fomorian Mountains. Edible but with low nutritional value.

Corcrannach Tree

A corpse eating tree native to the Autumn Court.

Echo Berry

Pink, berry-like fruit which tastes different according to the emotions the person feels at the time. Grows on vines in the eastern regions of the Spring Court.

Pixiecap

Small, yellow mushroom native to the Autumn Court and Elfhome. Edible and filling.

Muddlevein

A herb which, when made into a tea, has the power to increase a person's resistance to cold temporarily. Found across the north of Faerie.

Siabethan Nightshade

A climbing shrub native to Siabetha, which features brightly coloured, trumpet-shaped flowers. The scent of the flowers is a powerful natural aphrodisiac, but the flowers themselves are incredibly toxic.

FAE

People of the realm of Faerie, created by the Goddess Danu.

Many sub-species of fae have different traits, but a few are universal:

- 1) Fae cannot lie.*
- 2) Iron is lethal to them.*
- 3) Bargains made with them, or in their presence, cannot be broken.*
- 4) When a fae gives someone their full, true name, that person may use it to command them.*
- 5) All fae can use glamour—a kind of low-level illusion magic—but to different degrees.*

High Fae

Fae whose appearance is closest to humans. Their distinguishing traits are their pointed ears, slight fangs, and delicate bone structure. Some high fae have wings, and thus the ability to produce fae dust, which is an aphrodisiac to other fae but addictive to mortals. High fae are normally members of the nobility and can be quite judgemental of their under fae counterparts.

Dullahan

High fae who are able to remove their heads and summon bone weapons. They have an intense magical bond with their horses, leading them to become known colloquially as headless horsemen. Considered extinct.

Shifter

High fae who are able to take an animal form at will.

Under Fae

An umbrella term for all species of fae who aren't high fae. Under fae often have visible differences from their more human-looking high fae counterparts. These can include more defined traits such as fur, tusks or

horns. Or they can be more subtle, such as bright colouring or markings. Some under fae, such as Redcaps and Selkies, have specific appurtenances which set them apart.

Barbegazi

Distantly related to gnomes. They have white fur, a long beard, and enormous feet. They prefer to live in isolation in the mountains where their feet function as natural snow shoes.

Banshee

Renowned for their prophetic screams which foretell death and misfortune for someone close to them. Their faces and bodies are skeletal, and they have the ability to hover a short distance from the ground, covering immense distances at speed. They also possess a secondary row of teeth.

Brownie

Small, bipedal beings with a thick coat of fur, sharp teeth and flat, catlike noses. Naturally gifted at moving silently and remaining hidden.

Dryad

Dryads are under fae whose appearance is generally halfway between tree and human. They have bark for skin, and leaves for hair, and live in large family groups called Groves.

Faun

Fae with the legs of a goat. Male fauns have horns of various lengths, shapes, and sizes. Excellent pipe-players and fond of parties.

Gnome

Under fae with a deep connection to the earth and growing things. They enjoy gardening, food, and a simple life. Physically, they rarely get above two feet high and are often rotund.

Goblin

Small, stooped under fae with greenish skin who are particularly obsessed with gems. They have large ears, flat noses, and small black eyes. At milestones in their lives, they receive symbolic piercings. Produce a mating musk when aroused that is revolting to all other creatures.

Kikimora

(Plural: kikimory) A type of under fae who inhabit swamps and bogs and is able to give those who intrude on their domain nightmares. Usually soggy, with matted hair and a love for the clanging sound of metal on metal.

Leprechaun

Fond of tall hats, gold, and liquor. Fae superstition says that it is impossible to cheat one out of money.

Leshy

(Plural: leshens) Forest under fae who are considered protectors of the natural world. Like the Kikimory, they are fiercely territorial but generally helpful to strangers, provided they do no harm while in their forest.

Merrow

Green haired fat with a humanoid upper body and a green scaly fish tail. They can only come on land if they manage to procure a redcap's hat.

Ogre

Large under fae with horns and orange/peach skin tones. Smaller than trolls. Tend to use their strength in labour-intensive work and prefer warmer climates.

Pixie

Small, carnivorous fae with colourful skin and wings. Have been known to eat their enemies. Usually live in large family groups called swarms.

Púca

(Plural: púcaí) Known for being able to physically manifest their tattoos. They're born with their first tattoo, which is always an animal. They can borrow physical traits from their animal tattoo such as ears, wings, etc. As they age, they gain new art, dependent on their personality. Their tattoos can move to new places at will, giving them a disturbing, ever-changing appearance. A púca must be able to touch their art with their hands in order to manifest it.

Redcap

Fae who dip their hats into blood to survive. They're often considered crazed or psychotic. Their eyes are blood red, and their hats themselves are powerful magical artefacts, capable of changing size and shape and storing items.

Selkie

Seal shifting fae. They cannot shift without their skin, which is considered their external soul and is nearly indestructible. Anyone who steals the skin of a selkie is able to compel them in much the same way as they would had the selkie given them their full name.

Troll

Large, simple-minded fae with immense strength. Trolls are useful for their size. They have an immense appetite and are easily swayed by the promise of food. Often considered only one step higher than intelligent animals.

FOMORIANS

The sworn enemy of the Fae. Live across the Endless Sea and often raid settlements on the northern shore. They have skin in various shades of blue-teal-grey, white hair, and colourless eyes. They have double points to their ears, and cannot use magic but are great tinkerers, inventors, and ironsmiths. Biologically compatible with fae.

LOCATIONS

Spring Court

Capital: Pavellen. Ruled by: Queen Aiyana. Low-lying territory to the southeast which includes the riverlands. Its borders are marked by the Oratha and Findwellyn rivers.

Summer Court

Capital: Siabetha. Ruled by: King Eero. Southwestern territory mostly settled along the coast. Its borders are marked by the Findwellyn and Apporas rivers.

Autumn Court

Capital: Illidwen. Ruler: Queen Cressida. Forest-dominated territory in the northwest. Its borders are marked by the Apporas and Torvyn rivers.

Winter Court

Capital: Calimnel. Ruler: King Cedwyn. Freezing, mountainous territory in the northeast. Its borders are marked by the Torvyn and Oratha rivers.

Elfhame

Capital: Elfhame City. Ruler: Nicnevin Rhoswyn. The only place in Faerie that experiences all four seasons. An island in the centre of the four courts.

Fomorian Mountains

Capital: Fellgotha. Ruler: King Elatha. Kingdom of the Fomorians across the Endless Sea. Inaccessible to fae.

ONE

JAROMIR

My knuckles hesitate an inch from the polished door separating me from my mate. I've been trying to knock for the last fifteen minutes, but every time I do...

"No. But I should be able to charge into battle if I damn well want to!"
Pause. *"You did it!"* Pause. *"No. Don't bring Caed into this!"*

To anyone who doesn't know Rose, it might seem like she's having a one-sided argument with thin air. Unfortunately, I'm well aware that there are three ghostly queens in that room with her, and it makes interrupting them even more daunting.

My wolf whines in my head. He was already annoyed by the bitter, foul-tasting potion Kitarni made us drink this morning. Now our mate is angry, setting him on edge.

I drop my hand and pace the upstairs corridor of Marlen's small temple for the hundredth time. Drystan was the one who physically scooped her up and dragged her away from Elfhome last night, but I didn't stop him. In fact, I agree with him.

As Nicnevin, Rose *is* powerful, but she's *not* ready to fight a war against the Fomorians. Not to save a city we planned to retreat from anyway, and not until she has a solid mastery of her magic.

Every single time our little queen is within a hundred feet of violence, she dies. I have no desire to see the three lines decorating my palm multiply.

Legend says Nicnevin Maeve's Guards had so many lines that they covered both sides of their hands. I fear if Rose carries on like this, we'll suffer the same fate.

"I can't spend the whole war learning to read! Why is everyone so against me doing anything useful?!"

Her exasperation bleeds through the door, and I can just picture her staring down her guides with a fire she rarely feels confident enough to show anyone else.

Shifting my weight from side to side, I try to shake off the discomfort that comes with eavesdropping on her conversation, but I can't help it when she's being so loud and my hearing is so sensitive.

Rose needs to leave that room so we can get on our way. Her pilgrimage should already have started, and I have no doubt that Drystan is downstairs getting grouchier with every minute that we're delayed. I raise my hand again, determined to knock. Hesitate. Drop my hand. Raise it again—

Pale white fingers close over my fist, using my shocked state to rap my knuckles against the wood before I can stop myself.

"You're welcome," Lore singsongs, blinking away before I can growl at him.

The door opens, and I hastily rearrange my features into what I hope is a suitably apologetic expression. My wolf reaches out and yanks my head down. I can't resist, and I get the sense that had I tried, he would've forced a shift and rolled over to expose his belly.

"Sorry, my lady, but they're waiting."

Rose sighs in aggravation, running a hand through the stray strands of her hair. "I'm ready."

My gaze travels up, following the line of her calves and up past the laces of her bodice to finally meet her tired eyes. Did she even sleep last night? She should be resting, especially in her condition. Cursing the fact that we have to make her travel at all for the thousandth time, I offer her my arm, only to freeze as I take a breath and inadvertently get a lungful of her scent.

Ordinarily, my mate smells of sweet floral candy, but her natural perfume is deepening, gaining hints of a rich honey which makes my mouth water and my teeth ache.

It's only going to get worse.

Her fever is only a week away. My wolf prowls in my mind, wanting to break free and rub my scent all over her as a warning to anyone who might try to get too close. Suddenly, the idea of bringing her downstairs, where other fae can smell her, seems stupid. Why should we? We could just back her up into that room, splay her out on the bed, and...

Rose, oblivious to my struggle, takes my arm and lets me lead her down the tidy temple corridor. As we walk, she scratches absently at her neck, the corners of her mouth turning down.

"So, are we going to talk about it?"

"It?" I echo dully, staring at her lips without really comprehending what she's saying.

She stops, and I glance at her eyes, only to grimace at the resentment burning in their purple depths.

“I guess not.”

“Rosie.” I bite my lip. “I can’t read your mind.” I wish I could.

“I wanted to stay in Elfhome and help, but you stood there and let Drystan manhandle me like a sack of potatoes.”

Good. Saying that will only make her angrier, so I swallow the retort down and change the subject. “Do you know what you have to do in the temple?”

She huffs, giving me a dark look that tells me she’s well aware of what I’m doing, before nodding. “Enter the sanctuary, bless the shrine, and let Danu do her thing.”

“And stay away from other fae,” Lore pipes up helpfully, appearing at the top of the stairs just before we reach them. “Otherwise, they might fall off a cliff and die.”

Rose stares. “What?”

But Lore is already gone, blinking away with nothing but the echo of his manic cackling laugh to prove he was there in the first place.

“Your scent, Rose,” I murmur. “It’s getting... hard to think around you.” That’s not the only thing getting hard, but I force my mind out of the gutter. “Until your fever passes, all of us will be a little... on edge.”

On edge. On fire for her. Wanting to rip the throat out of any male who comes within five feet of her. Same thing, right?

Rose cocks her head to one side, lips thinning, in the way I’ve noticed she does do when she’s listening to her guides.

I have no idea which Nicnevins are accompanying us, and I’m not sure I want to know. Whatever they’re telling her is making her cheeks turn an adorable shade of pink.

Instead of answering, she ducks her head and speeds up, almost dragging me down the stairs in her haste to escape.

“Just *stop*, Maeve,” she hisses over her shoulder.

“Did you know that Nicnevin Maeve was known for taking audiences while her Guard ate her out?” Lore asks, popping back to her side again. “Queen Aiyana does the same. I think we should give it a try. Definitely a power move.”

“Lorcan!” Rose looks absolutely scandalised.

“That’s not a no!” His sharp teeth glint as he smiles widely. “Want to start now? I’m game to spice up this temple blessing if you are!”

Rose shakes her head, but she doesn’t get a chance to voice her objection,

because Drystan is there, grabbing the redcap by his collar and wrenching him away.

“We’re late,” he snaps, not even glancing at Rose. “Stop gossiping and hurry up.”

A growl rises in the back of my throat. “Give her a minute. We’ve all had a long night.”

The grumpy unseelie isn’t listening. He’s too busy attempting to frog march Lore down the stairs, a task that would be easier if the redcap didn’t keep blinking all around him, poking him, and yelling, “Boop! You’re dead.”

“Enough,” Rose mutters, pulling free of my grasp and brushing past them. “I’m coming.”

Lore stops his tormenting just long enough to wrap Drystan in a huge—and definitely unrequited—hug, before jumping after her. “Wait for me! I want to come too!”

With the two of them gone, it’s just us on the stairwell. The Lord of the Wild Hunt sighs, scrubbing a hand down his face.

“How long does it take you to get her off?” Drystan grumbles under his breath. “I stalled, but the priests were getting antsy.”

I shake my head, but don’t correct him. I *wish* that’s what we were doing. Better to let him think that I spent the last half hour making Rose fall apart in my arms, than admit I spent the time standing in front of her door like an imbecile. If he were smart—and not currently distracted by the scent of her fever—he’d have realised I’m not wearing a single sparkle of her dust.

“Is everything ready?” I ask.

“Horses are,” he confirms. “After Kitarni explained the... *situation*, the temple has kindly added charms to the tack so that they’ll travel faster.”

The ‘situation’ being that we have seven days to get Rose to Pavellen, rather than the eight we had planned.

“Bree was overseeing the last of the packing while Kitarni soothes the head priest,” Drystan continues. “Lore was *supposed* to be ensuring Wraith was well-behaved around the crowd, but evidently that task has bored him.”

“And Prince Bram?”

“Coming!” Rose’s youngest brother trips down the stairs towards us, carrying a bunch of books under one arm. “I know, I know, I’m late. But the temple library was...” He trails off when he takes in our expressions, and his knuckles turn white on the tome in his hands. “Sorry. It’s been a long time since I had the pleasure of a good novel.”

“You’re no later than Rose,” I offer. “Have you eaten?”

Drystan starts walking again, prompting the two of us to follow as Bram replies, “A little. It’s still hard eating in this form. Sometimes it feels like I’ve forgotten how to use two legs.”

I can imagine. In situations like the ones he faced, being in our animal forms gives us a survival advantage. Having a smaller, more evasive form which needs to eat less must have helped him tremendously in Fellgotha. But Bram was gone for almost a century.

That’s an awfully long time to give yourself over to the animal half. It’s a miracle that he’s as sane as he is.

“I understand,” I offer. “My wolf would’ve gone feral if I’d faced what you had.”

Sometimes, it feels like the animal side of me is halfway there already. The curse of being a strong shifter is that the animal is always closer to the surface than others’.

“Thinking about home kept me sane,” Bram admits, as we reach the bottom of the stairs. “I made a list of all the things I wanted to do when I returned. So many books I want to read, places I want to go.”

The prince holds up the books, then turns in the opposite direction to the sanctum where Drystan is headed. “I’ll meet you all by the horses. I’m going to make sure all of my things are packed.”

“If you see Lorcan, and he’s not got both eyes on that Barghest, hit him,” Drystan calls back.

Bram’s eyes widen, but he nods once and takes off in the direction of the temple gates.

“There’s no way Prince Bram is going to hit an assassin,” I mumble, lengthening my stride to catch up with the unseelie.

Drystan raises a brow. “You underestimate how annoying the redcap can be.”

Two

RHOSWYN

Drystan's continued refusal to look at me is nothing new, but after the events of last night, it stings.

My wings flutter as I walk, still reacting to my agitation, even though they're hidden beneath my glamour. Their feather-light brushes against my spine does nothing to soothe me. Instead, my skin is tight and my smile forced as I finally turn a corner and reach the grey stone courtyard before the temple sanctum. Kitarni is waiting beside an ornate stone door with a gnome in priesthood robes. Her bark-covered face is surrounded by blossoms that drip petals onto the flagstones beneath her, and her companion is brushing the ones which have fallen on him away good-naturedly.

Forcing my irritation at Drystan's heavy-handedness to the back of my mind, I offer the gnome a small—and hopefully regal—nod of acknowledgement. As I approach, he bows low. Kitarni does the same. Nervously, I find myself reaching for Lore, gripping his hand like a lifeline.

Like all gnomes, he's barely two feet tall, but his long bushy beard is so white it gleams in the morning sun like snow. His bow causes the ends of it to sweep the paved floor, and when he stands up, his beady black eyes remain fixed on my feet.

Probably safest that way, given that I'm not sure Lore's earlier threat was an empty one.

"Nicnevin, this is Nirbert," Kitarni introduces proudly. "He's been called to serve as head priest of this temple."

The gnome shuffles in place, not looking up, and I notice Lore crowding my back protectively.

"Marlen is deeply humbled to host our lady Nicnevin at the start of your pilgrimage."

"Nice to meet you," I say, my hand tightening around Lore's as I look around at the other priests, who are doing their best to look busy with various tasks nearby. When no one says anything else, I turn my focus to the carved stone door. "Is this the sanctum?"

I know it is, but playing dumb is apparently the correct thing to do because the gnome brightens.

“It is.” He rubs at his rounded belly thoughtfully. “It’s been well-tended since your lady mother—Danu rest her soul—began her pilgrimage here so many years ago.”

He speaks like he was there, but that can’t be right. My mother started her pilgrimage several millennia ago. While this gnome looks old, he can’t be *that* old, surely?

I suppose, with the fae, you never know.

I don’t know if it’s rude to ask, so I turn to face the door. Sensing that the pleasantries are over, the gnome gives a tiny cough, and another priest—an ogre this time—rushes to push the door open.

The great grinding sound of stone against stone echoes off the walls of the courtyard, revealing a small blossoming arboretum beyond.

Lore reluctantly releases my hand, and Kitarni gives me an encouraging half-smile. I slip off my boots and tread barefoot over the cool stones between me and the flourishing clover lawn beyond. Soft leaves tickle my toes as I step through the carefully tended inner garden to the great tree at the centre. It’s an immense twisted old blackthorn, and the fragile white blooms cascade from the branches like snow in the breeze.

The path to the gnarled trunk is dotted with more petals, and I resist the urge to linger. I’m here to do a job. I have to get this done so we can get on with what really matters: saving Florian and the other fae trapped in Elfhame City.

Someone has wrapped the body of the tree with colourful ribbons, and charms tinkle from the uppermost branches, lulling me into forgetting my anger from before. I sink to my knees and place my hand on the withered bark. Closing my eyes, I whisper the blessing Kitarni helped me memorise.

“May all of Danu’s children find strength, shelter, and safety beneath these branches.”

The branches above me shudder, and the ground below me pulses softly as I say the words. The bond between Danu and me throbs like a heartbeat before it settles once more. A part of me marvels at it all, but I shut that side down and climb to my feet instead.

One down. A billion shrines and sanctums to go.

I’m determined to be useful, even if the only way I can do that is by continuing this farcical pilgrimage. While the fae may believe that this blessing makes some difference—provides some mystical protection from the Fomorians—I can’t get the screams from last night out of my head. If even

the capital city isn't safe, what chance do these remote temples have?

I'm so stuck in my maudlin thoughts, as I strap up my boots, that I don't notice the change in the courtyard. It's only when I almost trip over a prostrated high fae priestess in my path that I'm forced to look up.

A tree root the size of my waist has broken free of the paved ground, forming a dirt-covered coil which dominates the space. It marks the edge of a graceful pond that wasn't there when I entered the sanctuary but is already teeming with life. A second blackthorn—the twin of the one I just blessed—has grown over the water, dripping white petals onto the mirror-calm surface.

"It's a sign from Danu," Kitarni murmurs, coming up behind me as I gape in awed stupefaction at the pond. "Our Lady of Rivers has given your pilgrimage her blessing. She's marking this as the right path."

The relief in the dryad's voice is tangible, and for the first time, I consider that perhaps I wasn't the only one doubting our plans. With her explanation, a tiny sliver of hope worms through me. It's not enough to cure me of the anxiety twisting my gut into knots, but it does dampen a little of my impatience.

"Most Holy Lady," Nirbert breathes, blushing pink from the top of his balding head down to the tip of his pointed nose as he bows deeply before me. "Thank you. This blessing is beyond all of our hopes. We shall... we shall... hold a feast day! And pray for your safety on this most sacred of journeys and an easy fever."

I give the verbose gnome a soft smile, choosing to ignore the fever comment. "Pray for my brother's safety in Elfhome. Danu has already gifted me with a Guard to protect me."

As if my words have summoned them, Drystan and Jaro finally enter the courtyard. The former doesn't spare me a glance, turning and heading for the great doors and the horses waiting beyond, but the latter meets my eyes and offers me a soft, hopeful look.

Damn him. I want to be angry with him for letting Drystan cart me away from the palace like he did, but Jaro's warm chestnut eyes are too apologetic for me to hold a grudge. I'm pretty sure I can stay grumpy at Drystan for as long as it takes, but the others? If I'm strong, I'll last until lunch.

Nirbert nods so enthusiastically that I worry his oversized head might cause him to topple over. "Of course! We shall make daily offerings for the health of the Knight Commander, and all his troops. The whole town shall pray."

“Nicnevin,” Kitarni murmurs. “I do not wish to rush you, but we have precious little time.”

“Of course, safe travels.” Nirbert bows again, even deeper this time, his nose touching the ground. “Danu bless her Nicnevin, and her High Priestess.”

“You as well,” I finish lamely, allowing Kitarni to take my arm and lead me through the small assembly of awed fae.

“This is a good sign,” the dryad murmurs, more to herself than me. “How are you feeling?”

Itchy, but I don’t bother mentioning it. The tightness across my skin has been plaguing me since the coronation, and I’m almost certain it’s a manifestation of my nerves, because no amount of scratching seems to alleviate it.

“I’m still frustrated that we can’t do more.”

“As am I,” Kitarni admits. “A great many of my friends were in the city, but I have faith in Florian, just as I have faith in you.”

I lean into her slightly, telling her without words how I appreciate her. Ever since we met in Lore’s tree, she’s been a steadfast presence by my side. While my Guard comes with their own drama, Kitarni is simply Kitarni.

Leaving the courtyard, we pass under the huge temple doors, and my cheeks heat at the sight of the crowd waiting for us. They keep a respectful distance from the organised column of horses, but the second I emerge, a huge cheer goes up.

The noise hurts my ears, and I cast around for my Guard, trying my best not to shrink back. Drystan only has eyes for his stallion, Blizzard, at the head of the group, double checking his reins with an expert eye. Bram is already astride his horse at the back of the group, looking distinctly uncomfortable under all the attention. Jaro swings up on a mare beside my brother, half smiling, half shaking his head as Lore cartwheels past him to entertain the masses.

My redcap ends his display with a back flip, blinking just before landing and reappearing by my side.

“There you are, pretty pet,” he murmurs, taking my chin in his fingers and stealing a quick kiss before blinking away again.

This time he reappears on Wraith’s back in the middle of the column, scratching the Barghest’s ears.

A tug at my leggings draws my attention downward, and I grin at the tiny selkie boy stretching his short arms as high as he can to offer me a wild rose.

“My lady, forgive him.” His worried father rushes up. “He is young.”

“It’s quite all right,” I promise, taking the flower and hooking it carefully into my braid. “It’s a beautiful rose.” *Do not thank the child. Do not thank the child.*

The fae bows, dragging his child back while trying to remain bent at the waist in an almost comical display of deference.

“Here,” Bree says, walking up beside me and passing me a small parcel wrapped in waxy leaves. “I know you haven’t eaten yet, so I grabbed this for you.”

“Thank—ugh!” I cut myself off, scowling at my error as Bree smirks. “It smells delicious.”

It does. The aroma of minty-sweet herbs is teasing me, making me painfully aware of my empty stomach.

“Eat on the way. We’re late enough,” Drystan orders, urging Blizzard over to us. “There are three shrines between here and our next camp.”

“I shall ride beside you for the morning,” Kitarni says, releasing my arm. “We have a few things to discuss before Prince Bramwell and I depart for Pavellen.”

“You’re leaving us?” I splutter.

“You have no need of me,” Kitarni promises. “And I must make sure that the cloister is prepared for your arrival while soothing over the Spring Queen’s ire. There is a chance she will consider your entering her city and heading straight for a temple a snub to her hospitality.”

“With Aiyana, there is an equal chance she’ll decide that your fever is a blessing and roll out a royal welcome,” Drystan mutters, offering me his palm. “Come. It won’t matter if we’re so late that you go into fever on the roadside.”

Reluctantly, I slip my free hand into his and allow him to pull me up into the saddle in front of him, releasing him as soon as I’m safely in place. Blizzard snickers softly as I pet his mane to distract myself from Drystan’s audible sniff.

“Fuck,” he mutters under his breath, adjusting his hips in the saddle. “Let’s go.”

With a slight nudge of his heel, Blizzard obediently trots away from the temple, making his way down the flower-strewn main street. Bree rides up beside Blizzard, his cat-sìth, Naris, butting his head into my leg as he prowls alongside the huge warhorse.

“Make sure you eat,” he mumbles, before urging Naris forward, taking the lead.

Obediently, I unwrap one corner of the herby bread and take a small mouthful. It goes down smoothly, and before I know it, I’ve finished the whole thing.

A whole loaf? Really? “Goddess, why am I still hungry?”

“It’s your body,” Kitarni advises, riding up beside me to take Bree’s place. “You’ll eat more before your fever. You’ll burn through it as your body prepares, but you probably won’t eat much at all once it hits.”

Great. “So as well as being a sex-crazed maniac, I’m going to starve for a week?”

Kitarni’s lips quirk up at the corners as she suddenly finds her saddle incredibly interesting. “I promise you’ll enjoy it.”

I’m beginning to doubt that very much.

“There is another matter we need to speak about before I leave you,” Kitarni continues, checking behind her, as if to assure herself that the rest of my Guard, and my brother, are still a little way back.

She tugs a small, wrapped leather bundle out of her bag and holds it out over the space between horses. Only my arms are too short; so Drystan is forced to take it and then pass it to me.

I hear the clink of glass bottles before I can unwrap the buckle holding the wrap closed. Inside, tucked neatly away into little pockets, are four vials.

“What are these?” I ask, looking at the wax-stoppered tubes with a frown of concern. The liquid within is translucent, like water.

“Sleeping draughts,” Kitarni answers. “I already gave your Guard a contraceptive, as you asked me to, and they took them. The potions last for a month, just in case.”

My cheeks heat at the memory of our long talk on the matter before the coronation, but my choice remains the same. I may want children, but I won’t raise them in a world where Elatha still breathes. I’m glad my Guard agrees.

According to Kitarni, the craziness that is fae biology means that—although children are rare—there have been instances of females becoming pregnant in the days before and after their fever. So I’m glad she’s taken no chances.

“The sleeping draught is a different matter. I would advise talking to them all about who you want in your bed. It might be that you’d rather only have a few of your Guard service you, and the others sleep, though I wouldn’t

recommend it. A first fever is usually demanding. The more partners you have, the easier it will be on all of you.”

Drystan’s hands clench a little tighter on the reins, but he says nothing. He must’ve been forewarned about this.

“And if they don’t want me, they could take the sleeping potion and just... not be affected by it all?”

With the majority of my Guard behind me, I can’t see their reactions. Drystan professed to not hate me but has yet to demonstrate an ounce of desire. Even if he did, unless I learn to shield, he’d spend the entire time with his eyes closed. Though in my current mood, I may never learn, just to spite him.

And Bree...

As much as that brief interlude with Lore in the alley of Elfhome makes me wish otherwise, I fear he’ll never be ready.

“Communication,” Kitarni reminds me, sensing the direction my thoughts have gone. “You must tell them what you think. Be open and honest—”

“But take no shit,” Maeve finishes, appearing on the back of Drystan’s horse.

“I thought I told you to go and keep an eye on Florian,” I hiss, twisting back to look at her.

I don’t miss Drystan’s raised eyebrow as I hurriedly wrap up the little vials. Right. I never mentioned to my Guard that I’d assigned my guides to watching over my brother. Oops.

Well, what was I supposed to do? Just blindly trust he’d be fine?

Best not to accidentally mention that I sent Mab to spy on Caed.

Kitarni, already used to my guides’ interruptions, follows the direction of my gaze and inclines her head respectfully. “As I was saying. Your Guard is honourable. They will respect your wishes.”

I swallow. “You only gave me four.”

Drystan’s knuckles turn white at my implied question, but Kitarni and I both pretend not to notice.

“Part of the reason I’m leaving you early is to find Caedmon and give him both potions.”

Drystan growls. “The only potion you ought to be giving him, priestess, is poison.”

“It is Rose’s choice who attends to her during her fever,” Kitarni replies brusquely. “For prudence’s sake, it’s best he takes the contraceptive as well. I

have a feeling that Caed will not stray far from her. Even with his powers bound, it's not unreasonable to assume he'll—"

"I don't want him there," I snap. "Goddess, how could anyone think I want him after all that he's done?"

I banished him for a reason. The idea of him near me, when I'm going to be at my weakest and most vulnerable, makes me feel ill.

"Nicnevin, I apologise." Kitarni bows. "I was unclear. I will be giving the sleeping draught to Praedra, who can slip it into his drink when the time comes. It's completely tasteless and scentless. You said you trusted her, and I assumed you would with this as well."

"So why bring him the contraceptive at all?" I ask.

Kitarni looks down at her lap. "Because accidents happen. If Praedra fails in her task... it's better you are protected."

I swallow but nod my understanding. If there's anything worse than bringing a blameless child into war, it would be having Caed's child. A child who—by no fault of their own—would inadvertently hand Elatha exactly what he sought to achieve by forcibly-mating me: an heir to both our peoples.

"If she fails, and Caed turns up in the cloister, the rest of us will rip him limb from limb before we let him touch Rose." The harshness of Drystan's tone makes the hair on the back of my neck bristle. "Provided she removes the charm on Jaro and me, which I'm sure she'll do at her earliest opportunity."

Remove the charm that stops them from fighting with one another? Not a chance.

"No." The word is tart on my tongue, laced with anger that lingers from last night.

Blizzard's head whips back, perhaps sensing his master's shock, and I reach to pat his mane automatically.

Drystan says nothing for a long moment. "What?"

It takes everything in me not to roll my eyes, and Maeve cackles behind me. "Oh, you shouldn't have pissed her off." My grandmother rolls off Blizzard's rump. "Florian's holding out fine. I'll report back properly later."

Traitor. Abandoning me with him? I scratch at a new itch on my upper arm as I try to ignore the death glare I'm receiving.

"Rhoswyn," he bites out. "Explain."

"If I reverse it, Caed will be able to harm you and Jaro." I have no idea who would win; in fact, I honestly don't think any of them would. They'd

probably maim one another so badly that I would be split in two trying to heal them all. “Like this, you’re all protected.” I pause, remembering how their last fight ended with my death. “*I am protected. Lore and Bree can keep me safe if Caed becomes a threat, and...*” I take a deep breath and look back, forcing him to meet my eyes with his swirling amber ones for just one second. “I trust both of them to listen to what I want.”

Whereas Drystan has already proven he’ll ignore my wishes if he disagrees with them, and as much as Jaro has never said as much, he also never objected to Drystan dragging me out of Elfhame.

“If you think I’m going to apologise for ensuring your Goddess-damned safety...” The high fae growls, body stiff behind me.

The heavy scent of smoke fills the air, and Drystan curses loudly, telling me without looking that he’s lost control of his magic again. I half flinch before I can stop myself, wings flattening along my spine in response to the perceived threat. My skittishness only makes his hands clench harder on the reins, but I refuse to be cowed.

“I don’t. And I’m not reversing the charm.” There it is. Our lines drawn.

Drystan has openly admitted that he will do whatever it takes to protect me. I will do whatever it takes to protect those I love. I understand his point, and I’m pretty sure he understands mine, but neither of us will budge.

Which leaves us here, caught in a stalemate neither of us knows how to navigate.

THREE

RHOSWYN

The rest of the ride is quiet, punctuated only by Drystan's occasional sneeze and the inevitable muttered curse which follows. The road is well maintained, but narrow, and so we ride in single file through the countryside.

In the four hours since we left Marlen, I've begun to grow restless. The endless meadows of wildflowers and pretty blossom groves are becoming repetitive. Without anyone to talk to, all I can focus on is the way my skin chafes beneath my clothes. If Drystan finds my constant scratching and twisting odd, he doesn't mention it. Perhaps he's too busy trying to focus past my aura to notice.

At the reminder, I pull back my sleeve and start squinting, trying to see the field of energy that he claims is gold.

I may be angry with him—and even that has started to wane the tiniest bit—but it's unfair for him to be blinded by the sight of me. We're stuck riding together because my guides might spook another horse, and he can't even see properly because I have yet to master what should be simple magic.

I can still pick up his aura easily enough. It flickers around him in orange and black flames, yet mine remains elusive.

"We're here," he announces, before I can figure out how to broach the subject.

I've been focused on my arm for so long that I've lost track of our surroundings. 'Here' turns out to be...

"A rock?" I ask, confused.

The boulder dominates the small woodland glade. Stretching as tall as the trees around it, its immense height is precariously balanced on a narrow base, forming a large overhang which blocks the midday sun. The massive granite face is carved with words written in fae which could be prayers or defacement for all I know. Like the tree in the Marlen temple sanctum, the rock has been wrapped with a long rope which is hung with hundreds of colourful ribbons, fluttering softly in the breeze.

"A very big rock," Lore confirms, blinking next to me, and then blinking us both to stand directly beneath it.

It's a sacred place, filled with the same soothing energy I felt at the temple, but I don't understand why.

"Fae who are desperate tie the ribbons onto the ropes while making wishes," Bram explains, stretching his arms as he walks up beside us. "The rock is special because it shouldn't be here. The scholars estimate that thousands of years ago, before the fae were created, a melting glacier carried it here from the Winter Court."

The sheer amount of water needed to carry such an enormous rock must have been... I can't even imagine it.

"Before Danu created Faerie, the entire realm was a wasteland," my brother continues, echoing my thoughts. "Fae scholars gifted with psychometry have identified a point in history called the fossil cut-off, because there were no plants or animals—" He stops abruptly, twisting his hands together. "Sorry. I... enjoy geology and got carried away."

"Why should you apologise for that?" I reply. "It's interesting."

"It's dead boring," Lore retorts. "The rock is here. And it's a rock. Hey, want to climb to the top? I'll race—"

A hand on his collar captures him before he can go any farther. I half expect it to be Drystan, but he's still fussing over Blizzard.

Jaro looms over the redcap, mouth turned down. "No climbing the sacred shrine."

"You should bless it so we can move on quickly," Kitarni adds, smoothing the folds of her dress down. "The next shrine is the standing circle at the sacred spring of Ellen, and that's still hours away."

I suck in a deep breath, not enjoying the thought of more hours in the saddle with Drystan. Still, I am here to do a job.

Placing a hand to the granite, I smile as a ribbon brushes my wrist, close my eyes and centre myself, then speak the blessing. "May all of Danu's children find strength, shelter, and safety beneath this stone."

The same soothing throb echoes down the bond to Danu, and I smile.

CRACK! My eyes fly open as Lore's hands wrap around my waist, yanking me out of the way. He blinks us, and we reappear back beside the horses, which are pawing the ground nervously.

Before my eyes, the boulder splinters in two from the point where I touched, each half falling to one side. The rope around it snaps, sending ribbons flying into the wind, and the very earth beneath our feet trembles.

What have I done?

I stare in mute horror as the rock splits like an egg, the two halves falling apart, rocking as they settle into place. But the chaos isn't done.

Water erupts from the crack, spraying everywhere.

No one moves as more and more spills forth, gushing over the rocks and trickling down between them. The steady stream rushes towards us. It's not powerful enough that we need to fear being washed away, but Lore moves us out of the way, regardless.

My eyes trace the path of the current as it flows over the path and downhill to the road, where it meets the bright yellow leather boots of a high fae female. The priestess—and she must be a priestess even if her temple robes are far shorter than the others I've seen—stands there with doe-wide eyes as the water slowly swirls around her feet.

The second she feels my gaze on her, she closes her mouth and drops into the lowest bow.

“Goddess bless the Nicnevin. I came as soon as I heard you were nearing the sacred rock,” she gushes. “I am Priestess Cadnia. It is my honour to tend this shrine.”

The shrine I just wrecked? Oh, Goddess, have I just put her out of a job?

“Thank you for this blessing, Lady Nicnevin.”

Kitarni comes up beside me, taking my arm. “This *is* a blessing. Danu has brought life to the lifeless. Look.”

I lift my eyes to where the water is still bubbling freely from the stone. Sure enough, all around it, moss and flowers have begun to grow, surrounding the spring with a tiny flower garden of its own.

Am I bound to change every single shrine I come across?

“Definitely an improvement,” Lore says, breaking the awkward silence amongst my Guard. “I like the sharp edges better.”

“The flowers are beautiful,” Bree murmurs, agreeing.

Despite the púca's words, Naris paces the edge of the water, unimpressed.

Swallowing back the hysterical laugh that threatens to break free—because yes, the edges of the once smooth boulder are now lethally sharp where the rock split—I nod. With my chest too full of emotion to even begin to process, I press myself into my redcap's embrace.

I glance at my brother, but Bram's expression is unreadable. I broke the boulder he was so impressed with. The stone that had survived since a time before Fae existed—so many millennia ago—was cleaved in two by little old me.

The priestess, evidently realising she's not going to be addressed, bows again to both me and Kitarni, then rushes past us towards the broken shrine. She falls to her knees in the water, raising her arms above her head as she begins a fervent prayer.

"I think we should get going," I whisper.

I want to get far from here as quickly as possible before they all change their minds and decide this isn't a blessing after all.

"No one is mad at you, Rosie," Jaro reassures me, crossing the space to draw me out of Lore's arms and into his own. "I promise."

"Hey, I stole her first," Lore protests, stealing me back before I have a chance to do more than inhale a lungful of Jaro's wood smoke and leather scent.

The shifter growls under his breath but doesn't escalate the argument.

"This is a good thing," Kitarni reassures me. "Danu is leaving a trail of hope. A reminder that she is still here, among all the war. If something like this happens at the temple in Pavellen..."

"Then she's just as apt to start a war if Aiyana decides it was a malicious attack rather than a divine blessing," Drystan reminds her, leading Blizzard through the water to my side.

"It's a sign of the Goddess's favour," Kitarni insists, squeezing my arm gently before taking the reins of her own horse and swinging up into the saddle. "Your mission is blessed. If Aiyana ignores that and refuses to bend the knee, her people will revolt."

"Come." Drystan holds out his hand. "We're leaving. We can discuss this on the road. It may not happen again."

I nod, pressing a tiny kiss to the underside of Lore's jaw to thank him for his quick intervention before pushing free of his arms and allowing myself to be lifted back onto the horse's back.

By the time we reach the sacred circle which marks the next shrine, I've convinced myself that Drystan might be right. Perhaps it was just a fluke.

Of course, that hope comes crashing down when a spiral of red toadstools appears in the centre of the standing stones. Each fungus is the size of my palm, their shiny caps gleaming in the afternoon sun, and the shrine keeper practically falls over himself with praises.

By the time we're in the saddle again, I'm achy, tired, and I want nothing more than to fall straight into bed. But the hardest part is yet to come.

"This is where we must leave you," Kitarni says, as our party reaches a

fork in the road. “Nicnevin, which direction is Caed in? We’ll find him and then ride along the banks of the river to Pavellen.”

I hesitate, then search for the cutting presence inside me. My hand moves instinctively, pointing west, back the way we came. “Not far.”

The rest of my Guard sits up a little straighter. “Is he following us?” Drystan demands.

I shake my head, then nod, then shake it again before slumping in the saddle. “It’s hard to tell. He’s getting closer right now, but it’s not constant like he’s actively pursuing us. I’m tired, and I haven’t been keeping track.”

“We’ll travel back a little and try to sneak up on them,” Kitarni decides. “It makes sense that he’d want to stick close to you, given his curse.”

“Try to rest,” Bram offers, riding closer until he’s within touching distance. “I’ll keep your high priestess safe, and we’ll meet again in the city.”

I reach out, dragging him into an awkward hug that almost ends with me toppling from Blizzard’s back.

“Enough,” Drystan snaps, grabbing the collar of my jacket and pulling me back into the saddle as Blizzard side-steps to put distance between us. The moment Bram and I are broken apart, I’m surrounded by a glowing golden shield.

When the barrier dissipates, Jaro mutters a frustrated apology for his wayward magic. He’s not the only one who’s had a severe reaction to my innocent goodbye. I catch sight of Lore on the back of Bram’s horse. The redcap crouches there for a second, scrunching his nose, before blinking back onto Wraith’s back like he’s thought better of whatever he planned to do.

Or his magic misfired again.

Even Bree’s ears have flattened atop his head. And are those... snake fangs? I glance down to find his hand on his arm, touching the snake tattoo there before he catches me looking and releases his hold on the magic, looking away in shame.

“Drystan.” I frown.

“It’s okay,” Bram reassures us all. “I get it. Her fever is definitely there.”

What? “But he’s my brother.”

“The forces that govern a fever don’t make those kinds of distinctions,” Kitarni advises. “Any fae who gets too close is a threat as far as your mates’ instincts are concerned. Males more than most, since it’s obvious that’s your preference.”

That’s ridiculous, but then again, it’s hardly the most unbelievable thing

that's happened today.

"We will see you soon," Kitarni promises. "When you arrive in the city, everything will be ready. Remember to have that talk."

She looks at my brother, who nods, and the two of them dismount, leaving my Guard and I to carry on along the main road.

"Pick up the pace," Jaro says, moving his horse beside Blizzard. "We need more distance between us and Caed before we bed down for the night."

Something in my gut twists, remembering the last time we camped down in the Spring Court, only to be ambushed by Caed. My thighs groan, and my belly growls as Drystan spurs us away from Kitarni and Bram without a second thought, leaving them in the dust as he sets a new, harder pace.

I try to return to my aura work, and a couple of times, I think I manage a glimpse of gold. Unfortunately, I'm concentrating so hard that I soon manage to develop a headache on top of everything else.

"Is there anything else to eat?" I ask, an hour into the ride, when the road has disappeared entirely, becoming a wide flat meadow, and I just can't take it anymore.

I'm miserable, and although I was prepared for such a long day on horseback, it's been hard. Perhaps food will settle my head, which is now pounding in earnest. I wish it could do something about the itching, but I've resigned myself to suffering in silence.

Drystan—who until now has been deep in discussion with Jaro about the precautions they can take in case Caed does show up, and ignoring me entirely—snaps his head down to look at me. At the same time, the wolf shifter's nostrils flare.

"Rosie, why are you bleeding?" Jaro demands, urging his mare closer.

Drystan grabs my hand and pulls it away from my neck where I've been scratching.

My nails are red. I've drawn blood.

But instead of turning on me, as I expect him to, Drystan rounds on Jaromir. "I thought you took care of her this morning!"

Jaro's cheeks redden as Lore rides up to my other side and reaches out with his cap scrunched in his hand.

"Oh, no he was just standing outside her door waiting for her to finish yelling at her ghosts," the redcap helpfully supplies.

He... was? It's my turn to blush, but none of them pay attention. Lore's cap drinks away the tiny trickle of blood at my neck, then he takes my hand,

and the soft kissing sensation continues until my fingers are clean too.

“I thought you knew what a fever was like,” Drystan growls. “You told Kitarni you understood what we needed to do.”

Jaro raises a hand in surrender. “It’s a week of sex. What more *is* there?”

Bree draws up on his other side, the four of them now riding abreast through the wildflowers. “The days before, she’s going to be needier than normal. She’s going to need more sleep, more food, more water.”

“And more orgasms,” Lore adds.

“Which is *why* you should’ve made sure she was taken care of so she could stand a full day of riding before we left,” Drystan finishes. “It’s bad enough she’s got to do all of this travelling when her body is going through so much.”

Goddess, it almost sounds like he cares.

“You’re talking about me like I’m not here,” I protest. “Why did no one tell me any of this? It’s my body.”

“Because it’s our duty to take care of you, pet,” Lore says, then beckons to Drystan. “My turn.”

“You just had a turn,” Jaro points out. “Besides, we can’t stop now. We’re nowhere near the Renfraw.”

My hands, now free, rub up and down my arms to try to dispel the urge to scratch. “It’s okay. I can manage.”

I don’t want to put us any further behind schedule on account of my own weakness.

“No. You can’t.” Drystan growls, stopping my hands again. “Play with yourself.”

My mouth falls open in shock. “What?”

“Bring yourself to climax as we ride.”

I’m frozen in shock. I’ve never done such a thing, and certainly not with an audience. Let alone Drystan, of all people. Behind me, I can feel his erection trapped between us. Is he...? Does the thought of me playing with myself arouse him?

It’s probably just the fever, I tell myself.

“Or you could come join me over here, and I’ll do it for you,” Lore promises.

“Not. Your. Turn.” Jaro’s wolf is bleeding into his eyes.

“Stop.” Bree reaches over and slaps Jaro’s arm lightly. “You’re overwhelming her.”

Four pairs of eyes narrow on me, and I squirm harder.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s your hand or one of us.” Drystan is giving me no quarter. “If you want privacy, the others will ride behind. Pick, Rhoswyn.”

“It can wait,” I protest again, but Jaro shakes his head.

“This is hurting you.” He sounds aghast at the very idea. “C’mere, Rosie. This was my fault. Let me fix it.”

He holds his hand out, eyes shining with the force of his wolf and the heat of the male. I’m sure I’m the colour of a tomato as I swallow and take it, but no one comments.

“Give me your reins,” Drystan mutters to Jaro, after he’s lifted me across the gap between horses like a doll. “I’ll ride ahead and keep the horse calm in case one of her guides shows up.”

It takes a few minutes at most before everything is set up. Lore and Bree fall back, and Jaro shifts in his saddle to make more room in front of me as Drystan takes charge of his mare.

“Close your eyes,” the wolf shifter whispers in my ear, taking both of my hands, which have started rubbing at my thighs and looping them up around the back of his neck. “Trust me.”

I do. My lashes flutter closed, shutting me in darkness, as he presses a kiss to my throat and strokes up the sides of my rib cage to cup my breasts. The horse rocks beneath us, her gait steady as he teases me through the layers of material that seemed like such a good idea in the face of a cold morning but are now in the way of the intimate contact I want most. Evidently Jaro feels the same, because he shoves aside the lapels of my jacket with an agonised groan, testing the weight of my breasts in his hands.

“I’ll buy you new clothes,” he promises a second before the fabric of my shirt rips loudly apart, followed by the lace hiding my breasts from view.

Goddess. The cool air on my skin is such a relief. My head falls back against his chest on a silent moan as Jaro’s hands finally touch me skin-to-skin. His lips lightly suck and kiss my neck as he teases my nipples to little points under the evening sun.

“So pretty,” he murmurs, his hot breath misting over the spot he kissed before his mouth descends to suck lightly at my throat, carefully avoiding the place I made bleed earlier.

“I want to feast on your tits every time I see them.”

He squeezes the soft flesh as he says it, causing a whimper to rise in the back of my throat. My hands tangle in the long length of his hair, tugging in

silent demand as a now-familiar ache begins to pulse between my legs, and I squirm.

Our position makes it impossible, but I want his mouth there.

I'm trapped between the saddle and the erection pressing into my ass, so I settle for grinding against the latter, hoping to encourage him to move faster. The tightness coiled in my lower abdomen is getting worse. I need him to touch my clit. I can hear my heartbeat in my ears, and the bud of nerves is pulsing in time with it, demanding his attention.

"More," I demand, my voice so breathy I barely recognise it. "Harder."

He obeys, massaging my breasts with firm caresses. They feel heavier than normal, and each squeeze alleviates a little of the ache. The brush of his callouses against my nipples is divine, and I arch into the touch. His teeth scrape against the column of my throat, drawing a whimper from me.

"Jaro." I'm trying to stay quiet, but arousal is singing in my blood, liquid rushing to the space between my thighs. "Please."

"Don't beg, Rosie," he murmurs, nipping the tip of my pointed ear in reprimand. "I've got you."

One hand releases my breast, and a second later cool air floods my pussy. He's ripped my leggings open, and the moment I'm exposed, his palm slides inside the remaining fabric to cup me boldly.

God, his skin is so warm, scorching even. Wherever he touches, the tightness retreats, replaced by desire.

I thrust my hips forward, grinding my clit into the heel of his hand with a kind of wild desperation. I need to come. I need it more than air. He groans as I work myself higher and higher, letting me gasp and tremble against him. A moan falls from my lips as two of those thick fingers plunge straight into my sopping wet core. Thrusting and tugging at that hidden spot.

That's all it takes. I fly apart, pussy clenching hard around the intrusion as my body falls slack against his chest.

He doesn't stop. The heel of his palm grinds harder, as his fingers force their way in and out of my spasming, pleasure-soaked sex, drawing out my peak until another approaches just as fast.

"Keep going," he urges. "Again, Rose. Come for me again."

The fingers of his other hand pinch my nipple hard, providing a hint of pain that blooms sharply against the backdrop of bliss.

Odd how that, of all things, should be the sensation to send me spiralling over the edge.

This time, I scream as I come, and I hear a quiet curse from in front that makes my eyes fly open.

“Hey, don’t worry about them,” Jaro murmurs, pulling my face to his and stealing a kiss that distracts me.

When he draws back, he gently pries my fingers free from his hair and rubs my arms to restore circulation to them. “You were perfect.”

“Beautiful,” Lore echoes, and I look up, startled to find him perched on the back of Blizzard. “I think she could come again. Don’t you agree, Huntsman?”

Drystan’s head doesn’t turn. “Get. Off. My. Horse.”

A blade is poking Lore in the ribs, I realise belatedly, as my eyes catch on the wicked silver glint.

“Hey, it’s not my fault. This was the best seat for the show.”

“Redcap.” Drystan’s knife digs in sharper. “I mean it.”

The relaxation of before begins to fade, replaced with anxiety at the promise of violence. As strange as it sounds, I’m used to Lore pulling blades out and threatening people, but not Drystan doing the same. Jaro’s arms tense around me, and I know he’s sensed my unease down the bond.

“Ignore them,” he whispers, rearranging me in the saddle so I’m sitting across it, and pulling me into a full-body hug. “Drystan threatens Lore with death at least half a dozen times a day. It doesn’t mean anything.”

His hand strokes down my back, brushing my wings, which tremble beneath his touch. Like last time, I’ve lost control of my glamour, and just like last time, Jaro’s front is plastered with the shimmering dust that proves exactly how well he pleased me.

“Rest,” Jaro adds. “When you wake up, we’ll have food ready for you.”

My stomach growls, as if threatening to hold him to that promise, and I smile softly as he plays with my hair, lulling me into a nap I didn’t know I needed.

FOUR

CAED

“How do I look?” I ask, spreading my arms to display my new outfit. Prae just snorts. “Like a fairy farmer. I still think you should’ve gone with blond.”

Rolling my eyes, I turn back to my reflection in the stream. My blue skin has been glamoured a sun-darkened bronze, my hair is an unremarkable brown, and my eyes match. I even gave myself fae ears and a scruffy stubble I’ve never been able to grow naturally.

I look like a fae.

The only problem is Danu’s damned mark. It refuses to respond to glamour. I can turn my arm invisible, but every time I try to put an image of unblemished skin, or even the illusion of clothes, over that arm, the stupid knotwork returns with a vengeance.

So long sleeves and gloves it is.

Unfortunately, the fae clothes we borrowed—stole—from a hut a few miles back are not my size. The baggy trousers and itchy shirt are plain linen, and the waistcoat doesn’t do much for me either. I’m pretty sure the shifter couple who hung them so carefully on their line never expected them to be worn by Fomorian fugitives.

At least our iron weapons won’t give us away. The ones Prae nabbed from the Palace of Elfhome are fae-made silver. She managed swords for both of us, and daggers that are sturdy but have clearly seen a lot of action if the nicks and scratches on the blades are anything to go by. Stupid fae, not caring for their weapons properly. As a child, I would’ve been beaten within an inch of my life for letting my weapon get into such a state. The only sword that’s been properly maintained is the knight commander’s, which is currently strapped to Prae’s saddle, wrapped in leather to hide it.

“We can buy new clothes at the next town,” I mumble. “And maybe a glamour charm to keep you hidden when I’m not nearby.”

I can manage to disguise us both for an hour or so, but if my cousin strays too far away from me, it won’t work. My glamour isn’t strong enough to keep both of us looking fae for long periods of time. So far, Rose’s route has avoided the busier roads, but that won’t always be the case. And I haven’t

even thought about what we're going to do with the drakes. Their proportions are so different from horses that it's not worth even trying to make them look like fat, squat ponies.

Better to just stay off the main roads and leave them behind if we need to enter a city or town.

"With what money?" she asks, then continues as if I haven't spoken. "The dark hair doesn't suit you. Can't you try something with more... colour? If not blond, what about red?"

I fold my arms. "We're not supposed to be drawing attention to ourselves. And we'll get money... somehow. You could sell that sword—"

"No way. Did you see how pretty it is?" Prae scoffs, turning away. "It's my trophy to remind me of the time I bit the fae princeling and got away with it. You'll have to take up some kind of honest work or something."

I raise my brow at her. "Says the skilled smith—"

"Inventor! And I am *not* lowering myself to creating blades out of substandard, soft-ass metals. There's a reason Fomorian steel is superior to this stupid fairy alloy—"

"All right. I get the point." I should've known better than to get her started on this rant, and now I need to change the subject fast before she gets on to her favourite lecture about how magic is the only reason the fae haven't succumbed to our iron weapons. "Have you come up with a plan?"

She blinks at me. "Me?! You're the one who fucked up."

"You're a female." I wave my hand at her. "What do I have to say to fix it?"

My cousin shakes her head, turning and striding away from me. "Ancestors, Caedmon! You can't just waltz up to Rose, say some magic words, and expect her to take you back! If she was any other female, she'd chop off your balls for the insult. In fact, I'm pretty sure the rest of her Guard will do that for her."

I roll my eyes. "So flowers?" Fae love flowers, right?

I look around at the ridiculous amount surrounding us—trying to figure out which ones Rose would like best.

Something pink like her cheeks when she blushes? Or purple like her eyes? I bend down, plucking a long stem of pale bell-shaped blooms that seem delicate, like her.

"Ancestors' balls," Prae groans, rolling her good eye. "Do you not think perhaps you should work on showing her you're a changed male?"

“How exactly am I supposed to do that when I can’t get anywhere near her?” The stem crumples easily in my fist, and I discard the broken bloom without a second thought.

The Call in my chest tells me Rose is moving again, and I head for my drake without thought. Her emotions have been *off* somehow all day, and it’s making me antsy.

“We’ll keep close and wait for an opportunity.” Prae swings up onto her drake. “Ugh. What is this skirt? How am I supposed to ride with so much fabric in the way?” She tugs the long brown cloth from side to side, then glowers at it and takes a blade to the hem, carving two long slits up either thigh. That done, she pauses, then sniffs delicately at her shoulder. “I even *smell* like a fairy. This is awful.”

“Prae, focus.”

“Right.” She pulls a map from her satchel, spreading it out over the neck of her drake and beckoning me closer as we begin to ride. “As I was saying, we know they’re heading east, crossing the Renfraw to visit some of the larger villages in the hills before she travels to Pavellen. We can follow until they reach the river, then split off and reach the city before them. Avoiding those villages cuts three days off the journey, and we can use the time to make a little gold, get ourselves set up.”

“I thought you just said we had to keep close and wait for an opportunity?” I demand, steering the drake back onto the road with a careful check to make sure there are no fae around.

“Have you got a better plan?”

“Actually, *I* do.” Both of us draw our swords, aiming them in the direction the feminine voice came from.

I know that voice. Where is she?

The drakes hiss as a dogwood tree warps in front of us. Her glamour falls away to reveal the high priestess herself. Her hair drips white petals as she walks calmly towards us, unperturbed by our weapons.

My blade lowers, but I don’t put it away. Rose and her Guard are still a good distance ahead, but I don’t for a second believe that the head of the Temple of Danu is alone.

“I have a proposition for you.” She steps into the road, calm and collected despite the threat we pose.

“Will this one end with my cousin as your Nicnevin’s mind-controlled puppet?” Prae’s tone is cold, her sword still high.

My cousin doesn't forgive easily.

"I will not apologise for attempting to protect my queen," Kitarni retorts. "I chose the path I felt would keep her safe, as I am doing now."

"You mean you're going behind her back. How noble." I sheathe my blade, crossing my arms.

"I don't have time to argue with you." Kitarni's lichen-covered brows draw together. "Answer me plainly: are you following Rose because you plan on kidnapping her again?"

I look back at Prae instead of answering, asking her silently if she wants to take the lead here. She spent a week with the fae while I was in my cell. She must have a better understanding of the high priestess's motivations.

"We've cut ties with Elatha," Prae admits slowly, and my jaw clenches at the unexpected offer of trust.

Then again, we're all on the same side now, aren't we? That's going to take some getting used to.

Kitarni isn't so stupid as to believe that means we're pledging our loyalty to the fae. "And what are your intentions towards the Nicnevin?"

Survive. Earn her forgiveness. Maybe not in that order.

I swallow back the vulnerability contained in those answers and instead say, "We're not going to hurt her, if that's what you're worried about, priestess. I won't let my father near her again."

Kitarni turns and nods to the empty space behind her. That quickly, another glamour drops, revealing Marl—Bram—and two horses.

"We will travel together to Pavellen." She adjusts her robes, heading for her horse. "We have much to discuss."

That doesn't sound ominous at all. "Why should we go with you?" I ask, taking the reins of my drake to stop it from getting too close to her horse.

The serpents would happily eat the pretty fae ponies if given half the chance.

"Because I've been listening to you both for the past hour, and it's clear you don't have another plan." Kitarni climbs gracefully into the saddle, her limbs seeming to lengthen to give her the height required to reach it, then shrink back down when she's in place. "So either follow us, or don't. Your choice."

True to her word, she urges her steed forward, Bram following behind her with a last long look at me.

I recognise that look from the time we spent together in the Deep Caves.

It's a warning to keep up or suffer the consequences. Back then, when I was a teenager, the consequence would've been being eaten by a tunnel wyrm.

I think I'd prefer that to the unknown threat he's warning me of now.

Prae's brows are pinched as she waits for my orders.

"Fuck it," I mutter, kicking the serpent into motion. "It's not like we have anything to lose."

Kitarni looks back over her shoulder, and her posture eases as it becomes clear we're following.

"You can drop your glamours," she announces. "As long as you remain silent, Prince Bram and I will ensure no one sees you."

I roll my eyes as if I couldn't care less, but sigh in relief as I let the magic drop. Bram is far more skilled with glamour than I am. Now that I no longer need to focus on holding the magic in place, the urge to fiddle with the fabric covering my upper body consumes me as we begin to ride in stony silence.

Fucking fae clothing.

Prae keeps shooting me looks, but I pretend not to understand them. I know what she wants. She wants me to talk to them, to find out what caused this sudden change of heart.

Rose ordered us exiled. Now her high priestess is working with us? There's more going on here, but neither of our fae escorts volunteer any information.

The fae stop riding shortly after nightfall, though Kitarni would've continued if she could. Unfortunately, the road farther on passes dangerously close to the river Ellen, and the last few decades of war have taught the fae to fear their waterways—even ones this far south.

Life in the Spring Court—a place dominated by spectacular winding rivers and low-lying bogs—has not been easy for the fae. I made sure of it. While I laid waste to the northern courts, I sent raiding parties to deal with the southern courts, keeping them too busy to even dream of sending aid to their neighbours.

A sound strategy, but... I cast off the twinge that attempts to take root in my chest. No 'buts'. We are at war. I did what I had to.

We tie the drakes on the opposite side of the camp to the horses, just in case they get peckish. My gut is telling me we'll have to lose them before we reach the capital, and I don't like it.

Horses are soft, vulnerable creatures. Drakes have tough hides and a serpentine ability to track by scent... but they're also not native to the courts

and a dead giveaway that we're Fomorian.

At some point, we're going to have to set them free.

Bram is poking at the fire, and Kitarni is reading a scroll, but both of them look up when we finish laying out our bedrolls and join them by the warmth of the flames.

"So what's your plan?" I ask, leaning back against my pack as I meet the dryad's stare. "You're going behind Rose's back? Why?"

Kitarni says nothing at first. "I believe in the Goddess. She has made her wishes clear." Her long, twiggy fingers point meaningfully at the covered skin of my arm. "She wishes for Rose to have a full Guard, and you need to earn that place." She pulls a vial of red liquid out of her robe and passes it to me.

Uncorking it, I give it a sniff, grimacing at the bitter smell. "What's this?"

"A contraceptive potion."

Bram's eyes flash with the presence of his fox, and he makes a low chuffing noise, but says nothing to voice his obvious displeasure.

"Rose is going to experience her fever in the next week," Kitarni continues, ignoring him. "You are only half-fae, so you may not be as powerfully affected as the others, but if something happens, and you both find yourself in a situation... she would prefer not to bring a child into the middle of a war. The others have all taken them. It will not harm you."

She's fae. She can't lie. I twiddle the vial in my hand. "Rose won't want me there. She won't let me get close enough to her for this to be necessary."

Bram scrapes a hand along the day's stubble with a groan. "Lad, when your mate's fever hits, neither of you gets a choice. Your instincts go insane, and hers doubly so." His eyes darken, making it clear that—even though we're companions for the time being—he hasn't forgiven me.

"How would you know?" I retort. "You never found yours."

His mouth tightens, and sadness haunts his next words. "Not for lack of trying, lad." He pauses, adjusting his spectacles. "You don't deserve to be around her when she's that vulnerable. Not after what you did."

"Rose will want her mates," Kitarni agrees. "Neither of you will care about the issues between you in the heat of the moment. It's better you take the contraceptive, just in case."

I eye the liquid suspiciously, uncomfortable with this entire situation. I want Rose—Ancestors, just remembering how she looked, soaked in my bathing pool, or pressed up against me while she slept is enough to make me

iron-hard—but not if she only wants me because biology is making her.

I know all too well how a fever can screw with a female fae's mind. My father often boasted of how—during my conception—my mother was so mindless that she begged him to do whatever he liked to her. Afterwards, she hated him, but not as much as she loathed herself. She was unable to understand how her body could betray her like that.

Could I watch Rose go through the same?

Maybe she won't care in the moment, but her other Guards certainly will. I can't imagine them just sitting back and letting me fuck her, and the last time we fought, she died. I can't let that happen again.

"Is there a different potion?" I ask. "One that can... stop me feeling the effects?"

Kitarni freezes, looking at Bram with something akin to surprise. "You don't want her?"

I shrug, knocking back the foul-tasting red brew with a shudder, because she's right, better to be prepared. "Call me insane, but I'd prefer not to have her hate me when the dust settles." I raise my arm, shoving back my sleeve. "And I highly doubt that taking advantage of Rose is the way to get Danu to release me from this Ancestors-damned curse."

The tattoo is painfully obvious against my blue skin, the firelight making it seem darker. The four empty frames glare accusingly at me, reminding me that the only way to be free of this is if the other males of Rose's Guard trust me.

Kitarni nods. "I have a sleeping draught. I was going to give it to Praedra..." *Because she didn't trust me not to force myself on Rose like an asshole*, I snarl under my breath at the insinuation. "But it will keep you unconscious for a week."

My hands curl into fists, everything in me rebelling at the idea of allowing myself to be that vulnerable. Growing up in Fellgotha taught me to sleep with one eye open, not voluntarily submit to the whims and protection of others.

I glance at Prae, asking a silent question, only to be rewarded by a dramatic roll of her good eye.

She's got my back, always.

"Fine. Give it here."

FIVE

RHOSWYN

G rowling rumbles through my body, waking me. It takes a while for my sleep-fogged brain to work out that it's because I'm nestled in a pile of fur. Next comes the awareness of how warm I am, followed by the wet huff of breath over my prickling skin.

"Jaro, let me sleep," I complain.

I know it's him. I can feel his closeness through the bond. I have no idea how I ended up curled up against his wolf, but he's warm, and soft and comfy and—

"Dragonfly, he's let you sleep too long," Bree murmurs, drawing another growl from the wolf. "It's past daybreak and you still haven't eaten."

Food.

I don't think anything else could've convinced me to blink open my bleary eyes. When I do, I realise the extent of the problem.

Jaro's wolf is curled around me on one side, sandy fur keeping me toasty warm. On my other side is a pile of white fluff that can only be Wraith. Both lupine heads are currently focused intently on the three other males, who have clearly been ready to leave for some time.

Lore is holding a severed blue arm—I'm not even going to ask where he got that—and waving it in front of Wraith in an attempt to tempt him to move, but my barghest puppy is just as intent on staying put as Jaro's wolf. Neither of them is quelled by the narrow, frustrated glare Drystan is levelling at the three of us, and I want to grin at the absurdity of the situation.

"I think Jaro must've shifted in his sleep," Bree continues, holding a bowl of steaming food in one hand, as he beckons me to stand with the other. "But if you can just get out from between them, it might get Jaro's wolf to calm down."

Easier said than done. I chuckle under my breath, then try to wiggle my way out from the literal dog-pile I'm caught in. I end up accidentally stepping on Wraith's tail, causing him to shoot up like he's been burned, kicking Jaro in the face as he does so.

Bree is forced to hold the bowl up over his head to avoid spilling the food as the two huge beasts snarl and snap at each other.

Drystan reaches out to drag me away. “Lorcan, sort them out,” he demands. “Do whatever you need to do to help Jaromir take control of his beast. The wolf is probably reacting to her scent.”

The huntsman is in typical grumpy form as he pulls me over to the horses, clearly not in any mood to answer my questions.

“Bad doggie!” Lore cries, and I twist to look, only to have my head turned back around by the impatient winter fae in front of me.

“How are you feeling?”

In answer, I yawn in his face. I don’t mean to, but I really can’t help it.

He raises his eyes heavenward and scrubs his free hand down his face. “Apart from tiredness, do you have any headaches? Itchiness?”

“You’re giving her an inquisition and she’s only just woken up,” Bree says lightly, but there’s a hint of censure in his tone as he joins us, offering me the bowl. “Eat up. We made this last night, but you were out cold.”

I take it from him, my mouth watering at the scent of rich herby stew. Bree hasn’t given me a spoon, so I tip the bowl back in careful sips, groaning at the taste. I can’t believe I just fell asleep after Jaro made me come. That must have been hours ago. We were supposed to talk when we made camp, and I was going to practise my aura skills again and—

“We need to ride,” Drystan continues, watching me eat with something unreadable floating in his ember-bright eyes. “We’re supposed to be across the Renfraw right now. Which means there’s no time to take care of your needs before we leave.”

Needs? It takes me an embarrassingly long time to get what he means, and when I do, I choke on my stew.

“It doesn’t matter,” I wheeze. “I’ll be fine.”

Drystan takes a deep breath, like he’s praying for patience. “That wasn’t what I was saying.”

“The dullahan is trying to ask if you want him to pet that pretty pussy as we ride!” Lore pipes up, leading Wraith past us to where his saddle is waiting.

“Dullahan?” I echo, confused.

“Don’t utter that word again, assassin,” Drystan snarls, aggression straightening his spine.

Lore, of course, pays him no mind, whistling happily as he hefts the saddle over Wraith’s back.

I’m still trying to get over the mental image of Drystan wanting to do

that, so it takes me a minute to figure out what he's referring to. I use the stew as an excuse, slurping the last gulps down as I think back over Lore's words, before handing the bowl back to Bree with a thankful smile.

"Why?" I ask. "Is it a bad word?"

Bree takes a step forward, almost like he wants to put himself between me and Drystan, then flinches as we draw the attention of the enraged lord.

"Dullahan is a species of high fae—a distant relative of shifters." Jaro shoves his shirt into his leather trousers as he approaches, looking disgruntled but not entirely surprised by Lore's pronouncement. Did he suspect Drystan was one of these dullahan? "An *extinct* species."

"There are extinct species of fae?" I had no idea. "How many? Why are they extinct?"

Drystan pinches his brow, visibly praying for patience as he turns around, giving me his back and heading for Blizzard—already tacked up and waiting. "Dullahans *are* extinct, and they will stay that way." A tense pause. "But yes, I was offering my services, *if* you want them. I'm aware you are still... angry with my decision to take you from the palace. I will understand if you'd prefer to ride with Jaro again."

I am angry, but I'd have to be stupid not to see this for what it is. This is Drystan's olive branch.

At Samhain, he admitted he was the last of his kind. Whatever a dullahan is, my gut is telling me that Drystan is one, and for whatever reason, he doesn't want anyone to know.

"You can trust us," I murmur, putting my hand out to touch his back.

He scoffs, and I can see his walls going up. "What's your answer, Rhoswyn?"

"No one here will betray your secrets," I push.

Drystan doesn't take my word for it. "Your decision, Nicnevin?"

Oh. We've graduated from my full name to my title now? I'm not sure we've reached this level of Winter Court surliness before.

"Yes." I shock myself when the word blurts free of my mouth, so I don't blame Jaro for fumbling his saddle or Bree for dropping the bowl. Then—before I can think better of it—I add, "I want you to stroke my pussy as we ride."

Oh, Goddess. Why did I say that? Did it sound as awkward as it felt? If Drystan turns around, he'll see me scarlet with embarrassment, but fortunately, he does no such thing.

He doesn't move, doesn't speak. Have I broken him?

Lore pops up beside me, stealing my breath as his lips descend on mine. "I'm so proud of you!" he croons as he pulls away. "See! I told you it was important to ask for exactly what you want." A half breath of a pause. "Can you say it again? It sounds dirtier when you say it."

Why would I do that when I don't even know why I said it the first time!?

"You're treading a dangerous line today," Jaro warns the redcap. "And it's not even noon."

"His erratic nature is nothing new." Bree stokes his hands over his tattoos, summoning forth his cat-sith. "Cut him some slack. All of us are on edge right now. Just be grateful he's not doing what redcaps normally do when they're horny."

"What do—" I stop talking as Drystan's hands come down on my waist, cutting off my obvious follow-up question.

The tips of his ears are on fire again, I notice dimly as he pulls me close. For a second, I get the foolish notion that he wants to kiss me. My breath catches, heart kicking wildly for a second as I wonder what kissing him will be like. I shouldn't want to know, should I? I'm still mad...

He lifts me, placing me in the saddle, and the moment is lost.

Swinging up behind me, he kicks the stallion into motion. Jaro and Bree trot ahead while Lore brings up the rear.

"Two questions." His voice rumbles through me. "I know your head is buzzing with them. I'll answer two."

Is this my reward? Or some obscure peace offering from a male who's harder to read than anyone else I've ever met? He normally despises my questions, so why open himself up to them? Not an apology—he's too proud for that—but perhaps a difference kind of truce, where we both put aside our anger.

My first question is obvious. "What was Bree talking about? What do redcaps normally do...?"

Wraith bounds up beside us before Drystan can answer, Lore lounging on his back with his wide-brimmed hat resting lightly on his chest.

"That one's easy," he says, licking his fangs. "We take what we want, and we're not picky about where we do it. Pet, you haven't lived until you experience a good public fucking. Even better if it's in the middle of a brawl. Now, aren't you glad *I* answered, so you still get to ask the grump two more questions?"

I can practically feel Drystan's displeasure radiating from him in waves. "Don't you have someone to kill? Your hat looks a little pink."

Lore looks aghast for a second before he blinks away, leaving Wraith to follow along by himself.

I take a deep breath and resolve to ignore everything Lore just said. "What's a dullahan?"

Drystan sighs in resignation, though he must've known it was coming. "The mortals know us as headless horsemen. Most fae regard us little better than necromancers because we have strong ties to the Wild Hunt. You've seen what I shift into. Do you really need more of an explanation?"

No, I suppose not, but if I wanted confirmation, I just got it.

"Next question," he demands, and I blink in surprise.

I didn't think he'd accept Lore answering the first as a valid argument, but I'll take it.

"Why did you offer your... services?" I play with the word in my mouth, not liking how clinical and detached it feels. It's not the kind of word I'd ever expect him to come out with, either. It's too humbling for someone so arrogant as him.

He doesn't speak, and I shrink a little as I wait for his answer.

"I'm not sure what you want me to say," he finally admits.

"She wants you to tell her you have feelings for her, idiot."

"Maeve!" Titania hisses, and I bury my head in my hands as the two of them fly down from above. "Eavesdropping is rude!"

"Like you weren't doing it too!"

"I came to give my report."

"Can you give it to me later?" I ask, still hiding my face. "And give us some privacy? Please?"

A heartbeat of silence later, I look up and breathe a sigh of relief when they're no longer there. Honestly, having my grandmothers involved in conversations about my sex life is never going to get any less embarrassing.

"To answer your question," Drystan says, after a minute more of silence. "It's my duty as your mate. Your well-being is my responsibility. Your scent is driving me insane, and I—" He stiffens. "Fuck off, Lorcan, or I'll drag your soul to the Otherworld myself."

"But you're about to make out with Rose."

I twist until I find the redcap perched on Blizzard's rump, looking like the cat who's got the cream.

“I want to watch. Last time, Jaro was being all noble and—”

Drystan jerks his elbow backward, knocking Lore from his spot and into the dirt—or he would have, if Lore hadn’t blinked away just in time.

So it’s just my scent? He doesn’t want—

“Whatever you’re thinking, you are probably mistaken,” he growls. “I was *about* to say that I wanted you to know I have been... interested for some time.” *He has?* “I could not see any other way to initiate a relationship since it appears we are incapable of understanding one another. Especially after you misconstrued my avoidance as distaste—”

“How else was I meant to interpret that?”

He just shakes his head. “If you’re still too angry to accept my offer, then you can ride with Jaro. Either way, I will always ensure you get what you need.”

“I’m not angry at you anymore,” I retort, not really realising the truth in those words until they’re out there. “I understand why you took me away from the battlefield. I know I wouldn’t have been much help.” I hate the honest truth, but I can’t change it. “And if I got killed and Elatha got hold of me again...” There would be no escape a second time. “I just want you to be a little less... heavy handed.”

We’re silent for a minute. I have the oddest feeling I’ve rendered him speechless, so I continue, changing the subject back to the matter at hand. “How can we *do* anything if you can’t even look at me?”

The redcap blinks back beside us, this time riding backwards in Wraith’s saddle, his cap now stiffer, with a pinch in the crown. “Blindfolds are kinky, but I’m not going to judge—”

“Lore, leave us alone!” It takes me a second to realise both Drystan and I snapped that at the same time.

Of course, the redcap doesn’t take offence. He merely blinks away again, cackling as he backflips onto Wraith’s back.

“Onward, noble steed!” he cries, racing to join Jaro and Bree in front. “We’ve angered the beast!”

For a second, I manage to hold it back, but then my face cracks, and the laugh breaks free, anyway.

“I know I can’t kill him,” Drystan mutters under his breath. “But sometimes I really, *really* want to try.”

SIX

DRYSTAN

Rose hasn't spoken since we yelled at Lorcan, and I'm becoming concerned. Even when we stopped on the bank of the Renfraw to allow her a chance to wash and eat, she was quiet. I expected a dozen questions about the river, the flowers, heck, even the sky.

I despise this ridiculous uncertainty that's been plaguing me all morning. Her earlier confession stunned me. I hadn't expected her to fold so easily, and now I'm uncertain what to say. Should I say anything at all? After all, if she's no longer angry with me, it's probably best I don't open my mouth. At least until she's at least come twice and I don't have to worry about her hurting herself. But she hasn't brought up my offer again.

Has she changed her mind? Is she unwell? Headaches are a symptom of a burgeoning fever...

I used to hate that I knew the signs so well, but the knowledge was necessary. My mother isn't above using one of her ladies to ensure the continuation of her line and pressure Cedwyn into taking me as his heir.

Deliberately forcing my mind away from that subject, I check Rose's hands again. She's not restarted her scratching. Good. Looking away, I blink until the sunspots from her aura disappear. I don't want to let her get to that point again, but even though I suggested this, I'm not sure how to broach her needs again. So I stay silent, waiting for her to say something.

It shouldn't take long. If there's one thing I've learned, it's that she has a seelie curiosity. I can't believe she's lasted more than an hour without asking at least one question. We're about to reach the old bridge that marks the point where the river breaks free from the southernmost point of Lake Orvendel. Surely when she sees the early third-era architecture, it will provoke some kind of response.

Being this close to the river is dangerous, but unbeknownst to Rose, I've had a strong glamour over us since we left. If the Fomorians dare come close, they won't see anything, and we won't let them live long enough to hear her.

"Rosie, look left," Jaro calls from in front.

The shifter has been in an unbearably good mood since yesterday. It probably has something to do with the fact that he's still wearing her dust like

a peacock. Ass.

Rose jerks like she's been jogged from a trance, looking up with a smile.

"I think I saw it that time!" she mutters.

Saw what?

But she forgets all about whatever she was doing when she spots the expanse of crystal calm water.

Orvendel is a sight to behold. It's one of the many beautiful baubles that the Spring Court likes to celebrate, for all that its northern shore is technically Winter Court territory, and its western shore sits in Elfhome. On a calm day, the water reflects the sky so perfectly, you might think it was a huge mirror.

"There's a tree in the centre that marks the boundary between Winter, Spring, and Elfhome," Titania explains, floating along beside us.

The Second Nicnevin has been here for a while, though the first and third are still apparently on whatever missions Rose gave them. I suspect that—while one is with Florian—the other is almost certainly keeping an eye on Caed.

If Rose was any kind of general, she'd have sent them to watch over Elatha and report back on his movements, but she doesn't think like that. As useful as it would be, I'm loathe to suggest it and let her work her way further into the thick of the war effort.

"It takes three days to walk all the way around," Titania adds, flitting down to hover beside the horse.

That's when I realise I've called Blizzard to a halt without thinking, allowing Rose to look her fill.

"There's a legend," I add, "That a huge sea monster was sighted in the middle of the lake during the Beltaine celebrations over a thousand years ago. The Queen of Winter was so concerned that she sent Prince Cedwyn—as he was then—to bargain with no less than seven different kelpies to ensure that there was no threat to the court hiding under the water."

Lore chuckles. "I was there. It was some off-realm shifter idiot high on fae-dust."

Sometimes I forget how old the redcap is. His immaturity belies his three-thousand years.

"Off-realm shifter?" Rose sounds distracted, but her curiosity is definitely piqued.

Titania begins to explain, but she's cut off by a loud shout as Lore urges Wraith into the water with a splash.

“Whoopee! Last one in’s as fucked as Drystan wishes he was!”

It takes me a second to process the insult. “We do not have time for this!” I snarl at him. “Stop messing around.”

But Rose is already slipping from my saddle, heading for the water with a delighted laugh. Even the second Nicnevin begins to follow, stopping at the edge of the water to watch on in amusement.

“She needs this,” Bree says, urging his cat-sith into Blizzard’s path and preventing me from calling a stop to their shenanigans. “I understand your urgency, but if you turn this pilgrimage into a death march, she’ll hate us by the end. Let her see that there are parts of her queendom worth fighting for.”

There’s wisdom in the púca’s words, as much as I hate to admit it. Rose has barely experienced the tiniest part of her realm—much like the other Nicnevins, who were raised in the temples.

For the first time, I consider the possibility that the tradition of the pilgrimage might not just be to raise the morale of the common folk. Could it be that whichever Nicnevin started it simply wished to see the realm she’d been sheltered from for the first twenty-five years of her life?

I dare a glance at Rose, only to frown in disapproval. Perhaps it was stupid of me to assume she’d stick to paddling like a sensible person.

“She’s getting soaked.”

She’s already up to her hips, splashing around with the barghest as Lore transforms his cap into a shark fin and wears it on his back to scare her. Her aura catches in every droplet of water, casting rainbows through my vision.

A second later, Jaro’s wolf joins in, leaping in and tackling the redcap before he can swim too close.

“We have spare clothes for her.” Bree pauses. “And the view isn’t bad.”

That’s not something I ever thought I’d hear him say. I raise a brow at him, letting him see my disbelief.

“I can’t fear her,” Bree reminds me. “And... I’d have to be blind not to desire her. It gives me hope.”

“Do you still plan to use Kitarni’s potion?”

The last time we spoke about him attending Rose’s fever, he asked us to lock him away and break his bones. At least the high priestess’s solution would spare him that.

He doesn’t answer me.

“You need to talk to her about it,” I prompt.

“I know.”

“She will—”

“If she wants me there, I’ll be there.” His tone is sharp, but the words are quiet. “I—I only ask that... if I should...”

Because it’s also one of my fears, I understand.

“You would never hurt her.”

“Just because I cannot fear *her* doesn’t prevent me from fearing the act, and I don’t know what I would do—”

“Take the potion.”

He stops dead. “What?”

“You’re not ready. Forcing yourself to be ready to please her will only end in tears. Take the potion.” *And while you’re at it, see one of the mind-healers*, I finish silently.

I can’t push him to do so, but he needs to speak to an empath or *someone*.

“Besides, even if you *are* ready, do you really think her fever is the time to test that theory? While all of those urges are magnified?” It would be a trial by fire, and he must know that.

Not for the first time, I wonder about suggesting he set up an encounter with Rose where he’s completely in control, and then dismiss the notion. Her fever is no time for that. His instincts may push him to keep going beyond his limits. Besides, what worked for me may not work for the quieter male.

He reaches out to stroke along his tattoos. “I’m not sure I could stand being... unaware. I do not sleep well, and I’m not comfortable being...” He shakes his head and looks away sharply, but his eyes find their way back to Rose within seconds, seeking her out like the flame to his proverbial moth. “I would rather be chained and beaten than not know what was happening to my body again.”

His hands are digging into his arm so hard that his tattoos have started to shift away from the spot. The nathair is the only exception, twisting around the area like it seeks to comfort him.

What twisted fuckery did the Toxic Orchid do to this male?

For the first time, I feel the stirrings of... guilt. I assumed, when we went our separate ways, that he was simply busy with his own affairs, as I was. I should’ve sought him out. Perhaps then, Bricriu would have been spared this.

“We will figure this out,” I promise him.

He deserves happiness, and it’s obvious our mate adores him.

Rose shrieks, and both of us nearly snap our necks as we search for the cause of her fright. My eyebrows rise into my hairline as I watch Jaro lift her

high into the air, then fall backwards into the water.

The two of them come up coughing, laughing, and spluttering, just in time for Lore to blink into the sky above and yell, “*Incoming!*” before he smashes into the lake, drenching them all.

I sigh, rubbing the bridge of my nose to alleviate the moisture gathering in my eyes.

Now her clothes are wet through, doing even less to muffle her aura.

It’s going to be a long ride.

The wind is cold, thanks to a hint of the winter chill from the northern border. She’ll freeze if she keeps this up.

“All right, that’s enough,” I call. “We haven’t even made it to the first village yet.”

Lore blinks beside me, pouting like he thinks I’m going to cave. “But Daddy D, we’re just getting started.”

The innocent expression morphs too quickly for me to react. Before I know it, air is whooshing past my limbs as I plummet like a stone towards the surface water.

“Lorcan!” I barely get his name out before I land in the lake and have to save my breath for swimming. I kick frantically back to the surface. The moment my head breaks water, I pin the red blur in the distance with the look that has made lesser fae quake in their boots.

“You fucking idiot! Why did you drop me this far out?!”

I’m at least a mile away from the shore, and I kick with all my strength, propelling myself back to them. By the time I finally reach the shallows, my anger has exploded from simple rage into a dark, calculating fury. With one hand, I grab the guffawing redcap’s hat, and with the other, I summon a handful of flames to hold underneath it.

“Do that again. I. Dare. You.”

The dangerous glint in his scarlet eyes returns, but this time I’m ready.

“Sure you want to play this game?” Lore asks, voice deadly quiet. “I’m not the only one with a weakness that can be stolen from me.”

My gut clenches, and I lower the hat an inch reflexively.

A small hand closes over my arm, but she stays behind me. “Drystan, we’ll keep riding. Please don’t start this.”

I want to retort that it was Lorcan who started it but bite my tongue and extinguish the flames without fanfare instead. If he continues this, I *will* finish it. I scrunch up the stupid hat—which has morphed into a helmet,

making the task considerably harder—and throw it in his face, then drag our Nicnevin out of the water.

“Stay still,” I growl under my breath as she twists to check on the rest of her males.

With a deep breath, I summon my magic in its most controlled form. Creating heat without flame is hard, but it’s worth it for her gasp of surprise as steam rises from our clothes in waves. I lift her back into the saddle with a smirk that quickly becomes a grimace as the smell of wet dog assaults my nose. Wraith bounds from the water and shakes thousands of droplets out of his white fur. He looks like a drowned rat, and I smile at the thought of Lore having to ride on his back for the rest of the trip.

Jaro follows, completely naked from the shift, and grinning as he recovers his clothes from the heap on the ground where he left them.

“Fancy giving me a hand?” He waves a hand at his still wet body without shame.

I suppose there’s no need to be embarrassed when our mate’s audible little gasp tells him exactly how much she appreciates the view.

I swing up behind Rose with a shrug. “It depends. Do you value your body hair?”

He’s got the most of all of us, and I snort internally as I realise he wears a pelt in both forms.

He just waves off my sardonic comment with an easy grin. “I’m pretty sure Rose likes it. She might scold you if you singe me.”

The perplexing female in front of me shifts, twisting to look at me, though she knows I can’t stare back.

“When we’re riding, can you teach me to shield my aura?” she asks. “I’ve been working on seeing it all morning, and I think I’m almost there.”

She... has?

Jaro is dry in an instant, and as an afterthought I do Lore and Wraith as well. I justify it to myself as I don’t want to spend the rest of the day smelling wet dog every time they move upwind.

“Hey, what did you do that for?” Lore protests. “I was going to strip off and air dry so Rose could enjoy the view.”

“Then it’s fortunate I decided to spare her the disappointment of seeing your cock.” I spur Blizzard forward and back to the road. “Hurry up. The village of Renhyrst is still an hour away.”

I ignore Lore’s protests about his cock’s appeal in favour of setting a

brisk pace.

Bree is already beside us, offering Rose more food without a word. I'm glad he's taken on the task of keeping her fed. I've spent years as a nomad across the courts, but the foraged fare I'd feed myself is hardly worthy of a queen. I'm also not sure roots and berries are enough when her body is trying to store energy.

She should really be holed up in the comfort of the temple, resting, eating her weight in sweet treats, and being pampered like every other female fae.

At least the púca seems to have packed most of the kitchen's supply of Fair Isle bread into his saddlebags. It makes me wonder if he packed any of his own stuff at all.

Then again... what does he really have? When we rescued him from Siabetha, he didn't have anything to his name.

Frowning, I resolve to deal with that later.

"Drystan," Rose calls me out of my musings with her mouth full. "You were explaining how to shield my aura."

I don't remember agreeing to that, but mentioning that would be pointless, given how much the last few days have really driven home how much I want her to learn this. If I have to spend her fever wearing a blindfold, I will, for her, but I selfishly want to know exactly what she looks like when she comes all over my cock.

Taking a slow breath through my nose, I consider once again how best to explain something that—to me—is as natural as breathing.

"Can you actually see your aura yet?"

I doubt that she can, or she'd be rubbing her eyes trying to chase away sunspots like I am.

"I see flickers of something!" she insists.

"Rhoswyn, if you could see your aura, you'd know about it. There are no 'flickers of something.' You shine brighter than the goddess-damned sun."

She sags in the seat, falling back against me in defeat. I freeze, unsure what to do in this situation. Her wings are fluttering against my chest, her shoulders curled up in defeat.

"This is where you offer her a hug," Titania hisses.

I'd forgotten she was here. Spirits have a way of waiting unseen until they want to be heard, and the past Nicnevins are no exception. I look down at Rose... then back at the ghostly queen. A hug? I haven't... How does one even...? I flounder for a second before I settle for patting her upper arm.

Shit. This is stupid. Maybe I should've just hugged her. My patting slows, then stops as I realise how ridiculous I look.

Goddess, damn it. Where are the seelie when I need them? I glance up, looking for Jaro, but Rose's hand takes mine, stopping me before I can call for him to take her away and fix her.

"I am going to learn this," she promises. "I... I just need to try harder."

"It's not about trying." I'm repeating myself, but I don't know how else to explain it. "It's just about doing. You don't try to breathe; you just do it. You can see my aura. You're already halfway there. Just... take the next step."

"Glamour her to look like you see her," Titania suggests. "Maybe if she knows what to look for..."

Unconvinced that it will help, I sigh. "Fine. But she can see my aura. She knows what she's looking for."

I wave the glamour over her with little effort, and the others turn in their saddles, giving away that they've been listening the whole time.

Jaro's hand comes up to shield his face. "Shit! Some warning next time?"

"Oooooo shinyyyy," Lore croons, still looking despite the risk to his retinas.

Bree hisses, his whole body flinching so severely that he almost falls off his cat-sith.

Ignoring all of them, I focus on Rose's reaction.

"This is how you see me?" she asks, haltingly, waving her arm out like she can dissipate the glow with movement alone. "Drystan... I. How can you still see?"

I dismiss the glamour, sparing the rest of them from the glow. "With. Great. Difficulty."

My nostrils flare as the salty scent of tears hits me in a wave, and I rear back, aghast. "Goddess, are you... crying?"

"N—" Her denial cuts off as her body rejects the lie. "Most of it is just the brightness."

I'm willing to bet that most of it is actually the early effects of her fever, combined with her overly soft heart, but I don't dare say that.

Should I pat her again? I glance to Titania for a hint, but the second Nicnevin is gone.

Fucking spirits.

"Now that you know what you're looking for, do you feel more

confident?” If I can get her to focus on her aura, perhaps she’ll desist with this emotional display. “Once you see your aura, you simply need to imagine it being sucked back into your skin and staying trapped there. You may not be able to shield all of it”—in fact, I’ll be impressed if she can—“but even half would lend you an advantage.”

It’s simple enough.

“Do you think she might be unconsciously blocking herself from seeing her aura?” Jaro posits. “It could be self defence.”

It’s definitely possible, and something I hadn’t considered. If she can’t see it... No. She has to. Danu wouldn’t be so cruel as to gift me a mate I can never look at.

Then again, a lot of the Goddess’s designs for my life thus far have been less than ideal.

I shrug.

Her body shifts, and I glance down just in time to catch her rubbing her arm. Her aura is spiking wildly across her skin, shifting in response to her agitation.

“Huntress,” I murmur. “You’re scratching again.”

SEVEN

RHOSWYN

I freeze, caught off guard by the huskiness in his voice. I hadn't even realised that my nails were curling into my skin until he pointed it out.

"Why are you looking?" I ask, trying to crush the butterflies in my stomach. "If it's so painful—"

"Every time I take my eyes off you, you end up in more trouble." One of his hands leaves the reins to rest on my thigh, and I swear my nerves light up at the innocent touch. "You said yes. Tell me what your boundaries are."

It's all I can do not to gape at him. "Boundaries?"

The silence in our group is oppressive. *They're all waiting*, I realise. *They all want to know.*

"I... erm... What are *your* boundaries?" I turn the question back on him.

He doesn't scoff like I expect him to. "Touching my neck. Anything to do with urine, blood, or shit. Degradation of myself or my partner. I won't be bound, topped, or spanked, but I enjoy doing those things to others. I'm not interested in males, though I'll admit Lore tempts me to flog him on a daily basis. I'm fine with public sex, but not with an open relationship, by which I mean, if you try to bring another male into your harem who isn't part of your Guard, I'll rip his heart out and make him eat it in front of you."

I... don't know what half of that stuff is, and the rest... I don't know if I want to know how shit enters the picture. My stomach sinks. These males are decades—no, hundreds—of years older than I am, and they've had all that time to figure out what they like. By contrast, my inexperience suddenly feels shameful.

There's only one point in the whole of that list that I feel qualified to answer, and it seems pointless. Nevertheless, Drystan brought it up, so...

"I don't want any other males," I promise quietly.

"You're messing this up," Bree grumbles from ahead, though he won't look at me. "Start slower."

After a long moment of silence, Drystan huffs out a breath. "I'd hoped Jaro would've gone over this already."

"Hey, don't blame me because I'm not some deviant unseelie," Jaro retorts. "My list of kinks begins and ends with worshipping every inch of her

body. I don't need to scare her by tossing around terms like 'degradation.'

Drystan ignores him. "Is there anywhere you don't want me to touch you?"

I hum as I think. "I... I'd like some warning if you're going to touch my wings."

"Noted."

"And... I don't like being struck about the head."

The atmosphere turns glacial in the span of a second. The bush we're riding past catches fire, then disintegrates. It falls to the ground as ashes under a wave of Drystan's power. Jaro lets out a sub-vocal growl.

"Pretty pet," Lore croons, suddenly standing in front of the horse. "Tell me a name."

His cap has morphed again, becoming a wicked-looking bird mask, with teeth just like a valravn. His scarlet eyes are hard as he waits for my answer.

"I... I never said I had been struck like that."

"Then say it," Drystan challenges. "Say: no one has ever hit me on the head."

I open my mouth, then close it. "It was not very often," I settle with at last. "Besides, he was not himself."

"If it was Caed..." Jaro begins.

"It wasn't!" I promise, before Lore can do something stupid like blink to wherever the Fomorian is and start a fight. "It... My human father was kicked in the head by a horse he was shoeing. He... wasn't the same after. He had fits of anger, and occasionally, I didn't dodge fast enough. But he *wasn't well*."

Jaro pins Drystan with a look. "You *told* me they were a good family."

"They *were*," I insist. "It was—"

Drystan is so stiff behind me that he might as well be made of ice. "There was no violence in his aura when we came across them. Besides, you were supposed to be protecting her!"

Jaro's warm chestnut eyes meet mine for a second, and his lips part, ready to respond.

"Please stop arguing," I whisper, then slap my hands over my mouth as I realise what I've done.

Too late. Jaro's mouth snaps closed so hard that his teeth gnash audibly.

"No. I didn't mean that. Please, don't listen to me—"

Jaro's hands spring up to cover his ears, and Lore falls back on his ass,

laughing.

“No! That’s not what I meant!”

I whirl, looking to Drystan to help me undo this.

He groans, pulling Blizzard to a halt, and slides from his saddle. “We don’t have time for this.”

So follows the most mortifying half an hour of my life. Jaro half-falls off his horse because he has no way to move his hands, which are then wrestled away from his ears by Lore and Drystan. Of course, then my charm magic refuses to work the first three times I try to undo it.

By the time we’re finally underway again, everyone has forgotten about the initial conversation, and the increasing signs of civilisation make me loathe to bring it up again. How do you ask someone to explain what they mean by ‘spanked’ when there are fae walking past your horse, hanging on your every word?

“We’re nearly at the shrine,” Bree announces, as we pass through a hamlet where the houses are built into small earth mounds, each one topped by a contorted blossom tree.

At the end of the street, over a dozen or so fae have gathered around the base of the oldest, most gnarled tree. They’re mainly dryads, though there are a few other fae dotted about. All of them bow deeply as we dismount, and I try my best not to feel nervous as I approach the shrine keeper.

Jaro stays close to me, and the other three form a protective semi-circle at my back. Remembering what happened with Bram, I keep a respectful distance between myself and the priest.

“Goddess bless the Nicnevin,” he murmurs, blossoms falling from the branches of his hair. “This is the heart of our sacred grove.”

I look up into the boughs of the immense pink magnolia, smiling at the white strips of fabric which stream from the many branches. Some of them are so old and weathered that they are practically see through, but a few are bright and new, with letters inked into the fabric.

“Are those wishes, like the boulder shrine?” I ask Jaro quietly.

He stiffens almost imperceptibly. “No. They’re mourning ribbons, for the dead.”

The compliment I was about to pay the priest dies on my tongue.

Instead, I settle for, “This is a peaceful place.”

It takes a minute at most for the blessing to be complete. This time Danu decides to make her presence known by changing the colour of the blooms

from a natural pink to the gentle blush of golden peach found only in soft summer sunsets. The leaves swell, becoming twice their usual size, before turning pure white to match the ribbons.

Unlike the other two shrines, where I could deal with the fallout without too many people watching, this time the crowd is right there, staring in wonderment as I let my Guard lead me away.

“Please, Nicnevin, take this for your journey!” A parcel is pressed into my hands.

“Take this tea. It helped with my first fever.”

Jaro is targeted next. “And this wine! My grandfather wanted to save it for something special.”

I look up at Jaro in alarm, silently pleading with my gaze as someone presses a rope of onions on top of the three packages I’m already carrying.

“Your offerings are appreciated, but we need to travel light.” His tone—while pleasant—is loud and unyielding. “You would be better served holding a feast to honour Danu’s gift and praying for your Nicnevin’s safety on the road.”

Murmurs of assent start up, and someone mercifully removes the onions from my grasp before I’m hurried back to the horses and lifted into the saddle. The village fae follow behind us, calling out praises and blessings. The longer it goes on, the more I sink down in my seat, trying to hide behind Drystan’s body.

It isn’t until we’re deep in the hills, finally alone, that I can relax. The tightness across my skin is worsening, and I open my mouth to say something to Drystan before it escalates, but I don’t get a chance.

Bree holds up a hand, bringing the whole group to a stop. On top of his head, his feline ears twitch this way, then that, causing the rest of my Guard to eye the two rock-strewn banks on either side of the road warily.

“Jaromir, take Rhoswyn,” Drystan mutters, so quietly I barely hear him. “Lore—”

The redcap is already gone. A second later, he lets out a huge whoop, followed by a clang.

As if that’s the signal they were waiting for, the Fomorians descend on us in a blue wave, swarming us with their iron swords raised high above their heads as they charge down from where they hid among the craggy hills.

An ambush.

Jaro yanks me down from the saddle. His grip is rough with urgency as he

surrounds us both with one of his golden shields, just in time to deflect a deadly blow from behind. Blizzard gives a fierce whinny and rears, stomping the Fomorian into the ground.

Blood sprays everywhere, splashing against Jaro's golden shield and dripping away in a macabre streak. My eyes follow the trail, grimacing as I see what remains of our attacker's caved-in skull.

So young. This Fomorian can't have been long out of his teens. His final expression is one of utter hatred, and I can't stop staring.

"Rose, come on." Jaro tugs at my arm, pulling me out of the way of Blizzard's hooves and over to the roadside. "Stay here."

With that single instruction, he abandons me in my golden bubble of protection, lifting his wicked looking axe from his belt before swinging it so hard he literally decapitates the next Fomorian coming at us.

My stomach turns, and I look away, only to find Bree casually stepping out of the way of three separate attackers. A weight presses down on my chest, but my fear is needless. He summons a blade from the tattoo on his thigh and stabs it through the throat of the first Fomorian. A second blade lands between the eyes of the next, turning back to an inky cloud the second its job is done. He's a whirl of blades and smoke, delivering deaths just as quickly as the rest of them.

Drystan is the only one who's chosen to remain on his mount. He has his spine whip out again, and a flash of heat at my back tells me he's incinerated another Fomorian who was trying to sneak up on me.

"Hey! I wanted that one!" Lore cries. "No stealing my kills!"

"Too slow," Drystan replies, smirking.

Hell, they're not... they're not having *fun* with this, surely?

But the more I watch, the more it becomes evident that they *are*. I expected Lore to be cutting through them with whoops of glee, but I can't say I ever thought I'd see Drystan smiling as he slashes our ambushers into charred little pieces.

Lore catches me watching, and his hat puffs up, becoming a strange feathery nightmare covered in frills. He grins as he performs a perfect somersault, twisting in the air to take out two Fomorians with the blades in his boots, then winks at me, offering a tiny bow, as they drop lifelessly to the floor.

The more I watch, the clearer it becomes that the unseelie are competing with one another. Every time one of them lines up a kill, the other does their

best to take it first. It's a gruesome game.

Jaro and Bree are efficient and practised, but it's obvious neither of them takes the same joy from it. Their mouths are set in grim lines, their eyes hard and constantly searching for the next threat. Bree's ears are swivelling on top of his head, twitching in response to every sound.

Is this another difference between the seelie and unseelie? Perhaps, but they all have one thing in common; they check on me constantly.

Despite being in the midst of a battle, I've never felt safer.

Or so useless.

They're machines. Warriors. Even Wraith and Naris are doing their part, their huge predatory jaws ripping and gnashing until nothing but blood and dismembered limbs remain.

And I'm... a damsel in distress. Or at the very least, a useless bystander.

I never thought that would bother me as much as it does. I'm protected by the shield. I wouldn't mind being on the sidelines if I had something useful to do, some way to help from afar. But I don't. They're out there risking their lives, and I'm sitting here looking pretty.

I suppose if I'm stuck here for a while—and there are a good number of Fomorians, so I probably will be—I can work on my wing exercises. I sigh and start the regimen of lifting, extending, collapsing, and lowering that Florian said I should do daily. Tense and release. Up, then down.

It's tiring, but not as much as it was only a week or so ago, which means I'm making progress.

My skin is crawling, my stomach is growling, and my head is starting to pound again, but I ignore the symptoms. Now isn't the time to drag one of them to one side and demand an orgasm. Drystan may have offered earlier, but he made no move to follow through. Maybe he's thought better of it.

I'll try to corner Jaro later tonight. Surely, I can go one day without coming? Right?

It won't kill me... I hope.

EIGHT

RHOSWYN

By the time they're done, they're all covered in blood and other... fluids I don't want to examine too closely. I'm pretty sure that the grey jelly-like substance on Drystan's jerkin is a piece of brain.

Jaro finally drops the shield, and I step from the safety of my tiny circle of clean grass, absently scratching the back of my hand as I go.

"There's a river across the ridge," he mutters, noting my reaction. "They probably came from there. I'd planned to cross it using the bridge a mile or so away, but we may as well clear out any who remain and get cleaned up."

"Goddessless Fomorian bastards," Drystan growls, kicking over a still-twitching warrior and plunging his sword into her heart to finish her off.

I do my best not to flinch. It won't help my case when I tell them my decision later if I'm reacting to every death.

Watching them fight, with nothing to do beyond staying out of their way, has cemented a thought that's been slowly building in the back of my mind for a while. As much as I dislike the idea of hurting anyone, the world we live in is at war. Not being able to defend myself is only going to become more of an issue as we approach the northern courts where the fighting is worse.

I may be afraid of violence, but that won't stop it from seeking me out. The only one who benefits from my weakness is Elatha. If he should take me prisoner again, I don't want to be a helpless waif.

Maeve's lessons in dodging weren't enough when the king of the Fomorians had my wings in his hands. I need to learn to defend myself. Better still—I need to learn to fight, so I'm not just a glaring vulnerability.

I'm still trying to figure out how to broach the subject with my males as they finish off the last of the wounded. Lore is dipping his hat into still-bleeding corpses with one hand as he rifles through their pockets with the other. A few minutes in, he lets out a feral grin as he tugs something gold and shiny from a corpse and skips over to take my hand.

"This matches the blood of your enemies," he comments, like that's an everyday comparison.

He draws away, heading back to the dead without waiting for my

response, leaving a chain bracelet with teardrop rubies glistening around my wrist.

Drystan's jaw clenches, but he says nothing. I don't know how I feel about taking jewellery from the dead, but I swallow back my objections. The craftsmanship on this is nothing like anything I saw in Fellgotha, which means the Fomorian who had it likely murdered a fae to take it.

So much death.

The horses have stayed put, thankfully, and Drystan and Jaro take their reins and begin to lead them up over the rocky ground to the crest of the hill. Lore trails behind, but only for as long as it takes to swipe his hat through as much of the blood as possible.

My mind flashes back to the dagger Lore gifted me back when we first met, and I fix my eyes on him as we crest the ridge and stare down at the river beyond. I'll ask him first. I'm pretty sure the others won't approve—in fact, I'm certain Drystan will outright forbid it. No. In the dullahan's case, it's definitely better to ask forgiveness than permission. Perhaps Jaro will help, if I can convince him it's mainly for self defence, and Bree... he's so quiet it's hard to tell what he'll say.

Three Fomorian ships are moored at the river's edge below us. Their iron hulls are leeching the vitality from everything around them, turning the clear water brown and cloudy. I don't really want to get any closer, but I stumble down the hill after them, anyway.

Choosing a flat-ish boulder to sit on that will keep me a safe distance from the shore, I hold my breath as my Guard advances on the seemingly abandoned ships. Evidently, my chosen spot is far enough away that Jaro doesn't see the point in shielding me, because I have a clear view of my males as they approach the bank.

"Let's flush them out of their boats," Drystan mutters.

Sweat beads on his brow, and I wonder what he's up to as the water begins to steam.

Of course. His magic would struggle to affect the iron boats, but the water around them is fair game. It takes a few minutes, but the Fomorians throw open the trap doors that lead below deck and flee their ships or risk being boiled alive.

"Out of the frying pan and on to my little knife!" Lore whoops, racing down the hill before the howling blue warriors can pinpoint our location.

"Stay here," Drystan growls in my general direction, before following

swiftly after the redcap.

Bree's wings pop out from his shoulders a second later, and he swoops down after them. Giving up on his axe, Jaro shifts into his wolf form and races Wraith the rest of the distance.

I try my best not to close my eyes, but there are some things I just don't want to see.

Like Jaro's jaws clamping down on a Fomorian's head and breaking it open like an egg. Or Bree slicing open a female's gut until the gory innards fall out.

The downside of closing my eyes is that my other senses are heightened. I can hear the squelch of... *something* and taste the coppery tang in the air. And, without my sight to distract me, the urge to itch is becoming hard to ignore. Every inch of me is so sensitive that the mere movement of wind over my limbs feels like too much. My palms stroke over the skin, but I resist digging my nails in to scratch as I want to.

Barely.

I open my eyes again, but the damage is done. A whimper builds in the back of my throat, splintering free before I can help it.

The blur of red that fills my vision makes me fall back, making space for Lore as he blinks beside me with a frown on his face.

"What's wrong, pretty pet?" he asks, brows creased in confusion as he reaches out to swipe a tear from my cheek with his thumb before bringing it to his mouth.

"I... I need you," I admit, meeting his eyes through my own watery ones. His pupils are so dilated they almost eclipse the red of his irises. "Please, Lore."

He cocks his head to one side, nostrils flaring as every single muscle in his body locks up. "Oh, pet... you shouldn't have done that. You have no idea..."

My shoulders slump, and I curl into myself as I realise he's not going to help me. My hands claw at my neck, drawing blood. That's his undoing. He leans closer, drawn by some invisible tether, eyes falling closed as he presses his nose to my hair, breathing in my scent. He groans.

He blinks me away from my boulder—and out of my clothes—landing us both in the mud in the middle of the fight. Before I can even process what's going on, he's sunk his shoulders between my thighs, wrapped his arms around them to keep me spread open, and dropped his mouth to my sex.

“Lore!” I scream—and not entirely from fear.

Goddess, that suction is *just right*.

A sword falls towards my face in slow motion. A scream of equal parts terror and pleasure wrenches free of my body as death stares me in the face. Lore swirls circles around my clit with his tongue until my pussy is dripping, silently demanding to be filled.

A familiar sand-coloured wolf leaps over the top of us and tackles the Fomorian attempting to take my life just in time. My back arches under the relentless assault on my nerve endings even as the hair on the back of my neck rises in fear.

My hands drop to his head, fingers digging into the soft woollen fabric of his cap as I fight an internal battle of my own. Do I rip him away and save us both? Or do I give in, trust the others to protect us, and accept what my body so desperately wants?

“Danu’s sacred tits, Lore! Get her out of here!” Bree yells.

Lore mumbles something, but his mouth is sealed to my pussy, licking me closer and closer to orgasm with every stroke. He’s feasting on me with unashamed abandon, making the lewdest noises that somehow ring louder in my ears than the clang of weapons. My body, apparently not bothered by the poor timing, is winding tighter and tighter, begging for the release I’ve denied it. I writhe in the cold wet mud like a wild thing, so caught in the storm of light brewing behind my eyelids that I don’t care if I die, as long as I get to come first.

“Jaromir, shield her before he gets them both killed!” Drystan barks.

A golden bubble surrounds us, and Lore’s fingers take that as a sign to join the fun, pressing at my entrance until my body yields to his silent demand.

“Yes.” I don’t mean for the breathy word to slip out, but it does. “Goddess, don’t stop, Lore. Please, don’t stop.”

Mercifully, he doesn’t. His fingers pump in and out roughly, twisting to rub my G-spot while his tongue lashes my clit. It’s a devastating dual attack, and I don’t stand a chance. I come crashing down in a tempest of sensation that seems to explode outwards along every nerve at once. I drop back to the mud in a rush, eyes going wide as Lore sits back and licks his lips, and then his fingers with a wide grin.

“Lore, I…”

We shouldn’t have done that. The sparkling pleasure that lingers in my

veins turns sour as I realise just how stupid that move was.

What was I thinking? No. Why *wasn't* I thinking?

My arms wrap over my breasts defensively, shoulders shrinking as my legs snap together.

“Pretty Rose,” Lore whispers, moving closer and ripping off his hat in one smooth motion. It turns into a hooded poncho the second it lands on my head, covering my nudity. “Don’t be mad. You can’t help what you need.”

I clutch the fabric around me as he tugs me into his arms beneath the glowing golden dome. He holds me as my body starts to shake and my breathing collapses into ragged half-sobs. The battle around us is winding down, the rage-filled noises becoming few and far between, which leaves nothing to hide the quiet sounds of my melancholy confusion.

“Why did I do that?” I ask, curling closer into him. “I didn’t mean to charm you. I’m sorry. I should’ve put a stop to it.”

“It’s your first fever, silly pet,” he murmurs against my forehead. “It’s going to be rough.”

No soothing words. Just blunt, honest truth. Taking a deep breath, I try to force my breathing to even out by force of will as I focus on the scent of him to clear my mind. Coppery and tart and unmistakably Lore. A minute passes, then another, as I slowly will myself to calm down.

“My headache still isn’t gone,” I mutter disbelievingly.

He shifts, as if to continue where we left off, and I shove him away. “No. I might charm you again!”

His eyes burn into me as he says, “I loved eating your sweet pussy until you screamed and soaked my tongue. I want to taste you every morning when I wake up and every night when I go to sleep. You can never charm me to do something I don’t want to do, pet. I’ve been your slave since the day you were born.”

My heart stutters, then restarts twice as fast as I read his face, looking for any hint of deception. He lets me stare for a second before claiming my lips. This time, the kiss is languid and sensual. His fangs nip at my lips, and I taste myself on him.

I didn’t think I’d like it, but I realise with relief that it’s not as bad as I thought it would be. In fact, I’m almost... sweet?

Lore’s hand traces back down to rest on my bare thigh, then strokes up until he’s near my core again. “I want to fuck you so badly,” he murmurs against my lips. “But you need one of them there to hold me back when I

finally slam my dick home and fill you up. I don't want to damage my pretty pet."

"You won't," I mumble against his mouth. "Lore." I hesitate, holding back the word 'please' through force of will alone. "You'd never hurt me."

Lore draws back as his fingers meet my still wet centre, tracing the combination of my cum and his saliva around my clit.

"That's where you're wrong." He brushes my nose with his own as his fingers abandon the bundle of nerves to search out my entrance. "I want you on your knees, pinned to the ground by my cock with my fist in your hair while your prissy courtiers watch. I want to fuck you until your mind breaks and your body yields to me so completely you can't imagine your life without me buried deep inside you." He shoves two fingers back into me, the brutality of the invasion a sharp contrast to the softness of his earlier kiss. "I want your squeals. I want your pain. I want your blood mixed with mine and your mating bond written on our skin for everyone to see."

My breath is gone, stolen by his words and the hammering thrust of his fingers in my sex. The image he's painted in my mind is so primal that my body clenches around his digits and embarrassing wet noises somehow drown out the sounds of battle with each thrust.

"I want you to come." Lore's voice has turned deep and husky. "I want you to come so damn hard you strangle my cock and I fill you up with filthy under fae cum, but right now I'll settle for you gushing on my fingers until you scream."

He adds a third finger, stretching me more as the heel of his hand grinds hard against my clit.

I detonate, flying apart as colours flash behind my eyelids. I clench so hard around Lore's fingers that he's forced to stop pumping and just hold them there, letting me grip and release them over and over until my body comes down from the high.

My eyes have fallen closed, but all I can see is red. When I open them again, the world around us is completely silent. The last of the rattling cries of the dead have been extinguished, and the golden dome which protected us is completely gone.

"Lorcan." Drystan has his arms crossed over his chest. "That was just about the most stupid thing you've ever done."

"I charmed him into it." I hasten to defend him, trying to ignore the fact that the redcap's fingers are still buried inside me. Both Bree's and Jaro's

eyes are glued to where Lore's hand is barely covering my mound.

The wolf shifter's nostrils flare, and Bree's ears are pricked up and flicking with agitation.

"You weren't going to leave any of them alive, anyway," Lore replies, withdrawing his fingers and licking them clean with a grin as I slam my thighs closed. "What does it matter if they saw before they died?"

"You put her in danger." Jaro's wolf flashes in his eyes for a second before he wrestles it back.

"She was suffering." Lore shrugs. "Now she's not. Did you want a round of applause for doing your job and protecting her? Good wolfie. Well done."

Behind Jaro, Wraith rips a blue limb free and throws it up into the air, playing a game of gory catch with himself as he waits for us to move on.

"I don't want to argue about it." I stand stiffly, not daring to look at Drystan as I tip-toe over the bodies towards my pile of clothes. "We have to get going, do we not?"

Yanking on my clothes beneath the poncho with jerky movements, I almost fall over in my haste to cover myself. I feel weirdly exposed like this, despite most of them having seen me in some state of undress at one point or another. They continue talking—well, growling, really—but I tune them out as I put my clothes to rights. When I'm done, Lore's hat transforms from the poncho to a stiff, flat-topped velvet riding hat with an arched brim and a fluffy red feather in the band.

I've just finished tugging my boots back on when a large pair of hands fall on my shoulders, steadying me. I barely hold back a squeak of surprise. I was so caught in my own thoughts that I didn't even notice their conversation ended.

It's Jaro. I can tell by his scent and the too-gentle way he holds me.

"Rosie, are you okay?"

I swallow, then nod. "I'm fine. Better now that Lore helped me."

He pauses, arching a brow. "You mean to tell me you weren't frightened?" I go to shake my head, but his disappointed look stops me before I can even try to deny it. "The Call was screaming at me until I managed to shield you."

"Well, maybe I was a little bit, in the heat of the moment," I admit. "But I trust you—all of you. I knew Lore would get us out of there if there was any real danger, and I knew you'd never let them near me." I pause. "You can't stop me from being afraid, Jaro."

His hands twist me and pull me against his chest. “I can damn well try,” he mumbles, the growl in his words causing them to rumble through his body. “Come on, we’ll get cleaned up in the river upstream.”

While getting clean sounds great, my gut sinks as I consider my plan to ask them to learn to fight. I thought maybe Jaro would back me up along with Lore, but his tone dashes those hopes.

NINE

RHOSWYN

The atmosphere is tense as we set up camp. We made it to three more shrines before my Guard decided on this tiny clearing in the hills, but at no point did anyone turn the discussion back to boundaries or sex. Perhaps because they were all too annoyed with Lore, who's still whistling a happy tune and twisting this way and that to admire the sheen of my dust across his chest.

With nothing else to do, I switched my focus to searching for my aura ten minutes into the journey, but I made no progress. I can still catch the subtlest glimpses of gold, but even I have to admit that might just be the sunlight against my pale skin.

I assume if I was actually managing to dim the glow, Drystan would've broken his angry silence and said something.

I've chosen to give it a rest for the night. Now, I'm sitting on the soft grass, wrapped in a shawl to guard against the chill wind, and trying to relax while Drystan packs away our things back into Blizzard's saddle. I'm pleasantly full thanks to Bree's valravn, which took down a brace of pheasants for our evening meal, and quietly debating how to bring up the questions I so desperately want to ask.

It won't be easy, given that Drystan is the only one here. Jaro is off patrolling in wolf form, Bree disappeared to wash our clothes in a small nearby brook, and Lore is finding Wraith someone to eat—though they think I'm oblivious to that last part.

I asked for something to do, and Drystan gave me the task of maintaining the fire he summoned by magic. It doesn't even seem to even be eating through the logs it's set on.

I may have been raised mortal, but even I know what busywork looks like.

"Why don't you speak your mind, dear heart?" Titania asks, softly.

I shrug. She's been here with me all evening but was recently joined by the others, who've chosen to stay for a while after delivering their reports.

Caed is with Kitarni, and Florian is alive. Drystan listened to the full details, not even pretending he wasn't eavesdropping. His jaw clenched when

Maeve confirmed that Caed and the high priestess are headed to Pavellen, and the news of the cousins defending Kitarni and Bram against an opportunistic band of Fomorian raiders earned a scoff of disbelief.

Biting my lip, I wonder how the rest of my Guard will react when he tells them the news. Kitarni is putting my Fomorian Guard directly in the path of my fever. Despite the news that Caed agreed to take the sleeping potion, I doubt any of my other mates will be pleased with her plan.

“He doesn’t listen to me,” I finally mumble under my breath. “I barely know where I stand with him...”

“He also has excellent hearing,” Maeve mouths, as my exasperation causes the volume of my words to climb once more.

My head falls back to thump against the stone. “He says he wants to help ‘service’ me, like I’m some duty to be endured, and then brings up all of these terms I’ve never thought of. Then he gets mad at Lore for doing the thing he didn’t even want to—”

Titania places a finger over my lips, tilting her head and raising her eyebrows in Drystan’s direction. The fae’s hands have stopped moving, his head canting to one side as he forgets to pretend he’s not eavesdropping.

Ugh.

I shove to my feet, my shawl falling to the ground as I abandon the fire. My guides follow closely.

“Rhoswyn.”

“I’m not going far!” I say abruptly, spine stiffening under the weight of his judgement. “I just need a walk. Alone.”

A slight pause. “I was going to tell you to take your cloak. A storm is coming in from the north.”

My posture softens slightly, and I stoop to pick up the cloak in question, hugging it around myself as I stride towards the treeline.

“Tell me how this works,” I beg my grandmothers the second we’re alone. “Tell me how I’m supposed to get through this when everything is so awkward, and we’re in such a huge rush, and there are so many obstacles between me and them. Drystan can’t even look at me. Bree is fundamentally *not* ready for sex. What Lore wants...” I trail off, thinking of how his earlier words made me feel. “What Lore wants scares me, but I can’t figure out if it scares me because I’m scared of the things he described, or I’m scared to want them.”

That’s half the problem. I don’t trust my own mind, and my body is

turning against me.

“Spar with me.” I turn to face Maeve, who’s been listening in uncharacteristic silence to my rant. “Right now. I want to learn to fight. No more dodging.”

My grandmother—the fiercest warrior queen the fae have ever known—frowns at me, shoving her red braids out of her face as she shakes her head. “No, kid. You’re not in any state for that. Your body is under enough stress as it is.”

Jaw dropping, because I expected her, of all people, to support me in this, I look to the other two for support, but they shake their heads.

“She’s right, dear heart.” Titania tries to put an arm around my shoulders, but without drawing on the Goddess’s magic, all she achieves is giving me a slight chill. “Even the most experienced warriors don’t train in the lead up to their fever. You shouldn’t even really be travelling.”

I deflate. “I want to do something useful. I’m fed up with being a burden.”

Maeve offers me a small, sorry smile. “After your fever, I’ll put your ass through all the training you want. Right now, pick a different problem to focus on.”

Which one? I grouch, before shrugging off my hopelessness. They’re right. One of the few good things about having so many problems is that I shouldn’t be lacking things to do.

“My aura,” I decide, settling on the stump of a long-ago-fallen tree. “I’ve been working at it for days, so why can’t I see it?”

The three of them share a glance. “Your power is different to the Lord of the Wild Hunt,” Mab murmurs, leaning against a nearby beech. “It stands to reason the methods which work for him may not work for you.”

“It’s likely that Jaromir was right,” Titania adds. “You’re probably subconsciously blocking it to protect yourself. That’s why you can see others’ auras but not your own.”

“Well, how do I unblock it!?” I shrug her intangible arm away. “He said I have to be able to see it to control it.”

“Do you?” Mab asks. “You have other senses. Reach out with them.”

“Oh.” I cant my head to one side.

If Drystan has always been able to see auras, it makes sense that would be the way he learned to hide his. I can’t see mine, thanks to this speculative block, but what if I can use a different sense? I’m not sure I want to start

sniffing myself on the off chance that I can scent my own aura, but...

What does an aura feel like?

If they glow, then they should be warm, right? It seems a little silly, holding my hand over my arm, feeling for a metaphysical heat source. This time, something in my gut is convincing me I'm onto something; I have to be.

I refuse to return to the camp without making some progress.

However, my own stubbornness soon comes back to bite me in the ass. Spring may bring warm days, but the evenings are cold, and soon even my cloak does little to hold off the breeze curling through the trees. I'm shivering, and about to give up, when my fingers start to tingle.

At first, I think it's numbness, even though it's not *that* cold. Then I jerk as the feeling doesn't dissipate. The realisation comes swiftly, making me feel stupid.

Of course, auras aren't warm, they're energy, just like spirits are. And when my guides touch me, they always leave a tingling cold feeling in their wake, so why should an aura be any different?

Now that I know what I'm looking for, it's easier, but I still wait until I've successfully found the cold almost-prickle of my own aura on my arm, my ankle and even my neck before I let myself dream of moving to the next stage.

What was it Drystan said? Imagine it being sucked back into my skin, and trapped there?

Holding the sensation in my mind, I take a deep breath, and then picture slowly sucking it into my skin.

A few minutes into the painfully slow mental exercise, a glow bursts through my eyelids, and I blink open my eyes.

"I can see it," I whisper, awestruck.

I was only halfway done when I stopped, and I stare at my skin in shock. It's bright, but not blinding, yet as I watch, the glow begins to brighten, until suddenly it disappears again.

"I stopped too soon," I mumble. "I can see my own aura when I've shielded it enough that it won't blind me."

Sweat drips down my brow by the time I manage to dim the golden light down to a gentle luminescence rather than a full sunburst. I can't seem to suck in the remaining glow, and I don't know if I have to. Surely this is an improvement?

“Trap it,” I whisper to myself. “How do I trap it?”

“Visualise it stuck beneath your skin.” Drystan’s voice is hoarse.

I shove to my feet, whirling and almost losing my grip in surprise.

“Focus, huntress. Your skin is a natural barrier. Use it.”

My Winter Court Guard is leaning against a silver birch directly behind me, so close I could touch him if I reached out. How long has he been there? All three of my guides have disappeared, leaving us alone, and his amber eyes are fixed on my face, irises glowing as he watches me struggle. The way he looks at me is like a physical caress, and I have to close my eyes or get caught up in that stare.

My skin is a barrier. My skin is a barrier.

“Anchor it.” The gruffness in his voice is edged in bossy demand, and I find myself complying without thinking. “Set the magic with intention.”

When I blink my eyes open again, I’m not certain I’ve managed it. Slowly, I release the hold I’ve had on the glow, trusting the shield around me to hold in the light.

Drystan is still standing there, leaning against the same tree.

“Did... did I do it?”

His nod is jerky and stiff, and he swallows.

He’s not looking away, tracing every inch of my features with a palpable focus that’s as intense as a physical touch. I feel him memorising my face, my ears, the exact colour of my eyes. For a moment, uncertainty flashes through me, and I find myself checking our bond before I can relax.

This is really Drystan, not one of Caed’s tricks, and he’s really looking at me with his lips slightly parted, like he’s seeing the stars for the first time.

Momentary sorrow that I don’t have a full bond with him hits me hard. I wish I knew what he’s feeling.

“I couldn’t get it all,” I mumble, suddenly self-conscious. “But I did it.” Pride flashes through me.

“You did.”

I don’t know what possesses me to do it—maybe later I can blame it on my approaching fever—but in the moment, I don’t think about it. Joy that finally *something* is going right eclipses all rationality. My hands grab his shoulders, and I pull him down into a jubilant kiss.

Two things become crystal clear in that instant. One, Drystan is hiding a whole lot of desire under that stoic and grumpy veneer. Two, he will never, ever let me be in control.

Flipping us faster than I can blink, my back hits the birch as he braces himself over me with one arm on the bark above. Caging me. Trapping me. Drystan's free hand finds my hair, holding my head securely in place as he takes over, mouth demanding and unrelenting as his lips slant across my own. He's hard, dominant, and uncompromising as he tastes me, and I melt.

It's embarrassing, really, how easily I submit. My core clenches, wetness weeping from my pussy to drench my underwear in a rush.

Drystan tears away with a tortured sound, eyes searching my face for a long second before he sighs. "You smell warm and sweet and wet and *mine*," he mutters, and my body shivers at the pure need in his tone. "But we didn't establish all your limits, and the others are waiting for you."

Did I do something wrong?

"Do you want me?" I'm not sure where the boldness comes from, but I need to know. "Or is it just the oath? Because we don't have to—"

Meeting my gaze evenly, he cuts me off with little more than an arrogant look. "I have never, in my life, wanted any female the way I want you. I'm not so young as to be so easily influenced by a bond—even one as powerful as a Guard's oath. This... *obsession* is purely your fault, Rhoswyn." Something akin to anger flashes in his gaze for a second before he steps away and gestures for me to walk ahead back to camp.

The sudden distance may as well be torture. My body screams, wanting his touch, wanting more kisses, and I sway a little in place.

"Come on. I came to find you because there are things we need to discuss. We've been remiss in caring for you, and we've come up with a solution."

His words are ominous, and I swallow back my complaint and head back towards the camp. How long have I been gone if they're all back and having discussions without me?

I glance back, trying to read his expression, only to find his eyes are glued to my ass. I freeze, and he catches me, catching him staring.

"What?" he snaps. "The others have had weeks to do this. I'm just catching up."

All my insecure thoughts about why he stopped kissing me evaporate.

Whatever is holding Drystan back, it's nothing to do with attraction. Now that I know he's staring, some tiny rebel part of me adds a little more swish to my hips with each step. Payback, I tell myself, for all the grumpiness he continuously sends my way.

A large hand comes down hard on my ass, making me squeak in surprise and jump a foot in the air. With wide eyes and goosebumps flaring across my skin, I turn to stare open-mouthed at him.

“Don’t tempt me, Rhoswyn. I’ve barely endured that ass grinding against my cock for the last few days. If you keep waving it in front of me while smelling like you do, I’m going to spank it raw and then fuck it.”

Holyyy... My knees actually tremble as the sting from the smack migrates straight to my clit, which pulses in sympathy.

“Keep walking. We have a discussion to get to.”

Biting my lip to hold back the ridiculous urge to ask him to do it again, I hurry forward like the devil is at my back.

And with this newly unleashed side of Drystan... I’m beginning to think he might be.

TEN

RHOSWYN

When we return to the fire, the rest of my Guard is scattered around it. Bree is wrapped in his wings like a gargoyle, his cat ears twitching as he stares into space, caught in thought. The moment he sees me, he reaches into a bag and grabs more of that delicious minty-sweet bread that he's been feeding me for the last few days.

"Eat this," he tells me.

Settling beside him, careful not to make any sudden moves, I take the food obediently and nibble happily at one corner. At some point, I want to ask him about what exactly this bread is, but right now, I'd prefer to know what the four of them have been talking about without me.

Bree shocks us both when one of those great black wings extends and curls around my shoulders, providing a barrier between me and the cool breeze. He doesn't touch me, but the care and concern in the motion is sweet. Holding myself still and resisting the urge to touch the downy soft axillary feathers where the wings merge with his back is almost impossible.

But he might not welcome the touch, so I distract myself by focusing on the others instead.

"You said you had a... solution?" I ask, picking the bread apart and nibbling at it.

Lore grins from across the fire, the flames lighting up his pale skin in ways that are almost demonic. "It appears our fun today wasn't on the scheduled list."

"We need a frank and open discussion about sex," Drystan interrupts, crouching by the fire and pulling a roasting spit of meat free. "Lore has proven today that he cannot control his impulses."

A knife buries itself into the dirt at his feet. "Believe me, dullahan, if I couldn't control them, I'd have had her on all fours, forced open on my prick screaming my name in the mud, rather than riding my fingers and tongue in a nice little bubble of safety."

Jaro's wolf's snarl is barely contained in his words. "Talk about her with respect, redcap."

"She likes it."

Damn him, I kind of do. Or, at least, my body does, given the way everything low in me clenches.

“She—”

“Enough.” Drystan holds out a plate of food to me. “This squabbling is not productive. The Goddess matched Rose with Lore for a reason. They’re compatible.” He hands another plate to Jaro, before turning back to the redcap. “But during her fever, can you control yourself from blinking her away from the safety of the temple?”

Lore opens his mouth, looks at me—eyes lingering on my breasts—then snaps it closed again.

Drystan’s hum is full of “I thought not. Your nature is too risky.”

“I’m not missing out,” the redcap hisses, a blade in his hand as he shoves to his feet. “You won’t fucking keep me from serving her—”

“I didn’t say that,” Drystan shushes him. “I think you should ask Rose to charm you into staying inside her room in the cloister for the duration of her fever—if she wants you there. She still hasn’t chosen any of us to tend to her.”

Lore’s aggression fades away, replaced with a smile I don’t trust. “Gonna take control of me, pretty pet?” he croons. “Chain me up with your sweet words and have your wicked way with me?”

Drystan looks at me next. “You’re going to protest, but the alternative is either asking him to take the sleeping draught, or accepting the risk that he may blink you to the middle of a crowd, and your safety couldn’t be guaranteed in that situation. When a female in fever is unleashed in public, the results are... messy.”

He says the words with a quiet authority that speaks of experience.

“Do you want that?” I ask Lore. “Wouldn’t you rather not...?”

“I meant what I said.” His fanged teeth glint in the light. “I want you every single way I can get you. Pretty please use those sparkly eyes on me, pet. And if you want to charm me into waking you with my tongue between your pretty thighs every morning, that’s okay, too!”

Jaro sighs. “Lorcan, I get that her scent is driving us all insane, but can you get your mind out of the gutter for one second?”

“Nope.” Lore pops the ‘p’ at the end.

“I’ll do it,” I whisper, before they can get back into arguing. “I’ll charm him. I... want him there.”

Lore’s presence has never been in question. He’s uncontrolled, wild, and

sometimes a little unhinged, yes, but he's never shied away from letting me see the depth of his devotion or desire.

I trust him.

"You'll have to use the connection to the Goddess to ensure it works," Drystan reminds me. "And be specific about the time and place. You don't want him stuck in the cloister for the rest of his immortal life."

"I get it. What else is there?"

"Who else? Jaromir?"

I nod. "If... he wants?"

Jaro rolls his eyes and shuffles closer to me, ignoring the way Bree's feathers bristle as he puts an arm around my shoulder. The wolf never put his shirt back on after shifting, so his warm hair-dusted body brushes against mine, spreading the telltale buzz everywhere we touch.

"Rosie, we all want to be there. I promise you, we're all incredibly willing. I'd give you my left nut for the privilege if you asked for it."

"Then why do you keep saying words like 'tending' and 'services'?" I demand. "Those are duty words, not..."

Drystan scoffs. "That's mortal thinking again. They're honourable words. You tend to and service things which have value or are precious. The responsibility of protecting and caring for your mate is sacred to the fae."

When Drystan offered me his services, was he asking for an honour, rather than resigning himself to a duty? Throat tightening, I silently reconsider our past conversations in that new light.

"So you want to be there?" I challenge.

He looks away sharply, that proud wall rising between the two of us. "I will abide by your wishes."

What does that mean?

I want to scream at him, force him to tell me the truth. For the first time, I feel the urge to look him straight in the eye and demand he tell me what *he* wants, using all my charm if necessary to get to the bottom of what exactly this contrary fae is thinking.

Bree sighs softly under his breath, distracting me from my ire. "I... will bow out."

My gut sinks, and I glance up to find his ears have drooped slightly.

"You were right," he continues, looking at Drystan instead of me. "I cannot be afraid of her, but... there are other things which may... endanger her. Females in fever are notorious for begging for cock. If she accidentally

charmed me again...”

Disappointment settles across my shoulders like a cloak. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, dragonfly,” he whispers, then pauses.

In a snap, his black wings close around us fully, granting the illusion of privacy as he knocks Jaro’s arm away and shields us from the others’ view. Vivid green eyes bore into me, and I reach out to brace myself against his chest, only to stop halfway.

Capturing my fingers, he closes that gap, letting my palm caress the smooth planes of his ink-covered pec.

“This is not because of you.” Every word carries guilt. “This was them. I’m sorry I wasn’t strong enough to break free and fix myself so you could have the first fever you deserve, with a whole and functional Guard who can worship you properly. I wish I could’ve been waiting by that portal for you, strong and hale and having been faithful to you since birth like the others—”

“Bree, you weren’t unfaithful,” I whisper, fingers caressing the head of his cat-sìth tattoo that twirls beneath my touch, arching like a real cat. “I would never think—”

“I was. I fucked other fae every single day you were gone, even after I swore an oath. I can still feel their hands on me—*inside* me.” His tone has shifted, going from mournful to angry. “I’m dirt, dragonfly. But I refuse to be the dirt that ruins this for you. If I snapped and brought drama into the middle of something that should be a perfect time for you, I would never forgive myself.”

That burning in my eyes isn’t a tear. It’s just the cold. I refuse to pity such a strong and beautiful soul, and raging against what was done won’t help now. Bree needs to heal. I just wish I knew how to help him.

“So you’re going to take the draught?” I ask.

He looks away, wings flapping and disappearing in an inky mist, leaving nothing to shelter me from the chill night air. “It’ll be simpler this way.” He pauses. “But without me, it would be wise for you to consider Drystan’s offer. Just two of your Guard probably won’t be enough.”

I don’t understand why two males won’t be enough, but the others are nodding, agreeing.

“I only have one...” I gesture down there.

“Pussy.” Lore grins. “Oooh. Say cunt. Please, please, please.”

Dismissing him, I continue. “So why will two not be sufficient?”

“We really need to teach her about anal sex,” Lore murmurs.

Jaro chokes on the waterskin, spraying liquid across the circle. “Lorcan!”
Anal... My ears burn... “Sodomy?”

Old mortal hangups worm their way out, determined to make themselves known, but I crush them down again with the full force of my trust in my Guard. Lore and Jaro made me feel so good the last time we were together. I can’t imagine either of them would ever do anything I didn’t like.

“Sodomy is a mortal word,” Jaro corrects gently. “Fae don’t have that term, or the shame that’s associated with it, but if it’s a boundary for you, we don’t have to—”

“Oh, come on. In four days, she’s going to be begging us to fuck her there as well.” Lore grins devilishly. “You’re going to love it, pet. We’ll prepare you properly. Did anyone bring any plugs?” No one answers, all of them watching me for my reaction, so he continues, “You have three main holes, and five mates, which means unless you’re willing to try stuffing extra sausage into your pretty cunt, then one of us gets a tit-fuck—probably your púca, given how much time he spends staring at them—and then I suppose Caed can have your feet, but he’s definitely not at—”

“Lorcan.” Jaro growls, scratching lightly at his beard. “Caed is not going near any part of Rose. Feet included.”

“Agreed,” Drystan echoes.

Bree simply nods. “Beltaine.”

One word, summing up Caed’s fate so perfectly. I wouldn’t be surprised if they were planning it, making his slaughter into a bonding activity.

“Back to the matter at hand,” Maeve says, stepping out from behind the boulder and proving she’s been listening the whole time. “You will need more than two males to satisfy your fever, unless you want to fuck them to death. Even with three, they’ll probably be wiped out by the end.”

Drystan stiffens. “Don’t push this on her, spirit.”

“Why? Afraid, huntsman?” Maeve offers him a sassy smirk. “You should be.”

“If Drystan wants to be there, I want him there.” Trying my hardest to keep a straight face is proving more and more difficult, so I stand and begin to pace, hoping to expel my excess energy.

What I want to do is ask Maeve if fucking them to death is a real possibility. After all, my Guard can’t die, so surely, she’s exaggerating, right?

Drystan pierces me with that gaze again, his eyes burning into me before he nods once.

“Good. Settled! More in the fuckfest!” Lore blinks to the top of the boulder above us, dropping his hat onto my head, where it morphs once more into a cosy poncho hood.

“The redcap is my favourite,” Maeve nods in Lore’s direction.

Ignoring her, because of course she’d like my stabbiest, foul-mouthed Guard best, I snuggle into the fabric, inhaling his berries and metal scent as I pace the length of the fire.

“Was that all?” I ask.

There’s been enough discussion of my sex life tonight to last me a lifetime, and my bed roll is looking like a tempting escape.

“No.” Drystan stops me in my tracks. “You’ve been experiencing too many symptoms, especially considering how long you still have left to go until the fever hits.” His tone tells me that’s not a good sign. “From now on, you’ll be tended to every morning and every night. We don’t leave camp until you’re satisfied, and you don’t sleep without it either.”

My mouth drops. “You’re scheduling sex?”

His expression doesn’t change. “For your well-being.”

I know without asking that this isn’t something I can talk my way out of, and I’m not sure I want to. In a way, I’m grateful. Asking them for it was too much, and now Drystan has taken away the anxiety surrounding that with one heavy-handed command.

“Don’t be too shocked, pet. This is the way winter fae get laid in the court that froze romance.” Lore blinks beside me, and then blinks me up to the rock with him, leaning down to whisper in my ear. “They say that, even in the grip of their fevers, winter fae females force their mates to book an appointment and sign reproductive contracts.”

“I doubt that’s true,” I mumble.

“You’ve never met his mother.” Lore tilts his head in Drystan’s direction. “She could freeze the dick off a barbegazi.”

I don’t have a chance to ask what one of those is, because Drystan’s skin has gone ashen.

“Don’t mention my mother again.”

“Why? She was a charming dinner companion. Got a bit pissy when I refused to murder Cedwyn for her, but—”

“No.” I cut him off. “Look. Can we just... I’ve had enough arguing. Jaro, apparently, I now need to orgasm before I sleep, will you...?”

The knight is on his feet before I can even finish.

“But it’s not his turn,” Lore whines as I’m pulled from his grip, blinking back down to the fire.

Drystan cuffs him upside the head. “Technically, it was mine.”

“Tough shit,” Jaro retorts. “You argued, and the lady decided.” He presses a cute kiss to my nose. “Want them to watch? Or would you rather they give us some privacy?”

A flare of heat bursts through my core at the thought of the rest of them watching, but I shake my head. “Privacy.”

Bree is gone in the next second, and Drystan drags Lore away from the fire and into the woods, muttering something about hunting for breakfast.

Without all of them there, I feel like I can finally breathe. Of course, that feeling only lasts until I look up and catch the raw desire written across Jaro’s face.

ELEVEN

RHOSWYN

“You okay?” Jaro asks, hands coming up to cup my face. “We keep springing more and more on you, Rose...”

“I’m fine,” I force out. “But... now that they’re gone...” I swallow and turn to Maeve, still hovering quietly in the background. “Explain how anal sex works.”

Lore made it sound like an inevitability, and I’m still not certain that it will even work. That’s an *exit-only* hole, right? I’m curious, but mildly terrified as well.

Jaro’s hands drop to my shoulders and turn me to face him. “If you want to learn about that, I’ll teach you, but I’m not sitting here while a dead female gives you a tutorial. You’re tired, and you need rest.” He pauses, rubbing the muscles of my neck in a massage that’s equal parts possessive and heavenly after so many hours of riding. “And can we make a no spirits in the bedroom rule?”

“You’re in a forest,” Maeve points out, though he can’t see or hear her. “Hardly a bedroom.”

“Shush, he’s being polite,” I tell her. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Such a prude,” she grumbles, fading away into the night air.

“She’s gone,” I reassure him. “So... Anal sex. I’m not dumb, I get that it probably means a dick in my ass.” With only him here, it feels easier to say the words. Perhaps it’s because he was my first—and so far, only—or maybe it’s just the lack of Drystan’s judgemental attitude and Lore’s over-the-top enthusiasm. The two unseelie don’t have the same level of empathy as Jaro and Bree do.

Jaro’s eyes darken with a hunger that makes something low in my belly tighten, but his words, when they come, are measured.

“I’m not sure I’m the best one of your mates to take you like that. Not until you’re stretched out and ready, but we can play around if you want.”

He heads over to the saddles and rummaging in one of the bags. “We’ll need oil, to stop the friction hurting you.”

He’s not looking at me, and that gives me the courage to start undoing the laces on my shirt. By the time he turns around, I’m fully naked. I’d feel bad

about it, but the cool air is soothing skin that feels far too sensitive, and I want to sigh in relief.

Ever since that kiss with Drystan, my body has been primed and ready for sex. It's not at the point where I want to scratch myself until I draw blood, but I'm aching.

Jaro blinks, the corners of his mouth turning up as he presses the softest kiss against my lips.

"You're beautiful."

He pauses, then in a move that should be illegal, bends and sweeps me off my feet, depositing me gently in the soft fabric of my bedroll.

His skin—shifter hot—is the perfect antidote to the chill night air as he settles his hips between my thighs, pinning me with the weight of his lower body.

Saliva pools in my mouth as I stroke his hair-dusted chest again, but he pulls my hands away.

"Lore's right about one thing," he murmurs. "You need to get more comfortable with us. If you try to hide what you need from us when your fever hits, you'll only hurt yourself. This... this is a good start." He gestures to the oil. "But this time, I want you to ask for everything you want. Don't worry about your charm, just ask. As long as you're not asking me to hurt you, I want to do everything you want me to."

"I want you to kiss me," I say, self-conscious of the way he's staring down at me.

He dips his head, obediently tugging my lower lip into his mouth, but he doesn't slip his tongue inside like I want him to. The kiss is almost chaste, and he pulls back too soon, returning to stare at me.

Fighting the urge to hide from his gaze, I force myself to take a deep heaving breath and fight through the nerves. This is about expanding my comfort zone, and he's right; I can't keep being shy around my guys if I'm going to make it through my fever. None of them—even Drystan and Caed—have ever said anything negative about my body. My shyness is an ingrained habit borne from years of closeted mortal teachings.

I'm fae. Fae are sensuality personified. I need to accept this.

"Harder," I whisper. "I want you to kiss me like you want to..." I trail off, take another breath, and try again. "I want you to kiss me until I can't speak. Then I want you to kiss my neck and my ears." I take one of his hands and use his forefinger to highlight the path I want him to take.

“What then?” he asks, tongue darting out to wet his lips.

I draw his hand lower to my breast. “I want you to suck on me here.”

“Here?” Those callouses abrade the pebbled buds, giving a tease of what I could have if he would just take hold and massage the aching weight of them.

I swallow, throat bobbing. “My breasts. My nipples.”

“You want me to lick them until they’re hard and aching?”

“Yes.” The word hisses out on a breath as he finally tests the weight of one in his hand.

He dips his head, but instead of kissing my nipple like I want him to, he takes my mouth with his again. This time, it’s no chaste thing. His tongue dives between my lips like I told him to, sweeping inside and claiming me, driving me higher until I’m dizzy and arching beneath him. My lower body twists, seeking more pleasure, but I’m still pinned by the delicious pressure of his hips between mine. Grinding against the hard length of his cock is almost impossible, and Jaro isn’t helping matters.

“Jaro,” I moan in complaint as we break apart, but he’s still following orders.

His mouth takes mine again, kissing me harder, tasting me until my next moan is little more than a breathless sigh.

Then, and only then, does he graze his lips across my jaw and down to my neck. His tongue flicks out, tasting me, and I shiver as his whole body vibrates with a deep growl of satisfaction. The purring rumble travels through him and straight to my nipples and clit, buzzing across my skin until I gasp.

“Do that again,” I whisper against his ear.

“This?” He kisses the skin lightly. “Or this?”

The growl comes again, and every muscle in my body tenses.

“That!” I cry.

“Goddess, your taste,” he murmurs, sucking hard against the column of my throat. “My wolf is fucking dizzy with how sweet your scent is getting. He wants me to bite you right here and make you ours forever.”

Is that a side effect of the fever? I want to ask him, but his teeth scrape against my throat, and my thoughts get momentarily scrambled, leaving me to whine needily and press myself against him.

His lips move up, brushing my hair aside until he can play with the hypersensitive tips of my ears.

I cry out, and a dollop of my own wetness leaks from my aching core to my ass.

“Jaro, I changed my mind,” I pant. “I need more. This slowness is killing me.”

He tuts, licking the pointed tip of my ear before switching sides. “What do you want, Rosie? Remember, you have to ask.”

“Suck on my tits,” I blurt, the crass word falling free. “And fill my pussy up with your fingers so I can take your cock. I feel so empty. Please.”

My eyes are closed, but they fly open as he adjusts himself, finally abandoning the torment of my ears to fasten his sensual lips around my nipple and suck.

“Jaro!” My hands fist in his hair, clutching him to me as his tongue swirls around the too-sensitive bud.

Lightning shoots from the peak, passing through my sex to echo painfully against my clit. My pussy clenches, the wetness leaking from me in a near-constant stream that must be soaking the bed roll beneath me.

Jaro’s free hand—the one not holding his weight—travels down and strokes right through the slickness.

“Soaked,” he hisses. “So hot and wet for me.”

I tremble at his praise, moaning as he finally, blessedly, dips one long finger into my heat.

Then he stops, staying there without moving as he continues to torment my nipples with that talented mouth.

Belatedly, I realise that I never told him to do anything but fill me up.

“Play with my clit,” I pant. “Play with my clit and fuck me with your fingers until I come.”

I’m so close, my lower muscles are squeezing his finger, but there’s no relief. It’s not enough to be filled. I want him to move. I need him to grant me the friction I so desperately crave.

Curving, seeking, that finger finds my G-spot at the same time that his thumb moves to brush over my clit. The dual stimulation is perfect, and when he adds a second finger and starts to thrust them into my body without mercy, my orgasm winds tighter in my stomach, waiting to burst.

Then, without warning, Jaro bites down on the sensitive skin of my breast.

I scream his name as I come, falling apart on his pistoning fingers as my body finally lets go of all the tension he’s been building inside me. My legs shake, and I cling to his shoulders, digging my nails into his back as I ride the waves of my pleasure until it fades into sated contentment.

When I've calmed down, I realise he's frozen in place, watching my expression with eyes gone wolf gold.

"You look so beautiful when you come," he murmurs, reaching up to kiss me.

"I want to do it again," I admit, breaking apart. "I want you to... play with my ass, like you said."

"You want me to stretch your asshole while I fuck you?" he prompts. "Want to imagine it's me and one of your other mates taking you at the same time?"

"Yes," I hiss as he withdraws his fingers and licks them clean. "I want you to fuck me and teach me how to enjoy having my ass played with."

Far from thrusting into me, like I expect, he withdraws completely.

"Hands and knees," he orders. "Show me what's ours."

My empty pussy clenches as the dark undercurrent of his animal sneaks in beneath his usual baritone. The rustle of fabric as he loses what little of his clothing remains spurs me on.

Making my limbs, which moments ago were numb with pleasure, cooperate is a challenge. I end up with my face smooshed into the fabric beneath us when my elbows buckle. I go to push back to my hands, but Jaro's palm presses down between my shoulder blades, stopping me. Those long fingers are inches from the place where my wings spill from my back, and I gasp at how intense the simple feel of him touching me there is. I lost my glamour some time during our earlier tryst, and now they're on full display, preening for him.

"I want to touch your wings," he says, cautiously. "Is that okay?"

I freeze, and he moves away instantly.

"No! I want it," I whisper. "Just... keep talking to me while you do it?"

I want this. I want to replace the memory of Elatha's touch with Jaro's, but if I can't see him, I need to hear him and know that it's him there with me.

"I can do that," he growls, hand returning.

He strokes up and down my spine, not yet touching any of the six delicate panels that tremble from his nearness.

"Your back is so soft. I can't wait to watch how your wings flutter as I fuck you."

His cock jumps against my ass, alerting me to its scalding presence.

"You're so tiny I'm going to have to lift you up to get my cock inside

you,” Jaro continues, his free hand taking his cock and forcing it downwards until the wide blunt head of him grazes through my wetness, spreading my slickness. I want to retort that I’m not tiny, he’s just huge, but what comes out is more of a wordless warbling demand for more.

Then, while I’m distracted, his fingers trace over my lowest left wing.

“Jaro!” I cry, twisting, hands fisting the fabric as I try to process the sensation.

“Okay?” he checks.

“More!”

He pauses. “I’ll give you more if you spread your ass for me.”

Heat flashes across my skin, and I release the bedding to do as he asks.

“Wider.”

I obey and his touch returns, stroking the membranes on my back with the most exquisite care.

“Look at how pretty you are, all open and needing me.”

Glowing under his praise, I shiver again as he traces another wing.

“Every time I touch these gorgeous wings, your pussy clenches and your little ass winks at me.” His lips caress the top corner of my left wing, then trace a path down. “The taste of your dust is driving me insane.”

I’m so close. I want to weep as his hands leave my back and urge me up instead of finishing me. For a second, I stand bewildered as he gathers his shirt and drapes it over the boulder near the fire.

“Don’t want to scratch your soft skin,” he murmurs. “C’mere, Rosie.”

His large hands arrange me carefully, lifting me until my feet are off the ground, my front half resting against the flat top of the stone. Like this, my pussy is at the perfect height for him to fuck me, but he doesn’t dive in, not yet.

“Hold yourself open,” he orders, and I reach back to do as he asks without thinking.

Too late, I realise how compromising this position is. It exposes everything, but the growl from behind me promises me that he likes what he sees.

Dipping into my heat, his fingers swirl around my clit once more, reigniting the embers of my earlier orgasm before they disappear. I hear the pop of a cork a second before the cool oil trickles down my asshole.

I feel the heat of his cock a second before he presses slowly into my pussy.

He doesn't sink all the way in, and I whimper as he torments me with just the head of his dick. The stretch of him burns slightly, but I love it.

"So good," he hisses. "So wet and hot, like a fucking glove."

Then his finger rubs against my ass, and I tense.

"Relax," he murmurs, forcing his cock a little deeper until I'm distracted enough to do what he says. "Let me play like you wanted me to."

It's a strange feeling, but there *is* pleasure there. It's not what I'm used to. The nerve endings he's awakening are sharper, darker, twistier, but it's delightful all the same.

It takes three more small thrusts until his cock is root-deep inside me. Like the gentleman he is, he gives me a moment to adjust, panting and squirming around the invasion, before he pulls his hips back.

But it's not just his cock moving. His finger moves in counterpoint, invading my ass as he pulls out of my sex and then retreating as his cock presses in again. The strange combination makes me groan.

"Talk to me," he encourages. "Tell me how it feels to have both of your holes played with."

Pleasure merges, combining until I can't separate the two sensations, or differentiate the two different types of penetration. I'm just one huge melting pot of fire.

"It feels... good," I pant. "Strange, but—oh!" He twists his finger, pulling back and thrusting in again as his huge cock increases speed, the mushroom head dragging over my G-spot.

My startled cry freezes him, stopping the delicious sensations in their tracks until I want to wail at the unfairness.

"Good?" he grates out.

"Yes," I promise. "Please, Jaro, just fuck me." I swallow. "Fuck me while you finger my ass so I can learn to take you there."

Because if this is how it's going to feel, then I want it. I want it almost as much as I want him to move.

His growl this time is thunderous, rumbling between our bodies. His hips snap forward, burying himself into me harder than I suspect he means to. My back arches, breasts rubbing against the fabric of his shirt and sending a lightning bolt straight to the place where he's joined us together. Rocking my hips in desperation, I whine as his iron control refuses to yield to my silent demand.

"If I get too rough..." His voice is barely human.

“You won’t.”

That’s all the permission he needs. Pulling back, he rams home again and again and again, taking his pleasure from my body with frantic thrusts that force my body against the rock and jiggle my ass. Wet sounds blend with the crackling of the fire beside us as my pussy weeps and flutters around him and my ass tries its hardest to draw his finger even deeper.

I’m so close, rapidly approaching my orgasm like a shooting star. When he slips a second finger in beside the first, stretching the muscles that are protesting his invasion in the most delicious way possible, I’m gone. My pussy milks his dick as rapture claims me and sunlight bursts in my veins.

I’m so far gone I barely notice him jerking inside me with a groan, or the hot trickle of his seed as it escapes from where we’re joined. All I can feel is the way his body collapses against mine, the warmth of his chest against my back as he presses kisses to the back of my wings, drawing out my pleasure until it morphs, becoming a second, smaller orgasm that steals my breath and leaves me twitching with aftershocks as he pulls away.

My ass feels strange when he withdraws his fingers, and I blush as, for a second, my sphincter clenches on nothing in concert with my now-empty pussy. Pushing up, I try to stand on wobbly legs, smiling when Jaro is there, scooping me straight up into his arms.

“Hey, let me.”

I’m cocooned in his shirt before I can say another word, being tucked into bed with him wrapped around me.

“Jaro, I’ve got to clean up.”

“Leave it.” His eyes flash wolf, then back to chestnut brown again. “I know it sounds gross, but it might ease your symptoms a bit.” He strokes my hair out of my face. “I’ll wash you before you wake, promise.”

Yawning, I nod against his chest. “Who’s next on the schedule?”

“Maybe we’ll flip a coin.” He snorts. “Or maybe Lore will just blink you somewhere and have his way with you.” He pauses. “You don’t need to worry about balancing us, Rosie. We’ll organise it. You just focus on resting and building your strength.”

TWELVE

BRICRIU

I take my watch from the upper branches of one of the trees surrounding our camp, but I leave the actual guarding to Lox, who circles the gloomy sky above us. As always, my focus is fixed on Rose.

She's nestled in Jaro's arms, as she has been all night. The wolf shifter hasn't taken to fur this time, and he's currently locked in a battle of twitching eyebrows with Drystan. The latter clearly wants Rose to wake, while the former clearly wants to give her the rest she needs.

Lore is perched on the boulder across the dead remains of the fire, snacking on a handful of echo berries as he watches the two high fae having their silent argument like it's the best entertainment he's had in years. Despite his casual posture, he's hardly unaffected. More than once, I've caught him checking the shimmer of Rose's dust that lingers on his skin, comparing it to the shiny fresh coat Jaro received last night.

"Fine." Drystan finally growls, his tone so quiet that I only hear him because I've borrowed Naris's ears. "I'll get the horses ready. You can pass her to me when I'm mounted up."

So he plans to start riding while Rose is still asleep? What happened to his great plan to start her day with orgasms?

Rose will never believe that the surly fae has a soft spot for her, but he does. Ever since she learned to dampen her aura, he's stared at her non-stop. Almost like he's afraid to look away. Now he's bending his rigid routine for her? That's basically a declaration of true love from him.

"Stealing her first climax of the day for yourself, dullahan?" Lore prods, not bothering to whisper.

"All that matters is that it gets done," he replies stiffly, heaving his saddle over the stallion's back. "And I *told* you to stop calling me that."

To anyone less observant, it would appear Drystan is completely apathetic. They'd be wrong. The blackened logs on the ground begin to smoke, and I drop down from my perch, distracting Lore before he can push the winter lord further. Lox lands on my arm, disappearing into my skin in a rush of ink that makes me sigh.

"It's dawn." And Drystan needs to stop talking about pleasuring Rose like

it's some horrid duty to be endured before she wakes up and hears him.

My eyes are drawn, once again, to her sleeping form. The tips of her ears are peeking through her hair and she's only wearing one of Jaro's shirts, which will bother her when she wakes up.

The oddest urge to replace his shirt with mine strikes, and I squeeze my eyes shut to hold it back.

Firstly, I don't own any shirts—or any other clothing that might prevent me access to my tattoos. Púcaí are often frowned upon for how little clothing we own, but I never considered it a problem until I realised how much I want to coat Rose in my scent.

Maybe I could try wearing a scarf or something.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I know this is just her fever affecting me. Making me more possessive. The effects are already strong, and when it truly starts in five short days...

Goddess, I want to be there. I want it more than I want my next breath. Last night, when I returned to the clearing, I borrowed Espen's tongue just to taste the lingering scent of her pleasure in the air. My dick was rock hard for hours afterwards, but I couldn't work up the nerve to deal with it—even while the others took their leave to take care of themselves.

Her scent is driving me mad.

That's just one of the many reasons why being close to Rose right now is a bad idea. The list plays on repeat in my mind as Jaro bundles up our precious mate.

"Time for another day of marching through this flowery paradise with our horny goddess," Lore sighs dramatically. "How ever shall we pass the time?"

"You can pass it with your mouth shut." Drystan checks the buckles before swinging up into Blizzard's saddle.

As soon as he's settled, he holds his arms out for Jaro to pass him Rose. Nostrils flaring, the wolf shifter looks down at his little wrapped-up bundle, muscles bunching as he physically fights the urge to keep her to himself.

"Jaromir." Drystan's warning is clipped, a reminder to the wolf that's flashing in the shifter's eyes.

"It's getting stronger," I murmur, dropping to the ground. "This was a bad idea."

How many more days must we parade her in front of others? She should be safe in her palace, away from all of them. Away from anyone who might seek to use this against her. Away from Caed.

My hands curl into fists as Jaro finally finds the strength to pass her over to Drystan.

“It was the only option we had.” Drystan arranges her across his body, then strokes a wayward lock out of her face with a tenderness he’s incapable of displaying when she’s awake. “We’ll ride hard today. The sooner we get to Pavellen, the better.”

He doesn’t say it, but he’s thinking the same thing we all are. The Call—that internal compass that gives us frustrating glimpses into her well-being—is screaming at us that her fever is approaching. If she’s not in the temple cloister when it hits...

She will be. If the worst should come to pass, Lore can blink us there.

And when we arrive, I have to choose. Which is worse: to be locked up in a cell and conscious, or to be unconscious and at the mercy of anyone?

My hands brush over my side, calling Naris forth with a grim sigh. The decision should’ve been made by now. If it were a question of trusting the rest of Rose’s Guard to protect me, I’d take the potion without a second thought, but they’ll be otherwise occupied.

Which means I’ll be in the care of the priests of the temple. Strangers.

“It looks like rain,” Jaro says, as I leap up onto my cat-sith’s back, dusting fur from my clothes as I go—damn feline is shedding again. “You might want to find a cloak.”

He’s right. Though the courts are stuck experiencing their namesake season year-round, there are microscopic changes. Tomorrow is the first day of Snow’s Glow, the second coldest month of the Faerie calendar. In the Winter Court, that brings harsher snows and blizzards. Autumn will suffer a dusting of frost in the mornings, and even the Summer Court experiences a subtle drop in temperature.

For the Spring Court, the turn of the year heralds rain. Lots of it. So we might as well get used to it.

We can only hope that the falling temperatures in Elfhome stall the Fomorians’ siege.

My spine stiffens as the date’s significance finally hits home.

How did a little over a month of freedom pass without my noticing?

Jaro is carefully covering every inch of himself, unwilling to let the shimmer on his hands and face be washed away. He’s still staring at me while he does it, and I grimace as I realise I’ve spaced out instead of answering him. Tugging the hood of my slashed coat over my head, I fiddle with it until

my ears poke through the holes I made for them.

“I don’t wear cloaks.”

All of that fabric is too easy to get caught up in. A little rain never hurt anyone. Being defenceless did.

Yet I’m supposed to voluntarily take that leap.

I’ve made it a month. The longest period of freedom I’ve had in two hundred years. I’m not going to fuck it up now. There has to be a better way.

That line of thought is futile, and I know it. Once again, I drift back to staring at Rose. I should do something for her. Come up with something to say thank you for what she’s done. But what?

My hands strum over the fiddle on my collarbone thoughtfully as the others saddle up. Jaro leads us south, back towards the Renfraw.

I don’t deserve her. Neither does Caed. Perhaps it’s fitting that neither of us will be there to—

But what if he is there? My nails cut tiny half-moons into my palms as the invasive thought plants itself firmly in the front of my mind. What if Kitarni’s plan to sneak him the potion doesn’t work, and the inevitable happens, and he’s drawn to her side? The only other member of her Guard who isn’t charmed against harming him is the redcap, and the last time they fought, Rose died. Goddess only knows what dying in the middle of her fever would do to her.

Fevers make fae so vulnerable. Scars from her first have the potential to ruin the experience for her forever.

She deserves to enjoy it. Elatha has already taken the joy of having her wings played with. If I wake and Rose wears the same haunted look because of something the Fomorian did...

If we reach Pavellen and Caed tries to get anywhere near her, I silently vow to deal with him before he can do anything to destroy what should be an amazing experience for her.

I may not trust myself to see her through her fever as I should, but I *will* keep her safe.

THIRTEEN

RHOSWYN

There are days when waking up is the most difficult task in the world. Today is one of them. Cosiness envelops me completely, and I snuggle deeper into the warm, reassuring scent of horses and saddle polish mixed with leather and woodsmoke. It's probably a dream, but it feels almost like I'm being rocked.

"You should wake," Drystan—why is it *always* Drystan—murmurs in my ear.

Blinking my eyes open, I grimace at the harsh sunlight and bury my face deeper into his chest without thinking.

He stiffens, and that's what finally wakes me up enough to realise what I'm doing.

"Sorry." I try to wiggle free, but his arms are like steel bands around me. "I'll just..."

"Stay put, before you fall off the horse."

I freeze, finally taking in our surroundings for the first time. Rain is pouring down around us, and what little sky is visible through the canopy above is an overcast grey. I wonder dimly if it's even morning anymore as I take in the open woodland we're riding through. Bluebells and wood anemones carpet the ground, their delicate blooms closed against the downpour.

How did I sleep through this? Why am I so dry?

Wait. Why can't I hear the rain?

"Bricriu, you can stop now. She's awake."

Like a bubble has burst, the pitter patter of raindrops returns in a rush, and my heart melts a little as I realise my púca was using his magic to quieten the sound so I could sleep. Drystan's greatcloak is wrapped around us both like a blanket, keeping me dry. The wonderful warmth must be his doing as well. Rain steams when it hits the fabric, and I smile in wonder before I catch the wary look on his face.

"What?" Does my breath smell? Have I somehow committed some egregious winter court sin in the five seconds I've been awake?

Maybe it's because I'm not even really dressed. All I have on is one of

Jaro's ridiculously large shirts—they haven't even provided underwear.

"Rose and Drystan, sitting on a horse," Lore singsongs, riding past in his bucket hat. "Will they fuck? Only if the dullahan doesn't mess it—"

"Lore?" I say, cutting him off. "Would you please eat my pussy until I come on your face?"

My cheeks are still burning, but I'm oddly proud of myself for getting the words out without stuttering or losing my nerve. The redcap—and everyone else, for that matter—is stunned into silence, then he whoops in excitement.

"I thought you'd never ask! Hand her over, your lordship. My lady has made—"

"We agreed. It's my turn," Drystan's eyes blaze, and my cheeks go scarlet. "Unless Rhoswyn has any objections?"

I don't even notice I'm shaking my head, too caught in that amber stare.

"It's settled. You can have her tonight when we make camp."

Lore pouts. "Pinky promise?"

Drystan jerks his chin down in agreement but doesn't deign to hook his finger around Lore's outstretched one.

Part of me wants to argue that I'm not a doll to be passed around, but this is what I wanted. This way I don't have to decide or feel like I'm choosing favourites. They're doing exactly what Jaro said they would, taking care of me.

"Turn so you're facing forward," he grunts. "Lift up your shirt. Jaromir, can you keep the rain off her?"

A glowing golden shield appears above Blizzard, sheltering both of us. With a sigh of relief, Drystan shoves the heavy fur mantle back, exposing me to the air and everyone's view.

Turning in the saddle without elbowing him in the face is harder than it should be, but he says nothing to me as I struggle to do as he asks. Silent, stiff, and unyielding behind me, he only moves when it's necessary to make certain I won't fall off the horse.

"Bricriu, your valravn will alert you if anyone approaches?" Drystan checks as soon as I've completed the first of his instructions.

My fingers linger against Jaro's shirt, the tiny tear in the hem suddenly fascinating as I try to get over my sudden burst of shyness.

"No one will get close without Lox telling us." Bree is behind me, so I can't see him, but the words are solemn. "And if I hear anything, I'll let you know."

“Rose.” The bark in his words tells me my time is up. He expects obedience, and I’ve been too slow. “Shirt up. Now.”

“She’s not ready for those kinds of games,” Jaro protests, turning back in his saddle to look at us.

Drystan may be behind me, but I can feel his eye roll. “I am restraining myself. Believe me, this is *nothing* compared to what I—”

“I don’t want to hear about what you’ve done with other people.” The snarl tears out of me before I can stop it. “And if you think I can’t take you being your bossy self, then you’re sorely mistaken. I’m not as fragile as I look.”

I’m out of my depth, but I’m not afraid. Drystan has never done anything to harm me—physically, at least.

“If I want you to stop, I’ll say so.” I crane my neck, meeting his eyes, so he knows I’m serious.

“That will do for now,” Drystan agrees. “We’ll figure out if you’re ready for more when you’re past your fever. Now. Lift. Up. The. Shirt.”

Those words, so clipped and edged in danger, shouldn’t tie my stomach in knots, but they do. Leaning back against Drystan’s chest, I meet Jaro’s eyes in front and bite my lip as I read the worry and reassurance there.

My fingers grip the material so hard that I have the irrational fear my nails will tear it before I raise it just enough to expose my pussy to the cool air.

“Higher.”

I hesitate, but do as he asks, lifting the fabric until it’s bunched at my navel.

“This goes no farther than us five,” Drystan mumbles, releasing the reins to take the shirt from my grip. Tugging the front up even farther, he threads it back down through the neck hole, so my lower body is on full display and my hands are free. “No one else can know. Redcap, vow it.”

“I swear on Danu’s holy tits that I won’t tell anyone about how you lose your head.” Lore grins. “I just want to see if there’s blood or not.”

“There isn’t.”

Lore actually pouts.

The widening of Jaro’s eyes alerts me to what’s happened. Before I can react, Drystan’s hands place his head on the saddle in front of me, wedging his skull between the pommel and my exposed sex.

“Hold on to me,” he murmurs. “I need my hands for riding. *Don’t* drop

me.”

My hands fist in his long, dark, braided locks, heart in my throat. “Put my mouth to your pussy,” Drystan instructs. “And don’t move.”

Freezing, I shift my eyes between his and Jaro’s. He can’t mean to...

“Was I unclear?” he asks. “Or would you prefer one of the others?”

Swallowing my nerves, I shift his head forward until his nose butts up against my clit.

“Don’t be shy,” Lore croons from beside us. “He wants you to use him to get yourself off. I bet the scent of you is driving him mad.”

I wait for Drystan to refute the statement, or snap another order, but he doesn’t. If I didn’t know better, I’d say that he was holding his breath—except how would that be, given that currently, he has no lungs?

A warm, wet, bold stroke snaps me out of my musing before I can fall any further off track, and I squeak in surprise. A second lick turns the sound into a moan, and my hands tug him closer before I know what I’m doing.

“Goddess, I’ve waited for this,” he murmurs against my flesh, the rumble travelling straight through my core to stoke the twisting knot of desire in my lower abdomen.

I’m already resting against him, but my head falls back as he settles in to lick me. I can’t bear the intensity of the stare I can feel drilling into me, and my eyes flutter shut as he traces the contours of my sex, exploring the folds for the first time.

Drystan is Lore’s polar opposite when it comes to this. Where the latter dives in with unrestrained abandon, Drystan treats tasting me with all the clinical attention to detail I’ve come to expect from him. Every touch of his tongue is precise, my reactions measured. If I jerk or moan, he repeats it again, confirming what I like as if he’s committing it to memory.

My fingers flex in his hair as his tongue swirls around my clit, and then his teeth graze it, and I almost drop him entirely. Arousal twists, painfully sweet, and I flush as I feel myself soak his face and the saddle.

So he does it again, harder this time.

“Drystan!” His name falls from my lips in shock, but it turns into a wordless moan as he releases the sensitive bud and sucks away the tiny hurt.

Why does that feel so good? I can’t even think. I press him closer, selfishly seeking the rapture that’s so close I can almost touch it.

My entrance weeps, begging to be filled. I snap my mouth closed, determined not to beg him to fill me. It can’t happen. We’re on a damned

horse, the rocking of the saddle against my inner thighs a cruel mimicry of what I can't have.

But I *ache*.

A hand cups my breast, and I press up into the touch. I can feel something warm against my neck—but his head is between my thighs, so I can't count it as a kiss. It's merely the caress of the shadows where his skull should be as he leans in.

His tongue dives lower, granting my clit a reprieve as he laps up the mess weeping from my entrance. The tip stiffens, penetrating me the slightest fraction in his quest for more, before returning to torment my clit again.

This time, when he bites down, his fingers pluck *hard* at my nipple.

Pain—not pleasure—tips me over the edge. I shoot for the stars with a cry of surprise. His mouth keeps working me, extending my orgasm, drawing it out and twisting it until I'm on the verge of another.

“Come again.” His words buzz against sensitised flesh. “Squeeze my tongue.”

Harsh words, but he follows them with a thrust of his tongue inside me at the same time that his hand at my breast squeezes punishingly hard. I detonate. My breath rushes free, and all the tension in my body falls away.

I pull his head back, but I don't have the strength to meet his eyes. Part of me is convinced I'll see indifference, or worse, that he won't be looking at me again. What if he disliked it? He wasn't as vocal as the others. None of the groans or snarls I've become accustomed to from Jaro.

“Put me back, huntress. You're not done.”

His husky words snap me out of my fog, my eyes blink open, meeting his with shock. His mouth is glistening, pupils blown, and my hands have sent his usually neat braids into disarray.

“Put. Me. Back.” He licks his lips. “I'll tell you when you're done.”

My arms react before I can even comprehend what I'm doing. Something in that dark, commanding tone has managed to bypass my rational thinking, demanding my compliance. Drystan's head settles back between my legs, his hair tickling my inner thighs as his mouth goes back to slowly and methodically dismantling me one nip and suck at a time.

Every obscene slurping licking sound steals a fraction more of my sanity until I'm a shameless, shuddering mess. I can feel the gazes of the rest of the Guard on us, watching him play my body like it's an erotic show meant just for them.

Through it all, Drystan's iron sense of control never wavers. He never loses himself to passion, and the distance between us is a taunting, dangerous thing. The temptation to demand he lose that icy façade—or more—to lift his head and kiss him until he's just as overcome as I am, is so strong I would do it... If I could muster the strength to move.

I'm shaking, writhing against him by the time he carefully pries my hands free of his hair and takes his head back, I've lost feeling in my toes and a fine sheen of sweat covers me, mingling with the dust weeping from my wings.

He puts his head back into place, and I feel him crack his neck a few times before he settles into silence. Even Lore says nothing, though I can feel his smirk.

"Get her to drink this," Bree urges quietly, and I startle as I realise he started riding beside us at some point. There's a nameless longing in his eyes as he passes Drystan the waterskin, and the winter fae holds it to my mouth.

I should be embarrassed to have him look after me like this, but I don't have the energy to be. So I recline against him, letting him and Bree work together to feed me tiny mouthfuls of food as Jaro continues to shelter us from the rain.

I may be strung out and exhausted, but I'm also floating on a cloud of pampered bliss. It still feels surreal that it was Drystan, of all my males, who brought me to this point.

FOURTEEN

CAED

The solid gold gates of Pavellen are so damned shiny it hurts my eyes. The ostentatious display of wealth is almost worthy of my father. Of course, the fae have decorated with emerald encrusted swirls and rivers of crystal-clear water rather than the heads of their enemies, but they intimidate visitors just the same.

“Keep close,” Kitarni says, spurring her horse forwards. “Don’t speak too much. Your accents will give you away.”

Little does she know that I’m pretty good at impersonations, but I nudge my mare forward, as ordered. Prae is stiff as a board beside me. She’s clearly uncomfortable entering a fae stronghold, despite being armed to the teeth and well concealed.

The two of us are covered in layers of thick glamour that disguise us as high fae knights from Elfhame, complete with purple tabards and ridiculously ornate and shiny armour. Kitarni’s magic has transformed everything about my cousin, leaving me free to take care of my own glamour. I’ve borrowed a pair of Bram’s gloves to cover the mark on my hand.

The gates are open wide, allowing a large crowd of fae to mingle beneath. The throng parts for our horses as Kitarni leads us forwards onto the main street which runs alongside the enormous grand canal.

The capital of the Spring Court was built at the confluence of two great rivers, and the entire city glimmers with the wealth that being on such a trade route has bought them. The rich cream travertine stone of its arching bridges and open colonnades is complemented by the perfectly crystal-clear turquoise of the water that flows everywhere.

Like everywhere else in this damned court, the city is *dripping* with flowers. I want to retch at just how heavily scented the air is. It’s not even sweet, it’s suffocating.

And they’re growing *more* of the fucking things.

“The queen demands more roses!” a pompous-looking fae clucks at a group of workers as they coordinate to persuade a vine into bloom in a garland that wraps between the columns. “The tribute to the Nicnevin must be perfect!”

“They plan to welcome her by stinking her out?” I mutter under my breath. “Ancestors, this place fucking reeks.”

“Welcome to the City of Rivers,” Kitarni says, drowning out my sarcastic remark. “We’ll make our arrival known at the palace, then I’ll find somewhere for you both to stay and leverage Prince Madoc’s connections to procure a permanent glamour charm for Praedra. Whatever you do, don’t draw attention to yourself, don’t swim in the river, or the canals, don’t talk to anyone, and don’t—”

“We get it. Lie low.” Prae eyes the water with suspicion. “Are there any ways we can make some money while we’re here?”

Kitarni shakes her head. “Most money-making opportunities in this city come with a catch. Don’t be tricked into any bargains. Just keep to yourselves. As knights of Elfhome, your room and board are paid for by the city, so you’re covered as long as you stay out of trouble.”

“Shouldn’t be hard,” I mutter. “It’s not like we have much to talk about with do-gooder fairies, anyway.”

Kitarni’s frown sharpens. “Do not, under any circumstances, mistake the seelie for good simply because their magic is peaceful and they believe in honour. They are still fae. Their methods are just as—if not more—insidious than their unseelie counterparts.”

I shrug off her words, focusing instead on the shadow I just saw slither through the water. Shifting closer, I blink in surprise as a giant cream and gold scaled eel slithers through the water. It has a crimson splotch in a perfect circle on its head which glitters in the sunlight before it disappears beneath the bridge, followed by a second, orange companion.

“The giant eels of Pavellen are carnivorous,” Bram warns, riding back until his horse is beside mine and fixing me with a pointed look. “Queen Aiyana feeds fae who displease her to their spawn, along with traitors and enemies of the crown.”

He hasn’t spoken much since we joined them. Part of it is just who he is—always in his own head—but I’m sure he’s still pissed about what I did to his sister.

“Dreaming up creative ways to kill me seems to be a realm-wide pastime,” I comment, keeping my tone light. “Pity none of them have worked.”

Shaking his head, Bram scoffs. “Lad, you’re going to have to lose the cocky attitude real fast if you want to keep the immortality the Goddess

gifted you and your head.”

“Would you care if I did?”

His eyes lose focus, and he stares at the water for a long second, irises swirling with the presence of his fox. “You’re a fuck up.” His words sting harder than they should. “But no. I don’t wish you dead.”

He doesn’t? Then he must be the only fae in the queendom who can honestly say as much.

“Keep up,” Kitarni chides, breaking the moment.

I realise with a start that she and Prae are already a good distance ahead of us.

Fae bow as she passes, then stare at Bram with open-mouthed disbelief. Between the two of them, they’re causing enough disruption that traffic along the main road has stopped. Urging my mare forward, we rejoin her, following the main road alongside the grand canal. Our path takes us across a dozen decorative bridges and past dozens of weeping willows until we reach a small dock.

Pavellen is a city of concentric circular waterways, bisected by yet more canals that connect them. So it shouldn’t be any surprise when we abandon the horses and clamber into a low-lying boat which has been enchanted to take us the rest of the way.

There is no wall between Aiyana’s court and her people, but that doesn’t mean she’s left her home undefended. A wide moat, filled to the brim with glittering eels, serves in place of a traditional barrier. On the other side, guards in golden armour scan the water for anyone attempting to cross. There’s no bridge either.

I bet I could still sneak over. There are probably all sorts of treasures in there. Enough to outfit a pair of fugitives.

As if reading my thoughts, Bram shakes his head. “See those crystals?” He points at the pillars reaching out of the water at even intervals, topped with glowing yellow crystals carved to look like lilies. “Anyone tries to fly over without one of the matching bracelets, and they’re fried. Apparently, the eels appreciate the crispy flavour, and no, before you ask, glamour doesn’t work.”

Chewing my lip thoughtfully, I shrug. “There’s always a way.”

Rolling his eyes, the prince shakes his head. “You mean, there’s always an idiot stupid enough to try.”

It’s only idiocy if I fail.

I quash that thought and focus on looking like a pretentious fae as our boat bumps against the palace steps on the far side of the moat. Kitarni is helped from the boat by a page, but the rest of us are left to fend for ourselves as we follow her up the steps into the palace.

If there were too many people on the streets, the inside of the spring queen's home is just as crowded. Servants are scurrying this way and that across the foyer, and what space they don't take up is consumed by hundreds more fucking flowers.

"Bram!" A loud booming voice greets us as soon as we're through the great doors. "You fucking idiot! Where have you been?"

Bram's shoulders stiffen, then relax slightly. "Madoc. I... You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

A grinning high fae with freckled skin and braided red hair drags him into a hug before he can really finish. The second eldest of Diana's six sons is built just like Florian, all muscles and probably no brains. A small head pokes around from behind his knees, and I frown at the tiny fae girl.

"Khloe, this is your Uncle Bramwell," Madoc continues, barely sparing the rest of us a glance. "Bram, this is our younger daughter." His chest puffs out with pride beneath his bushy beard. "Our eldest is a Hellebore Knight, but she's... away from the city at present."

The child doesn't notice the meaningful look that passes between her father and the other two fae. "I thought Uncle Bram was coming with our auntie?"

Kitarni bends down, smiling. "Your aunt will visit in a little over a week, child. She's excited to meet you."

"High priestess," Madoc bows hastily. "Sorry, I—"

"Your enthusiasm is understandable, Your Highness." Kitarni sweeps her robes out of the way. "Now, we must pay our respects to the queen, and then I'll leave your brother in your care while I deal with the temple."

"Of course. Queen Aiyana has been waiting for you." He pauses, then shoots his brother a look I can't decipher. "She's in the throne room and eager to meet the Nicnevin. As are we all."

They're definitely doing some of that silent sibling communication, because Bram's shoulders stiffen slightly before he inclines his head back at us.

Madoc's eyes narrow and he lets out a sigh. "Perhaps your guards would prefer to wait outside. I'm sure they won't be needed."

Kitarni doesn't hesitate. "Of course. Stay here. We'll only be a short while."

Prae and I exchange a glance but don't say anything. If I know anything about palaces, the walls always have ears.

Madoc looks down at his daughter, expression softening. "Khloe, go find your mother. Tell her your uncle and I will return home in a few hours."

She nods, offers Kitarni a shy smile and a curtsy, then runs off along the canal, the baby dragonfly wings I hadn't noticed before fluttering behind her as she runs.

Bram and the high priestess follow Madoc in the direction of yet another gilded set of doors, from behind which, the sound of screaming and angry shouting can be heard. I edge in the same direction, trying to overhear the drama, but before I can get far, a gnome in a frilly apron corners me.

"You're knights from Elfhame, right?" he demands, looking between Prae and I suspiciously.

Shit. Can't lie, or he'll know. "We came from Elfhame," I confirm.

"Good. I need to know which colour flowers the Nicnevin prefers." He brandishes a handful of different roses in my face, in all different shades of the rainbow. My gut says that violet is the correct answer, but there's an unnaturally bright blue hiding towards the back.

Wordlessly I point at the blue, trying my hardest not to smirk as he beams and rushes off.

"Blue! The Nicnevin prefers blue!" He yells his newest discovery so loudly I'm sure my father can hear him across the Endless Sea.

Prae tuts under her breath. "Really?"

I shrug. "Can't let her forget me."

Tuning out her sigh, I settle back against the wall and watch in amusement as the group of fae whose magic must be colour—or flower—based start changing the arrangements into various shades of blue. The yelling and screaming from the throne room has ceased—which I hope is a good sign—and fifteen minutes later, Kitarni and the two princes emerge. While the dryad retains her customary calm, the two males wear matching expressions of shocked relief.

The dryad brushes stray petals from her robes, looking exasperated at her own blossoming hair for a second before she continues, "Excellent. Now, I'm off to sort out the temple. Prince Bram, I trust you're capable of sorting the rest."

That's a tactful way of telling him to take over the trial of glamouring Prae. Bram gives Kitarni a half bow in response, which Madoc echoes before she disappears.

"Come on," Bram says stiffly. "We'll find what we need on Main Street."

Prae and I hang back, letting them lead us onto the boat, over the moat of deadly eels, and back into the streets full of regular fae.

"You're lucky the Queen took news of the Nicnevin's fever as a good sign," Madoc murmurs under his breath. "If she hadn't..."

"Does she always flog florists in the throne room?" Bram looks a little pale.

"Only when they can't tell her the Nicnevin's favourite blooms," Madoc says. "Aiyana does not take failure or surprises well. It is better that she's prepared; it makes her reactions more manageable."

"She seemed in a good enough mood," Bram comments.

"For now," Madoc murmurs. "Last week, she exiled her entire elite guard when she had a lovers' tiff with the captain and then dismissed her favourite maid servant for serving her too-hot tea."

Prae and I share a look. Crazy fucking fae, but I suppose Elatha is no better.

"She can't seem to decide if she's excited for Rose's arrival or furious," Bram comments.

Madoc nods. "I'd say that's an accurate assessment, but enough of the queen. Where have you *been*, brother?"

"I was... held captive. Our sister freed me." Bram's voice is tight, and Madoc slaps him on the back in apology.

His sister freed him? *I* fucking freed him! If I could burn a hole in the back of his head with my gaze, I would.

Bram changes the subject. "You remember Mother's words about her?"

Madoc nods, glancing back at us. "I memorised them all. As have the others. We are ready."

Cryptic assholes. Prae watches them both, the cogs in her brain visibly turning as she mulls over their words.

"And your loyalty?"

Madoc tuts. "I remain loyal to the Nicnevin before all others."

It seems to satisfy Bram somewhat. "You know why I had to check."

Rather than take offence, Madoc snorts. "I bet Florian insisted on it."

Both of them sober at the reminder of their eldest brother, and beside me,

Prae rolls her eyes.

“He’s not fucking dead yet,” she grumbles under her breath. “That pompous asshole is too stubborn to die, anyway.”

“What are we here for?” Madoc asks, as we turn the corner onto a row of neatly maintained shops.

“A glamour charm,” Bram says carefully. “Better if you don’t know the details.”

“You know it won’t hold up against Aiyana’s gift.”

“That won’t be necessary. The person in question isn’t going anywhere near her.”

Madoc nods, pulling his brother into an alley. “Down here. You’ll want to make sure it’s unregistered, I suppose?”

“Obviously.”

A few twisting turns later and we come to a stop outside an old and incredibly tall door. Madoc knocks twice, and a peephole opens above us. A second later, it slams shut again, and another opens at eye level.

The face visible through the slit has wrinkled skin the dark orange of an ogre.

“Your Highness. Here for the usual?”

“No.” Madoc’s reply is curt, cutting off all speculation as to what ‘the usual’ might be. “I need an untraceable glamour charm.”

The ogre’s beady pink eyes gleam. “Anything specific?”

Bram reaches back and pulls Prae to the forefront. “This. We need it to look like this.”

The ogre nods, squinting at her. “One hour. Sixty gold.”

“Sixty!” Bram’s incredulity colours the word.

Madoc winces. “That’s an excellent price. We’re happy to pay. Thank you.”

The peep hole slams shut, and Madoc drags his brother away. “Try not to piss off Moggoth, Bram. I know you’ve always been tight, but the value of gold has plummeted since the fourth war with the Fomorians began. Sixty is the most reasonable offer you’ll get.”

Scowling, Bram shoves his brother lightly. “I’m not tight! I just have a higher understanding of the value of enchantments than you.”

SO FOLLOWS AN HOUR OF WATCHING BRAM SPLUTTER OVER PRICES IN THE market as Madoc shows him around. Amusing as it is to see the fox shifter drawn out of his quiet shell by his brother, being their personal guard is frustrating. The youngest prince fear-shifts whenever a loud noise startles him, and soon, trying to dodge any sharp sounds becomes tiring.

Bram doesn't much care for the arrangement, either. Despite his earlier words, he's still not forgiven me for what transpired in the Deep Caves, and so it's no surprise when he thrusts the glamour charm at us as soon as he's paid for it.

"Take this and get yourselves a room at the Temple Inn. Wait for Kitarni's instructions, and if you suddenly start to feel horny as fuck, drink that potion."

His eyes glint in warning, but he doesn't elaborate before turning on his heel and rushing after Madoc. The two of them have been talking about going to meet his family all afternoon, so I suppose that's where they're headed now.

Prae asks for directions, even though I tell her not to, and before long we're standing in front of an inn that looks like some seelie grandmother threw up on it. Flowers and doilies and lace curtains abound, and the effect is so nauseating that I can't bring myself to cross the threshold.

"Not this one," I moan. "I can feel my balls shrivelling into my asscrack."

Prae snorts. "That sounds like a fragile masculinity problem."

"It's painted *pink*, Prae. Come on. This is obviously Bram getting back at me. Don't make me go in there."

"Don't be a baby. He chose this one because it's close if the dryad wants us." She jerks her head towards the temple across the street. "Seems like a nice place."

Her words make sense, but she's hugging her waist in an attempt to keep herself from bursting out laughing.

"No. No way." I put my foot down. "We'll stay somewhere else."

Only, the next inn I drag us to on the main street is full. So is the next, and the one after that. Soon we've checked out every single inn on the major roads—even eventually giving in and trying the one Bram sent us to. Nothing.

"Are there no rooms anywhere in the city?" I growl, after our latest failure.

"Lots a' folk coming in to see the Nicnevin," says the goblin innkeeper as

he ushers us from his doorstep. “Try the Poison Pixie down on Hollowmere Street. It’s in the poor district, if you think you can handle that part of town.”

I raise an eyebrow at the challenge, but he’s already gone. “I like the sound of that.”

Prae gives a long-suffering sigh and pushes off the wall where she was waiting for me. “We could just go find the dryad again.”

“Oh, come on. What’s she going to do? Make us stay in the stuffy temple? Besides, this new place sounds fun.”

“The poor district.” Prae groans. “Caed, we’re going to be robbed blind and then arrested for murdering the thieves.”

“They can try,” I retort. “Besides, there’s nowhere on earth that can be worse than Fellgotha.”

It turns out the Poison Pixie is a dive on the very edge of the city, across the river. This far from the palace, the houses are smaller, ramshackle, and forced together in odd shapes that defy the neat and orderly nature of the rest of Pavellen. Some of them are even sinking into the water below—as if the marshy riverbed has chosen to reclaim this part of the city.

The canals and white stone architecture have been left to grow mossy and green, giving the entire place the feeling of having been dragged straight from the swamp. Weeping willows fall over the water, branches smacking the faces of the fae attempting to boat through the dark water beneath them.

The inn is one of the worst buildings, pitching over the water to a worrying degree despite clear attempts to prop it up with huge wooden braces on the far side. Even from across the street, the place reeks of piss and ale, and as we approach the battered and chipped door, we’re forced to dodge as an angry selkie is thrown from the inn by an even angrier troll.

“Come off it, Frannie,” he splutters. “You know I didn’t mean it.”

“That’s Frangila to you, Dex!” A troll’s roar is a terrifying thing, and this female is unleashing the full force of it on the selkie. “Now get out of my inn!”

He stammers, eyes comically wide. “You took my pelt! We’re wed now!”

“I thought it was a Goddess-damned dishrag!” the troll retorts, tits swaying beneath her apron. “As ya’ well knew. Now get yer scheming drunken ass back home before I rip ya’ apart and feed ya to the eels.”

“But I’m the only chef worth a damn in the district. You need me!” the selkie tries again.

The troll grips the doorframe with both hands, opens her large mouth

terrifyingly wide, and roars so loudly my ears ring.

The male scampers off, heading for the canal. When he reaches the water's edge, he grabs the pelt strung around his waist and wraps it over his shoulders before diving, shifting into a seal mid-leap, and landing in the water with a splash.

When the troll is finally satisfied that he's gone, her eyes scan the crowd, noticing the onlookers. "Whaddaya' think yer looking at?"

Suddenly everyone has someplace else to be, except us, and our inaction calls her attention to us.

"Males." Prae nods, approaching the troll in her dirty apron. "I don't suppose there's a vacancy in your establishment now?"

The troll sniffs, wide nostrils flaring and then wrinkling. My heart stops in my chest as I consider for a second that Prae's glamour might not hold up against a powerful nose, but she doesn't immediately charge at us, so Bram's money must have been well spent.

"Yer kind don't belong here. Go stay at the barracks with the other—"

"Nowhere has any room," Prae continues. She's not lying, not really, so the fae doesn't know we never tried the barracks.

I understand why Kitarni and Bram don't want us there. The chances of discovery would be far too high.

"Eh, fine. But no arresting the patrons."

"Trust me, not a problem," I grumble, following her huge bulk as she squeezes herself back through the peeling door and into the dim and stale-smelling hole she calls a business.

I take one look around at the suspiciously glaring patrons and grin at Prae. "Perfect."

Of course, she turns her nose up. "If your idea of perfection is a shack with suspicious stains on the upholstery, then yes, sure."

"Yer room is on the fourth floor." The troll pretends not to hear my cousin's words, and I suspect that has something to do with the fact that Prae's stolen Bram's gold from me and is currently placing it on the bar in front of her.

"We'll be staying until the Nicnevin's party leaves," Prae says, swiping the key up quickly.

Neither of us has missed the way that every single eye in this place has turned to regard the glinting coin.

Of course, the glamour makes us look like upstanding knights, which

probably comes with a decent salary. I can almost feel them weighing our weapons against what they think we might have in our packs.

We just became the biggest marks in this place.

“I give it an hour before someone tries to rob us,” I mumble, grinning as I follow her up the rickety wooden staircase.

“You could at least *pretend* you’re not looking forward to it,” she growls. “And I don’t think it’s going to take an hour. They’re already following us.”

Sure enough, there’s a shadow creeping behind me.

“I know we’re team fairy—”

Prae’s eyes flash as she unlocks our door and shoves me inside. “No, Caed. Killing them is *not* going to win you any points with the Nicnevin.”

The door slams behind us, and I prop the lone, rickety chair underneath the door handle.

“Okay. So what now? Want to go down to the bar and see how long it takes for someone to try to steal our non-existent gold?”

Prae flops down on the bed closest to the door and rests one arm over her eyes. “Now, we rest. Tomorrow, we go out and scope out the city some more. There might be a way you can sneak into the palace to see Rose when she arrives.”

“And what? Plead my case again?” My face tells her exactly what I think of that plan.

“No. Find a way to protect her without the rest of the Guard knowing you’re there. They’ve got to trust you, remember? The only way they’ll do that is if you actually do the job you signed up for and look out for Rose.”

Her plan sucks. “Protect her from what? The fairies? You’ve seen them. They’re all so desperate to earn the great Nicnevin’s approval that they’d kiss her feet if she asked them to.”

“Hogart and Haor are still out there,” Prae reminds me, moving her arm to meet my gaze. “They might be preoccupied with the siege right now, but that could change at Elatha’s whim. And you know that Draard is probably begging your father daily to let him leave Fellgotha to bring back your head.

Draard has always hated me, as have the other two. If not for my banishment, I would’ve killed them all years ago. Now those three are probably plotting and scheming ways to use this situation to win the title of heir.

“By that logic, we should still be out there, following them.” The floorboards creak alarmingly as I pace the length of the tiny room. “What am

I supposed to do? Sit in this room until she arrives?”

She shrugs, her arm going back over her face. “Explore the city? Relax?”
Relax? Is she serious?

“It’s been a long ride,” she says. “Get some rest. We’ll figure the rest out in the morning.”

There’s no way I can just lie here and sleep. “I’m getting something to drink.”

She shifts, turning onto her side and fixing me with a glare. “Don’t get into trouble.”

“I’m not a child.”

Even with that glamour covering her, the way she raises one eyebrow as if to say “Really?” is typical Prae.

Rolling my eyes, I unblock the door and let it slam behind me. I take the stairs two at a time, fuming as I go. The force of the patrons’ stares is like a prickling wave that washes over me the moment I descend the stairs. No doubt the gold coin is still fresh in their minds.

Jokes on them if they think I have all the money.

“Something strong,” I demand, as soon as I reach the bar. “And keep it coming.”

The tankard hits the dented and cracked wood of the bar quickly enough, and I glug it without stopping to breathe. There’s no hiding my grimace at the taste of the swill they serve, but the burn in my throat reassures me that the alcohol is strong, so I’ll take it.

“Another.”

The troll eyes me critically. “You got the coin for that?”

Grimacing, I reach into my pockets and withdraw what little spare change I’ve got left. Prae’s cleaned me out—typical—but there’s enough for the drink I just had.

A troll scoffing sounds a lot like a horse, and her stale breath washes over me.

“I’m not a charity.” She shuffles away, abandoning me in favour of scolding the drunken rabble at the other end of the bar.

The patrons, realising I’m not wealthy enough to be interesting, back off. All except one.

Stinking of desperation, the faun drags his stool closer to me. His balding brow is sweating, the fur on his legs shaking as he trembles.

“If it’s coin you’re in need of, I know where you can get some.”

Distrust settles across my shoulders and must show on my face because he backs away and hurries to cover his tracks.

“My mistake—”

We do need the money... Before I can think better of it, I grab his arm, stopping him.

“Speak.”

Watching the indecision play over his expression is comical, but in the end, whatever greed prodded him to approach me in the first place wins again.

“There’s a place where those muscles of yours could make you rich, if you’ve a mind to try.”

A fighting ring? I can get *paid* to pummel fairies? This seems too good to be true.

My eyes narrow. “And this place is completely legal, right?”

“Is it illegal if there are no laws against brawling?”

Typical fae, avoiding a question by asking another question. Still, I’m interested. We need money, and there’s not much I do better than kicking fae ass, even without my powers.

This could fix a lot of problems for us. Grinning, I imagine Prae’s face when she realises that I’ve solved our money woes single-handedly.

Standing, I tower over the faun and grin. “Lead on.”

FIFTEEN

RHOSWYN

A chill blooms across my skin as the gleaming spires of Pavellen draw closer. I'm weak. Every muscle in my body aches, and the tight, itchy feeling has transformed into a whole-body ache, despite Lore eating me out until I screamed myself hoarse less than two hours ago. My wings are so sensitive that I can't lean back against Drystan, let alone complete my exercises.

Worse, a deep cramp is starting low in my abdomen.

We're so close, having crossed the grand delta of the Renfraw the night before. Now the vast capital of the Spring Court stretches out before us. All I have to do is make it an hour longer.

All four of my Guard are sparkling under a generous coating of my dust—even Bree, though he hasn't made any advances. The stuff is *everywhere*, dripping from my wings with even the slightest brush against them.

"Rhoswyn." Drystan's voice has an edge to it I haven't heard before.

"I'm fine," I promise, taking a deep breath as if that alone will help me control my fever.

Jaro looks back, disbelieving. "Are you going to make it until we reach the temple?"

How should I know? I want to snap, but bite back the words.

I've been crabby since I woke, and I just don't understand why.

"I'll make it," I answer. "I'm more concerned that..."

"What?" Jaro demands. "Are you in pain?"

"Caed is there," I admit in a guilty whisper, ignoring his question because the answer will only upset him. "I... I can feel him."

The curse that leaves Drystan's lips turns the air blue, and aggression pours off the four of them in a great stifling wave.

"He won't do anything," Bree promises. "Kitarni would never allow you to be hurt, and neither will we."

"This is too close for comfort," Jaro argues.

"Close enough that I can stab him?" Lore asks, his face taking on a dreamy expression.

"If he comes near the cloister, yes," Bree says.

“He wouldn’t.” Only... do I really know what Caed would and wouldn’t do? A second’s deliberation later, I nod. “For all that he was responsible for, he never took advantage of me like that.” My mind flashes back to that one night we spent together—the one where I ended up snuggling him—and I resolve to never ever bring that up with the others.

Lore’s brows shoot into his hairline. “You mean to tell me he didn’t so much as kiss you? How dumb can you get?”

“Personally, I think it was a smart fucking choice,” Drystan snarls.

“The least he could do,” Jaro agrees. “Given his betrayal of everything his oath stood for.”

They fall silent, and I regret bringing the subject up. Without their chatter, all that I have to focus on is the abrasive fabric rubbing across my body and the uncomfortable wetness saturating in my underwear.

If not for the fact that we’re about to ride through one of the largest fae cities in the realm, I might seriously consider removing all my clothes just for some relief. Keeping my hands on the pommel of the saddle is becoming an exercise in self-restraint, and the rocking motion of Blizzard beneath my thighs isn’t helping things.

Hold it together, I order my body.

“Hail!”

Every single member of my Guard draws a weapon at the unexpected greeting, and I flinch at the suddenness of their reaction.

That voice didn’t sound threatening; in fact, it was almost familiar...

“Ambassador Neila?” I ask, peeking around Drystan’s sword arm.

I only met the selkie once at the ball before the inner city fell, and I forgot all about her, but she’s changed. Her fur is still wrapped around her shoulders with the chains from before, but she’s more unkempt and wild now.

Behind her, four dozen other females are mounted on horseback, spears strapped across their backs with their round shields emblazoned with a delicate hellebore design. There’s no way they could’ve snuck up on us, which means they have to have been waiting here, glamoured, for us to arrive.

“Nicnevin Rhoswyn.” Her fist thumps over her heart in a warrior’s bow. “I recognise the delicate timing, but I have an urgent request to make before you enter the city.”

I take in her deliberate non-confrontational stance, and the respectful distance she maintains between us with interest. For all that my Guard still

have their weapons raised, she's making every effort to appear unthreatening.

"Mab?" I whisper, trusting Drystan's body to hide the movement of my lips.

"I would hear her out," my grandmother advises, popping into existence beside me. "Having all the facts can never be a bad thing."

Trying not to squirm at the idea of trying to have a civil discussion with a small ocean in my panties, I lift my hand and gently place it on my knight's arm.

"I'll hear what she has to say."

He glances down at me, brows drawn. "Rhoswyn, we don't have time—"

"I'll be fast," Neila promises. "My lady, Queen Aiyana will welcome you with all the pageantry you expect, but she has no intention of offering you her vow of allegiance." Her statement is like blasting powder, exploding in the space between us. Before my Guard can do much more than tense, she continues, "She exiled myself and the rest of the Hellebore Knights who wanted to go back and help your brother retake your city."

"Then we'll kill her and find a more cooperative queen." Lore grins like that's the best suggestion.

At the same time, Mab says, "This is not good. The vow of allegiance is not to be trifled with. If Aiyana doesn't offer it, she's essentially making a declaration of civil war."

Goddess, we can't afford another war on top of the one we already have.

"Did she say why?" I ask, taking a deep breath as I fight past another twinge in my abdomen.

I can do this. I can convince Aiyana to change her mind...

The selkie looks beyond me, to where Jaro is sitting on his horse. "She became incensed when she learned you had called a traitor's son to your Guard. It only became worse when reports said he was accompanying you on your pilgrimage."

"My father was not a traitor," he snarls.

"Your father broke my queen's heart," Neila counters. "It matters not what he was or wasn't. She also banished your entire family from her court, or have you forgotten?"

Jaro is having none of that. "That was hundreds of years ago, and he found his *mate*. I wasn't about to leave my Nicnevin unprotected in a court where Fomorians are raiding indiscriminately."

He bares his teeth in a snarl at the very idea.

“Matters of the heart are not easily forgiven. Especially with my queen. She intends to demand a trial of restitution.”

“My father is dead.” Jaro’s eyes are fully wolf now. “Just who does she think is going to take it? Me?”

“A scorned lover is not always rational,” Mab murmurs, but it goes unheard by the others.

Neila swallows. “That’s exactly what she expects. If you win, she’ll offer her allegiance and rescind the banishment, but... she does not plan to let you win.”

I glance at Mab.

“The trial of restitution is an ancient ritual of atonement,” she explains. “The party who was wronged is entitled to demand the one responsible undertake a trial of their choosing to atone. It’s not dissimilar to what Danu is requesting of your Fomorian.”

“What would the trial include?” I ask quietly, as Jaro continues to argue his father’s innocence.

“Usually... combat,” Mab admits. “But there have been different variations throughout the years. Sometimes it’s coin, other times a period of servitude.”

Combat doesn’t sound so bad. Jaro is an accomplished warrior, I’ve heard several people say so, plus, he can’t die.

“There’s always a catch,” Mab warns, seeing the relief on my face.

“She can’t be talked down?” I ask the selkie.

Neila bows again, and I get the sense she’s deliberately not looking at me so as not to upset my already-on-edge Guard. “If you manage it, Nicnevin, you will be the first to do so. Regardless, I wished to warn you before we leave.”

“Leave?” Drystan demands, suspicion layering his tone.

“The Hellebore Knights are headed for Elfhome.” Neila retreats back to her own waiting horse. “We shall help Knight Commander Florian retake the city, or enter the Otherworld with our honour intact, knowing we did as Danu would have wanted.” Her eyes soften as she glances behind her to the glimmering city beyond. “Perhaps, if we survive, our queen will allow our return.”

A pang of sympathy radiates through me, and I open my mouth to say something, but the words won’t come.

“Florian will welcome the extra spears,” Jaro says, the wolf slowly

disappearing from his eyes.

She swings up into her saddle. “We plan to take the passageway from Orvendel to the heart of the palace and help your knights until you return with reinforcements. I know that Danu will likely seek to punish our court for our queen’s disloyalty, but perhaps, in this, we will earn her some leniency.”

“You still love her,” I realise.

Neila inclines her head slowly. “She is my queen.”

It’s difficult to get my head around her motivations, but I understand the sacrifice she’s making. She didn’t have to protest. She could’ve taken the easy path, followed Aiyana’s orders, and stayed in the relative safety of the southern courts. Instead, she chose to warn me, then go into battle in the hopes of some divine redemption for herself and the female she loves.

Is this what being Nicnevin is like? Watching people willingly face down death for you? I can’t even thank her without owing her a debt.

Which I already do.

I take a deep breath, knowing that Drystan will likely kill me for this later, but equally certain that it’s the right thing to do.

“Thank you.”

Every single fae stiffens, and Neila’s eyes widen for a second before she drops into a lower bow.

“Lorcan.” Drystan bites out the name.

I don’t have to look at him to know he’s glaring daggers at the back of my head. For a second, I question whether he’s warning the redcap against doing anything rash or ordering him to take Neila’s head.

The redcap’s glamour disappears, revealing him crouched on the back of Neila’s horse, his head canted to one side. Well, that answers my question.

“There’s no debt if the one who could claim it is dead.”

“The Nicnevin”—Oh shit, Drystan is back to calling me ‘Nicnevin’ again?—“has made her decision clear.”

Lore blinks back beside Blizzard, holding out one of Neila’s bangles in his hand. “Just say the word, pet, and I’ll make sure you have the full set.”

It doesn’t seem possible, but Drystan’s posture turns to stone as Lore drops the glittering band in my hand and blinks back onto Wraith’s back.

“Redcap.” So much warning in that one word. All over a bracelet?

“Don’t make me say the little word that begins with du—” Lore cuts off, pressing two fingers to his grin. “Oopsie! I almost said it!”

“We need to get to the city,” Jaro cuts off their argument.

“Danu bless the Nicnevin.” Neila spurs her horse, getting out of our way.

Good thing, too, because Drystan seems to have made it his mission to get us out of there as quickly as he can, nudging Blizzard forward before I can even wish Neila and her warriors luck.

“Do you have *any* idea what you’ve just done?” he growls the instant the other riders are out of earshot. “Have you gone mad? That is Aiyana’s lover, and you just gave her an open-ended favour.”

“She betrayed her queen for me,” I argue. “And she seemed honourable —”

“Fae change!” Drystan growls. “In four hundred years’ time, that female could be a tyrant who murders Aiyana for her throne, and then demands yours, and because you did the *one thing* we told you never to do, you’ll be forced to hand it over! Even if she doesn’t, what happens if she’s ever tricked into giving up her true name, and her new owner decides to command her to use that vow against you? Did you consider that at all?”

“Drystan,” Jaro cautions. “She’s young.”

“Then she should listen to those who know better.” Drystan kicks Blizzard into a canter as I curl into myself.

No. I hadn’t considered any of those things. Why would I? I wasn’t raised in this world.

“I just wanted to do something to acknowledge the pain it must have caused her to betray her queen just to give us a warning,” I mumble.

“Don’t worry.” Lore smiles, Wraith easily keeping up with Blizzard’s gait. “If either of those things happen, I get to kill her. It’s a win-win!”

“I suppose this could be why Danu chose one of the realm’s most prolific assassins as your Guard,” Bree says, coming up on our other side.

Swallowing, I try my best to tune the two of them out. I didn’t mean to accidentally sentence poor Neila to death.

“You must not blame yourself,” Mab murmurs, clearly uncomfortable with the business of trying to console me. “You are still learning.”

How long does that excuse last? My headache pangs a little harder, and I grimace, which she catches. “How are you feeling?”

Turning my head away, I open my mouth to tell her I’m fine, but the words die on my tongue, proving them a lie. “I feel... weak.”

“Headaches? Nausea? Cramps?” Mab presses, floating closer to us.

Not wanting to admit to all those things, I simply nod in answer. “I can handle it.” I’m used to pain—I know how to keep up appearances when I feel

weak.

If Drystan had relaxed at all with the selkie's departure, he tenses once again at my admission. Spurring Blizzard into a full-on gallop, he mutters something dark under his breath.

Mab has to fly faster to keep up, but she doesn't complain. "The cloister will help," she promises. "You're in the final stages now. The temple will have herbs and things that will ease the worst of things until it peaks."

The city gates are a blur. The scent of flowers cloy my nose as we ride past cobbled streets filled with fae calling out blessings. I should smile, wave, something—but all of the desire to do so is wiped out by an unexpected burst of fear.

For so long now, the fever has been a looming threat in the future. Now that we're here, I'm confronted with the knowledge that it's coming, and there's absolutely nothing I can do about it.

"We'll take care of you," Jaro murmurs, riding up close beside Drystan as we're forced to slow by the crowds and the narrow streets. "You don't need to be afraid, Rosie."

The rest of my Guard surrounds Drystan's horse, forming a barrier between me and the fae cheering my arrival. I squeeze my eyes shut, like it can block out the noise, but when I open them again, the world is blurry and painfully bright.

The Call buzzes fiercely in my chest, and my head turns instinctively, drawn like a magnet to the far side of the street. Even my worsening vision isn't enough to prevent me from recognising a familiar pair of turquoise eyes watching from the back of the crowd.

"Caed," I whisper, knowing—despite the glamour—that it's him.

He's here, just like I knew he would be.

In those eyes is a deep, tormented question. A plea he'll never voice. His lips part, his hand reaching out towards me, and my heart skips a beat.

Slowly, deliberately, I turn away, letting my eyes flutter shut.

I don't need to see him to know what that did to him. He's half fae, and just like the rest of my Guard, his instincts will be screaming at him to be close to me. If I'm honest, mine are doing the same. His bond to me—usually so cutting and sharp in my chest—is dull and bleeding from my rejection.

"I'll deal with the Fomorian," Bree says, peeling off from the group without giving the others time to argue.

"Fucking idiot," Jaro says. "How on earth can he bear to be apart from

her right now?”

“All pain is relative,” Drystan comments. “He’s experienced worse.”

“That doesn’t explain how the Fomorian is walking away from her as well,” Jaro grouches.

It does. But Caed’s pride would never allow them to know how he’s suffered at the hands of his father.

Hooves clatter across cobbles, cheers give way to murmurs of greeting, and then finally, Blizzard stops.

“Jaromir, take her. I’ll see to the horses.”

I’m jostled between arms, and I hear Kitarni murmur a greeting, but I can’t bring myself to open my eyes. Tiredness whispers seductively in my ear, promising relief from the ache.

“We’ve drawn the bath with soothing herbs, and everything is ready.” Kitarni keeps her voice soft, and I’m grateful. “Is she sleeping?”

“Almost.” Jaro’s voice rumbles through me.

“Then it won’t be long now.” Rough bark kisses my temple, wiping my sweat-damp hair out of my face. “The attendants will see to her. You need to eat while you can.”

There’s a moment’s pause, and then I find myself resting on a soft cloud. A bed, perhaps? I snuggle deeper into the covers, my whole body sighing at the impossibly soft sheets.

“Thank you, high priestess.” Jaro is still close, soothing me with light touches.

“Lorcan, have you been careful to keep your hat—?”

“It’s so red, isn’t it? It drank down eight this morning, and twenty the day before.”

“When on earth did you find time to kill all those people?” Jaro asks. “We didn’t even run into that many Fomorian patrols.”

“It’s a talent,” Lore quips.

“And where is Bricriu?”

“Dealing with Caed.”

I’m too adrift to hear anything else after that.

SIXTEEN

DRYSTAN

It wasn't a lie when I told Jaromir that I was checking on the horses, but it's not all I plan on doing. Bricriu worries me. His decision to go after Caed alone reeks of a male seeking out distraction.

It's reckless. Rose is too close to her fever for him to be so far. He should be secluded in the cloister, taking the sleeping draught. Not out tracking down the Fomorian.

Goddess, I don't understand how either of them are able to be away from her. I honestly thought we'd have to fight Caed to keep him away, but it looks like the blade prince has managed to dig up a shred of honour and walk away after Rose's clear dismissal.

I watched his aura sour from hopeful to resigned with a kind of grim satisfaction, but there wasn't a hint of malice there. Whatever his reasons—and I don't trust any of them were good—Caed was going to leave and take that potion.

Here's hoping Bree doesn't do anything stupid to change his mind.

Fortunately, the púca's distinctive looks make it easy enough to track him through the city, across canals until I inevitably turn up in a dingy bar in the poor district.

"Where is the púca?" I demand of the innkeeper.

My urgency must be plain on my face, because the troll extends one long finger towards a door in the back. Shoving it open, I frown at the raucous noise that assaults my ears. The sudden blast of sound tells me that the walls have been enchanted to disguise this room's true nature. Blood and sweat hang heavy in the air, and once I've descended the stairs into the grotty basement, I realise why.

A fighting ring. How unlike the Spring Court. The corner of my lip curls, only for the expression to vanish as I realise exactly who is in the cage in the centre of the room.

Bree and Caed are circling each other like predators. The former has stripped down to just his leathers, his tattoos writhing beneath his skin as he wields a particularly vicious looking dagger while the Fomorian is wearing a glamour that makes him appear to be unseelie fae. It can't disguise Danu's

curse mark running across his bare chest and down his arm, although his wrapped hands hide Rose's mark—for now.

How he hasn't given himself away already, Goddess only knows. I suspect the willingness of lowlife scum to look the other way for gold is a big part of it. Still, it's an unacceptable risk. What if the cloth hiding Rose's mark was to fall away? What if he took a mortal blow and lived? What if the city watch decides to stop taking bribes and pay attention to this—because there's no way Aiyana lets this shit fly on her turf. Some of those bars are iron—the rust on them proves as much.

Rumours would fly if anyone caught wind that a member of Rose's Guard was hanging around underground fight rings. Did he even consider how that would affect her? No.

In a burst of motion, Bree and Caed collide. Clashing blades ring out over the furious screams of the crowd. The Fomorian is good—I expected as much from the tales of him on the battlefield—but surprisingly, the púca is holding his own.

When Bree summons a second blade from his skin in a burst of ink, then executes a leap over Caed's head, a grim certainty starts to dawn. My suspicions are solidified when he summons his cat-sìth tail, then uses it to knock the blade out of Caed's hand in a practised move, trusting the catlike reflexes of his beast to carry him out of striking distance.

He's done this before.

No one is this good at close quarters combat without decades of practice.

Caed is down to one dagger, and it only takes Bree a practised dodge and an uppercut to remove that, too. The second blade skitters out of the ring and into the crowd, leaving only the first lying in the dirt.

Caed hesitates.

“Pick it up.” I've never heard the púca so angry. “You left her afraid to have her wings touched. Pick your fucking blade up.”

Still, the Fomorian does nothing. Can he sense, like I can, that this isn't really Bree? The púca I know would never have chosen to do something so stupid so close to Rose's fever. This whole situation reeks of out-of-control instincts, suppressed trauma, and a male desperately trying to run from a reality he's not prepared to face.

Rose is going into fever. Bree can either help her through it or take the potion Kitarni brewed. This accomplishes nothing.

His earlier request—that we beat him and chain him in iron—rings in my

ears.

The púca would rather be put out of commission for a week than sleep soundly in the temple.

Caed's hands are spread in a gesture of surrender, and the crowd is beginning to boo the two of them for not providing the entertainment they were promised.

"What are you doing, kid! Get the fucking knife! Do you know how much this match is worth?" A faun on the sidelines yells, and I groan.

Of course. Caed would get himself mixed up in an underground fighting ring for money. Whose gold is he betting? Does he even know that technically his debts are Rose's? If a bunch of Spring Court bookies turn up on the doorstep of Elfhome demanding half of Rose's treasury, I'll gut him.

"I see you found him." A hand slaps my shoulder, and I nearly jump out of my skin.

I've never met Madoc, but the familiar black and silver fox wrapped around his shoulders gives his identity away. Bram regards the fight with lazy vulpine eyes while his broad-shouldered brother eyes the place like he's wondering if they'll let him join the fight.

"Prince Madoc, I assume?" I incline my head. "I thought Kitarni would've ensured Caed was asleep by now." There's an edge in my tone, but I can't tell if it's due to strain, anger, or some messed up combination of both.

"Caed and Praedra disappeared the instant they had reliable glamours. We only found them yesterday." Madoc shrugs as if a pair of Fomorians loose on the streets of Pavellen isn't worth fretting over. "He's earning money the only way he knows how, and the female is spending it for him."

"And you thought it was a good idea to let them continue?"

"Hey, the lad promised to take the potion when it was time, and we're not his jailers."

Fuck. I shouldn't even be here. I should be at the temple, tending to my goddess-damned mate, but these two—

Cutting off the thought with savage efficiency, I debate my options.

"I suppose dragging Bree out of there by the scruff of his neck is out of the question?" I ask.

"Only if you want to make an enemy of the entire Pavellen underworld. Some big names have taken to betting on Caed's fights. He's good—normally."

I turn my attention back to the pits as the crowd surges forward like a

great wave. A second later, I realise why.

Bree has traded his legs for the coils of his nathair and is currently crushing the life out of the Fomorian with that immense tail. Caed must have picked up the dagger again at some point, because it drops from his hand as he's squeezed tighter and tighter. Bones crack, the sickening sound filling me with satisfaction.

Rose may have prevented me from harming the asshole, but I'm going to enjoy the second-hand justice.

Until he falls unconscious, and a few seconds later, the glamour he's been holding drops.

"Shit." I'm not sure who says it—it could be Madoc, or me, or both of us—but there's no stopping the disaster now.

"Fucking púca," Madoc curses. "How is he supposed to keep his identity secret when he's unconscious?"

"Fomorian!" The whispers have turned to shouts now, and a minute later the situation escalates again.

"Make way! In the name of the Queen!"

Patrons start fleeing as city watch soldiers in full Spring Court armour pour into the basement. I guess the news of a Fomorian spread fast—prompting them to do their Goddess-damned jobs for once.

"Fuck." I force my way forward, intent on getting to Bree and Caed before they do, but I'm not fast enough.

By the time I'm through the crowd of escaping fae and inside the cage with Bree, they've already got Caed surrounded.

"Guard, thank you for your help in uncovering this interloper," their captain says, as Bree dismisses his serpentine tail, dropping Caed to the ground without mercy. "We'll have him executed, then hunt down whichever fae colluded with the enemy to provide him with a glamour."

"Leave him alive," I grate out, hating myself for stepping in, but if they try to kill Caed, they'll quickly figure out that he's a member of Rose's Guard. "I want to question him after the Nicnevin's fever has passed."

The captain nods, finding nothing strange about my edict, but hastens to add, "I assure you, Guard, there is no threat to Danu's daughter here. This is an unfortunate, but completely isolated, incident."

"Bricriu, come." I turn on my heel, expecting him to follow, but he's looking between Caed and me with regret etched into the space between his brows. His hands are physically shaking, and I'm not the only one who's

taking note.

“He’ll be secure in the dungeons until we return,” I say. “No one will kill him while we’re looking after Rose.”

Her name gets through to him. His body jerks like he’s been hit with a bolt of lightning. “Rose.”

The urge to drag him out of here is strong but touching him might shatter whatever fragile hold he has on his emotions right now. Behind him, Caed is groaning on the ground—judging by the deep navy patches blooming across his chest, Bree’s tail broke at least a few ribs—and the city watch wastes no time in slapping a heavy pair of manacles on his wrists.

If they unwrap his hands... if they so much as suspect...

Fuck. We can’t deal with this right now. I shoot a glance at Rose’s brothers, and they nod to me, silently promising to take care of this.

Two princes should be able to handle this until the fever breaks, surely? Which leaves just one problem remaining.

I sweep my arm out, gesturing in the direction of the open cage door. “Come. She needs to know you’re safe.”

Rose should be resting, not worrying about the location of her Guard. Yet, I can feel her unease thanks to the Call. Not quite a full-fledged panic, but still enough to churn in my gut.

Caed is dragged away, and Bree finally takes a step towards the cage door. His feet drag, and his shoulders slump the farther away he gets. When he finally reaches the open bars, he hesitates, as if only just noticing the iron woven into the structure.

“What did I just do?” he mumbles, more to himself than to me.

His aura is smudged with disbelief and shock.

I sigh. “What any male who’s spent the last week bombarded by his mate’s fever pheromones without relief would do. Sought out a threat to her and tried to end it.”

I don’t add that, had he simply done as I suggested and sought the help of a mind healer or an empath, or even talked to Rose, he might not be in this situation. The temptation is strong, but it won’t help him to hear it.

Now we’re in an even deeper mess, and I can tell from the distress glinting through his aura that he realises it. If the spring queen learns the identity of the Fomorian in her dungeon, she won’t hesitate to play the upper hand against Rose.

Rose, who should be worrying about nothing except getting through her

first fever.

“I’ll take the potion,” Bree mumbles.

Madoc sets Bram’s fox on the floor, abandoning his brother to follow the city watch soldiers with his shoulders set in determination. The three of us hesitate, and I sigh again before leading our messed-up gang out of the basement and onto the street. The silence is frosty. I may not say anything, but I let my disapproval radiate off me. Bree should know this is not acceptable.

“I just...” the púca begins, when we’re within sight of the Temple. He hesitates, stopping in the middle of the street, then turns to face the fox shifter. “Rose trusts you.”

Bram shifts, naked but without shame. “I will protect you while you sleep, brother. You needed only to ask.”

There’s so much understanding in the look that passes between them that I’m forced to take a sudden and deep interest in my boots. Of course, Bram would know better than most the fear of being captive and defenceless.

“I will be in your debt.” Bree shifts his weight from foot to foot. “I would rather bargain, so I at least know the price I will pay in advance.”

Bram inclines his head but doesn’t argue, as I suspect he wants to. “I will protect you if you swear to the Goddess that once her fever is over, you will explain exactly what happened here to my sister.”

Bree winces, and I don’t blame him. “The bargain is struck.”

“Come on.” There’s something... crawling beneath my skin. My cock—which hasn’t fully gone down once in the last three days—is painfully hard and demanding my attention. “You should see her before you go. She’ll want to know you’re safe.”

The cloister is heavily guarded, and I nod to the females on duty as we leave Bram in the main temple and pass through the immense courtyards separating each fever suite. This is a place sacred to females, held safe through the sisterhood of the temple, and our every step is carefully watched to ensure we don’t stray where we’re not welcome. There are dampening charms hanging everywhere—even strung into the wind chimes—as a precaution to keep the females’ scents from affecting every fae in the city. Despite that, I swear I can still taste Rose’s floral-caramel scent on my tongue as we stride towards the largest of the suites, secluded in the very centre.

I don’t bother knocking before I enter the suite, but perhaps I should’ve. Maybe if I had, it would’ve given me some warning.

No. Instead, I take a step into the room and almost double over as my cock tries to explode in my breeches.

“Shit,” I groan, taking in Jaro and Lore, who sit on the edge of the massive bed hunched over themselves as they cradle their crotches like they’ve been kicked in the bollocks.

Neither of them is wearing a shirt, and I shrug off my coat as the warmth hits me as well. I would lose my shirt, but I’m clinging to the vain hope that the barrier will give me some control.

The room itself is gleaming and so elegant that I almost don’t notice the lack of windows. The lighting is kept dim, on account of Rose’s eyes, and the furniture is all soft with rounded corners—no doubt so that we can bend her over any convenient surface should she require it. A small feast has been laid out on a table at the far end. The food is sealed under enchanted glass cloches that will keep it fresh, though I can’t even consider eating while my balls feel like this.

Swollen.

Shit. Resisting the urge to check them for damage is taking most of my willpower.

Jaro flops back on the bed. “She’s bathing. Shit. We made it just in time. They reckon she has half an hour, if that.”

“I can’t blink.” Lore seems dazed. “I want to so bad, but she’s so shiny.”

At least Rose managed to take care of that concern. I was worried she wouldn’t be able to in her state.

“Go to her.” I step back to allow Bree to shuffle in the direction of the only other door in the room.

I don’t even realise I’m following until my eyes latch onto her. She’s reclining in a round pool, surrounded by female attendants with her eyes closed. I suddenly grasp why the others are out there and not in here.

Rose has no attraction to females, and yet seeing anyone who isn’t us close to her right now sends rage crawling down my spine. A curtain catches fire, and I hurriedly extinguish it with a curse.

Bree must feel the same, but he doesn’t show it as he bends down close to her, the attendants shifting to give him room.

“Are you awake, dragonfly?”

Rose’s lashes flutter, and she makes a noise in the back of her throat that sounds like affirmation.

Goddess, why did they have to put her in the water? The damned herbs

they've tipped in there have turned the liquid a cloudy white that obscures her body, and it's the worst kind of tease.

"Bree?" She sounds so out of it, and I have to wonder just what they've been giving her. "Don't leave me."

The anguish is written in the rigid lines of his body. He wants her—so badly I can practically taste it—but his fear wins out.

"Have fun, okay? I'll dream of you." He bends and kisses her temple, lifting back with a tormented groan.

Glutton for punishment that he is, his hand comes forward and strokes her hair away, before trailing his fingers down past her jaw and along to her collarbone. A flash of black inky mist later, and a tiny snake uncurls from Bree's arm, heading for Rose's shoulder. The nathair wriggles until it finds a comfortable spot, then dissipates in a cloud of darkness, reforming as a tattoo.

"Here. Now part of me will stay with you."

If my entire focus wasn't consumed by battling the urge to yank Rose out of the pool and savage her naked body like a beast in rut, I might've found the sentiment sweet. As it is, I can barely find the sense to step aside and let the púca flee the room.

He barely gets out in time.

Rose's body jerks, sending water splashing, and the attendants share a look before they drop what they're doing and start the process of pulling her from the water and drying her.

Somehow, I just *know*.

This is it.

Without a word, I step between the maids, taking Rose into my arms as they scurry from the room with hasty bows.

"Drystan," she murmurs, snuggling into me without opening her eyes. "It hurts so bad."

"We'll make it better," I promise, barely recognising my own voice. "You just have to say yes."

We may have discussed it before, but she might've changed her mind. If she has, I'll follow the púca. It'll kill me, but I'll do it.

She buries her face in the crook of my neck in answer, breathing in my scent as I carry her into the bedroom and lay her carefully out onto the dark silk sheets. The *click* of the lock on the door is a distant sound, secondary to the pounding of her heart and her harsh little pants as I step back. Shit. I have to squeeze the outline of my cock through my trousers to force back the seed

begging to be set free.

I half expected her to lose control of her aura, but the Goddess must be watching over me for once, because when she opens those beautiful violet eyes, I can read every single emotion in them.

“Yes. I need you. I need... all of you.” Her gaze darts between the three of us, now kneeling around her on the bed. “Please, make this stop.”

The wash of her magic is nothing—she’s barely even capable of focusing—but I feel it, nonetheless. My mind goes blank. Thoughts retreating as instinct rears its head and *demand*s I touch her. Soothe her. Rut her.

Lore and Jaro must too, because they each take a corner of the towel and drag it away from her.

Fuck, she’s glistening, and not just from her bath. Her skin is flushed with fever, and her eyes are glassy and barely focused. Those delicate hands press uselessly against her abdomen, as if she can push the cramps away.

Under my gaze, her little nipples harden into diamond hard points, and between her legs, a rush of wetness flows out, shocking her so badly that she stiffens and tries to close her legs.

No.

I don’t have to say the words. The others are thinking them as well. Each male grabs one of her knees and forces her wide and open, exposing the twitching perfection of her little pink cunt to my gaze. Her clit is so swollen it looks like it hurts, and her slick is literally dripping for us.

I’ve spent my whole life running from females in this state, but not even the Goddess herself could pry me from Rose’s side right now.

“I need a taste.”

I know now that one taste will never be enough, but I’m determined to have her release coating my tongue before I sink my dick inside her for the first time. Once she’s come, the fever should clear a little. I selfishly want her to remember our first time together as more than just a moment of biology-driven desperation.

SEVENTEEN

RHOSWYN

Drystan is looking at me the same way he would a last meal, and I shiver only to flinch as the action triggers another of those god-awful cramps.

I ache. Goddess, my skin is on *fire*, and their touch is only stoking the flames.

“Please,” I beg again, not even knowing what I’m asking for.

“We’ve got you,” Jaro soothes, bending down to claim my lips.

My Goddess. His lips.

We’ve kissed before. This shouldn’t be so revolutionary. But it is. His taste is somehow deeper, more complex, and the very texture of his lips is somehow rougher. Demanding.

I melt, and Drystan actually growls as yet another embarrassing flood of moisture escapes, seeping down to soak the sheets beneath me. Trying again to close my legs in the hopes of crushing the terrible aching in my clit is futile. Jaro and Lore are holding me spread, and it doesn’t take long for me to realise why.

Drystan’s tongue has become intimately familiar with my pussy in the last few days, and he puts all that experience to work as he presses his mouth flat against my core and laps at my wetness. Gathering it all up with a groan, I squirm as he swallows and drives in for more. In this state, I am a hundred times more sensitive than before, so when he licks and sucks every sensitive spot I possess, the pleasure is so sharp that, were they not holding me, I would’ve snapped my thighs closed.

“Goddess!” I cry, as he takes on the task of cleaning the mess I’ve made.

Jaro’s lips reclaim mine, and I gasp as Lore dips his head and bites sharply at my nipple.

My back arches, then twists, trying to get away, but they don’t relent. Jaro’s mouth swallows my screams, and Drystan’s takes care of the gush of slick that follows.

“Let her suck you,” Lore growls, causing Jaro to break the kiss.

Without him there to muffle my noises, my keening cry pierces the room.

“Open up, Rosie.” Jaro’s wolf is in his eyes as he rips the laces of his trousers open and shoves them down just enough to free his cock.

I stare, entranced as a pearl of his seed beads at the tip, the head redder and angrier than I've ever seen it. Between my thighs, muscles I didn't know I had clench *hard* in anticipation.

I'm not sure if it's instinct or wishful thinking, but it feels like salvation. He rubs the salty-sweet mixture against my lips, and my skin soaks it up, like a plant absorbing sunlight.

Flicking my tongue out to taste him, I groan in relief. Nothing has ever tasted so *right*. Without pause, I take the entire head into my mouth, tongue delving into the deep slit for more of his release.

"That's it, pet." Lore nips at my breast again. "Show him how greedy you are for his cum, and maybe he'll give it to you."

Perhaps his words are just as much of a turn on for Jaro as they are for me, because the shifter's hips buck in response, forcing my tongue to abandon its mission and my jaw to stretch as the head inches closer to the back of my throat.

I want to gag. I want to scream. Most of all, I want to come and drink Jaro's release while I do it. Drystan's tongue curls around my clit, and I bob up and down on Jaro's length to distract myself from the sharp barbs of pleasure clawing through my lower abdomen. My whole body is coiling tight, ready to explode at a moment's notice. But it's not enough. My pussy flutters around nothingness, craving the stretch and burn of being filled.

"Please," I whisper, pulling away from Jaro entirely. "Drystan, please. I need you to fuck me."

He doesn't let up. Doesn't assuage the empty ache building to a near-painful intensity inside me. Jaro's feral grin grows as he turns my head back to his cock.

"Suck."

I'm powerless to resist. One hand rests against the coarse hair on his thigh, while the other seeks out Lore.

The redcap snatches it out of the air and pins my wrist above my head.

"Mustn't play," he scolds, stealing my other hand from Jaro and securing that as well. "You're not ready. Let them stretch you first."

I want to complain, but Jaro is slowly and steadily going deeper down my throat with each bob of my head. His girth blocks my airway, making me dizzy with the need to breathe, before he pulls back and lets me lap at the salty-sweet tip. Then he does it again.

Drystan's teeth scrape over my clit, splitting my focus, and a second later

his finger presses against my entrance. Shit. I'm shaking, my body practically vibrating as he pushes past tense muscles, then twists it inside of me.

"She's so swollen," he murmurs, his breath abrading my sensitive flesh. "You're going to come the second I get inside you, aren't you?"

"Yes," I moan. "Please make me. Please fuck me. Please." I'm on fire. I can't take it. I won't survive.

Jaro surges into my mouth again, coming with a roar, and I forget everything but the taste of his cum. For one blissful second, the heat and tightness beneath my skin starts to abate, and I can think clearly, but I don't make the mistake of believing it will last.

"Good pet, swallow it all. Your body needs it."

Lore's words are crooned in my ear. A litany of praise for me alone, and I soak it up.

Right until Drystan adds a second finger and begins pumping them in and out of my body like he's on a mission. He spreads them a little with each thrust, and my pussy grips him greedily. Demanding more.

He gives it. A third finger joins them as he finally stops circling my clit and sucks at it instead.

My cry forces me to release Jaro's cock, but I can't mourn the loss of it because I'm too busy shooting for the stars. My eyes flutter closed, and my sex strangles Drystan's fingers as he laps up every drop of my release and continues to force his fingers in and out of my trembling body. Forcing me to a crescendo that floats out of reach.

When I come down, I realise the fire hasn't gone away at all. If anything, that tiny taste of pleasure has made it somehow *worse*.

My breath catches on a tiny sob, and Jaro's head twists sharply. "She needs you to fuck her."

"Keep her there," Drystan mutters, ripping his shirt free and over his head.

Lore and Jaro don't argue. Their hands on my thighs hold me spread while the redcap's other hand keeps both of my wrists pinned.

Drystan steps off the bed and drags his leather trousers down his legs, and that's when I lose my nerve.

They all feel my fear, I know they do, but I can't help it. Unlike Jaro's dick—which is admittedly large but otherwise completely normal—Drystan's is pierced. I knew that, in theory, but not that there would be so *many*. A ring of curved metal barbells protrudes from around the edge of the mushroomed

head, like someone has given the glans a silver crown of beads.

It doesn't stop there, either. Along the underside of the shaft are more barbells, spaced evenly until they reach his balls, where a smaller ring glints against the seam of his heavy sac.

Lore was right. There's so much metal that he may as well have armoured his dick. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if he wasn't also well endowed—not quite Jaro sized, but enough to have my pussy tensing in anticipation of the stretch.

Surely those will get caught inside me. Surely they will tear and—

The next cramp hits hard, wiping away the fear and replacing it with desperation. Twisting and pulling against the others' grip does nothing to fix it, but I know what will.

I'm not sure that thing will get inside me, but if it can banish this fever, then I'll try.

"It won't hurt, huntress," Drystan promises, crawling slowly over the top of me. "You're going to love it. Relax and watch me as I give you what you need."

My eyes, which had been falling closed to brace myself, snap open and fix to his as his cock slides against my pussy. Those metal barbells are so odd. They're hard and unforgiving against my silky-soft flesh as they notch at my opening and forge forwards into me.

"Goddess!" I scream as the length of him stretches me open.

He pulls back, then thrusts inside an inch farther. I swear I feel every single piercing as they rub and tease inside me. His amber eyes are blazing as he watches me struggle against the sensations he's eliciting, and I smell smoke briefly before he gets his powers back under control.

"Please." My lips form the words, but I can't hear them over the rush of my heartbeat in my ears.

On his next thrust, he loses all restraint and buries himself deep, settling his hips firmly between my thighs as I arch beneath his weight and scream.

"Drystan!"

"I said, look at me, huntress." His long fingers grip my chin and pull my head forward from where I've slammed it back into the pillow in ecstasy. "I want to watch you fall apart on my cock as I destroy this perfect little cunt."

One of his free hands delivers a slap to my inner thigh, and I jerk. The reaction, in turn, causes his dick—and those damned piercings—to rub against my inner walls, which makes me shake and rock and whimper and

plead and tremble.

“Move. I need you to move.”

“No. You don’t make demands.” He stays there, rotating his hips, working me higher without so much as a thrust. In retaliation, I squeeze around him, gasping when my actions only make the sensations stronger.

“You want me to fuck you?” he asks, giving me the tiniest, shallowest thrust. “Beg for it.”

He’s all icy cool and collected, but the way his dick is jerking inside me gives him away. Still, my pride melts quickly under the dark satisfaction in his gaze, and before I know it, my lips are parting.

“Please. Drystan, please. Fuck me. Destroy my perfect little cunt.” The words are pure filth, and a part of me flinches slightly, preparing for them to mock me for how awkward they sound coming from my own mouth. But the way my males grin down at me banishes those fears. “I need you.”

There’s no hiding the surge of wicked satisfaction in his gaze as he looks down at me.

“Brace yourself.”

That’s all the warning I get before he starts to move, thrusting into me like a male possessed. He told me to brace myself, but how can I when I’m pinned down and spread like an offering? All I can do is squirm and take it as those piercings rub and stimulate every single nerve ending I possess.

It’s bliss. It’s torture. It’s *everything*.

I’ve never been fucked like this. Jaro has always been so careful to take things at my pace, his touches loving and gentle. Drystan is neither of those things. He’s domineering and forceful, and I revel in it as my mind shuts off and my vision narrows until all I can see are amber flames.

When he comes, it’s with a satisfied groan that vibrates through my core, and I shiver as the jerking of his cock draws more pleasure from me. My toes curl, and I’m pretty sure my eyes roll back in my head as his release floods me in silky spurts, seeping out around where we join.

Drystan’s forehead drops against my own, his breath fanning against me for a second before he pulls back. There’s something almost... *soft* in the way he regards me. It’s so different from the grumpiness and disappointment I’m used to. Almost like... adoration.

Craning my neck, I try to claim a kiss, and he smirks for a second before leaning down to grant it to me.

It’s not enough, I realise, as our lips part. The heat under my skin is

already building again, and I squirm, trying to thrust on his renewed erection despite how I'm pinned.

"Nuh-uh." Lore releases me to reach between us and shove Drystan off, making us both groan. "He had his turn. Just because his cock has more metal than mine, doesn't mean he gets to hog you."

With a careful tug, he pulls me away from the other two and rolls us until I'm on top with my legs spread over his hips, my pussy directly aligned with his leather-covered dick. I feel a trickle of liquid and grimace as I realise my release and Drystan's is slowly leaking out onto him, but Lore doesn't seem to care.

"Wolfie, you get to play with her ass," Lore announces as his hands fall to my hips, then he grinds up into me, making me gasp.

"Yes," I hiss as my clit grinds against his erection, and I lose coherent thought for a second. The calm that sex with Drystan bought me is quickly wearing off, and the ache is returning faster than I thought possible, turning into a burn that tears at my insides.

"Take me out, pet," Lore coaxes. "I'm not going to move. You've got to—fuck." He pants as I caress his chest, tweaking his nipples beneath my fingers. "Your hands feel too good. Someone pin me before I rut her and mark her."

Lore's words make me shiver, but not with fear. In my current state, all I'm capable of feeling is lust, so I pout at him.

"Not for our first time, pet," he pants, seeing my disappointment. "Later. When your fever is done."

He grinds up against me again, and I forget the subject entirely.

It takes a frustratingly long minute for me to finish fumbling with the leather ties on Lore's trousers, then shove them down. I feel blindly for his shaft beneath me.

What I find makes me freeze.

"Danu's tits," Drystan growls. "What the fuck did you do to your cock, redcap?"

Lore's grin shows off every one of his fangs but turns quickly to a hiss as I stroke my palm down the strangely textured shaft of his erection.

It feels like... like someone has put beads beneath his skin. They're the size of pearls and I'm pretty sure they're arranged in some kind of pattern across the top of his shaft, though I can't figure it out right now. Normally, I might've demanded the full story about them, but right now, all I care about

is how they'll feel inside me. Whether they'll calm the fire burning beneath my skin and the shivers overtaking my body.

"Like you can talk," he retorts. "And for the record, mine is better looking. I got it done specially for our mate."

"No cock is good looking," Jaro says. "But most don't make my balls shrivel from just looking at them, either."

"Don't be jealous, seelie." Lore groans as I stroke up and down his dick.

I've not done this before, but I rise to my knees and position him at my entrance anyway, sinking down onto him with a moan.

Goddess. He's different to Drystan. Those beads are more subtle. The pearls seem to move between us, rubbing against my G-spot until I cry out, throwing my head back.

There's a snarl from beneath me, and when I look down, Drystan's hand is collaring Lore's throat, pinning him in place as he thrashes beneath me.

"So good," he murmurs, and his hands dig into my hips, claws pricking me. "Pretty pet, ride me hard."

I shift, experimenting until I find a way to move my hips that feels natural and allows me to rub my clit against his pelvic bone with each rise and fall. I've barely gotten used to it when Jaro's fingers caress down my spine, narrowly grazing the too-sensitive membranes of my wings.

I come, slamming down on Lore's dick as my whole body trembles, and then sag against his chest. Lore groans, cursing, but doesn't follow me over the edge. He stays hard as Jaro's wicked fingers trail lower and start playing with the tight pucker of my ass.

Slickness is spread across the ring, then a finger dips inside. I relax, used to this by now. The careful stretching Jaro did for the last week is familiar, and I breathe into it as he adds a second finger.

Unfortunately, my fever isn't as patient. My need is building again. My body demands my mates.

My hips wiggle against Lore, seeking relief, but he's got me pinned with his grip on my hips.

"I need to move," I plead, meeting his magma hot gaze. "Please, Lore."

"Trying to charm me into starting before Jaro is even inside you?" He tuts at me. "Silly pet." He looks to one side, but still can't move his head thanks to Drystan's grip. "I think her mouth needs something better to do."

Drystan evidently agrees, because his dick is there in the next second. The silver of his piercings are smooth under my tongue, and I taste myself

mixed with the metallic tang and the sweetness of his cum.

Unlike Jaro, he doesn't let me dictate the pace. His left hand, which isn't busy pinning Lore by the throat, winds into my hair and tugs. He uses the grip to pull me back when I would've gone deeper, controlling everything. Then, without warning, he shoves himself deep and holds himself there.

"Swallow." His tone demands obedience.

It's hard. Made harder by the pressure building at my asshole, but I manage to convince my throat to do as he says a second before I would've run out of air. Drystan slides a little deeper with the action and groans before pulling back.

Just in time for the burn of Jaro's cock passing through my sphincter to register. Tears spring in my eyes, but before I can say anything, the shifter reaches around and begins to play with my clit. His cock doesn't move, doesn't press deeper. He simply allows my body to get used to the incredible stretch of being filled by all three of my males at the same time.

"That's it, Rosie," Jaro murmurs, pressing a kiss to my shoulder that tickles lightly with the brush of his beard. "You're doing so well. I can't believe you're taking me back here. You're so tight. Watching you stretch around my dick is the hottest thing."

My pussy floods at the praise, and he slips in a little farther. He's pressing against Lore in my pussy, and I don't know how the redcap is managing to control himself long enough to keep still. I can't even look at them, because Drystan is guiding my mouth back down his shaft, pressing insistently at the back of my throat again.

"Good girl," Lore snarls. "Fuck. Swallow his cock."

I swallow around Drystan without prompting this time and am rewarded when I draw back and he spills a little into my mouth. Not a true orgasm, just a taste, but enough to make me greedy for more. I twirl my tongue around his piercings when he draws back, my teeth scraping lightly against the underside of his cock.

His fingers tense, tugging my hair lightly in reprimand for my sass.

"Please." The word is garbled, almost incomprehensible, but I can't stand it anymore. The fever is rising, demanding they tend to me. Fill me.

Jaro's cock stills. He's not fully in, but my patience is past its limit. I rock between the two males, my hips snapping forward and back of their own accord.

"Rosie, Goddess. Stop. I can't—"

But I'm too far gone. I couldn't stop myself if I tried. Lore's pearls are rubbing at my G-spot in a way that makes me moan with every grind, and Jaro's cock in my ass is awakening forbidden nerve endings I didn't know I had. I rock, clench, and whine as I try everything to make them come. To stop this mindless need.

Jaro succumbs first. The poor shifter never even manages to bury himself all the way into my ass before he groans and holds me still against him, emptying himself into me for the second time in under an hour. He pulls out with a kiss to the back of my shoulder, flopping bonelessly onto the bed just in time for Drystan to follow suit, almost choking me as he shoots his load straight into the back of my throat.

His orgasm must cause his grip to slacken, because a second later, I'm no longer riding Lore. The redcap may not be able to blink until my heat is over—thanks to my charm—but he's still *fast*.

Before Drystan or Jaro can do anything, he slips out of me, catches me by my hips, and throws me across the bed. My elbows meet soft sheets, and he wastes half a second spreading my legs wide before he lines himself up behind me and *thrusts*.

My knees aren't even on the bed, my entire lower half held in the air by his steely grip on my thighs.

"Lore!" I scream at the sudden violence of this new claiming.

Jaro curses and growls behind me, but my pussy doesn't care. She sucks Lore in, revelling in the feeling of those beads moving as Lore pummels me like he's possessed. He doesn't even seem capable of speech, just animalistic grunts and snarls that tug at something buried deep in my lower abdomen, releasing another gush of slick each time.

Rut.

That's what this is. My hands fist the silk that's abrading my sensitive nipples with each swing of my breasts. All I can do is hold on as Lore's claws dig into my thighs, keeping me in place for his fucking, his possession. When he bows his head to lick the dust from the length of my spine, I shiver.

Dimly, I realise that Jaro and Drystan are trying to reason with him, but their words aren't getting through. Lore is just like me, caught in the moment as his hips piston away, slamming into my soft ass until the *slap, slap, slap* of our bodies colliding is the only thing I can hear.

"Lore!" I warble, near mindless with pleasure. "Lore, I need..."

His teeth sink into the back of my shoulder, and I scream as pain mixes

with pleasure. My mind goes blank. White hot molten lava courses through my veins, scorching me, and my clit pulses as the orgasm goes on and on and on.

It doesn't stop. Lore's teeth sink into my other shoulder next, then into the junction of my neck.

I'm pretty sure the only reason Jaro and Drystan aren't physically intervening is because I'm chanting "Don't stop, please, don't stop," like a prayer.

When he finally comes, I'm wrung out and lying in a puddle of my own release. The pleasure has begun to morph, stinging my skin as his cum bathes me from the inside out, scalding me. It soothes the edge of the fever just enough that I manage to lose my grip on consciousness and fall into a much-needed doze.

EIGHTEEN

CAED

In my life, I've been stabbed, flayed, flogged, whipped, chewed on by my father's dogs, and beaten to within an inch of my life. It turns out, being separated from your mate during her fever without a sleeping draught to numb the pain is worse than all those punishments put together.

Fucking púca. I was on my way back to drink that damned potion and sleep off Rose's rejection when he tackled me. Of course, the patrons loved that, and before I could talk our way out of it, we were in that damned cage.

Now my cover is blown, my cock and balls feel like one touch will make them explode, and every single part of my being wants to break free of the hole they've dropped me in and bury myself in Rose's body.

My lungs burn, nostrils flaring as I seek her scent in the damp dungeon air. Even though I'm too far to possibly smell her, occasionally I swear I taste flowers and honey on my tongue. It's unending torture.

I tried rubbing my cock raw in an attempt to ease the ache, but I can't fucking come without her. Seed climbs, then stalls, making it worse. I've tried humping the damned floor in my less sane moments. Fuck. At this point, I'd chop my dick off if I thought it would bring me some release.

That's just during the times I can remember.

There are times when I wake up on the floor, body covered in bruises and new dents in the bars above me that weren't there before, cursing and grateful all at once that they managed to hold me back.

But this is the first time I've woken up to a female above my cell.

I snarl before I can help it, throwing myself away from the fae who smells of arousal but who is definitely *not* my mate. Fae instincts I've never dealt with before are running rampant through my body, demanding this female get away from me. I want to dig down, through the stone floor of the pit, just to escape her.

Taking a deep breath, I try my best to right myself, but it's no easy task with my wrists chained to my feet—when did that happen? After days in mostly darkness, my eyes water in the light that my visitor has brought with them.

The candle flickers, glinting off her enormous gold and crystal flower

headdress, showcasing the long tangles of cherry-red hair caught in it. Her deep honey skin is decorated with finely inked garlands of wildflowers, and her eyes are the tempestuous grey of a spring rainstorm. Every inch of her is regal, but her manic grin says she's not all there.

This must be the Queen of Spring herself.

"You're certain?" she demands of the guard standing over the metal grate in the ceiling of my cell, sweeping her hands down the sheer fabric of her dress.

"He bears her mark, Your Highness," the high fae replies, though his face is obscured from my view by his helm. "He's got all the symptoms of a male separated from his mate during her fever."

Shit. I glance down at my hands and realise my wraps have been torn away, exposing Rose's mark on my palm. I fist my fingers, but it's too fucking late.

"But he's *Fomorian*." A robed male comes forward from behind his queen, his pale rounded wings flickering with distaste. "They don't have mates."

A startled, tinkling laugh bursts forth from the blood-red lips of the queen. "Oh, this is just excellent. Danu incarnate, mated to our greatest enemy. I thought the business with her under fae Guards was enough to destroy her credibility, but this... This shall *ruin* her."

Shit. Shit. Shit. I open my mouth to lie, to deny that Rose is my mate, but the rejection doesn't come. Even if it did, the fae would taste the deceit.

"Your Highness," the guard says. "Some of those who've been in skirmishes with his kind say he looks a lot like the blade prince, except for the hair."

Fuuccckk. My head falls back against the stone, and I curse the Ancestors and the púca a hundred times over for putting me in this situation.

"If it *is* him," the robed male says, pale skin almost ghostly in the lamplight. "This would be proof of what Eero has been saying all along. The Fomorians have meddled with Danu's magic somehow, trying to put one of their own kind on the throne. They *must* be responsible for all of the abnormalities with the Nicnevin's Guard and her poorly appointed high priestess. Their dark magic must have warped the Call somehow, allowing under fae to be called as well. We need to get answers from him, and then send news to Siabetha. If we organise a conventicle of the grand clerics, we can put a stop to this. Convincing the Nicnevin to reject all of them and select

suitable high fae males before the—”

“No need to be hasty, Mervyn,” the queen says, pushing him aside as she steps closer to my cell, eyes roving over my body. “Eero is no friend of spring, and you do not speak for me. Besides, this one is alluring in his own feral way. Perhaps he can be made use of.”

Bile climbs in my throat as her salacious gaze drops down, lingering on my crotch. It will never happen. My cock may be rock hard right now thanks to Rose’s fever, but I’ll cut it off before I allow this bitch to touch me.

Shifting to obstruct her view, I let my eyes fall closed. My head thunks back against the wall a second time, and my balls give an answering pang.

“You. Fomorian. Do you speak?” Her tone is curt, grating on my over-sensitive ears.

I have a feeling only one voice would sound good right about now, and the Call in my chest claws at me, screaming at me to go to Rose. To care for her. To sink into her and beg her to never let me go.

The spring queen is still waiting for an answer, and she tuts under her breath impatiently.

“Fuck. You,” I grate out in my own language.

That quickly, her curious glee is replaced with a dark fury. “He *dares* speak their dark tongue in my court.” Her thunderous expression fades as quickly as it came, and she delivers her next order so calmly, I wouldn’t have believed her anger if I hadn’t experienced it myself. “Cut out his tongue, then stitch his mouth shut for good measure.”

Ah, fuck.

NINETEEN

RHOSWYN

Soothing, steaming hot water laps gently at my skin, waking me. I must fuss, because Jaro murmurs something soft, his chest vibrating beneath my fingertips in a soothing rumble that might have sent me back to sleep if not for the soreness that pervades my body.

“Oww,” I moan, as the heat of the water starts to work on the tense muscles of my back.

“Hey, Rosie.” Jaro strokes my hair out of my face, and I blink my eyes open, catching sight of his exhausted smile. “Your fever broke in the night. You can just sleep; we’ll take care of you.”

Relief swells, then overflows, until tears burst free.

“Hey, hey.” He wipes them away, eyes widening with panic. “What are these for? Are you hurt? Did we... did we hurt you?”

“No,” I whisper-sob. “I don’t... I don’t know why I’m crying.”

“It’s the crash,” Drystan mutters, though I can’t see him with my face buried in Jaro’s bulk. “Her body is working to return to normal. All her emotions are going to be haywire for a few hours.”

“Sleep through it,” Jaro advises. “We’ve got you, and you need the rest.”

He does, too; though I don’t think he knows it. I open my mouth to tell him to let me take care of myself, but the yawn that breaks free ruins my plan.

The bath and the gentle beat of his heart conspire against me, and before I know it, I’ve done what he said.

“NO MORE SEX,” I MUMBLE, BATTING AWAY THE HEAVY MALE BODIES AROUND me. They’re too warm, too hard. Pressing against my aching body that doesn’t seem to understand we’ve had enough.

“She doesn’t mean it, right?” Lore’s voice breaks through the sleepy haze. “Pet, you don’t mean no more sex forever, do you?”

“If she does, it’s probably your freakish cock that’s to blame,” Drystan retorts, and the arms around me tighten.

“But I did it for her!” The redcap sounds farther away now. I guess he got his ability to blink back now that my fever is over. “See, it’s an ‘r’ for Rose. I was so caught up I didn’t even get to activate the enchantment—”

“Put it *away*,” Jaro growls, which I take as confirmation that Lore has his dick out and is showing off his pearls to the whole room.

My cheeks flush red as I search my memories and finally understand what he means about the pattern. It’s written in fae, which explains the diagonal ridges they’re aligned in. He’s literally had his cock modified to tell others it belongs to me. Something feral inside me purrs in approval, and despite how worn out I am, I have to resist the urge to demand a second look.

“There’s nothing wrong with a little exhibitionism, wolfie. You might learn something.”

“Well... that’s... new.”

Bree’s voice is strained, but it’s enough to make me perk up. I lift my head, only to find myself completely buried in blankets. After digging myself out, I realise I’m sandwiched between Drystan and Jaro in the middle of the bed.

Lore is hanging from the lampshade, upside down, with his cock out, proudly displaying the beads in my direction.

“They’re very nice,” I murmur, my sex clenching at the memory of them inside me.

My voice is rough—probably from all the screaming I did—and my mouth feels dry and horrid.

Goddess, I’m sore. The room, which earlier reeked of sex, must have been aired out at some point, because the sheets around me smell fresh and clean, and someone has dressed me in their shirt. But neither of those things can disguise the fact that I can feel my heartbeat in my poor, overwrought clit and swollen sex.

“I brought you some food,” Bree murmurs. “And a tea from Kitarni that’s supposed to help with the aftereffects. And there are some pads, for when the bleeding starts.”

Oh great. Bleeding. Just what I need. All those years without ever experiencing what my mortal sister-in-law, Clair, once derisively called ‘slaughterhouse week’, and now I get to learn what that feels like as well.

Bree stands in the open door, holding a tray laden with food. As he speaks, he takes a few more steps into the room, the pot in the middle of the tray wobbling alarmingly. I can only breathe again when he settles the

arrangement on the end of the bed, and I crawl carefully towards it, wincing with each movement.

“How are you feeling?” he asks, his green eyes tracing over every detail of my exhausted face.

“Sore,” I whisper, taking the teapot and pouring out a small cup.

The liquid is scalding hot, but it washes away the dry, claggy feeling in my throat, which I’m grateful for.

A second later, the other, more magical effects make themselves known. My head starts to clear, and my body groans in relief as the heaviness in my limbs subsides and the ache dies down.

“This stuff is good,” I say, taking another sip. “How long...?”

“Eleven days,” Jaro confirms. “Longer than most, but not unheard of for a first fever, especially considering the circumstances.”

Almost two weeks lost to mindless fucking. I sigh, because I can’t say I regret it either. Much of what happened is a kind of haze, but at least my first time with Lore and Drystan happened before I fell too far into the grip of my body’s demands.

It’s silly, but the first time still feels special to me. I might’ve cried if I didn’t remember anything.

Drystan, ever practical, adds: “Next time you’ll be bonded to us, and we’ll make sure you’re not travelling hard in the week before.”

“And there will be more of us, which should make it a lot easier on you,” Bree finishes. “If... if you want me—that is.”

There’s a steely determination in his eyes that I’ve not seen before, and I can’t help but wonder what’s happened to put it there.

“Wait until she’s dressed and fed,” Drystan says, and they share a look.

Sighing, I take a small piece of bread from the tray. More things to deal with, no doubt, but I’m starving and in no condition to tackle them right now.

Unfortunately, the food doesn’t last long. I demolish everything Bree brought with him, and within an hour, I’m dressed and ready, sitting in the courtyard with my Guard as we await the arrival of the others.

Kitarni is first, and I rise to my feet when I realise she’s limping and there are brown leaves scattered in her flower-strewn hair.

“What happened?” I ask.

She waves her hand, as if to brush me off, then stops herself mid-motion. “I suppose it is right to tell you. There are those who protest my appointment as high priestess. Each of the main temples has candidates lined up to

challenge me.”

“Challenge you?” My eyebrows rise. “But... Danu chose you.”

“She did.” Kitarni hobbles to the bench beside mine. “But my position isn’t immune from criticism. I can be challenged if the other priests believe I’m not serving Danu’s will or the best interests of the Temple. If I am defeated, then I am forced to comply with the will of the grand clerics until such time that I can reclaim my position. It was a system put into place during the reign of the third Nicnevin when she tried to strip the Temple of the immense powers they’d acquired under her mother’s leadership. Her high priest agreed with the move, as do I—in theory, at least. Only Danu is perfect, after all. Accountability is important for all leaders.”

The dryad sighs, pushing the branches of her hair behind her ear, before continuing. “Currently, their issues with my leadership are as numerous as they are ridiculous. But none of those are your concern. I have yet to lose a challenge, and even if I did, you would still be Nicnevin, so it would make little difference to the pilgrimage. The temple can be dealt with after we have solved the war.”

“But Aiyana has no intention of pledging herself to me.”

“Worse, she now has Caed,” Bree whispers, guiltily. “And it was mostly my fault.”

My head snaps around to pin him with an astonished look. “What?!”

“I goaded him into fighting me. When I won, his glamour was broken, and he was arrested.”

A stone drops in my stomach as the ramifications hit me.

“What Bricriu is forgetting to mention is the immense impact your fever likely had on him at the time.” Drystan sounds oddly sympathetic, not an emotion I associate with him. “It messed with all of our self control. As much as he clearly wishes to shoulder all the blame, it’s likely that any of us might’ve done the same in his position.”

“Bram and Madoc are currently trying to sneak into the dungeons to work out how much the Spring Court has discovered.” Kitarni massages her upper leg with a wince. “There’s a small chance he was unaffected—being half Fomorian—and thus, his link to you remains undiscovered. Even if that’s not the case, I still recommend we work to free him. If not for his sake, then for yours. He’s your Guard.”

Drystan scoffs, but I ignore him.

“Aiyana wouldn’t dare use him as blackmail.” Jaro’s wolf flashes in his

eyes, and he drags me closer against him.

“She’s already using the trial of restitution to try to get out of pledging her allegiance,” Bree corrects. “It would be wise not to put anything past her at this point.”

The high priestess doesn’t look surprised by any of these revelations. Someone must’ve already filled her in, and I try my hardest to draw strength from her imperturbable serenity.

“Do you intend to accept the trial?” Kitarni asks Jaro.

“He shouldn’t have to,” I protest.

Jaro is already nodding, though, and it’s him they all pay attention to. “It’s the easiest way for us to get her vow of allegiance and get out of here, without civil war.”

“Unless Rose uses her sparkly eyes on Aiyana,” Lore suggests.

“Even if that was possible, Aiyana’s magic is strong, and Rose isn’t experienced enough to counter it without drawing heavily—and obviously—from Danu.” Kitarni dismisses the idea.

Biting my lip, I have to admit she’s correct. “Still, it doesn’t seem fair.”

Jaro isn’t responsible for whatever his father did, and his father’s crime was simply falling in love.

“It shouldn’t be happening,” Jaro agrees, running a hand through his long chestnut hair in exasperation. “But everyone knows that Aiyana isn’t exactly enamoured with the idea of mates. We should’ve seen this coming.”

The appearance of a familiar shaggy white hound stops me from asking what Aiyana’s issue with mates is. Wraith bounds across the tiny private courtyard, licking my face in happy abandon, leaving Bram, a high fae male, and a child to follow in his wake. Behind them is one of the knights of Elfhome, and I make a mental note to ask her for news of Florian.

“I missed you, too,” I whisper, throwing my arms around the huge barghest—because he’s gotten even bigger in the days I’ve lost to fever—and burying my face in his fur.

“Nicnevin Rhoswyn, may I introduce Prince Madoc of Elfhome,” Bram announces quietly, but with a huge grin on his face as he sweeps to one side. “And his daughter, Lady Khloe.”

My second eldest brother is just as tall as Florian and built like a bear. His russet braids are ornamented with golden clips embedded with runes, and he’s passed the colour down to his daughter, who peeks shyly out from beneath her bangs as they both drop into deep bows.

“Nice to meet you,” I murmur. “Florian told me a lot about you.”

Unlike Bram, Dare, and Roark—who were described as the main troublemakers; although, in Bram’s case, that was mostly accidental—Madoc is a steady presence.

Although I find that hard to believe when the first words out of his mouth are: “I believe the trial of restitution will provide the perfect distraction to break the Fomorian out of the dungeon.”

“What?”

“As much as it pains me to admit it,” Drystan grumbles. “Caed is too much of a liability to leave him lying around for our enemies to use against us. If he’s wounded and draws from you...”

“Even if we don’t manage to break him out, I’ll bargain with Aiyana to ensure your whole Guard is permitted to leave without being hunted,” Jaro adds. “It’ll be more public than we’d like, but we can’t leave him there to spill everything he knows to Aiyana.”

I heave an impatient little sigh. Of course, it would be too much to ask for Caed to just stay peacefully in exile without causing any trouble. Now we have to rescue him, too? Irritation makes my wings flick against my back, and Jaro strokes a careful hand down my spine.

Without fever to lower my inhibitions, the action makes me bristle, but I take a deep breath of his scent and force myself to relax and accept the touch, breathing in his scent to steady myself.

Now that I know just how amazing having my wings played with can be, I refuse to let Elatha steal that joy from me. It will take work, but I’m prepared for that.

“Caed’s been under torture for days, and he hasn’t admitted to anything or drained her.” The knight shocks me by striding forward, a look of frustration on her face. “My cousin might be a fuckup, but he knows exactly what will happen if he uses the bond to steal her energy.”

That’s when it hits me. Her dark hair and rich brown skin are nothing like her usual look, but the grey eyes and effortless confidence is definitely Prae. Perhaps what threw me the most is that her glamour hides her bad eye entirely. I wonder if she’s thought any further about my offer to heal it for her.

Is she saying that Caed’s deliberately refusing to draw from me because of that time I took his wounds after he took those lashes for protecting me? Something deep in my gut twists uncomfortably.

Prae continues, “He wouldn’t even be in the dungeon if it wasn’t for—”

Bree steps in front of me, wings flaring with aggression. “I’ve accepted the blame for this. On my honour, I shall see him freed and returned to exile as our mate wishes, but if you get much louder, everyone in the city will know who’s in that dungeon.”

Prae’s grimace turns into an angry snarl. “Oh yes, I forgot. He’s supposed to be her dirty little secret.”

“I didn’t exactly see him loudly proclaiming me as his mate while he was parading me around Fellgotha for his father,” I snap, then force the anger down.

I can feel Danu’s matching ire right there waiting. She’s not happy about the news of one of her males being imprisoned, and the last time that happened, I blew up a building.

“I understand your anger and your worry.” If I’m honest, I’m concerned, too. “But he won’t be stuck down there much longer.” I turn to Kitarni. “Danu will take it into her own hands if we don’t get him out of there soon enough.”

The dryad’s nod is grim and accepting. “That’s a good thing. You need to be confident going into this first meeting, use Danu’s strength. Let the Goddess’s presence remind you that *you* are the high queen. Aiyana is no different from any other subject.” She smooths down her robes and stands. “The boat is ready for you. Your guides won’t be of any help in that throne room.”

Because Aiyana’s magic is the gift of negation. She can literally cancel out all other magic in her vicinity, much in the same way iron does. From what Kitarni and Florian told me before we left Elfhome, my mother was strong enough to cancel out that gift, but it took connecting to Danu—something which isn’t a good idea while the Goddess is so riled.

“Good. She relies on them too much as it is.” Drystan stands, offering me a hand up. “Danu sent us Nicnevin Rhoswyn, not a mouthpiece for dead spirits.”

“And if I mess up?” I reply. “What then?”

“Then we kill them all!” Lore cartwheels past, his hat having taken up the form of a pot helm, which makes his exuberant words echo louder than they need to.

I look to Jaro for a better option, but he just shrugs, as if to agree with the insane unseeleie.

Yes, because the threat of slaughter makes me calmer about the entire situation.

“Your guides won’t be there,” Kitarni repeats. “But Bricriu will be.”

Bree stiffens. “It’s been centuries since I was at court.”

The dryad raises one imperious mossy brow. “You are still a bard, are you not, Lyarthorn?”

The hesitation on his face is plain to see, and his hands come down to rub across the harp on his ribs. “I suppose. But Drystan is a lord, and—”

“A bastard from a different court,” Drystan retorts, smoothly. “I haven’t returned to Calimnel outside of Samhain in centuries. Kitarni is right. You’re of more help here than I will be.”

“I don’t understand.” I look between them all, hating feeling like I’m missing something. “I thought bards were musicians?”

“The lesser ones are,” Jaro explains. “Those you find in taverns and inns barely warrant the name, but Lyarthorn was part of an elite—”

“Please stop saying that name,” Bree cuts in, running a hand over his ears, which are flat against his head. “I was only one half of it, and the other half”—he grimaces—“was the one who was most involved in court drama.”

I open my mouth to tell him it’s okay, that I’ll be fine. But that’s a lie, so what leaves my lips is. “I don’t want you to put yourself through more pain for me.”

Bree pins me with sorrowful green eyes that hold the weight of agonising centuries and replies, “Nothing would hurt me more than knowing I had the skills to protect you and failed.” He pauses, eyes darting to the snake tattoo still wrapped around my wrist, then continues in a whisper. “I have a feeling... Never mind.” He looks away sharply. “I’ll listen for whispers and report what I hear.”

Why did that sound a lot like... spying?

I resolve to ask my grandmothers exactly what a bard does at the earliest opportunity.

On my arm, his snake wiggles, and I smile as his head lifts from my skin in a flash of inky mist.

“I think someone missed you,” I coo, stroking the head of the tiny serpent.

I don’t understand how the giant snake that saved me from Elatha can be the same, pocket-sized version currently wrapped around my upper arm, but I put it down to magic as the little beast slithers off my skin.

“Espen’s usually shy around people.” Bree leans forwards and slowly, deliberately, touches his fingers to my arm to create a bridge for the snake to return to his rightful home. “It’s surprising that he’s taken to you so quickly.”

I smile, rubbing the snake’s head one more time before he disappears back into his master’s flesh. “I like him too.”

My eyes flick up to meet Bree’s, trying to convey without words that I like him just as much. He may have fucked up with Caed, but I don’t want to add that to the pile of self-blame he’s already carrying.

My fever was hard on all of us, but now that it’s out of the way, perhaps Bree and I can get to know one another properly. I’d like to try sex with all of them without the cramping and sweating and haze of sexual need fogging things up.

Before that can happen, I have to deal with Aiyana. She’s waited almost two weeks, which I doubt has warmed her to me.

TWENTY

RHOSWYN

The second we descend the temple steps, the furore begins. Pavellen is a bright and airy metropolis, with buildings made of a pale stone dressed in garlands of bright flowers. In fact, blossoms are *everywhere*.

Petals fall from the sky in a shower of natural confetti, getting caught in my hair and the folds of my dress. They coat the bottom of the gleaming silver boat that waits in the crystal water of the canal.

It dips and bobs as Jaro carefully helps me to my seat, guiding me down onto the bench as I try my hardest not to fall into the water. When I'm settled, Wraith jumps into the boat, making it rock dangerously, and my stomach turns before he finds his balance. He settles, curled around me with his head on my lap, as if to keep me secure. Once the two of us are in, my Guard takes their places around us, with Jaro and Lore at the front, and Bree and Drystan behind. I have no idea how the enchantment knows that all the passengers are aboard, but the second they're ready, the boat begins to move.

Prae, Kitarni, and my brothers will follow in a different boat, for which I'm grateful. With Wraith's weight, we're already riding low on the water, and I really don't want to meet the glimmering metallic eels up close. I remember all too well looking at paintings of them in Kitarni's lesson in awe, only to learn that they eat anyone unlucky enough to fall into the water.

"Wow, they really like the colour blue," I murmur, as we pass under a garland dripping with cornflower-coloured blossoms.

Sure, there are other colours mixed in, but the sheer amount of blue overwhelms the majority of them.

"Probably another subtle way to snub you," Jaro murmurs, unhappily. "Everyone knows that the Nicnevin's colour is violet."

The temple is just across the palace moat, so our boat trip isn't long, though I spend longer than I should staring at the glowing golden water lily-shaped crystals sticking out of the canal at regular intervals. Between the deadly eels and the enchanted shield that prevents flying in and out, Aiyana has effectively made it so that anyone entering or leaving has to take a boat... and the canal around the palace is wide, leaving nowhere to hide.

Glamour could hide a boat and the occupants, but it takes someone truly

skilled at creating illusions to hide the ripples in the water from the prow. Even a tiny blip in focus would be their doom.

Which is why Madoc is right. A big event—like the stupid trial of restitution—is the best chance to smuggle someone out. With the queen away from the palace, we should be able to slip Caed out under a glamour without anyone noticing.

Our boat bumps against the steps to the palace, jolting me out of my thoughts. Bree leaps out of the boat with his typical feline grace and holds a hand out to help me up, which I accept.

Wraith lets me up long enough to clamber onto the gleaming steps himself, then plasters himself to my left side and stays there as guards in golden armour bow before escorting us into the palace proper. Instead of conventional hallways, the spring palace has small waterways connecting the rooms, and I have to work to suppress a gasp as a high fae male floats past, standing on a silver lily pad which acts like a one-person raft. Trees and water plants are everywhere, and the drooping branches of willows form privacy curtains between rooms.

It seems like every time I think I'm getting used to the fae way of building in harmony with nature, something new comes along and I'm awed all over again. Unfortunately, the throne room doesn't require us to use one of the enchanted pads. Perhaps that's a good thing, given I'm not certain I have the balance required to stay upright on one.

"Whatever you do," Bree murmurs, as trumpets blare and the great doors open. "Don't say anything about the axe."

I want to ask what he means, but he falls back before I can say anything, leaving me to lead the way into the court of a queen who stands on the brink of dropping our realm into a catastrophic civil war.

My boots click against the mosaic tiling of the floor, the vine pattern shifting, then exploding into bloom whenever I step on it.

Stop looking at your feet, I instruct myself, squaring my shoulders as I ignore the stares of her gathered court and look straight ahead at the female on the throne in front of us. Remembering Kitarni's advice, I try to quiet the voice inside my head that tells me they're all staring and focus on my connection to Danu.

It's harder to find her with panic icing my chest. When I do, her seething displeasure hits me like a smack to the face. She's not even focused on Aiyana, or the judgement of the court—those things are beneath her—all

Danu cares about is that these fae have the nerve to lock up one of my Guards and attempt to defy her.

The Goddess is *pissed*. That anger lends power to my steps, and resoluteness to the set of my shoulders as I stride across the room, the pale fabric of my skirts fluttering in my wake.

The ancient cherry blossom throne is a pale imitation of the hawthorn one in the Palace of Elfhome. Its floral branches have been contorted into heavy pink clouds that form a dramatic backdrop for the queen of spring. Embedded into the trunk above the carved seat—so deep that it's clear the tree has been growing around it for some time—is a rusted greataxe. The weapon's presence sends a warning shiver down my spine, and I wonder how something so brutal came to be buried in a court so obsessed with beauty.

It distracts me so much that, for a second, I forget about the female sitting beneath it.

Aiyana is just as delicate and beautiful as everything else in the room, but her piercing gaze is shrewd as we evaluate one another. Someone has arranged her deep ruby locks into an immense updo that forms a nest for her impressive crown. In contrast, her gown is simple... and so sheer I can see the dark shadows of her nipples peeking through.

She's also got her legs spread. A female kneels between them, casually eating her exposed pussy.

The boldness alone is enough to make me hesitate a half step, losing my rhythm. It's not much—barely noticeable—but she catches it, and her lips quirk.

Trying to pretend that I didn't just give her the upper hand is difficult, but I make it work as I come to a stop before the dais.

If she actually intended to offer me her allegiance, now would be the part where she would stand, and offer me her throne.

The murmurs start when she throws her head back and comes loudly on her partner's tongue instead.

Fae may be free and open about pleasure, but there's no doubt in my mind that this is a deliberate insult. A big one.

So, just as deliberately, I cross my arms and fix her with my best 'are you finished?' look.

I'm pretty sure the fae nearest me take a step back, looking nervously at their queen, who's still enjoying the last aftershocks of her orgasm.

When those long lashes part, her eyes widen fractionally with surprise.

Her lips part, but I beat her to it.

“If you’re quite done?”

Lore’s snigger—and the resulting *oof* as one of my other Guards elbows him for it—are loud in the otherwise silent hall. Aiyana takes a second to collect herself, then offers me a carefully curated smile.

“Nicnevin Rhoswyn, it’s a pleasure to welcome you to my court. I hope you enjoyed our hospitality during your fever.”

The words are sweet, her tone elegant and practised, but she’s still sitting on that throne. This is just her flexing her power. Posturing.

Beneath us, somewhere in her dungeon, a member of my Guard is being tortured. My hands curl into fists as Danu grumbles in my veins.

“And you’ve brought your... *unconventional* Guard.” Her eyes linger on Jaro behind me. “And a pet.” Her lips curl downwards in distaste at the sight of Wraith.

“And I see you’re in my spot.” I offer her a weary smile. “Shall we get this over with?”

Aiyana pats the face of the female now resting her face on her inner thigh, dismissing her. Without her body in the way, the spring queen is free to cross her legs and lean forward, resting her elbow on her knee and her chin on her knuckles as she regards me.

“You’re not even surprised, which means there are traitors in my midst.” Her tone quickly turns from polite to frosty.

I stay silent, unwilling to repay Neila’s loyalty by outing her to her queen or get involved in whatever is going on between them.

Without warning, Aiyana points to a fae three deep in the crowd, the motion so sudden it jostles the crown on her head.

Immediately, the high fae male collapses to his knees, palms outstretched as all the colour bleeds from his classically handsome face. “No! Please, my queen! I don’t deserve this!”

“I’ve known you were a spy for the Autumn Court for years, Lord Gawain,” she says, bored now. “There’s no use trying to plead your innocence when this is exactly the sort of thing Cressida would do to undermine me.”

She thinks the queen of autumn did this, and if I say nothing, this male will pay the price.

I open my mouth to stop her, then close it again. In the time it’s taking me to come up with something, Aiyana’s golden soldiers have dragged the

courtier forward and shoved him down before the throne. My indecision will kill him just as surely as Aiyana will.

Gah, I just have to think! What would my grandmothers do?

Probably more than just stand here quaking in their boots, I grumble to myself.

“If you’re going to waste your time killing the wrong male, can you do it after we’ve got this over with?” Delivering the words with a bored tone takes a lot more work than it should, but it freezes the whispering court in their tracks. Even Aiyana leans a little closer, though I suspect that’s just another calculated move. “You want to demand a trial of restitution. Get on with it. I have a realm to save once you’ve finished throwing a tantrum.”

The whole room holds its breath. Shit, even *I’m* holding my breath.

I never meant for my anger to spill out like that, but Aiyana’s selfishness is costing us time. Time which could be spent saving Elfhame. People are dying while she stalls us here.

The spring queen’s rage flickers, changing targets rapidly until all of it is focused on me. I swear the clouds in the sky above draw closer, and the room noticeably darkens as she draws herself up to her full height.

“Sir Jaromir Macblaid is to be held accountable for breaking his family’s banishment before I will offer my allegiance to anyone.” The acidic bite in her tone is a line drawn in the sand. “And I’ll rule my court as I wish. End him.”

Before I can speak, the soldiers have taken Lord Gawain and shoved his hands into a pair of thick cuffs that dangle from a wooden hoist at the side of the room. The fae lord screams as they yank the chain tight, pulling him into the air by his arms, and then shove his writhing body out of the enormous open window. The hoist rotates, and his body swings in a wide arc, leaving him suspended over the glittering canal that runs alongside the room, screaming like a child.

“Don’t watch,” Bree murmurs in my ear, but I don’t listen to his advice.

I can’t. I don’t even manage to blink as the first golden eel jumps from the moat and rips into the fae’s guts.

The first drops of his blood splattering the surface of the water acts like a dinner bell. In seconds, dozens of the creatures are leaping straight at him, ripping off his flesh in great mouthfuls. They’re smaller than the eels I’ve seen so far, so they must be the young of the larger eels in the canals.

This is no better than Elatha killing fae to make me behave. The

comparison chills me as the screams cut off. In Fellgotha, I was held back by force, but here I'm kept still by the knowledge that we *can't* risk a civil war on top of the invasion we're already dealing with.

Aiyana's face is lit with satisfaction, her eyes gleaming. What does it say for my chances that she's considered the most moderate of the four minor royals? Once he's stopped twitching, but before all of his bones are gone, she turns back to us with a pleasant smile.

"Now that we've dealt with that, Sir Jaromir, how do you answer?"

"Accepted." Jaro steps forward before I can say anything. "And when I win, you will offer your allegiance without argument, prepare your armies to assist Elfhame, and allow the Nicnevin and her full Guard to continue on her pilgrimage without hindrance."

"Agreed. *If* you succeed." Her soft smirk tells me she doesn't expect him to.

I'm not sure which worries me most: that she entered a bargain so easily, or that she expects to best someone who is—for all intents and purposes—immortal to lose. The gathered fae, however, seem to breathe a collective sigh of relief. Perhaps they were expecting some huge magical showdown where the Goddess would show up in a rage.

I kind of wish she would. It would certainly make things simpler. As it is, her fury at Caed's imprisonment is duller, and it doesn't take me long to realise that it's because of the queen.

She wasn't actively using her magic to suppress my own earlier, but sometime between me entering the room and now, she must have snuck under my defences.

"Come, court is tiring, and we shall have tea together." Gone is the terrifying female who fiercely ordered a male to his death not ten minutes earlier, and in her place is an almost girlish charm as she stands from her throne, holding out her arm for me to take. "I do so despise the inconvenience of dealing with traitors."

My gut is telling me that taking her arm is the best option, lest her mood change again and she decides to sentence someone I care about to death by eel next. Though my Guard is immortal, my brothers aren't. Fear for them is the only reason I slide my arm in hers and allow her to lead me out of the throne room and into a smaller, more private chamber.

My Guard follows, but Kitarni, Prae, and my brothers stay put, getting the hint that they're not invited.

This new room is a lavish parlour, laden with cushions which are already occupied by a handful of beautiful fae. Aiyana ignores them as she settles on a plush chaise in one corner, pulling me down with her as she tucks her feet up beneath her with easy familiarity. The room is decorated in pastels and soft fabrics, the space obviously used for entertaining guests. Rather than sit amongst the cushions, my Guard stands stiffly around the edges of the room, surveying our company.

The other fae are dressed in barely there silks that just manage to cover the important parts, and Aiyana beckons two of the males over to us with a long finger. In the back of my mind, I notice that both of them are conventionally attractive, their muscles oiled and carefully displayed as they kneel before us, but I'm more worried that Aiyana is about to try to have another conversation with me while one of them tongue fucks her.

I expected the Spring Court to be obsessed with sex, but I didn't realise it would be this bad.

"Won't you partake of my concubines?" she asks, as the first male bows and moves behind her, starting to kiss his way up her neck. "All of them are skilled in the art of bringing a female to pleasure. I find it refreshing to take a new lover after my fever. It keeps the others from getting ideas about their own importance."

My mouth opens, then closes, completely flabbergasted. "My Guard are my mates," I hiss.

"Are they? I don't see any marks. Wise of you to escape that trap, I say. No one needs to be tied to the same lovers for our ridiculously long lives." She snaps her fingers in the other male's face. "Please the Nicnevin. I'd hate for her to find our reception lacking."

The male bows low, not even daring to meet my eyes as I try my best to formulate a response. His hands rise, as if to reach for my legs, and less than a second later, I flinch back as his head rolls forward and lands in my lap.

I never even saw Lore move, but he stands behind the body with satisfaction blazing across his face. Even with Aiyana blocking his powers, he's still lethal. Worse still are the approving glints in the others' eyes.

They don't care that the male died. In their minds, he dared to try to touch me, so Lore's actions were justified. I can't even censure them for it, because I know I'd do the same. I *have* done the same, when Bree was surrounded by other females back at the ball.

Still, two deaths in the space of an hour is not how I hoped this would go.

“Interesting,” Aiyana murmurs, accepting a kiss to her ear from the male behind her, who continues as if nothing has happened.

I expected her to be furious, but instead she simply smiles and leans into the caress. It doesn't take a genius to figure out why. She's learned one of our weaknesses already, and my Guards' possessiveness is something she can use against us.

Lore bends, letting his hat absorb the blood before he kicks the body out of the way, throws the head to Jaro like a macabre ball, and takes the dead male's place between my legs.

“Mine,” he growls, hugging my thighs and pressing his face into my lap.

“What are the terms of the trial?” I ask, trying to ignore his breath fanning over the crease of my sex.

“My people will organise everything.” Aiyana waves my concerns away. “In the meantime, why don't you tell me a little more about your Guard.”

Lore's hands are tracing up my calves, a silent question, and my hands find his hair and tug it lightly in rejection. Aiyana may get off on being pleased while in my presence, but I don't trust her enough to let my guard down. Plus, I've only just gotten used to sex in front of the rest of my Guard.

Thankfully, he gets the message, and his head tips to one side, letting me stroke his hair twice before he shifts, massaging my calves instead.

The same hands that just killed a male for even thinking of touching me are so gentle on my muscles, finding knots with ease.

“It's obvious you allow them far too much leeway,” Aiyana continues, watching. “A queen can't let her lovers walk all over her and tarnish her name. That's just setting a precedent for everyone else. You should take other lovers and order them to do the same. Break them of the possessiveness before it becomes a problem.”

“I'm not interested in opening our relationship.” I work hard to keep my tone cool and even.

Take other lovers? The very idea makes my gut churn and my mind boggle. I can barely manage the five the Goddess has given me, let alone more. And the idea of ordering my males to touch other fae... I want to throw up and rage all at once.

Mate bonds are sacred. She knows that. So she's pressing my buttons on purpose, and damn her, it's working.

Aiyana scoffs. “Your loss. I can't say I've ever had the issue of my males being caught in an illegal underground fighting ring.”

“And I can’t say I’ve ever experienced the desire to punish someone for the sins of their dead father,” I retort. “Now. Tell me the details of the trial.”

Aiyana hums, deliberately ignoring my demand a second time. “It’s funny, isn’t it? Despite being this all-powerful Nicnevin with a crown on your head and a Goddess on your side, you’re still required to get my approval to rule.” Her subtle jab stings, and I fight not to let it show. “Rather shows how little the Nicnevins trust their successors, if they have to hobble them like that, don’t you think?”

“It’s not there to hobble me.” My ire, already poked by her words and actions, prickles further at the latest jab. “I think it’s there as a reminder for you.”

She cocks her head to one side, still smiling. “How so?”

I meet her eyes. “When was the last time your people cheered for you like they did for me when I rode into your city?”

Her mouth snaps closed, grey eyes going from stormy to thunderous in a snap. But I’m not done. My filter has been destroyed, burned away by a combination of the Goddess’s fury and my own—oh, who am I kidding? It’s my own.

“I think the pilgrimage is here to remind you that you rule by my leave, and if you choose to play games with me, your people might not be as loyal as you’d hoped.” I stand. “I’m done with this. When you’re ready to stop talking in circles and start focusing on saving our people from the Fomorians, come and find me.”

I make it to the door before she can reply, the guys hot on my heels.

“Funny you should be so concerned about Fomorians,” Aiyana snaps, her voice colder than I’ve ever heard it. “Given that you spent the entire time you were kidnapped fucking one.”

The room goes deathly quiet. I turn on my heel to face her, my face blanching as every single fae in the room absorbs the information. Lore’s hand slips into mine, and I feel the cool metal of a blade hidden there.

He’s offering to kill her. I don’t doubt that he could do it, too.

But my lessons circle in my brain, reminding me that Aiyana has no heir. If she dies, we’ll be stuck here until her court has found a new successor. That could take months.

“I have never fucked a Fomorian,” I enunciate every word clearly. “Unlike some fae, I know which side of the war I’m on.”

“Do you?” Aiyana demands, but I’ve already left the room.

TWENTY-ONE

RHOSWYN

I collapse onto the bed with an angry groan.

The new room we've taken over in Madoc's home is just as nice, if not nicer than, the one we stayed in for my fever. The wide-open windows look out over the palace, and from this distance, I can pretend the gold swirling in the water isn't a bunch of deadly fae-eating eels. The huge bed I've chosen to vent my frustration onto is so soft and comfortable, I'm convinced it's been magicked into existence. The pale pastel sheets are all in shades of blue, which, combined with the soft cream colour of the stone, should be calming.

It's not.

My clothes are still damp with the rain that started on our return, and the boat ride back to the East District was fraught with tension. I know my males were holding back until we were safely away from the palace with walls for ears.

"Don't even start," I mutter into the sheets.

They don't need to tell me I screwed that up.

So much for diplomacy or being clever with my words or anything remotely queenly. I wasn't going into that meeting to insult her, but she started it...

Okay, that's not an excuse, but still. Suggesting I whore out my Guard? That I should take other lovers? Then, on top of that, her accusation that I might be working for the Fomorians? I scowl into the pillow, even as I debate moving closer to the fire to dry myself. Honestly, I just want to strip off this ridiculous dress and get comfortable.

"That was a mess," I mutter into the silk. "A goddess-damned fucking—"

"Careful," Lore chides. "Use too many naughty words, and the huntsman might use it as an excuse to put you over his knee."

Ignoring his words, and the answering flush of heat that runs through my body, I push up so I'm lying with my weight resting on one arm and brush my hair out of my face with the other.

"I screwed that up, didn't I?" Sighing, I finally meet Jaro's eyes as he opens his mouth to confirm it. "Don't answer that."

Titania, Mab, and Maeve pop into existence beside me, sitting on the covers with me as my Guard, Prae, and Kitarni crowd around us.

“You did well,” Maeve says. “So, you don’t have the seelie patience for sweet words and diplomacy. Big deal. You showed her you weren’t a pushover. You can learn diplomacy when you’re not in the middle of a war. It’s a damn sight harder to learn to hold your own against powerful people who want to intimidate you.”

“We don’t often agree, but in this... she’s right.” Titania pats my back gently, though I can’t feel the touch. “You couldn’t see us, but we were there, and we were proud.”

“Next time,” Mab mutters. “Hold your temper if you can. If it comes to a fight and you’re angry, you’ve already lost.”

I don’t point out that—given Aiyana’s age—I’ve probably lost the second we come to physical blows. Maeve’s lessons in dodging and basic self-defence won’t do anything against a fae queen several hundred years into her prime.

That reminds me of my decision to ask Maeve to step up our training, and I nod resolutely. Now that the fever is over, learning to fight properly—to protect myself—is at the top of the agenda next to flying, and reading.

Drystan is the only one who can see and hear my guides, and his fists clench at his sides, but he doesn’t dispute what she’s saying.

“You did exactly what you needed to,” Kitarni reassures me. “Which was give us time to find Caed.”

My head snaps up. “You found him.”

Bree strokes his arm, revealing a blank patch where his nathair should be. “Espen tracked him to the dungeons. They’re holding Caed in a pit...” He trails off, and I get the sense he’s not saying something.

“What?” My own morbid curiosity demands that I know.

Because I don’t care. Not one bit. Caed stood there and watched as his father played with my wings. A few nights in a seelie dungeon is nothing. He probably considers it pampered, given what I’ve seen of Fellgotha.

If he was hurt, I’d know. He’d have drawn from me using the bond.

“They have no plans to move him before the trial of restitution,” Bree says. “He should be left alive until Aiyana’s people have prepared whatever it is they have planned.”

“You didn’t catch any news?”

Bree shakes his head. “I don’t think she’s announced it yet. It’s almost

like she's stalling."

Stalling for what purpose, though?

"Is this another power play?" I ask aloud. "Just another way of trying to show that she's in control?"

"It could be." Kitarni perches on the edge of the bed, a few stray petals drifting from her head to tickle my arms. "Or it could be a way for her to interrogate Caed. Whatever her reasons, it's not good for us."

"Every second we waste here is another second that the Fomorian can spend battering down the palace wall," I grumble. "She's letting people die while she forces us to wait."

"I still don't see why the redcap can't just blink into Caed's cell and break him out," Prae growls. "He's suffering down there while you play your stupid political fae games."

"The second we do that without Aiyana's vow of allegiance in place, she'll tell the entire court who he is." Kitarni waves the Fomorian's anger away with a long bark-covered hand. "We have to break him out while Jaromir faces the trial, and Aiyana *cannot* know he's gone until after she's sworn her vow to Rose."

Prae is still seething, obviously about to argue further, so I quickly change the subject. "What exactly does the vow entail?"

"It is simple, really, though the language is old." Kitarni shrugs. "She swears to never act in a way that will harm you, or to stand by and allow harm to befall you, on the condition that you permit her to rule the Spring Court in accordance with the terms of the treaty."

Prae snarls under her breath. "And how will that help Caed?"

"Caed is you," Mab murmurs, hesitant. "Even if he is exiled. Wounding him harms you, and a mated couple—especially a Nicnevin and her Guard—is perceived as one entity in fae law."

At the same time, Kitarni says, "Exposing his part in your Guard would damage Rose's image. It still counts as 'harm' to the terms of the vow."

"It's not foolproof," Titania grumbles, running a finger under her colourful headband. "They can still keep secrets from you and spread information if they perceive it as benign, but it was the best I could get my brothers to agree to at the time."

"That is why the vows are so important," Kitarni says. "Until they are sworn, you and your Guard are fair game to the royals. Only the fear of another civil war and the people's disapproval keep them from banding

together to overthrow you, causing a second War of Seasons.”

“I figured it was better to let them have some modicum of control.” Titania waves her arm in the air in exasperation. “They weren’t exactly fond of the idea of recognising me as Nicnevin. Appeasing their pride was the only way to get them to agree.”

I reach over and pat her arm, grimacing at the slight chill. “You did all you could.” I sigh. “So if we’re stuck waiting for Aiyana to come up with her trial, what do we do while we wait?”

I’m just about to broach the subject of learning to fight or even to develop my powers, when Drystan steps forward. “There are probably a million fae seeking an audience with you, you still have to bless the temple shrine here, and then there are several fae who could be formidable allies if you can convince them it’s worth their while.”

So more diplomacy and blessings?

I grimace, and Kitarni notices. “What would you like to do, Nicnevin?”

Her earnest gaze meets mine, and I’m sucked back to that moment on the stairs after I failed to charm Caed and fled where she swore to have my back.

I guess it’s time to test that theory.

“I’m going to put all my energy into learning to fight.”

The silence explodes between my males, broken only by Maeve’s enormous whoop of excitement. Kitarni freezes, clearly not expecting my answer, and Prae’s eyebrows shoot up into her glamoured hairline.

I suppose the announcement did come out of nowhere, but their reaction makes my gut churn with nerves.

“No,” Drystan rebukes, as I expected he would. “Why would you even think that’s a good idea? You can barely stand being in the same room as iron, let alone parry an iron sword. If this is all part of some foolish fantasy of charging onto the battlefield to save Florian, then—”

“It’s not. And I wasn’t asking your permission.” My eyes burn with humiliation. “The entire way here, I’ve stayed in a little bubble, useless, while you all risk your lives—”

“That’s our *job*, Rosie,” Jaro mumbles, and a shield flickers over me for half a second before he can reel his magic back. “We were born to protect you. If I could and it was necessary, I’d die doing it.”

“I’m not asking to become a soldier,” I protest, glancing at Prae, who lingers on the fringes of the discussion, not saying anything. “I just don’t want to feel useless. I want to learn to use my magic too, but learning to use a

sword seems like a good backup in case I can't reach Danu again like last time when I panicked. What if your magic fails when I'm in danger? What if Elatha—?"

"He. Will. Not. Touch. You." Drystan strides closer to me until I can pick out specks of bronze flickering in his irises. His hand cups my cheek, tilting my head back to meet the amber eyes burning into mine as the scent of smoke fills my lungs. "You *are* useful. You're the key to gathering the armies, which will allow the trained soldiers to fight the enemy. Once that's done, you can move back into Elfhome and rule as you were meant to. Maybe take up knitting or something, I don't know."

"Knitting?" I blink, pulling my face from his grasp. "You think I want to start knitting?"

Drystan rolls his eyes. "It's just an example. You've never suggested what you might want to do with your time when you're not busy attending to your duties."

"I am now. I want to learn to defend myself. Maeve's been teaching me to dodge attacks for years. I think it's a good idea to learn more while we have the time."

Lore blinks beside me, landing inside Mab, who grimaces with distaste before floating away to pace the other side of the room.

"You can still stab people with knitting needles," he informs me, yawning. "But it takes a lot more force. Better to start with archery or something. Your grandmother can help you turn your enemies into pincushions from a distance. Or a spear! Letting your enemies skewer themselves is always satisfying."

At least that's one vote in my favour.

"Don't encourage this," Drystan growls, turning away from me. "It's bad enough the spirits put this idea in her head. You've all watched her charge headfirst into danger. She's not going to be content with defending herself."

"She can be our sexy little battle goddess." Lore's pupils are blown wide with arousal, and he licks his lips. "Come on, you mean to tell me you *don't* have fantasies of her wearing nothing but the blood of her enemies as she rides your cock?"

"Lord Huntsman," Kitarni interrupts, shooting the redcap an exasperated look until he blinks away. "I think it would be wise to accept that Danu did not give her chosen daughter two incredibly powerful gifts to watch from the sidelines as people win her battles for her."

I could hug her. As it is, my eyes are welling with moisture.

Drystan gives Jaro a look, then strides away. “Fine. But I want no part of it. When she bleeds out on the battlefield in our arms, you’ll learn I was right.”

He shoves through the double doors and into the night without another word, and I cringe.

There was anger in his words, but beneath that hid a deeper undercurrent of tremulous fear. I wouldn’t have noticed it if I wasn’t so attuned to him, but the realisation that Drystan is scared for me melts a little of my anger.

I’m still not happy, but I get the feeling that the unseelie lord isn’t used to caring for the welfare of others, and this latest development has rocked him. In typical Drystan style, he’s chosen to retreat behind a wall of blunt, unfeeling ice, rather than face the issue directly.

“Rosie,” Jaro begins.

“Don’t.” I shove up from the mattress, only to stop when he grabs my wrist. “I get it, okay? The answer is no.”

“I’m not saying defending yourself is a bad idea.” I meet his warm eyes, dying a little inside when I read the grave expression on his face. “But I worry, like Drystan does, that you’re going to take this further. Have you really thought this through? If we train you to fight, that means we’re training you to kill. Can you handle that? Can you look into someone’s eyes and take their life? Because I’m willing to bet you still regret the two kills the Goddess performed through you. And if you freeze when you should strike, that puts you in danger.” His thumb strokes the inside of my wrist. “I’m not saying never, but you’re young.”

“You’re not that much older.”

“I still have decades of training on you,” he contradicts evenly. “But even that won’t mean shit if you’re in the middle of a battle. My wolf will go mad trying to protect you.”

“Maeve and her Guard managed it. She went straight into war the second she was crowned.”

“Two of my Guard were female,” Maeve mutters. “The lack of testosterone made things infinitely easier.”

I can imagine.

Bree’s face is ashen beneath his tattoos. “In the process, she died so many times it turned the northern beaches black.”

Okay, even I can’t help my shudder there. As much as I want to fight, I’m

not sure I have the fortitude to go through the agonising process of being reborn hundreds of times.

“Why is that always what people remember about the second war?” Maeve grumbles, thrusting a hand through her fiery braids as she paces. “I ripped the head off Balor’s second son, Sengann, killed so many of his generals that they had to flee, and then I trounced their armies so badly in the third war they didn’t return for over three thousand years. But noooo, everyone only remembers *my* deaths.”

“Ahem,” Mab interjects with one raised eyebrow. “You forgot the part during the second war where their own infighting forced them to retreat.”

Maeve waves her off, uncowed. “There wouldn’t have been infighting if I hadn’t killed their leaders. Whatever the reason, they left, and when the third war came, it was over in months.”

Oblivious to their byplay, Jaro’s face pales. “The Third Nicnevin was training for war her entire life,” he reminds me. “Her gifts were strength and sword-wielding, and she—”

“And I can use that! All I have to do is touch Maeve and—”

“Maybe with training,” Jaro admits, scrubbing a hand over his beard. “But unlike with the Third Nicnevin, those powers won’t be innate. You’ll have to draw power from Danu *and* keep in physical contact with your guides—easier said than done in battle—*and then* focus enough to use that power. And you won’t be able to do any of that, because you’re iron sensitive. Merely being surrounded by Fomorian weapons would stop you from using your magic. Even if that wasn’t an issue, you’d have to master your own power, and hers as well.

“In fact, learning to channel your gifts would be a vastly better use of your time for that exact reason. Learning to wield a sword properly takes years, but if you could reliably master drawing from the Second Nicnevin and Danu, you’d be able to use her gift of perfect aim to support us from a distance. That’s a compromise even Drystan would accept.”

But it won’t save me if Elatha gets close enough to rip off my wings. My heart shrinks in my chest, and I look away, breaking his gaze.

“Fine. I get it.”

Jaro reaches for me, as if to offer comfort, but I shift, putting myself out of his reach.

“Rosie, I think—”

“I get it,” I repeat. “I’m a liability on the battlefield. If I’m attacked, I

should just stand there and wait to be saved.”

Maeve sucks in an impressed breath, her cheeks creasing into a smirk. “You make me so proud every day.”

My other two guides shoot her disbelieving looks.

“Perhaps it would be best if we left them alone,” Titania coughs, grabbing Maeve’s shoulder. “This is something they should work out without our interference.”

Mab nods once, taking hold of Maeve’s other shoulder when she might’ve objected. Before I can say anything, all three of them poof from existence.

Without them beside me, I feel oddly alone. My guides were my backup, even though none of the others could see them.

Jaro straightens, opens his mouth, then closes it, then opens it again. “I will protect you,” he promises. “Once the war is over, there will be time to teach you self defence. I’ll do it myself, I swear on my honour. Right now, we need to focus on getting help to Florian and reclaiming the city I lost.”

My head snaps up, and I see the second he realises what he’s said because he looks away sharply.

Kitarni speaks. “Jaromir... losing Elfhame... that wasn’t your fault.”

I nod so hard that my neck hurts. “There was nothing you could’ve done.”

“Forgive me, High Priestess, but if I hadn’t lost the outer wall, the city could’ve withstood years of siege. So, I think you’ll find it was entirely my fault.” Jaro shuffles on one foot, then turns on his heel. “I have to prepare for the trial. If you need me...” He trails off, giving me an indecipherable look before he heads out of the room and into the night.

I look at the remaining fae in the room in despair. Kitarni is still perched on the bed, deep in thought. Prae has managed to keep her mouth shut, but she looks as fed up as I feel with the whole situation. Bree is still keeping to his spot by the door, eyes fixed on me and expression unreadable.

And Lore... Lore is missing.

I swallow, wondering what he’s up to now.

“So, now that that’s gone about as well as you probably expected,” Prae begins. “Wanna start training?” She pauses, then looks at Bree. “Unless you’re also going to hobble her with excuses as to why she—Elatha’s number one target—shouldn’t be able to defend herself.”

Bree sighs, running a hand through his hair. “I won’t. I understand Drystan’s fear, and honestly, I agree with all of Jaro’s arguments, but I know

what it's like to feel helpless. I would never put my mate through that." He pauses. "If this is what you want, I'll help, but I'm not the best one to teach you. I'm stronger and larger than you. The Third Nicnevin is probably your best option."

It's reluctant support, but it makes the stone in my gut lighten considerably. Finally, someone who doesn't want me to sit around being useless.

TWENTY-TWO

LORCAN

So many shiny pretty things. *Ouch*. Sharp.

I'll take that one. Snatching it up from the shelf smears a little of my blood on the serrated edge of the blade, and I stare at it for a second before a gleam from my left distracts me.

Ohh, she might want these as well. I snatch the ring blades out of the drawer in my armoury with a satisfied smile. This whole corner of the giant panelled room has been curated specially for my mate. I've been collecting for years, so it's taken me almost two days to figure out which ones might be best to begin her education, mostly because I keep getting distracted by all the sparkles.

One day I'll bring her here and show off the brightly lit room full of shiny stabby toys. We didn't spend nearly enough time in my court before we had to run off and fetch the *púca*. I just know she'll love the way the torchlight flickers off the silver...

"Lord Lorcan."

"Go away, Widdikins." I shoo him off with one foot—because my arms are busy.

I need to stop by the vault and grab some more jewellery before I leave. It's hilarious watching the vein in the dullahan's temple twitch as I cover Rose in jewels while he frets over how to give her one tiny necklace.

Silly Winter Court high fae and their stupid engagement rituals. Why bother tricking your mate into wearing some silly piece of metal when she can wander around wearing a stylish scarlet cap instead?

"It's Winstan, my lord." There's a thread of disapproval in his tone, and my lips quirk. "And I believed you might want to know about the attempts to destabilise the troop in your absence."

My head turns, but I keep my body turned towards the locker and the important business of arming my mate.

The redcap before me takes in my armful of weapons and my bare feet with red eyes full of scorn. Like a lot of the young ones, he's decided a red-dipped beard and moustache is the fashion, and I grimace at the waste of good blood.

“Mutiny?” I can’t suppress the glee in my voice. “Ohhh! It’s been ages since we had a good backstabbing! Who is it, Withers? Which of them thinks they have the guts to take my spot?”

For a brief second, I consider letting them succeed. I have things to do, most of which now involve watching Rose, or fucking her, or just listening to her talk. Her fever was so delicious, but distracting. We never even got to use that enchantment that I had set into my pearls...

Wilbur is still staring at me. Oh, right, mutiny.

I guess I’ll deal with it. Rose might want a bloodthirsty army of redcaps at her beck and call. And besides, I enjoy pissing off Cressidick too much to let this little slice of her court go now.

I really must remember to get Rose another present for getting me out from under that bitch’s thumb... Perhaps she’d enjoy another dagger... or maybe the flayed cocks of her enemies...

Wait...

What was I doing again?

Oooh, yes, getting her more pointy things.

Ignoring Wimples, I step back to regard my mate’s corner of the vast armoury. No. There’s a whole wall of daggers for her to choose from. Perhaps a spear? Very practical for a female, especially one of her size...

“Lillian is the one responsible for most of the whispers, sire.”

“Good on her,” I reply, distractedly. “I didn’t think she had the balls.”

Then again... I stop with my hand outstretched and ready to claim a curved sword to the already heavy pile of spiky things in my arms.

Wimbly can’t judge me. We all know I’m a sparkle whore.

“How long has it been since my last leadership reshuffle?” I ask my second, frowning. “No. Wait. Don’t answer that.”

It was just after Rose got me out from under Cressidick’s thumb. Only a quarter of a century. Their lack of loyalty is disappointing, but I suppose it’s to be expected.

Fae love a bit of excitement, after all. What better way to spice up the ennui of such long lives than a coup?

Sighing, I step closer to Winters, dumping my bladed burden into his arms. “Wrap these in something soft. Maybe add some bows or something. Glitter. My mate deserves the best. I’ll be back when I’ve killed everyone.”

Winstable has been in the troop so long he doesn’t even blink. It’s almost enough to make up for his boring lack of ambition.

He may hate me, but he serves more faithfully than most of the rest. I'm so good at cultivating worthy friendships... or maybe that's because at one point I stole his name. Eh, I can't remember.

Humming to myself, I blink directly into Lillian's home and start the boring process of dealing with insubordination with a sigh.

"You know," I say to Lillian's dismembered head once I've finished arranging it and several others on the pikes outside my tree-palace. "You should be grateful that I waited for you to close your mouth before I killed you. This way you won't catch flies."

The curling moustache I drew above her pouty lips is a definite improvement. She should be thanking me for making her look more fearsome in death.

Her sightless eyes stare back, lids drooping as I nail her pathetic, barely-crimson, cap to the pike beneath her. Stupid female, letting her cap out of her sight. Trusting her greatest weakness to her pathetic mate to protect. Not smart.

As an extra bonus, this little activity has given me an opportunity to collect all sorts of fun body parts for Wraith to play with. I've even managed to rip out a few windpipes for him to chew on once they've dried.

Rain is starting to trickle down my back as I work, and I whistle, thinking about how much fun it will be to persuade Rose to strip me out of my sodden clothes.

Brushing my hands off—can't risk giving Rose splinters—I blink back to the Spring Court, directly into the main parlour of Madoc's fancy residence.

It's raining in the Spring Court as well, and the fat droplets are pounding the window beside the small table where Rose is playing a game of banriall with her niece. She's frowning at the pieces on the board like they'll tell her what to do if she stares at them hard enough. The game is similar to mortal chess, but with a Nicnevin instead of a king, a high priestess in place of a queen. Guards in place of knights and so on.

I've seen variations of the same board across the realms I've visited, but the rules are far harsher in Faerie.

Even without knowing which of the four variants she's playing, it's obvious my mate is only three moves away from losing. I tut under my breath as I blink down from the chandelier—

Oops, damn, not the Illidwen dungeons *again*! Ignoring the screams of the damned—because unseelie are definitely not lazy when it comes to a

good round of torture—I finger wave at the master of agonies before I blink a second time, until I’m standing right behind Rose.

Pressing my nose into the crook of her neck, I try to use her natural scent to banish the lingering smell of burnt flesh as I survey the board. Before I can think better of it, my fingers dart forward and move her Nicnevin piece safely out of the reach of the little girl’s high priestess.

“Hey, it’s not fair!” Khloe complains. “I can’t win against the Blade of Autumn!”

Wraith looks up lazily from his spot at their feet at her tone, and his tail begins to thump against the smooth mosaic floor when he recognises me. I must remember to take him out for another game of fetch... Madoc’s stuffy neighbours were less than impressed by a barghest catching limbs in their posh flower gardens.

“Focus less on the priests,” I advise Rose, ignoring my unfortunate moniker. “She’s using her courtiers against you.”

I whip off my cap and tug it snugly down over her ears, grinning as my mate strokes the soft fabric appreciatively. She can tell it’s extra red today. I know it.

Nothing like a good mutiny to freshen one’s cap.

“She’s right,” Rose says, instead of taking my wealth of experience on board. “You’re helping me cheat.”

“It’s outcome engineering,” I correct. “And the child needs to learn that all fae do it sooner or later. I’m dispensing a valuable life lesson free of charge.”

Further proof that I’ll be an excellent father when we reach that point. My chest puffs out, and I take another sniff of Rose’s scent just to make sure she isn’t pregnant, because that’s a surprise she doesn’t want in the middle of all this chaos.

Nope. No scent change. Good to know Kitarni’s potions still work.

Not that I ever doubted that.

When she bleeds, will she let me use my cap to soak it up? Or will her silly mortal hangups get in the way? Kitarni gave her those pads, but they won’t suck the tender flesh between her legs like my hat can...

“Oh! I forgot your gifts!” I blink away, grabbing the giant trunk with a bright red velvet ribbon tied artfully around the lid, then blink back.

Rose gapes in surprise as it lands in the middle of the grand room.

“Lore,” Bree murmurs, frowning as he finally steps out of the shadows.

“Is whatever’s in there fit for a child to see?”

I cock my head to one side. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Because you’re covered in blood.” Bree arches a single eyebrow.

Grinning, I look down at the white leathers as I steal my cap from Rose’s head and pass it over the still-dripping splotches. It’s watered down thanks to the rain, but my hat doesn’t mind. The second I’m done, it transforms into a delicate circlet, and I plop it back down on Rose’s brow.

“Ahhh, the perils of leadership. Rest assured, pet, there are no dead bodies in the chest... though if you want one, just say the word.”

Who knows, Rose might want decorating tips for how best to display the heads of her enemies, and I’m just the redcap for the job. It’s been far too long since I did an honest day’s assassinating—ooh, look at me, making up my own words. I’m practically a scholar now.

Abandoning the game, Rose slips from the chair by the window and approaches it with a wary expression.

Too slow. Using a claw, I slice through the ribbon and kick the chest open.

Rose freezes, and Bree lets out a low groan.

“For Goddess’s sake, get that out of here before Drystan—”

The doors at the other end of the room burst open, and Madoc and Bram stride into the room like their asses are on fire.

“Khloe, sweetheart, go find your mother,” Madoc says, cutting off the child’s petulant pout with a look.

“Okay,” she mumbles, skirts fluttering around her ankles as she leaves the room. Not before stealing a longing glance at the chest of blades, though. Ah, a child after my own heart.

My own ankle biters will be even more bloodthirsty.

“Where’s the rest of the Guard?” Bram asks, twisting his hands together.

“Jaro wanted to train, and Drystan agreed to spar with him,” Bree answers. “Why? Has there been news?”

Madoc paces the length of the fireplace. “Aiyana has set a date for the trial.”

“And?” Rose asks, my present completely forgotten—stupid princes ruining my moment. “When is it?”

“Two days from now, at dawn,” Madoc says. “But everyone who knows anything about what Sir Jaromir will face is keeping their mouth shut. Aiyana has spent the last week executing anyone she suspects of being the traitor,

and they're all scared.”

Rose's face pales, but I doubt either of her brothers notice. Silly Rose, suffering from an overdeveloped sense of personal responsibility.

If I know the minor royals, Aiyana was looking for excuses to off those snakes, anyway. There's no way the queen of spring hasn't figured out who it truly is by now.

Bree's noticed Rose's tension as well, and he moves close enough for her to touch, becoming a silent protective gargoyle at her back. The closer he gets, the more she relaxes, and the second I'm sure she's okay, I blink out of the room and snag Drystan, then Jaromir, without warning.

Two shirtless and bloodied high fae look so out of place in the elegance that is Madoc's parlour as they tumble to the floor, still clutching their weapons. Rose's eyes widen, then darken, as she realises exactly how little her mates are wearing. Her tongue darts out to wet her lip, and I track the motion.

Maybe I should take my shirt off, too—

“Lore!” Jaro grumbles, cheeks flushed. “We were—”

“In this case, he was right to interrupt,” Madoc cuts in, before proceeding to fill them in.

I half-listen, but most of my attention is on Rose. She's shifted, using her skirts to hide my present from the dullahan, and I grin as I blink away with the chest and then return before he can notice.

She's not going to be deterred from her plan. Stubborn little thing. Luckily for her, she's got just the unseelie on her side to help her sneak away.

TWENTY-THREE

RHOSWYN

Sweat prickles down my back as I lift and lower my wings for the hundredth time, but it's getting easier. Working on my flight muscles has become a habit whenever I sit still for too long, which lately seems to be all the time. I'm hoping that soon I'll be able to manage to hover in short bursts, which is what Florian described as the next step.

Bree says nothing as he stands silently behind me. The two of us watch as Jaro goes through another set of fluid martial poses in the stone courtyard of Madoc's home. There's no moon tonight, thanks to the heavy rain clouds, and the darkness is illuminated by soft glowing spheres of magic that hang in the air above us, casting everything in a bluish light.

My courses arrived this morning, much to my disgust, and I grimace as another slight cramp hits me out of nowhere.

It's nothing. Barely noticeable compared to the wicked cramps that hit me during my fever, but I'm still gratefully sipping at the steaming purple potion Kitarni brewed to ease the twinges. At least this should only last a day or so, and it reassures me that I'm not with child, for which I'm grateful.

Experience has taught me that the best way to deal with pain is to focus on something else, so I've come to watch Jaro as he trains for the trial that's taking place in just a few short hours. Though the rain has let up slightly, his wet hair hangs in ringlets around his face and his shirt is clinging to his body in ways that make me wish I wasn't bleeding.

I still can't believe Lore tried to get me to shove his cap between my thighs this morning. I had to put my foot down because there's no way I'm walking around with his hat wedged into my underwear. He's looked so dejected ever since, at least, he was until Wraith started bouncing around demanding his attention. Demanding food.

Do they think I haven't realised that Lore takes the barghest out to kill people and devour their souls? I may dislike violence, but I'm not ignorant. I also believe that Lore—for all his madness—would never turn Wraith loose on someone who didn't deserve it.

My redcap may be insane, but he's got a core of honour. They all have.

"You should get some rest," Bree murmurs, slipping onto the stone bench

I chose for its sheltered position under the portico.

“Jaro isn’t.” The shifter is still repeating the same drills over and over. Unceasing. Tireless.

He gives me a sideways look. “Jaro is a warrior working out the pre-battle tension. Not a Nicnevin who’s been worrying herself sick over the last few days.”

Like I can help that. Drystan may have been doing his best to schedule me so many audiences that I can’t breathe, but not even the hundreds of fae petitioning for blessings can distract me from this.

“Have you heard anything?” I ask.

Mab confirmed that bards are known for travelling between the courts, listening for rumours and gossip as they go. According to her, they’re also known to sell the information on occasion, for the right price. The better the bard, the more powerful their patrons, and the more people will pay to learn their dirty secrets.

Apparently, King Eero pays incredibly well.

I’ve been itching to ask my púca about it, but it never seems to be the right time, and he always seems so uncomfortable whenever his past is brought up.

“From what I can gather, Aiyana is having to blackmail his challenger to get them to fight the Nicnevin’s Guard, but that’s just servants’ gossip.” Bree pauses. “Are you sure you won’t sleep? It’s getting cold.”

“I don’t mind.” I move to lean against him, as I would with Jaro or Lore, only to freeze halfway.

His hand snakes out, pulling me against his side.

I don’t breathe until he sighs, the muscles of his shoulders sagging. “You can touch me, dragonfly. I... I want you to touch me.”

Does he really, though? Or is this just his way of punishing himself for what happened with Caed?

My doubts must show on my face, because he bites his lip and runs his free hand over his catlike ears before continuing. “I don’t want my life to be overshadowed by what they did to me. My inability to deal with my own demons led to what happened with Caed. If I’d worked on my issues, then perhaps I might’ve been able to keep a clearer head.”

I shake my head, ready to rebuke him. But he continues, “I may never be worthy of being your mate, but I want—I need—to take back the things that once brought me joy. For both our sakes... just... don’t make any sudden

moves?”

I can do that. Letting a little more of my weight settle against him, I tense when he does, only relaxing when I feel him doing the same.

“You are worthy, Bree. I don’t know how to make you see it.”

“I’ll see it when I’ve earned it.”

“And when will that be?” I press. “Because it seems to me like you’re measuring your worthiness by comparing yourself to the others.”

Bree goes rigid. I try to move away, but his arm pins me in place. “They are good males—Caed excluded, though even he has a title.”

“If you need a title, I’ll invent you one. Lord Bricriu. There. Done.”

“That’s not how it works, even if it was, that won’t change anything.”

Not sighing and rolling my eyes is more difficult than it should be. “Of course, it won’t. You’re a different person. That doesn’t make you any less than them.”

“No,” he admits slowly. “But the fact that I took the Oath to escape my debt does.”

“Oooh, are we comparing dubious motives?” Lore blinks in front of us with a grin. “Well, I win. I took mine to retire early. Even though the job came with perks, it was getting a little bit demanding for my taste. Besides, Rose’s tits are perkier than Cressidick’s.”

Bree’s mouth has dropped open.

“Of course, I was sworn to her service for centuries until my oath broke my old vow.” Lore cartwheels backwards, abs flashing as he narrowly avoids crashing into Jaro. “It was such a pain. You swear yourself to one queen, thinking she’s a glorious bloodthirsty killer, then she gets all bossy and boring.”

“I’m pretty sure Jaromir is the only one who took the oath for noble reasons,” Drystan grumbles, appearing in the doorway to my left. “Now, shouldn’t you all be getting some sleep before we have to deal with more of Aiyana?”

I’m not sure if their interruption has helped Bree at all, but he jumps on the excuse to change the topic. “Yes. Rose needs sleep. She’s still recovering from her fever.”

“I’m not tired yet.” I wave them away. “Besides, I have questions.” Drystan rolls his eyes, but I don’t let him put me off. “Why is Aiyana... the way she is? And why does she leave an axe in her throne?”

I understand that Lore’s madness is an inherent part of him, and an

accepted trait of his species. But Aiyana is high fae.

“Aiyana is old,” Drystan grouches. “Older than all the other royals—except perhaps Cressida. With extreme age often comes instability.”

“It’s not just that.” Bree hesitates. “She despises mating. Forbids anyone with a mate from serving her directly. Any fae seeking to join her harem is required to forswear taking a mate for as long as they serve her.”

“Who would agree to that?” I ask, brows furrowing.

Drystan shrugs. “Plenty of fae seek their mates for centuries with nothing to show for it. Many eventually give up. Some don’t want a mate—or any relationship beyond sex. Aiyana pampers them well. They want for nothing, and for many, that’s a fair trade.”

“And Aiyana herself was betrayed by her mate.” Bree’s fingers twist in my hair, teasing out a tangle. “Or so the story goes, anyway. It happened two thousand years ago. Not many fae were there to witness it. Even fewer are still alive now.”

“What did he do?” I have a sick feeling that I know, but I need to hear it confirmed.

“She,” Bree corrects. “Aiyana’s mate was female. Kaia Alstone was the warrior queen of a minor court in the Summer Court—not unlike Lore’s Court of Blades.”

“Except my court is better.” Lore yawns, then blinks directly in front of Jaro with a strike that would’ve sent the shifter flying had he not dodged at the last second.

“Damn it, redcap! I’m training.”

“You’re wasting time with novice exercises instead of resting and snuggling our mate,” Lore corrects, blinking onto Jaro’s shoulders and grabbing his hair. “Giddyup!”

“Aiyana’s mate tried to kill her.” Bree tunes out their fighting as Drystan strides over to diffuse it. “Different versions of the story exist. In some, Kaia was tricked into believing Aiyana was about to attack the Summer Court and chose to protect her family. In others, it was a lovers’ tiff that went too far... No one knows for sure.

“Either way, the stories all agree on what happened during the confrontation. Kaia attempted to take Aiyana’s head with her fabled greataxe, and Aiyana barely escaped with her life. A week of interrogation did nothing to force Kaia to confess her motivations or show remorse, and Aiyana was forced to sentence her mate to death.”

“Wow.” Shivering, I look over to where Drystan is now standing between Jaro and Lore, all three of their shoulders heaving.

I can’t imagine what I would feel if one of them tried to kill me without even telling me why. Is it any wonder the spring queen is a little bit crazy?

“We would never,” Bree whispers, reading my mind again. “All of us would rather chop off our own hands than touch you in anger, dragonfly.”

“I know,” I whisper. “But I feel so sorry for Aiyana. And I suppose, if she truly cared for Jaro’s father, him leaving her for his mate must have hurt.”

“True, but it’s been centuries, and for the last two hundred, Neila has been Aiyana’s favourite. At this point, Jaro breaking the banishment has bruised her pride, nothing more.”

“Perhaps he shouldn’t have come with us,” I mutter.

“It wouldn’t have made a difference,” Bree murmurs. “Aiyana would simply have found a different excuse. Besides, with only Lore and Drystan to look after you during your fever, there’s a good chance it would’ve been rougher than it already was.”

True.

“Do you think Aiyana might’ve reacted better if I’d come alone?”

“It doesn’t matter if she would,” Drystan grumbles. “There will never be a day when I let you walk into *any* of the courts without backup. You’d be safer walking into a camp full of Fomorians.”

Jaro’s brows raise, then he shrugs. “Actually, that’s probably true.”

Well, that does little to boost my confidence.

TWENTY-FOUR

RHOSWYN

The dress Kitarni helped me choose is stiff and severe—a sharp contrast to the floaty airy gowns I’ve been wearing all week. The dark, embroidered fabric sends a message of disapproval, something which is echoed on my High Priestess’s face as we sit together in the royal barge, on our way to the arena.

The rain, which has been nearly unceasing for the past few days, has given way to patchy clouds that catch the first flickering rays of the sun in a spectacular blaze on the horizon, but I can’t appreciate the beauty.

All I can see are the hundreds of other fae on boats just like ours, bedecked in their finery as they chatter and laugh.

This is entertainment to them.

Do they not realise that their queen is gambling with their lives? Do they simply not care?

“Rhoswyn,” Kitarni murmurs. “You are breaking my hand.”

I release her, apologies springing to my lips, but she waves them away.

“It is natural to be nervous, but Jaromir is a trained knight. Whatever rival Aiyana brings against him, I have confidence that he will triumph.”

Me too, I just... “Something feels off. Perhaps it’s nothing... I just...”

Kitarni doesn’t brush aside my concerns. “We’ll keep our wits about us.”

Perhaps I’d feel better if my full Guard was here, but Jaro snuck away before I woke up, and so did Caed’s rescue party, which leaves only Drystan, Bree, and Wraith to stand guard behind us as we travel. I know, logically, that all the members of my nascent court are powerful fae and able to take care of themselves, but I suspect I won’t feel reassured until we’re all safely out of here.

“Are the horses packed?”

The dryad nods. “We can leave the second the spring queen swears her vow.”

Good.

The stone arena looms ahead, the huge boughs of the trees surrounding it partially obscuring the delicate architecture from view. There are so many spectators attempting to reach the island that the water below is almost

invisible beneath the throng of boats. As they realise who we are, the crowd parts, lining our route with curious stares and cries of “Goddess bless the Nicnevin” and “Goddess bless the high priestess.”

Deep breaths, I remind myself, trying to focus on my friend instead.

Fisting the skirts of my outfit until my fingers go numb, I have to work to release the fabric, then smooth away the creases as we drift to the dock. Stern-faced soldiers usher us quickly up carpeted steps and into the royal box; a pergola hung with heavy clouds of blooming jasmine which has a front-row seat of the dusty pit below. The stone walls beneath us are splashed with the dark stains of dried blood, and interspersed along them are huge metal gates, all of which are closed except one.

Kitarni notices my hesitance, but says nothing, nudging me toward the three thrones which wait in the centre of the box. Given the ornate blossom carvings across the one in the centre, it must normally be Aiyana’s, which means that the two either side are intended for Kitarni and me. Another slight, seating herself foremost when we all know she’s not the real power here.

She must be nearby, because my guides have been absent since we docked, but she’s yet to show herself. In her absence, I turn my attention to the rest of the arena.

It’s clear the lower levels, closest to the action, have been reserved for the very wealthy. The stands around me are mostly full of high fae, wearing so many glimmering fabrics and gems that they twinkle in the patchy rays of the sun. In the rows above them, more under fae are scattered, and in the topmost rows—farthest from the sand—it’s hard to spot any high fae at all. Regardless of their affluence, they all wear the same expression of glee.

They’ve all come to watch Jaro fight for his life, and they consider it entertainment. Danu’s presence stretches inside of me, a lioness flexing her claws.

Not here, I beg her. *Not now*.

We need this to go well, but if Aiyana’s stupid trial brings Jaro harm, neither Danu nor I will be able to take that lightly. It’s bad enough that the Goddess is still angry over Caed’s imprisonment.

Perhaps I stare at the sand a little too fiercely, because Kitarni coughs pointedly, and I take that as my sign to retreat back to the throne that’s waiting for me.

“She’s late,” I say, taking a seat on the largest throne.

If I accept that lesser position as Aiyana intended, it sets a dangerous precedent. Is it bitchy? Probably. But giving Aiyana permission to continue slighting me—even in this small way—seems the more dangerous option.

They all keep telling me I'm a Nicnevin. I suppose my first meeting with the spring queen drove home the point that I need to start acting the part.

"Careful," Kitarni notes. "Take a breath. Feel the way the air changes from cold to warm as you breathe out." I frown, but do as she says. "Good. Now, who feels this irritation? Is it you? Or is it Danu? You need to take care to separate the two if you're to retain control."

It's both, but mostly Danu, and I admit as much, before I ask, "But don't you serve the Goddess? Why would you want me to control her?"

"If what Danu wanted was a vessel for her own whims, she would never have given the Nicnevins any autonomy. The Goddess chose the Nicnevin to rule in her place. Besides, just because someone feels rage, doesn't mean they should act on it. The Goddess herself likely wouldn't. Her emotions are simply so much stronger than any normal fae's that they overwhelm you. They will continue to do so until you master them, which is something that took the previous Nicnevins years of careful training."

"Good for them," I mutter.

"Nicnevin," Aiyana's silky smooth voice cuts through whatever Kitarni might've said. "So generous of you to spend your time on such a trivial matter."

As if I'd be anywhere else right now. Locking my jaw to hold the retort back, I settle for a nod of acknowledgement. Her eyes are narrowed, taking in my choice of seat with silent judgement.

The spring queen is dressed as regally as ever and shadowed by a handful of beautiful attendants who glow a little when she waves them over to the floor before her throne. They shy away from Wraith, who's taken the cushions no doubt intended for them, as his own. To my mind, his presence on the floor beside them makes it clearer than ever that Aiyana's lovers are little more than pets to her.

I glance behind me at Drystan and Bree, who are watching our interaction with passive expressions. Mimicking their stoicism doesn't come naturally to me. I'm sure every second of my discomfort shows on my face as Aiyana takes her seat and holds a hand up for silence.

The arena holds its breath.

"In a few moments, justice will be served," she says, her voice magnified

by some hidden enchantment. “Centuries ago, a knight sworn to my service betrayed my trust. In response, I banished anyone from the House MacBlaid from these lands. Today, his son will undertake the trial of restitution, proving once and for all that even the Guard is not above our most ancient laws.” She pauses. “But first, there is entertainment to be had! Let’s show Danu’s chosen daughter, the pleasures of the Spring Court.”

What is this? My mouth opens, but whatever protest I might’ve made is cut off by the joyful trill of pipes accompanied by the deep, sonorous rumble of drums.

Three dozen fae dancers, clad in gauzy, revealing outfits, race out onto the sand and begin a complex twirling routine. Their long sleeves flutter like pastel flags in the breeze, and their bodies move to the music. It’s enchanting. On any other day, I’d be captivated.

Aiyana leans forward, but she’s not focused on the dancer, her attention has been caught by Wraith.

“Such an unusual choice of companion for a Nicnevin.”

“No more so than a moat filled with fae-eating eels.” I’m proud of how steady my voice is.

“Those were my mother’s doing,” Aiyana corrects. “Though I suppose they serve a purpose.”

Her hand twists into the hair of one of the males by her feet, guiding him until he’s pressing kisses to the outside of her thigh.

Oh Danu, please don’t make me sit through watching her come again.

As if in answer, Wraith lays his head across my lap and glares at the spring queen. Her lovers might make pretty pets, but my barghest is deadly, and his entire focus is on her.

“What exactly was Sir Braiden’s crime?” I ask, settling back on the throne as the dancers continue to weave patterns across the sand.

Aiyana stiffens, her fingers turning to claws in her pet’s hair. “I would’ve thought your shifter would’ve told you the whole sorry story.”

“As far as he and the rest of the realm is concerned, it’s a simple matter of a male finding his mate and choosing to accept the bond.” I shrug.

Her face is thunderous as she shoves the male away from her and levels her full focus on me. “My lovers are required to forswear their mates when they come into my service. I honour that sacrifice by giving them anything they could ever want. He agreed to my terms, but the second that snooty little scholar came along, he claimed his wolf couldn’t even look at me. He begged

to be released from his vow—like the centuries we had spent together before her meant nothing.” Are the tears glistening in the corners of her eyes from rage or sorrow? “*I* meant nothing. All because that mangy animal in his head chose someone else.”

“He broke his promise.” It sounds like Aiyana might even have genuinely loved Jaro’s father, in which case, I can almost sympathise a little. “That must have hurt.”

Still, she’s had dozens of lovers in the years since then. Her wounded pride isn’t worth holding a grudge for so long or taking it out on a dead male’s son.

“Mating is the worst of Danu’s choices for our people,” Aiyana continues, settling back in her throne to stare absently at the dancers. “A mockery of free will, and yet some fae wait millennia in hope, only to die alone, having never found theirs. It’s a miserable system, and many of us wish to be free of it.”

Understandable, especially if your own mate tried to kill you.

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” I concede. “But if free will means so much to you, why do you hate Sir Braiden so much for exercising his? It seems to me like you don’t believe in choice at all, simply in control.”

All three of her forgotten attendants are gaping at me in horror, and when I look back, Kitarni’s face has gone slack. Oh dear. I don’t need to check to feel Drystan glaring daggers into my back.

Before either of us can say anything, however, a pointed male cough interrupts us.

“Nicnevin, Your Highness, High Priestess,” he acknowledges us in turn from his place at the top of the steps. “I hope I’m not interrupting.”

Aiyana’s stormy anger evaporates, and the flicker of vulnerability that was swimming in her eyes a moment ago is quickly hidden, replaced with cool indifference as she waves him forward into the box.

I suppose I should thank the stranger for saving me from my own runaway mouth, but one glance at him makes me shiver. He seems unremarkable enough. His round face is framed by neat, chin-length brown hair, and he wears the robes of the priesthood, but his blue eyes are flat and assessing as we study one another. Nearly every other priest I’ve met has regarded me with awe or respect. This stranger clearly feels neither.

“Mervyn, I was wondering when you’d show up.” Aiyana waves him across to her side. “Nicnevin, this is Grand Cleric Mervyn. He’s served as the

representative of Danu in my court for some decades now.”

I would say it’s nice to meet him, but it would be a lie. He sets my teeth on edge. Instead, I offer him a half nod and turn my attention to the dancers once more.

Unfortunately, he’s not content to be dismissed. He moves to stand on the far side of Aiyana’s throne, looks over again, and then turns rigid when his eyes land on my Guard.

“Nicnevin, surely it would be better if the under fae were outside the royal box.”

I look up in disbelief as Danu’s ire prickles at the edges of my awareness. Bree is obviously a púca, and calling him ‘under fae’ simply adds extra insult to the suggestion that he’s not worthy to stand in the royal box.

“Bree is my Guard.” My tone broaches no further discussion.

He isn’t listening. “Of course, the high priestess is expected to be by your side.” He delivers the words with incredible magnanimity. “But it would give the other under fae ideas above their station if he were to remain.”

Bree is already moving, ready to depart without protest. My arm snaps out, stopping him in his tracks.

My stomach churns as I level my best death glare at the priest. “Leave.”

How dare he?

His genial smile creases into a frown. “Pardon, your—”

“I would rather have a hundred under fae in this box with me than suffer your presence a second longer. Leave.”

Mervyn looks to Aiyana, as if she might save him from being dismissed, but the queen simply shrugs, red lips curling into a smile as she ignores the aghast cleric and focuses back on the dusty pit below.

“Ah, look, the trial is about to start.”

Her comment snaps my head around in time to see the dancers giving their final bow. The sweet and sensual pipe music gives way to the sombre beat of a lone drum as they flit from the arena in a flurry of soft fabric and smiles. The crowd, who were muttering amongst themselves, grow quiet at the promise of the blood they came for.

Drystan has gripped Mervyn’s upper arm and is in the process of escorting him bodily from the box, but I can’t hear the priest’s protests over the pounding of my heart as Jaro takes his first strides out onto the sand. His armour gleams in the pale rays of the morning sun, every inch of him a seelie knight.

His confidence is an easy thing, a cloak borne of decades of training that fits him so perfectly.

Jaro is a warrior. He knows what he's doing. He's immortal.

My churning gut settles, then erupts into butterflies as he reaches the centre of the arena and bows before me, his eyes flicking wolf amber for a fraction of a second.

Aiyana stands from her throne, approaching the edge of the box with measured steps. "Are you ready to face your trial, Sir Jaromir?"

He nods, untucking his helm from under his arm and sliding on in a single practised move. Across the arena, one of the many gates groans as it's winched open, and the crowd leans forward, craning their necks to catch sight of who—or what—Aiyana has chosen to face my Guard.

That drumbeat echoes ominously, and anticipation digs its claws into my chest.

No one expects the two figures that emerge.

They're children—twin boys no older than twelve summers—dressed in simple, neat clothes, and completely defenceless. They stare around the arena with wide, hesitant eyes as they walk across the sand towards Jaro. Someone has lovingly braided their hair into neat warrior braids, and their rangy limbs move with the awkwardness that comes with adolescent growth spurts.

What is Aiyana playing at?

TWENTY-FIVE

JAROMIR

At first, I think it's a trick. There are beasts in Faerie who take the appearance of helpless and vulnerable fae to lure their prey to them before striking. The closer they come, the more I tense, ready for the inevitable attack.

It doesn't happen.

When they're finally close enough for my wolf to pick out their scents over the hundreds of others surrounding us, I grimace.

Fae.

There are very few things powerful enough to fool a shifter's nose. Which means Aiyana really has put two children on a battlefield in some sick and twisted ploy to force my surrender.

I rip my helmet away from my face as I turn to confront the royal box. Rose—just as heartrendingly beautiful as always—has turned ghostly pale, and Bree's hand has slipped around to hold her shoulder, keeping her in her seat. Kitarni is frowning at the spring queen, and Aiyana...

Is grinning like a feral loon.

"Are you surrendering, Sir Jaromir?" she demands.

She knows as well as I do that I can't. The fate of the realm hinges on my passing Aiyana's trial, but this is beyond even Aiyana's twisted sense of humour. She can't seriously expect me to harm them?

"I don't fight children," I retort. "Choose a different champion."

What kind of honourless unseelie does she take me for? In fact, even a few of them would object if presented with this situation.

"Fortunately, then, this isn't a fight." Aiyana claps her hands together. "My trial is thus: your wolf must spend fifteen minutes under the influence of Gryth's magic, after which I will consider the matter closed and your banishment forgiven."

"What magic?" Rose demands.

There's a tremor in her voice, and the wolf bristles beneath my skin at the sound of her fear.

"Nightmares," Aiyana replies, before turning to her audience of gathered fae. "Since it was the wolf of Sir Jaromir's father that caused him to betray

me, it is the wolf I take issue with.”

So she’s devised a plan to take revenge against an animal who has no way of knowing that whatever that kid puts in my head isn’t real. Shit. It’s a clever plan. She knew no champion of hers stood a chance in a physical fight against a member of the Nicnevin’s Guard. I never anticipated that she’d figure out a way around my immortality.

Rose’s expression hides nothing of her fury, but I shake my head at her, silently telling her not to protest. Because no matter how ill-prepared I am for this, I’ll face it. My wolf feels the same.

For her, for Rose, we’ll endure anything.

Buck up, Jare. It’s this or civil war.

“And Amias is here to ensure our audience remains entertained.” Aiyana shrugs. “After all, watching your Guard twitch on the ground with no context at all is no fun. Amias’s projection magic will allow us to watch what Gryth is showing Sir Jaromir.”

“You’re making a spectacle of torture.” Rose’s tone is sharp with reprimand.

“I’m simply doing as the ancient laws allow.”

Aiyana is enjoying this, but I don’t think—in all her thirst for vengeance—that she’s realised the true danger she’s putting herself in. Rose is almost glowing with power as the spring queen threatens me. Her barghest’s fur stands on end in response to his mistress’s emotions.

Right now, I’m pretty certain only Bree’s touch and the dampening effects of Aiyana’s own magic are keeping the minor royal alive.

The sight of my mate like this makes the wolf preen and my cock harden.

Shit. There are children present, Jare. Now is not the time!

At least my armour covers the evidence. I thought my body was broken after Rose’s fever, but barely a few days later, and I’m ready to pounce on her again.

Hopefully when this is over, she’ll let me bury myself in her body as many times as it takes for me to fuck the memory of this twisted court from our systems. I’ll fall asleep with the taste of her on my tongue again, and she’ll snuggle against me until she falls asleep. My perfect mate. All I have to do is survive this.

My eyes meet my fellow Guards’, and we exchange a meaningful look. Bree nods distractedly, and Drystan’s chin tilts up. I take that as a silent promise.

They've got Rose. Even if I'm a vegetable at the end of this, she'll still be protected for the rest of her days. All I have to do is focus on making it through the next few minutes with my sanity intact.

I drop my helm to the sand and prepare to shift.

LORCAN

Rescuing the Fomorian is so dull. Mainly because Bram and Madoc keep making me do things the long way.

Case in point, I'm not allowed to kill anyone.

Who takes a redcap on a rescue mission without giving them something to kill? Stupid fae, that's who.

"Aiyana should've challenged me." I pout as we creep along the deserted palace corridors. "I would've had more fun, and Jaro could've used his wolfie nose to sniff Caed out."

"Trust me," Bram murmurs. "The only thing any shifter can smell down here is the scent of blood."

"I should've brought nose plugs," Prae grumbles, still wearing her fae glamour.

Oooh, on second thought, blood sounds promising.

"When does the stabbing start?"

"When we find Caedmon," Bram grumbles.

"Try it." There's enough threat in Praedra's voice that—if she were Rose—I would've gotten an instant hard on.

I wonder if I can persuade my mate to growl cute little threats at me.

"Patience, brother," Madoc cautions. "From what I heard, there won't be much of him left to stab."

That's unfortunate. I cartwheel down the dingy staircase with a whoop and a grin. We're almost at the door to the lower dungeons now, and the damp air is thick with the smell of mould and piss. The posh stone walls have been replaced with bricks coated in pitch-blackened brick and—ooh, a rat!

Rumour has it that when the river floods, so do Pavellen's dungeons, and the seelie use that as a way to cull the prison population. Ah, the joys of a low-lying city.

Madoc doesn't seem impressed. "Lorcan, slow down. There are guards at the bottom and—"

But I'm already blinking past the soldiers, crashing their heads together with enough force to knock them out. They sprawl in a heap at the entrance to the small antechamber, my loud descent having lured them away from

their card game.

The four others are frozen for a tense second as they wait to see if anyone comes rushing to the aid of their fallen comrades.

They don't. Of course, they don't. Everyone is at the arena, actually enjoying themselves.

"We were supposed to knock them out with one of Kitarni's potions," Madoc grumbles as the two brothers step carefully over the two unlucky sods.

Praedra just stomps over them, leaving a nice set of bootprints across their pale-yellow tabards.

"Potions are boring," I complain, dipping down with my dagger.

"Lore!" Bram hisses. "No killing."

I roll my eyes. "I'm not killing them, but I happen to be an expert at making a point."

I drag the shallowest of cuts along the throats of the two guards, dipping my hat in the blood to smear it slightly. Then, for good measure, I pocket the gold coins on the table, tutting at how truly atrocious their cards were. Stupid seelie, being too honourable to cheat.

Bram cracks open the heavy metal door, then shifts and darts through as a fox.

It takes a minute, maybe more, of me bouncing on my tiptoes for the shifter to return.

He shifts back, just long enough to say, "There are six guards between us and Caed's cell," before returning to his fox form.

Prae palms a dagger.

"Race you," I call, tumbling through the door and into the blandest dungeon I've ever seen. Seriously, even Aiyana's torture devices are boring. Racks? Thumbscrews? Times have changed.

Perhaps it's the lack of traditional cells that make the boringness so obvious. Personally, I'm a fan of a warren-like dungeon, to keep prisoners disoriented. None of this open-plan bullshit. But Aiyana likes to keep her guests in dank little holes in the ground, covered with metal grates. If the sickly wet smell of rot wasn't enough proof, the watermarks on the walls make it clear that the rumours about drownings are true. No one down there will survive a flood.

I yawn as I take out the first unaware guard. Blink. Another one down. Blink. Another one down. Blink. Oooh, two for one.

By the time Bram and Madoc walk through the door, I've arranged the guards in a nice little pile and tied cute little ribbon bows around their chests. The prisoners in the cells are reaching through the grates in the floor, pleading for their freedom.

"Sorry, I'm not taking requests for a mass breakout at this time." I dismiss their calls with a wave. "Maybe next Samhain."

Not that I have any intention of freeing them. For all her faults, Aiyana tends to be fairly unbiased in dispensing judgement... usually. Like that lord she fed to her eels when she was showing off to Rose. He was a sick piece of shit who smuggled dust off-world for a little extra gold to fund his extravagant lifestyle.

"Has anyone seen a blue-skinned asshole with a big mouth?" I ask.

"He's this way," Bram interrupts, grabbing my arm and tugging me away from my audience. "Goddess, you don't understand the meaning of the word subtle, do you? Where's your glamour?"

The two princes are disguised as well, like they think it'll matter. Who else would break Caed out of the dungeon?

I shrug. "Like she won't know I'm involved."

Prae ignores us as she rushes across the room, falling to her knees with a hiss as she reaches what can only be Caed's little shithole.

"You stupid fuck," she whispers, grabbing at the mangled bars and yanking.

"You might want this—" I hold out the key I pilfered from the guards, but she's already fished out a bottle of something green and fizzy from her belt. It sizzles as it makes contact with the lock and then melts the metal.

Ooooh, I want some of that. What does it do if you pour it on flesh? Is it bloody? I wonder where she keeps it. I could ask for some, but stealing's half the fun.

Madoc shoves open the gate, and the four of us look down... and down... and down...

At the bottom, in a stinking puddle of water, sits a huddled blue mess of blood and torn flesh. When he looks up, Prae gasps at the sunken eyelid where his right eye once was, but I'm more interested in the thick twine jaggedly holding his lips shut.

"Wow. I guess they got fed up with your big mouth, too. And are those broken legs? Well, someone is really trying to get their damsel points in." I sigh. It's been too long since I sewed my enemies' mouths shut. Seeing it

makes me nostalgic. “This is impressive for the seelie. Usually, they’re lazier with their torture.”

And he didn’t draw from Rose once... I shrug it off.

“Shut up and help me get him out,” Prae snarls. “We need a rope or something.”

Caed’s little pit of despair is quite a bit deeper than the rest, but I snort at her suggestion.

Blink, and I’m in the puddle of ankle-deep smelly water with him. Another blink—

Ouch.

We rebound off Aiyana’s stupid palace barrier as my magic misfires and tries to drag me back to a different dungeon. Damn. Shaking my head, I blink again and then finally, Caed is shivering at his cousin’s feet, glaring at me.

Ah, I guess he didn’t enjoy the bumpy ride.

“Awww, don’t be like that.” I pout. “And what’s with the hair? Honestly, blue, there’s only room for one dishevelled blond in this harem.”

The words are casual, but a blade is in my hand, ready to add to his wounds.

“Your hair is much paler than his,” Bram reassures me. “And Caed will grow his out.”

Nodding, I touch the twine. I could blink it out, but...

“Argh!” Caed roars as I hook my finger between the lacing and tug hard, ripping the twine free.

He tries to retaliate, but it’s pathetic to watch. His hands are cuffed, and his legs broken, so all he can really do is flop his torso in my direction. Oooh, and with his mouth open, it’s clear they cut out his tongue too.

“You shouldn’t have hurt my pretty pet,” I coo, admiring the shredded remains of his lips with glee.

“Slap some of Kitarni’s healing salve on him before he starts drawing from Rose,” Madoc hisses. “We have to get out of here.”

“He won’t draw from her,” Bram and Prae say at the same time.

“He’s had every opportunity to thus far, and he hasn’t,” the former continues as the Fomorian princess goes back to tending to her cousin.

A twang in my chest distracts me. The Call.

“Rose.” All eyes swivel to face me, but I wave them off. “Let’s get him out of here. I think the wolfie’s fight has begun.”

My poor little pet gets so worried over her unkillable males. It’s sweet,

really.

Without waiting for their permission, I blink Bram, and then Madoc, to the dock where we stashed our little boat. They stumble around in shock for an instant, but I don't have time to watch.

"The salve hasn't kicked in yet," Prae objects when I return for the Fomorians.

She's managed to get rid of the cuffs on Caed's wrists and is rubbing more of Kitarni's lotions and potions into the raw skin there. It seems a little pointless, given that the salves won't heal his broken bones and missing body parts.

"Awww." I pretend to care for half a second before blinking her away to join the others.

"Next time," I say, as I return to Caed's still shivering almost-corpse. "Refrain from following Rose around like a lost puppy, and this won't happen."

Very slowly, and with a grimace of pain, he lifts one bleeding hand and flips me off.

I chuckle. "Oooh, careful, blue. Keep this up, and I might actually start to like you."

I sweep my cap from my head and run it over the fresh blood on his face before he can react, then blink us both to the little boat.

"Where did Prince One and Prince Two go?" I ask, confused, as Prae unmoors us.

"To sail the decoy boat in the opposite direction," she retorts. "Honestly, were you even listening to the plan?"

"Nah," I shove Caed over and lean back in the hull. "Plans are for stuffy seelies. Improvisation is an art form." Lowering my cap over my eyes, I yawn. "Wake me up when we get there."

"Redcap!" Prae snaps. "You're supposed to glamour the boat."

"Oh, yep. Someone mentioned something about that."

Sighing, I push up from my napping spot and pop a glamour over us, all the while wondering why the Call is so antsy in my chest.

"I bet the wolf is showing off," I mutter, pouting as I rub away the fluttering sensation behind my sternum.

TWENTY-SIX

RHOSWYN

Jaro shifts, his body morphing easily into the huge wolf I love so much. He shakes out his sandy fur, stretching, before he levels his golden gaze at the twins. Aiyana's mouth turns down as she beholds him. Without comment, she reaches out and tips over an elegant silver sandglass.

The drumbeat stops.

“Begin!”

I barely have time to brace myself as the twins join hands. Jaro instantly stiffens.

The wolf's eyes roll back in his head. His spine arcs, tail tucking so far between his legs that I can no longer see it.

“Rose, you need to keep calm.” Bree's lips are at my ear, breathing the words so quietly that I barely hear them. “The Call will distract him and give them more ammunition.”

Stay calm. I can do that. I take a deep breath, falling back on the way Kitarni told me to focus on the air entering and leaving my lungs. It gets harder when the images start to appear on the dusty floor of the arena, blurry at first, then sharpening.

I shouldn't be surprised that Jaro's first nightmare is set in the middle of a bloody conflict, given that he's a warrior. The entire arena watches through the eyes of a wolf, low to the ground, as he races through clashing swords and screaming fae. The boy with the magic responsible is apparently able to project sound as well. Cries of pain and roars of anger echo in the amphitheatre.

Even like this, it feels so real.

The battle is fae against Fomorians. Swords flash. Magic blasts rain down. It's a terrifying assault on the senses, and more than a few members of the audience shuffle back, alarmed by the intensity—or perhaps the mere sight of Fomorians.

After all, these fae are relatively sheltered seelie who've likely never seen the wholesale slaughter that Jaro's mind so readily recalls.

His wolf lopes through the fray, dodging weapons as he races up a sandy bluff. He's heading for someone, a fae with blurry features who's battling a

Fomorian easily double his size. The warrior looks like Jaro, but his features aren't fixed.

"Pa!" Jaro shifts and screams.

Of course. Braiden died not long after Jaro was born. He never knew what his pa looked like, so the boy with the magic of nightmares can't use Jaro's memories to create a true likeness.

His voice distracts the warrior for a split second, and that's all it takes. The Fomorian takes the fae's head with a single sweep of his longsword.

Jaro's screams in his dream blend with the whimpers of the wolf on the dirt as his body collapses. On his belly, he paws at his own skull as, in the dream, his child-self watches his father's head topple down the bank towards him.

My heart cracks, sympathy and horror bleeding past any semblance of forced calm I achieved with my breathing exercises.

The dream isn't done. The sand is still falling.

Jaro catches the rolling head of his father, and it morphs, becoming a huge spider that unfurls long hairy legs.

Several fae shriek. The arachnid launches straight for Jaro's face, pincers snapping. Then it bursts, becoming hundreds of smaller spiders.

In that moment, I forget that I'm not in the dream with him, and my hands fly to my arms, trying to swipe away imaginary bugs. Wraith's head moves, drawing me back to the present, and I fist his fur as I turn my attention back to my wolf. Jaro hasn't moved from where he fell in the dirt, but his paws are still swiping at his head, harder now, like he's trying to crush his own skull to escape the horrors unfolding in his own mind.

My legs tense, ready to leap up and go to him, but Bree and Wraith work together to keep me in place as yet more twisted dreams play out. I ignore them, focusing on Jaro, trying my hardest to keep calm so that our bond doesn't add to the torture.

Every now and again, my eyes flicker to the sandglass, pleading with the golden grains to hurry up. About halfway through, the wolf's ears start to bleed, then his nose drips blood. I look up at Drystan, pleading with my eyes for him to do something, but the dullahan's icy expression freezes me out. Even Bree—squeezing my shoulder in equal parts restraint and reassurance—appears perfectly stoic.

The leaves of Kitarni's hair are turning yellow, but that's the only outward indication she feels any emotion at all.

How can they all watch him suffer?

Because they know it's for the greater good, my inner voice whispers.

That's no comfort at all when the shifter I love is crawling on the ground, howling and whimpering.

I have to stop this—

I open my mouth to tell Aiyana that Jaro surrenders—damn her vow and the civil war—only to be brought to a halt by an eerie silence.

The entire arena is holding its breath, and my attention is yanked back to the projection.

My own face stares back at me from the familiar surroundings of my garden room Elfhome City. My violet eyes are lit with tears, and the thick smoke billows around me, blending with the thick iron collar tracing black veins up my throat.

A shadowy figure, who might've been an older version of Caed, yanks cruelly on my chain. His large blue hand holds me out over the drop by my collar as I twist and struggle, exposing six bloody wounds on my wingless back. The arena watches with wide eyes as the gold-crowned Fomorian grins.

And drops me.

Jaro's howl echoes across the dirt, and Bree's hand crushes my shoulder as the wolf claws desperately at its eyes, drawing blood.

But the golden sand is still falling.

Another nightmare plays. This time I'm being held underwater by Fomorians, drowning. Then I'm burned alive. My wings are ripped off over and over as Jaro watches. Sometimes it's Caed who's responsible, other times faceless Fomorians, but the result is the same.

The twins have narrowed in on the most effective way to hurt him. Me.

"This borders on treason," Kitarni hisses across my lap at Aiyana.

The spring queen doesn't tear her gaze away from the whimpering wolf as she casually waves off the accusation. "It is merely an illusion."

"You will drive him feral," Drystan argues, surprising me. "His wolf cannot differentiate between the loss of his mate in dreams and reality."

My heart snags. Then tears.

"Stop this," I whisper.

Jaro's wolf genuinely believes I'm dying. And I can do nothing but watch as slowly the beast gives up, curls into a ball, and just whines. I reach for the bond in my chest, determined to reassure him that I'm still here, but it flinches from my touch.

It's too much. I can't bear it. War or no war, this stops now.

"End this." My voice is deadly. "Now."

Aiyana glances at the sand. "Would you look at that? Time is up." She pops the last word as the final grain of glittering powder falls. "Thank you, boys. Your family will live another day and be compensated as we agreed."

The children blink like they're coming out of a trance, releasing each other. They glance at the wolf, who's panting and bloody on the sand with wide eyes, and swallow before bowing stiffly in the rough direction of the royal box and hurrying away.

Leaving my wolf alone.

This time, no amount of force will keep me in my seat. I stand, pushing Wraith and Bree away and pace towards the edge of the box.

Jaro doesn't move.

It's over. Why isn't he moving?

Please, Jaro, get up. Please get up.

The barghest leaps down from the box, circling the curled-up wolf and growling at any fae who tries to approach.

"Drystan, get him out of there." There's no humanity in my voice.

The Winter Court fae frowns but doesn't argue with me. I can tell he dislikes leaving my safety to Bree alone, but I don't care. Fear has given way to rage, which bubbles in my blood like magma, and I settle the full force of it on the queen.

"Announce the trial complete," I say, my voice deceptively calm.

My guides flicker in the corner of my vision. It's the first time I've ever seen them in Aiyana's presence, and I smile in savage satisfaction.

The spring queen makes a final attempt to save face. "Technically, the trial is only..."

My eyes lock with her honey ones, and her words trail off.

Finally, Aiyana realises she's crossed a line.

"The trial is over." Is that a quiver in her voice? "Goddess..."

I can feel Aiyana's power desperately clawing at my own, trying to smother my magic. She can't. Though the spring queen is a descendant of Mab, and powerful in her own right, the Goddess's strength is infinite.

She was arrogant enough to believe she had a chance.

All she can do as I approach her is fall to her knees and begin furiously uttering the vow of allegiance. Does she honestly think that will save her after everything she's done?

“I swear my fealty to Nicnevin Rhoswyn. Never will my deeds bring harm to her, nor shall I hear of harm to her, unless it is to obstruct it. I accept her as my Nicnevin, on the condition that she rules my subjects with the Goddess’s fairness, and that she will perform all duties as they are written in the Treaty of Marlen. May Danu witness my vow and strike me down if I recant.”

“Too late.” It’s not me speaking now, though I wholeheartedly agree.

No amount of breathing is going to control the Goddess this time, and I don’t want to. Aiyana tortured my mate. Blackmailed *children* to do it.

“Nicnevin.” Kitarni hovers by my side, her normally unflappable voice edged with tension. “Elfhame needs her alive. We don’t have time for the Spring Court to choose a successor, and she has no heir. Think of Florian.”

I want to listen, but my blood is roaring in my ears. Two halves of me are at war with each other, and the side that demands retribution is the only one I care about right now.

“Torturing two of my Guard,” I hiss. “Keeping us waiting when you knew the fate of the realm—of my brother—hinges on the speed of my pilgrimage. Give me one good reason why you deserve to live.”

Aiyana looks up at me, eyes wide and watering. Her normally pretty face is drawn and grey, and this is perhaps the first time I’ve ever seen her look afraid.

“I was entitled to restitution. It’s the law,” she stammers.

“I said a *good* reason.” I take another step. “It’s been centuries. You’ve had more than enough time to move on. This was just an excuse to satisfy your pride.”

“Dear heart,” Titania mutters, appearing beside me and placing her hand on my shoulder. “If the Goddess demands punishment, sometimes it’s best to compromise. Rein her in rather than try to stop her entirely.”

I know I’m drowning in Danu’s emotions when it registers that I can feel Titania’s cold hand as a physical touch. Reign the Goddess in? Why would I want to?

“Being queen isn’t always about getting what you want,” my grandmother counsels, sadly.

She’s right, I know she is.

But Jaro still hasn’t gotten up.

My eyes burn with tears as I take a shuddering breath. “How do I do it?”

“Give and take,” Titania answers cryptically. “It’s all about balance and

connection.”

“I swear, if you let me live, I’ll never waver in my support of the Nicnevin.” Aiyana’s head drops, shoulders quaking in fear. “I’ll do everything in my power to help retake Elfhame.”

An open-ended bargain like that is dangerous for her. She’s afraid of me and desperate. *Good.*

“Rose,” Kitarni tries again, but is interrupted.

“Nicnevin Rhoswyn!”

Neila’s voice—so out of place—halts my hands inches away from Aiyana’s throat. Every face in the arena turns to regard the selkie as she shrugs off her cloak and strides towards the royal box.

She must have been hiding in the crowd. So much for taking the Hellebore Knights to Elfhame. My eyes narrow. Has she been in Pavellen this whole time? I fold my arms over my chest and try to keep them there, mildly concerned that I don’t even remember raising them in the first place.

The selkie’s clothes are rumpled, her wary eyes surrounded by dark rings. Nevertheless, she’s defiant as she hurries up the steps to the box and takes a stand between me and Aiyana.

“Aren’t you supposed to be in Elfhame?” I demand.

She bows her head. “I will join the rest of my knights, who are already fighting alongside your brother as we speak, but I couldn’t leave my lady while she was in danger.” She pauses, expressive eyes pleading for me to understand, but looks away, sighing in resignation when my scowl remains unchanged. “I call upon the debt you owe me. Spare my queen’s life, and I’ll consider it paid in full.”

“You were exiled.” Aiyana’s eyes flash with annoyance.

“I will accept your reprimands later, my lady,” Neila promises without looking back at her still-quivering queen. “Nicnevin, punish her as you see fit, punish *me* for not riding straight to Elfhame, if you must, but spare her life this one time.”

It’s the strangest thing; Danu’s strength soars through me, but instead of shoving the selkie aside and taking the queen’s head, we’re forced to step back. First once, then again.

Kitarni breathes a sigh of relief, and deep in the back of my mind, some rational part of me feels the same way. I don’t want to begin my reign by killing another queen in front of a crowd of her subjects. Not like this. That way lies a cycle of retaliation that we’ll never break free of. Danu, however,

is not so easily appeased, and I'm not certain I would've managed to hold her back by myself. Her ire bristles against me.

"Very well," I whisper.

"Then I hold your debt fulfilled." Neila's shoulders sag.

But it's not over yet. "You understand this cannot go unpunished."

The selkie grimaces. "As you wish, Goddess."

Danu regards the trembling queen through my eyes. The corners of my mouth turn down as I realise that there are a lot of ways to hurt someone without killing them, but if I'm truly honest, I'm not sure I have the stomach for torture.

We need to end this, I think. Jaro will get justice, but not with more violence.

There's a pause. Then Danu takes control of my lips. This time, instead of addressing the fae as she has done in the past, she tugs on my magic and says two words.

"Kaia Alstone."

A ghostly figure of a banshee female staggers to life beside me. She's wearing armour from another time, and her head is shaved bald. A hundred piercings decorate her brows and ears, the glints matching the giant greataxe trailing along the ground behind her. The arena, which was silent before, erupts with whispers as they see my magic in action for the first time.

Well, the secret is out now. No going back.

Aiyana looks like she's been struck, but she can't look away. Tears stream freely from the corners of her eyes, and Neila's answering grimace tells me everything I need to know.

The spring queen chose to torment my Guard emotionally. Now Danu is simply returning the favour.

Kaia offers me a bow.

"Ky—" Aiyana catches herself; the fae dislike for saying the names of the dead catching her tongue. "No. You..."

"What is your will, Nicnevin?" the ghost rasps.

My will? I want to make Aiyana fight this ghost, to force her to battle her fears and trauma in the same way she forced Jaro to battle his. To let her die at the hands of her mate, as she should have so many centuries ago. But that will create a mess we can't afford right now.

Danu's rage softens, just the barest fraction. My logic is finally breaking through to her.

“Compromise,” Titania whispers. “Re-breaking a bone to heal it is more painful than the original wound.”

Danu’s approval radiates through me at the suggestion. “Tell your mate why you tried to kill her.”

The banshee’s expression turns thunderous, but I control her. She has no choice but to comply, and even in death, fae cannot lie.

The banshee turns to face the queen, eyes softening. “When I was young, I gave my name away to the queen of summer in exchange for her permission to create my minor court. Queen Lark never used it against me... until her spies discovered I was your mate.”

Aiyana’s eyes widen, tears falling free. “She made you do it.”

“She was furious that you hadn’t backed her objection to supporting Nicnevin Maeve during the third war. It was her hope that, if I killed you, your replacement would be too busy cementing their reign to support the northern courts when the Fomorians returned. If I failed, it didn’t matter, as I was bound by her orders never to divulge anything.”

And such a command could only be broken by death.

“The Fomorians never returned,” Neila murmurs hesitantly. “Until recently, when Aiyana refused to send aid to Elfhame.”

Kaia’s shoulders slump. “Then Queen Lark was successful, in her own way. I am sorry, Nicnevin. My mate’s actions shame her court.”

The banshee may as well have slapped the spring queen in the face, and Danu’s satisfaction washes over me. Perhaps to some, it might seem that Aiyana has tortured two of our mates and been rewarded with a final visit from her lost love. They’d be wrong.

Aiyana ordered the execution of the only mate Danu will ever give her. She’ll have to carry the guilt of that for the rest of her days and live with the knowledge that she will never have a chance at that perfect bond again.

It’s a battle to release my power and allow Kaia’s image to fade, channelling the excess to my Guard. Following the steps Titania taught me was easy before, but with Danu still actively invested in the outcome of this encounter, it feels almost impossible.

“No, I—” Aiyana cuts off as the vision of her lost mate wavers and then fades. “I... didn’t have a chance to say goodbye. To seek forgiveness...”

“You ordered her death. You have to live with that.” I turn away. “Ambassador Neila, don’t you have a city to retake in my name?”

The selkie’s reply is stiff but swift. “As you wish, my Nicnevin.” A

pause. “With Queen Aiyana’s permission, I’ll take the Hellebore Knights who weren’t exiled with me. And together we’ll await the full force of the Spring Court for the counteroffensive.”

“Good. Now get out of my sight before the Goddess changes her mind.” At the mention of her title, Danu prods at my consciousness one last time. “Oh, ambassador?”

Neila stiffens. “Yes, Nicnevin?”

“We admire your loyalty, but perhaps it would be better directed toward your own mate in Illidwen?”

Aiyana flinches like she’s been struck, and Neila offers a stunned little bow. What happens next is up to them, but Danu and I are in agreement. The selkie is far too good for the petty queen.

TWENTY-SEVEN

RHOSWYN

I keep Bree's hand trapped in a death grip as we journey back to Madoc's home, but he doesn't object. Power is still thrumming in my veins, and the second we're away from prying eyes, I begin to pace along the far wall of Madoc's parlour.

All I can think about is how badly I want to go back there and deal with Aiyana properly.

I can't. We need her alive. We can't afford to wait for the fae to find a successor. Besides, Neila asked me to spare her.

For now.

Some dark part of my brain rumbles that the war will eventually be over. When that time comes...

"Say something," I mumble. "Distract me."

Bree's ears twitch and he takes a seat on the emerald sofa. "You did a good thing—"

"Nothing to do with that!" I cut him off.

I'm too on edge to hear about how leaving Aiyana alive was the right thing to do.

His jaw works, and he glances back at Kitarni uncertainly. The high priestess is talking quietly with one of the servants, having shadowed us back.

"Where's Jaro?" I ask. "Is he...?"

"Nicnevin, it may be best to give him some time to shift back. Drystan and Wraith are struggling to control his wolf."

What? "Do they need help? Can I... can I do anything?"

Will he even want to see me? He was just put through all of that, and I... I did nothing. I'm not even sure what I'd say. Rawness prickles at the edges of my chest, and perhaps Kitarni senses how overwhelmed I am because she crosses the space to pull me into a hug.

"It might not be wise for you to show up after his wolf has just seen your death so many times," Kitarni advises, and I slump slightly at her logic. "We can't predict how he'll react."

"He wouldn't hurt me." I'm sure of it.

The long pause reeks of her doubts, and I try not to overthink it. She's just being cautious.

"Follow me then," she says. "We'll go past my quarters. I have a sleeping potion there that should knock him out if he needs it."

Bree starts to follow, but the high priestess stops him with a wave of her hand. "Rose will be safe in my company, and someone needs to remain here, in case Bram and Madoc return."

The púca looks unhappy with her order but nods his assent regardless. True to her word, after a brief stop in her room—which looks more like an alchemist's laboratory than a place to sleep—we head outside.

"Why is he in the stable?" I ask as Kitarni leads me across the courtyard.

"He's yet to shift back," Kitarni murmurs, keeping her voice low. "Drystan and Wraith have managed to keep him contained, but..."

"But?"

My question is drowned out by a growl-bark that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

Who made that noise? Wraith or Jaro?

Kitarni hesitates at the wide, imposing door to the stables, so I brush past her, blinking as my eyes try to adjust to the gloomy interior.

"Rhoswyn," Drystan snaps. "Go back inside."

His voice draws my attention to a stall on my right, where he's leaning against a hay bale and... bleeding?

"I want to help," I press. "I can heal—"

"You cannot just heal a feral shifter. Get back inside before you get hurt."

"I—"

But whatever I might've said to change his mind evaporates as a huge sand-coloured ball of fur and teeth careens around the corner and charges us.

"Move!" Drystan roars.

I'm frozen, and I stay that way—caught between disbelief that this is Jaro and the heart-pounding terror that is a predator bearing down upon me—until a white blur slams into Jaro from the side, tackling him away.

They roll, crashing into a thick wooden stall door, which gives way with a smash, followed by more snarling that rings in my ears. It's only when a hunk of flesh and white fur sails past me and splats against the floor that I realise someone has to stop this. By then, it's too late. Drystan has a hand on my arm and is doing his best to drag me away.

"Let me go." My own vehemence surprises both of us enough that I

manage to twist myself free. “Wraith, come.”

It takes a second, but the barghest does as I ask, scrambling away from the panting, heaving wolf and back to me with a notable limp.

“Nicnevin,” Drystan growls.

“Let me.” I whisper. “He can’t hurt me.”

“He’s not *himself*.”

As if to prove Drystan’s point, the sandy wolf begins pacing against the wall, staring at the three of us.

“Jaro,” I whisper. “Shift back.”

“He won’t until his wolf lets him.” Drystan sounds like he’s trying not to lose his patience with a child. “And his wolf won’t do that because it thinks its mate is dead. Shifters don’t come back from this, Rhoswyn. They stay shifted and feral until someone puts them down.”

“I’m not dead,” I promise Jaro’s wolf, holding both hands out like he’ll read the truth of my words in my non-confrontational posture.

The wolf looks at me through golden irises ringed in white, his hackles raised, and his ears drawn back. He’s not seeing me. If I had to guess, he’s still trapped in the nightmares Aiyana forced those children to show him. The Jaro I know is buried deep beneath a whole load of primal instinct.

“Hey.” I gentle my voice, crouching to make myself less of a threat—though it seems unnecessary given the sheer size difference between me and his wolf. “Smell me. You know I’m real. I’m here. You’re safe.” A tear prickles at the corner of my eye.

Nothing changes. The wolf isn’t even blinking as it tracks my slow advance. His ears flatten.

Does he even know I’m real?

“Back up slowly,” Drystan orders quietly. “Madoc will contain him. We can search for a cure after the war is over.” His tone makes it clear he doesn’t believe we’ll find one.

“*Please*, Jaro,” I whisper. “Shift back.”

I’d be lying if I said I didn’t know what I was doing. I’d also be lying if I said I felt guilty.

But it works.

My mates may be able to shrug off the effects of my charm if they’re prepared, but an animal has no such defence. I’m too exhausted and scared to reach for Danu again, but I still put every ounce of my magic into my voice, willing it to work.

Bones crack and limbs extend. A second later, Jaro is crouched on the floor, naked, bloodied, and shivering.

Chestnut eyes meet mine, flashing gold once before his body jerks and convulses.

“Out of the way.” Kitarni rushes past me as she rummages in her bag.

Her fingers trace Jaro’s pulse, her legs cushioning his head as his body trembles and shakes. She withdraws a small phial from her bag and tips the contents between his lips before forcing his jaw closed and pinching his nose to make him swallow it. A tense second passes as we all wait to see if her potion has done anything, then another. Jaro goes limp.

“He’s out,” she confirms, slouching. “It should give his healing time to fix whatever just happened and let his body recover. He won’t dream.”

Because dreams are what got him into this mess in the first place.

“I shouldn’t have charmed—” I begin, but Drystan silences me with a look.

“Actually, that’s the first good decision you’ve made since you decided to walk into a stable with a feral shifter—which I ought to spank your ass red for doing. His wolf wasn’t letting him return. It was the only logical choice, and one that spared the rest of us more injuries.” He pauses. “You may have just saved his life.”

I... Am I going insane? Did Drystan just... praise me?

Do not glow. Damn it, I’m glowing, aren’t I?

I crouch beside Jaro’s sleeping form and brush a lock of his hair back. “Will he be back to normal when he wakes up?”

“No feral has ever shifted back before,” Drystan says. “No one can guess how he’ll be.”

“He’s a Guard,” Kitarni reminds me gently. “He’s immortal. He may carry some scars, but we must trust the Goddess will protect her own.”

“I’ll get him inside,” Drystan grunts, hefting Jaro across his shoulders.

If they were both human, the hold would’ve been impossible. Jaro is much larger, and even someone with Drystan’s physique would’ve struggled. Fortunately, fae strength makes the size difference a non-issue.

Kitarni draws me into a one-armed hug as he carries Jaro out, Wraith limping behind them with a last look at me. The scent of the blossom in the dryad’s hair fills my nose as she draws back and pats my shoulder.

“You should go back inside, too. Drystan is more than capable of tending to Wraith and Jaromir.”

Without a logical reason to refuse, I let her bring me back to where Bree is still waiting in the parlour.

“Any news?” I ask as soon as I see him.

He nods. “A message came from Madoc. They were successful, though Caed is severely injured.”

“He will heal.” Kitarni brushes the issue off. “Their success is all that matters. For now, we should focus on our next steps.”

“Our next steps?” Bree asks, cat ears shifting on top of his head. “I thought we were leaving.”

Kitarni nods. “I know our plan was to leave immediately, but I think it’s prudent to stay one more night and assess Jaro’s condition when he wakes.”

“Whatever Jaro needs,” I whisper. “I can’t believe...” I run both hands through my hair, mussing the braids as helplessness settles heavily on my shoulders. “We can leave in the morning.”

“I’ll find you when I know how he is,” Kitarni promises. “For now...”

Her pause is heavy, and I groan. “For the love of—Please don’t tell me to rest. I’ve had enough.” I pace away from them both. “I’ll find something to do. Just... go and help Jaro.”

Kitarni does one of those hasty little half-bows and hurries from the room.

TWENTY-EIGHT

RHOSWYN

The second the door has closed behind her, I turn on Bree.
“I want to see Caed.”

The púca blinks, ears twitching, but otherwise appears unsurprised.
“You mean to heal him.”

“I know he was tortured.” They’ve tiptoed around the subject, but it’s obvious that’s what happened. “I can heal him. I want to. I just need to get to him.”

The word ‘please’ lingers on the back of my tongue, but I hold it back. I swore I’d never charm Bree again, and I mean to keep that promise.

He huffs and wraps his arms around his stomach, his hands running over his tattoos for the hundredth time.

“I suppose I do owe him for my part in his capture.” He sighs, eyes going heavenward as he thinks my request through. “They were taking him to Madoc’s daughter’s home. It’s not far, but we should fly to avoid drawing attention.”

“I can hover.” I bite my lip. “But only for a few seconds.”

Slowly, he unfolds his arms and crosses to the large window, unlatching it before turning to offer me an ink-covered hand. “I’ll always carry you, dragonfly.”

I barely manage to hold back the ‘are you sure?’ that threatens to break free. He said he wanted to get used to touching me, which means I have to trust his confidence that he can do this.

Still, I keep my movements slow and predictable as I take his hand and let him pull me against his chest. His *naked* chest, because he only ever wears that sleeveless and shredded coat, which now that I’m this close to him, I notice doesn’t even have buttons to fasten it. My eyes trace the lines of his abs, and I force myself to look away.

The last time I accidentally got turned on by Bree, he ran from me.

This must be the most of his skin I’ve ever touched at one time, and I have to swallow back the urge to press my face against him and revel in the buzz of contact with my mate. One of his arms traps me against him by the small of my back while the other reaches up to his shoulder to caress the

valravn tattoo there.

His black wings explode out of his shoulders in a cloud of ink, and I gasp as they beat powerfully, lifting the two of us into the air with enviable ease.

My attention should be on making sure he was comfortable, but instead I find myself fascinated by the way the houses are getting smaller and smaller beneath us.

“This is amazing,” I whisper, staring around the sky with wide eyes. “You can see so much from up here.”

It’s surprisingly cold. Without thinking, I burrow closer to the warmth of Bree’s chest, only to freeze as his wing beats stutter.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he grates out, after a long second. “I should’ve realised it was too high for you.”

“It’s amazing,” I correct. “I can’t wait until I can do this. Though... I’ll need to remember a coat next time.”

“Your wings will never take you this high,” he corrects absently. “Different wing structures have different limits.”

“Oh.”

He chuckles under his breath. “Don’t sound so disappointed. I’ll fly you whenever you wish, and your wings will make up for the altitude limit by giving you much greater manoeuvrability.”

“I had no idea,” I murmur. “But I suppose it makes sense.”

I can’t help a secret smile as I imagine what it will be like when I’m finally confident in the air. Will Bree play with me in the sky? Chase me?

My mind almost falls into thoughts of how that scenario might lead to us both sweaty and naked, but I shut it down. I may want him terribly, but not until he’s ready.

“We’re almost there.”

I nod against his chest, breathing in his muted honey scent. “Will we fly back?” *Please say yes.*

Being tormented by his closeness is worth it for this amazing feeling. I can’t wait to do this whenever I want. I chuckle under my breath as I imagine Drystan standing below me with his arms crossed, demanding I come down from the sky in his grumpy voice. Maybe I’ll even oblige him every now and again.

“Yes. Keep your knees loose. We’re landing.”

It’s rougher than I expected. I let out a small *oof* as we drop onto a stone

balcony in the market district just in time to hear Lore cackle, followed by a distinctively male snarl.

“I’ll go first,” Bree mutters, pushing through the stained-glass doors.

I let him, partly because I think he needs a second to decompress after the prolonged contact, even if it was only for a few minutes. Then Caed lets out a hiss of pain.

That’s it. I’ve had enough of hearing my mates suffer today. Without waiting, I let the Call lead me through a small but warmly furnished parlour and into the hall.

Bram and Madoc are hovering by the open door to a tiled bathroom, but both of them bow as I approach. Neither of them seems to know what to do with themselves, and I can’t blame them.

They’ve just broken my Guard out of prison. Only he’s not really my Guard, he’s just a Fomorian with an execution date. I can’t imagine either of them is feeling particularly charitable towards him, and Madoc would most likely rather be home with his mate and daughter.

“Go home,” I tell Madoc quietly. “It’s almost Khloe’s bedtime, and she’ll be missing you.”

He bows, but I interrupt him midway, pulling him in for a hug before retreating back to the doorway.

“So, shall we not mention you were here?” Bram asks, raising an eyebrow. “Because I doubt Drystan will be impressed.”

I shake my head. “I’ll tell him.” I don’t plan on keeping secrets from any of them. “But he has bigger problems right now.”

“The trial?” Bram realises. “You’re still here. Did it...?”

“Aiyana decided torturing Jaro’s wolf was better than a fair fight,” I grate. “But that’s being seen to. How is... How is Caed?”

Is it cowardly to hide on this side of the wall? Now that I’m here, I don’t know what to say.

“Pet, you missed all the fun.” Lore blinks in front of me, sparing Bram from having to answer me. “The seelie have seriously improved their torture games since I last—”

“They *what*?” I demand, a hint of Danu’s fury returning as I shove past the grinning redcap. He knew exactly what his words would do.

I stop dead in my tracks, blood rushing to my cheeks as I realise Caed’s naked in a bath full of murky water. He’s currently shoving Prae away as she attempts to wipe a mix of filth and blood from his skin with a cloth.

The second I step inside, both Fomorians cease arguing and turn to face me. That's when I see what they've done to his face.

What happened to his eye? His lips? A bolt of the Goddess's displeasure rushes through me, and I grimace.

Prae stands, dropping the cloth, which splashes loudly in the water. "I'll... go."

"Stay." My arm blocks her exit. "This... I'm not... This can't change anything... I just wanted to offer—" I look away, frustrated with my ability to form a single sentence. "I can heal you." I meet Caed's one good eye. "If you want me to."

Every muscle in his body is taut, and he exchanges a look with his cousin. They tilt heads, twitch brows, and share a last long look before he looks back at me, and his shoulders slump. He leans back in the water with a resigned sigh of surrender. I take a hesitant step forward.

"Titania," I whisper.

The ghost of my great grandmother floats into the room and circles the tub twice, tutting under her tongue. "This will hurt." A pause. "I still think he deserves worse for what you went through in those tunnels."

"She says this will hurt," I warn, stepping closer still, until I'm just in arm's reach and holding out my hand in offering.

He rolls his one good eye. Typical Caed. Is he not speaking to me now?

"Bree brought me here." I keep talking as Titania draws closer. "I think he feels bad for what happened."

Caed scoffs, ignoring my offered hand, and I take another step forward reflexively.

Titania's hand slips onto my shoulder as I try to pick a place on his body that doesn't look like it hurts. I settle for his upper arm, which is bruised a deep teal but otherwise unharmed, but as I reach out, I hesitate.

"They took your armbands?"

The skin is still paler where they once were, but the iron is gone.

"And your hair. I'm sorry. I know you said it was important to you."

Caed's eye flicks open, and he pins Prae with a glare.

She smirks and answers me, despite his warning look. "We lost them when we officially became fugitives. And Caed cut off his own hair. He was being a drama king."

Rather than find words for how confused that statement makes me, or focus on the tiny twinge in my chest that might be a niggle of hope, I draw on

my connection to Danu. Focusing on funnelling the goddess's power to the place where Titania grips my shoulder and then down into where my hand rests on Caed's arm is easier than trying to piece together my feelings right now.

It isn't long before he jackknives up in the water, sloshing it everywhere as he jerks away from me with a hiss.

Titania just tuts. "Did you think regrowing a tongue, an eye, and all of your nails in one go would be easy? Stay still."

Thanks to her connection to me, Caed hears her this time. His glare is flint-hard, but he takes my outstretched hand, his grip punishing as her power works through me to heal him.

Watching his eye socket swell makes me a little nauseous, so I try to focus on something else. Only my eyes inevitably land on the blue abs peeking out of the water. Yanking my eyes away from the waterline is more difficult than it should be, and my mind drifts back to that night in Fellgotha.

The night before he broke my trust. I turn away.

"Fuck," Caed growls, then freezes.

"Of course," Titania tuts, derision dripping from her tone. "That's the first word you come up with for your new tongue."

His lips press together in a mulish line, and he offers her a glare that causes my own brow to crease.

"She's healing you. Don't be rude."

"You're healing him," Titania corrects. "I'm not alive, dear heart. I cannot act alone." She steps back, releasing my shoulder. "He's fine. The rest will heal on its own with sleep. Now, release and ground the power."

Biting my lip, I do as she says, and Caed's brows shoot up at the sudden rush of magic. "You've gotten better at that."

"It's easier to learn when I'm not shackled in iron."

Our eyes clash again, his nostrils flaring before he drops the contact. "Why did you come?"

My thoughts flash back to Jaro—to the horror of wolf teeth flashing in my face—and I flinch. Why *did* I come?

Because I failed one Guard? Because I felt guilty for my fever being indirectly responsible for his landing in the dungeon in the first place? Because I was worried about him?

"Why did you walk away when you saw me ride into the city?" I counter.

Prae coughs and sidles past me, followed quickly by Titania. We're

alone, but I barely notice.

His eyes flash, but it's hidden a second later. "I was hoping to get some last-minute shopping done before I barged into a heavily guarded temple and demanded you fuck me."

His lie coats the back of my tongue with an astringent bitterness that I have to swallow to clear.

"I don't know why I came." I turn. "But I meant it. I'm not staying. Have a nice life—"

"Wait."

I hesitate, glancing back before I can stop myself. He's half out of the water, clinging to the side of the bath with both hands. The tattoo that covers his left arm looks bolder now, but perhaps that's because the iron bands are no longer there to disguise it. I frown as I notice the third frame already contains a faint smudge of ink, but I can't determine the shape past all the bruising.

"You sent the redcap to rescue me," Caed says, shifting so I can no longer see the mark.

I swallow. "We couldn't have you draining me and... Danu dislikes having my Guard imprisoned."

"Just Danu?" He raises one brow, a trademark cocky smirk reappearing.

"I—I'm not answering that."

A long pause. "Prae was right. We've decided—I've decided—to switch sides. If you'll have us."

A tiny fissure opens up in my chest, and my hand reaches up to staunch the ache before I can stop it. "Caed..."

"I'm good with weapons. I know I can prove myself."

"Caed, I—"

"They'll listen to you if you just tell them to let me accompany you. I can glamour myself. No one else will know who I am—as long as the púca can refrain from trying to crush me to death again. You need the help. I heard things in that dungeon—it's not just my father you have to worry about."

I open my mouth, then close it again, and he takes that as a sign to continue pushing. "I fucked up in Fellgotha. I tried to make it right in the tunnels, though. I'm on your side now. I can prove it if you just—"

"No." I stop him with a single word, taking a step back. "No. I can't trust you."

His face falls for a second, then hardens. "You can. You know I'm not

lying.”

He’s not, but it doesn’t make a difference.

“Every time you did something nice for me in that place, you followed up by threatening me or worse.” I grip the doorframe for support. “How am I supposed to ever trust you again after that?”

“I brought your brother back to you.”

“Because Danu’s curse made you.” Does he think me stupid? “What happens if you can’t make Drystan trust you by her deadline, and you decide going out in a blaze of glory is your best option? You’ll trick me again and drag me back to your father in the hopes they’ll place your statue next to Balor’s. I’m not falling for it.”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

I give him a look. “Caed, most of your identity is tangled up in trying to make Elatha love you. You think I didn’t see how you were practically begging for some kind of praise when you handed me over? Or how you happily accepted two hundred lashes simply because he ordered them?”

“That’s not true.”

Bitterness floods my mouth, but I didn’t need it to confirm the lie. My face must give away something, because he slumps back in the water.

“I won’t hand you back to my father.”

Not a lie. “I believe you mean that now.” I take a step back towards the door. “But it won’t last. Elatha will offer you something you can’t resist, and you’ll change your mind. I can’t—I won’t have my trust broken again.”

Because next time, it won’t just be my trust. My Guards are far too good at worming their way into my heart.

Without giving him a chance to protest or break my resolve any further, I dash from the room, my wings fluttering anxiously.

“Take me home,” I whisper to Lore and Bree, who are doing an awful job of pretending they weren’t listening the entire time.

“Rose,” Prae begins. “He’s—”

“I can’t... I can’t do this right now,” I tell her honestly. “I’ve had a difficult day. Besides, it’s not up to me, is it? It’s my Guard he has to convince to remove the curse. I don’t get a say.”

“You’re the only one who matters,” she argues. “We’re going to follow you across the courts if we have to. Why not just let us travel with you? It will stop the others from being paranoid if they can keep an eye on him.”

I shake my head silently, because we both know how much strife having

Caed with us will bring. We have enough on our plates with the minor royals without fighting amongst ourselves as well.

“Take me home, Lore.”

TWENTY-NINE

CAED

“I can’t believe we’re doing this,” I growl, tightening the strap holding my sleeping roll to the back of my horse. “She as good as told me to fuck off and die.”

The rainy courtyard is grey and miserable, doing nothing to help my mood or the lingering aches in my body. Rose may have sped up my healing considerably, and sleep has erased the last of the bruises, but the twinges remain, and my pride is bruised.

Stupid púca. I would’ve slept blissfully through having my balls explode in a comfy bed if not for him. Now there’s a curfew and soldiers sweeping the city for us. Ideally, I would’ve liked to wait another day before departing, but now we have to leave before they close the gates.

Rose will travel faster than us by ship as it is.

“That is *not* what she said,” Prae corrects. “And I’m beginning to think you missed the entire tone of that conversation. I heard every word through the door. She wasn’t mad at you, cousin. She was heartbroken that she couldn’t trust you.”

“How am I supposed to prove she can when she won’t believe me, even when I tell her the truth?” The mare snickers nervously, and I put a hand on her neck to steady her. “Now what? We’re supposed to race across the continent on the off chance she changes her mind?”

“Would you prefer to stay here and prove yourself by becoming a fairy hermit?” My cousin’s dry sarcasm is cutting, and I sigh.

“No. It just... She wouldn’t even listen, Prae. How am I supposed to do this if I can’t even get Rose to consider travelling with us?”

She pulls herself up into the saddle. “She listened, dumbass. Did you not hear her?”

“I heard her tell me to leave her and her Guard alone.”

I check the bag of coins strapped to the saddle for the hundredth time, glad that Prae did a good enough job of saving at least some of my hard-earned winnings. The rest she spent on new wardrobes for both of us. We’ve traded our Elfhome livery for leather armour in the hopes that we can pass for high fae mercenaries. She even got me a crossbow and herself a set of

enchanted throwing knives.

And yet, the glimmer of the knight commander's sword still peeks out from the centre of her bedroll.

"If Rose truly doesn't care about you, why did she sneak away to heal you?"

"Because she's got a bleeding heart." I sigh and tug my horse back towards the stable. "We can stay here. I'll keep fighting so you have enough money to get by with when Danu's curse takes me..."

I trail off, freezing in place as a familiar voice drifts through the door of the stable we just left.

"I need a good horse and your best charms for speed and endurance."

"How far do you need to go?" the gruff horsemaster replies.

"Siabetha. Quickly."

I hold my breath, praying that this isn't who I think it is, but the priest who exits the stables five minutes later, leading a grey gelding, is unmistakable.

It's him. The priest who watched as I was tortured. He doesn't recognise us—our glamours are different now—and he's distracted enough that I don't think he even notices we're here.

My hands clench on the reins, and if I had access to my powers, I'd strike his head from his shoulders.

"Grand Cleric," a smaller fae beside him pipes up. "I beg you to reconsider. Your presence is needed in the capital more than ever now that the spring queen's leadership is under scrutiny. The people need you. The calming words of Danu—"

"Will mean nothing if we don't stop the Fomorians' plans to poison the holy office of Nicnevin," Mervyn argues, swinging up onto his horse.

"We sent a hawk to Siabetha—"

"This is far too important to entrust to a bird. The other grand clerics will not act against that phoney high priestess without good reason. King Eero must keep the Nicnevin distracted until we can find a way to force her to hand her crown down to her daughter. Necromancy, Poldrick! Danu would never give such a dark gift to her chosen Nicnevin. This is Fomorian dark magic at work. Corruption of our most sacred office! I will not rest until we have a true Nicnevin with a respectable high fae court."

With that declaration, he spurs the gelding through the gates of the courtyard, leaving the younger priest behind to gape at him in astonishment.

“He means to kill her,” Prae murmurs, and something in my chest seethes at the statement. “What did he mean about Fomorian corruption?”

I scoff. “Fucker thinks we interfered with Rose’s birth or something. Poisoned her magic and made her Guard and high priestess turn out wrong.” I flex my hand at the memory of him demanding my nails pulled. “It’s all some bullshit theory he’s come up with to justify his hatred of being subservient to the dryad. He kept trying to force me to confess to poisoning the sacred well of the goddess or some shit.”

“What do you want to do?” Prae asks, eyeing the gate warily. “He’ll be riding hard to Siabetha. We won’t beat him there. We don’t have enough coin for those kinds of enchantments.”

“We follow anyway,” I retort automatically, before her answering grin makes me realise what I’ve done. “Only because I owe him the loss of ten fingernails.”

“Of course.” Prae tries for a disinterested shrug, as if this wasn’t what she wanted all along. I bet she’d be singing ‘I told you so’ at the top of her lungs if not for the young priest still standing on the other side of the yard.

“And when we get there?”

I sigh, swinging into the saddle and checking my weapons automatically. “I don’t have a plan, Prae. She doesn’t want me. They don’t want me near her. But if she needs me...”

I owe it to her to be there. I can’t say it, but Prae must read it in my face because she taps her mare with her heels and leads the way out of the city, following that self-righteous cleric into the wilds.

THIRTY

RHOSWYN

Pavellen may be beautiful, but I couldn't be more ready to leave it behind as I examine the boat waiting for us in the city's large harbour. It's a beautiful river barge, though I'm told we'll only be on it for the better part of the day, thanks to the speed of the current.

It seems counterintuitive to travel by water, but as the river Ellen is unconnected to any of the northern rivers, Kitarni reassures me that it's quite safe. While there is always a chance that Fomorian raiders will attempt an ambush, there are glamour charms across the hull aimed at making the boat invisible to anyone who isn't fae, and even if there weren't, my Guard is more than capable of taking them out.

Still, it's not the ship that holds my attention.

"Where are they?" I ask, bouncing on the balls of my feet nervously.

"They'll be here," Drystan replies, though he's more concerned with watching the fae escorting Blizzard onto the barge. "Wave at the crowd or something, and try not to extend any more debts to random fae."

I roll my eyes at him, but truthfully, the crowd is too far away to wave at, even if I wanted to. Soldiers from the Spring Court have formed a barrier farther down the dock, and the gathered fae are keeping a respectful distance.

"They've lined the entire river," Bram says from behind me. "Your actions in the arena have granted you even more fame than if you'd killed Aiyana outright."

That finally gets Drystan's attention away from the stallion. "The people don't care that she's a necromancer?"

Bree shrugs. "They care more that she's merciful. The common folk knew Danu was likely to send a Nicnevin with a strong unseelie gift to meet the threat of another war with the Fomorians. The Third Nicnevin had the innate gift of sword wielding, remember? She once slaughtered eighty males in under ten seconds. And before that, the First Nicnevin wielded lightning."

"So far their love for Danu outweighs their fear," Drystan surmises. "It might not always be that way. She should work on ensuring she continues to have their adoration when the threat of Elatha's armies is eliminated."

"She will. The temple's support will never waver, and the people listen to

the temple's edicts above all others," Kitarni says, coming up behind me and wiping a stray blossom from my shoulder. "Are we ready to depart?"

"Still waiting for the others," Drystan grunts. "I think Bram is struggling to say goodbye to Madoc's library."

Bram may be, but I know the comment is a cover up. I haven't seen Jaro since last night, and his absence is palpable. I can feel him alive on the other end of the bond, and that's the only thing keeping me sane.

A bunch of roses interspersed with daggers is thrust into my face in the next second, and I blink in confusion.

"Look! I got you flowers." Just as suddenly, they're snatched away again. "Hands off, dullahan. This is Rose's courting gift. Get your own."

Lore holds the bouquet as far back as he can physically manage, but it doesn't stop Drystan from trying to seize it.

"Goddess dammit, redcap, give me that before you poke her eye out."

Lore blinks until he's crouched on Drystan's shoulders, flowers gone as he grins. "I'm only interested in poking Rose with one thing, and it's not a dagger."

"Don't be so crass," Jaro growls.

I whirl, their byplay forgotten as I search desperately for him.

The second I do, I break into a run. He lets out an 'oomf' as I slam into him, my arms wrapping around his waist so tightly that I may as well be trying to merge myself into his body.

"You're okay," I murmur. "I'm so—"

"Don't even think of apologising," he says, before I can finish. "This was not your fault, and you couldn't have predicted what would happen. As for charming me, do I look angry with you?"

"And your wolf?" I check, pulling back, to see his eyes already golden with the presence of his animal. "Has he recovered?"

"Kitarni's potions are great." Jaro releases me, taking a step back, and I link our hands happily. "Now, we have a boat to catch if we're to meet the ship in the bay by sundown."

Behind him, Bree shifts his weight from one foot to another, pinning the shifter with a glare. He opens his mouth to say something, but before he can, a blare of horns cuts through the noise of the crowd.

On the far end of the dock, the crowd parts, revealing a familiar figure on a throne, borne aloft by four oiled and muscled ogres.

"Queen Aiyana of the Spring Court," a male announces.

As if it could be anyone else.

“Is she really so eager to die?” I whisper before I can stop myself.

Jaro’s hold on my hand switches from supportive to gently restraining.

“Rosie, she doesn’t—”

“I’m behaving,” I murmur. “And so is Danu... for now.”

There are no rumblings of the Goddess beneath my skin. Nothing to suggest we might harm Aiyana.

“I don’t like her. That doesn’t mean I’m going to kill her,” I continue when he fails to release me.

Yet.

One of her attendants crouches beneath the throne and allows her to step on him to aid her descent onto the docks, and my dislike ratchets up another level.

It takes me a second to realise I can still see Mab, and that’s what holds my tongue. Aiyana isn’t using her power to try to block me. Is that a peace offering, or just because she’s realised the futility of it?

“Nicnevin.” She bows her head when she reaches me, and the subservient gesture doesn’t suit her. “I came to bid you safe travels on the remainder of your pilgrimage.”

I doubt she means that. She’s simply trying to save face. I can see the fae beyond the soldiers watching expectantly, eager for the drama that began in the arena to continue. If Aiyana manages some kind of cordial send off, perhaps it will do something to regain the respect of her people.

She’s recovered from yesterday’s events well. Her gown and makeup are perfect once more, and there isn’t a trace of the shaking, scared female who asked me to spare her life.

My stone-faced silence must be getting to her, because the spring queen clears her throat, beckoning forwards one of her other attendants.

“These are gifts. Charms, potions, and other things that might help on your travels. I hope they serve you well.” She pauses again, then sighs. “I was wrong, and I took things too far. I was hurting.”

“That’s no excuse.”

“All I can say is that I was young and in *love*. He *knew* he was the first person I’d let in since my mate tried to kill me, and when I confessed and begged him not to leave me for a female he’d just met, he didn’t care.” She swallows, brushing her fingers through her braids. “It was a rejection that stung more because I chose him for myself. As I chose Neila.”

I pin her with a look. “If you—”

“I have no desire to repeat my mistakes.” She clicks her fingers, and her attendants back off, leaving the two of us relatively alone. “I will respect whatever she decides. In the spirit of repentance, I offer you this knowledge: Mervyn was seen leaving the city before dawn this morning, headed for Siabetha.”

“Why should the whereabouts of one priest matter to me?” I ask, confused.

“Because I’ve long suspected he’s a spy from the Summer Court. If I’m right, then you should be aware that he knows about your fifth Guard.”

“Which means Eero will too,” I finish for her.

Her head dips in a regal nod. “The Summer Court has eyes and ears everywhere, and even your lady mother only managed to stay ahead of their schemes thanks to her foresight. Without that advantage, it’s best if you enter and leave as swiftly as you can. Trust no one, Nicnevin.”

“Are you suggesting I trust you instead?” Goddess only knows how I manage to hold back the snort that threatens to break free at the idea.

Aiyana looks past me, to the opposite bank of the river where yet more fae are gathered. “I spoke the vow, did I not?”

“You did.”

She spoke more than one in her desperation to live. Bargains hang heavy between us now.

Aiyana laughs. “Treat everyone you meet in the other courts with the same scepticism, and you might just live long enough to face the Fomorians.”

“When I do, I expect your soldiers to be there.” I turn, heading for the gangplank. “With you at their helm.”

She may not be a warrior, but something tells me you don’t survive hundreds of years as a minor queen without learning to fight.

I’m proved right when she nods. “As you wish, Nicnevin.”

The barge sways beneath my feet, and I cling to Jaro’s arm for support as he leads me up onto the deck. The silver oars are enchanted, and as soon as we’re all safely on deck, they push us out into the centre of the river.

“Rosie, look.” Jaro points into the water as the cheers of the fae swell once more, filling my ears.

A hundred gold and silver eels are swimming alongside us, turning the river into a stream of molten metal. It’s beautiful, but I can’t quite put the way they jumped out of the water to eat a fae alive from my mind as I watch

them happily escorting us to the city wall.

THIRTY-ONE

RHOSWYN

“Eugh.” I heave, emptying my stomach over the side of the ship for the third time that morning. “Stupid boats.”

“I think you’ll find it’s a ship,” Lore says, grinning. “But by all means, call it a boat in front of the captain, and if he gets mad, I can stab him.”

Note to self, become fluent in nautical terms as soon as possible to avoid accidental deaths.

Groaning, I accept the water he hands me and rinse my mouth. “I suppose it’s a good thing the iron sickness kept me unconscious for most of the trip to Fellgotha.”

“A lot of the villages in the Summer Court are on the coast, or I’d suggest disembarking and riding the rest of the way.” Kitarni rubs my other shoulder soothingly. “I’ve got a potion brewing, but it’s going to take a few more hours, and by then, you might have found your sea legs.”

Given that I’ve been up half the night like this, I doubt that very much, but I nod anyway. No one planned for this because fae rarely suffer sea sickness. This unfortunate turn of events is entirely the fault of some quirk of my body.

“A bit of toast?” Bree offers. “You need to eat something.”

“I can’t keep anything down.” I’m not sure how toast is going to magically be the exception. “I just want to get off this stupid—” I cut off as I catch the tell-tale clacking of hooves on wood that announces our captain is on his way.

Great.

“Don’t worry, Nicnevin,” he booms, throwing his red scarf over his shoulder, only to roll his eyes as the wind blows it right back out of place. “Plenty of time to get your sea legs before we reach Siabetha. You won’t want to miss the view of the city from the ocean—there’s nothing like it.”

This terminally happy faun is going to be the death of me. At least he stopped flirting with me after Lore threatened to castrate him.

“Sounds great,” I murmur. “How long until the next shrine?”

There are still a few left in the Spring Court for us to visit along the way.

The faun's lips break into yet another easy smile. "An hour, if that. Winds are working in our favour, Danu be praised."

Danu be praised, indeed. Perhaps she's taking pity on me.

Something on deck catches the captain's eye, and he frowns. "Oi, keep your hands out of there!"

Then he's gone, leaving me alone with my under fae Guards and the high priestess, all of whom keep shooting me concerned looks.

"I'll be fine," I promise. "Honestly, this is nothing compared to how things were before. I'll take a little nausea any day."

That doesn't seem to make them any less concerned. In fact, Bree's grimace only grows deeper.

"Let's do something," I say, casting about the deck for a distraction, only to draw up short. "I'll feel better if I'm not thinking about it."

The sailors are hard at work keeping our violet-sailed ship cruising through the roiling waves as Captain Byrne strides between them, shouting orders with a confidence I envy.

"I've got plenty of ideas to occupy our time," Lore says, waggling his pale eyebrows.

I hit him with a blank look. None of them have made any serious advances since my fever ended, and *now* he says something?

"Lore, if we have sex right now, there's a fifty percent chance we'll be swimming in a pool of my vomit by the end."

He shrugs. "Not the first time that's happened. I have a very sensitive gag reflex."

It takes me a second to work out what he's said, but by the time the meaning of his words has hit me, he's blinked up to the rigging, hanging upside down by his knees.

"What about more flight practice?" I decide. "I was getting so close before."

"Not here," Bree says, surprising me. "The wind is too strong at this time of year. It could lift you into the water if you're not careful."

I try my hardest to quell my disappointment, but it must show because Lore is back in front of me in a blink.

"I'd catch you," he promises, holding his hand out.

In his palm is another bracelet, this one wrapped in rubies and pearls, which sparkle in the sun.

"Do I want to know where this came from?" I ask.

“Probably not,” he admits, before adding. “Nice of you to join us at last.”

He didn’t even look back, but somehow he’s picked up on Drystan approaching over the cacophony of splashing waves and shouting sailors.

“Where’s Jaromir?” Bree asks, eyes narrowing.

“Below deck with Bram, trying to convince the ship’s hawkmaster to send a bird to Elfhame with news of our progress in the Spring Court.” Drystan’s tone makes it clear he thinks their efforts are futile, but Kitarni breaks into a smile.

“Good. News of our success will lift their spirits and reassure them that we’re making good progress.”

My winter knight pinches the bridge of his nose. “Good progress? We spent over a week longer in Pavellen than we expected, and we only achieved Aiyana’s vow at great cost. Not to mention the news of Caed’s place in Rhoswyn’s Guard is now on its way to Siabetha.”

“We’ll make the time back,” I promise. “We’ll rush to the Summer Court, get Eero’s vow as quickly as possible, and then head to Illidwen.”

“You shouldn’t miss this chance to see your queendom,” Kitarni advises. “The Goddess has given us no signs that we’re doing anything wrong. She encourages your pilgrimage with every shrine you visit.”

So just because the Goddess lacks a sense of urgency means I should, too?

“Elfhame is a fortress,” she adds. “It has never fallen.”

“None of the great walls had until this year,” I retort.

“Either way,” Drystan says, eyes lingering on the bracelets on my wrist. “We will stick to the planned route unless we hear from Florian that things have taken a turn for the worse. What matters more is our plan to deal with Eero if he decides to follow Aiyana’s lead and demand concessions in exchange for his vow.”

“He has no grounds to,” Kitarni says. “Even if he holds the destruction of the Toxic Orchid against Rose, by law, she was within her rights to do all things necessary to retrieve her Guard. Unless any of you have any other long-forgotten family grudges against the king of summer I should know about?”

Drystan snorts. “Does thinking he’s a prick count?”

“I’ve never met him officially,” Lore grins. “But sometimes Cressidick would send me to leave presents for him while he slept.”

Kitarni groans, scrubbing a hand down her face. “Do not, under any

circumstances, mention that to anyone.”

“Not even the time I filled his bed with corcrannach maggots?” Lore pouts. “But that was so much fun. It’s not like it hurt him. His magic meant they couldn’t even sink their teeth in.”

My skin crawls. Suddenly, I pity Eero. Any insect named for those terrifying trees must be something gruesome or fierce, let alone maggots.

“Absolutely not,” Kitarni says. “In fact, it may be best not to speak about your time serving Queen Cressida at all, even when we make it to the Autumn Court.”

“I won’t need to speak about it then,” Lore says. “Everyone knows who I am in Illidwen.”

“Because they’re all scared shitless at the whisper of your name,” Kitarni mumbles. “Now. Back to the topic of Eero. Our approach should be simple—be gracious yet firm. He’s a formidable warrior, for all his faults, and his gift will make him an invaluable ally on the battlefield. He has no reason to refuse to offer you his vows, and we will not give him one.”

“Except he might, if what Aiyana said is true,” I remind her.

“Mervyn could well be a spy for the summer king,” Kitarni admits. “But we may yet beat him to Siabetha. It is faster by sea than by land.”

“But we’re stopping multiple times a day.”

“For a worthy cause.” Goddess, Kitarni’s unflappable nature is usually a blessing, but it’s infuriating right now.

Unlike her, I can’t just use ‘Danu’s will’ to brush over or avoid complicated issues or emotions. Does that make my faith weaker? Or is my sense of self stronger?

“I hate this,” I mutter, slumping.

“I know you do.” She rubs my shoulder again. “You’re very unlike your mother in this regard—in a good way. The Fourth Nicnevin was raised to respect the traditions of the fae and often preferred to wait for visions and advice to make decisions. You have more drive than she did.”

“Perhaps if I was more like her, I wouldn’t be so frustrated.”

“If you were like her, you would be dead.” Drystan doesn’t blunt his words. “Diana was an excellent ruler, but she never had to endure half of what you have. She was a diplomat, and a pampered one. She suffered less than a handful of deaths in thousands of years of life.”

Whereas, at the rate I’m going, I’ll have doubled that number by the time I reach twenty-six.

FIVE DAYS LATER, I'M BACK ON DECK FEELING MUCH BETTER WHEN A LOUD shout goes up from the rigging above us.

"Summer ahead!"

I look at Bree in question, and he smiles. "You'll see."

Frustrated by his answer, I look out over the water, only to gasp.

In the middle of the ocean, there's a rift. Two different waters clash, swirling against one another in a meeting of eddies that sets electric blue against slate grey, with white foamy crests between.

"It's the border between spring and summer," Jaro says, approaching from behind, with Bram at his heels.

My shifter looks grim as he takes his place behind me. Ever since we left Pavellen, he's lost his habit of touching me whenever we're close, and I try to shrug my disappointment off and focus on the amazing meeting of oceans instead.

"It's actually a result of the high-sediment waters of the Findwellyn meeting the ocean." Bram ducks his head when we all turn to look at him. "Sorry. I just... the scholarly studies are *fascinating*."

Offering him a small smile, I turn back to the strange ocean border, only to realise we're already crossing it. The ship pierces the clashing waves, sailing over the top. It's easy to track our progress, because the difference in sunniness is like a blade of light bisecting the ship in two. As soon as the line passes me, cloying humidity bursts over my skin, and the heat increases fivefold.

Incredible.

"Welcome back to the Summer Court," Bree murmurs, but he doesn't seem happy about it.

I want to apologise for making him come back here, to the place where he was held captive for so long, but the words die on my tongue as he turns and points at something to our right.

"There's the first summer shrine, up on the cliff. Do you see it?"

I follow his finger, gawping at the sight of the perilous staircase set into the chalky white stone stacks. A set of small rickety bridges spans the gaps between the headland and the two tall stacks that rise out of the water. Atop the farthest stack from the shore, a bent and rickety pine weathers the strong winds against impossible odds, its bare roots clinging to the scarce soil

remaining.

“I’ll fly you to it,” Bree murmurs. “I don’t trust any of those bridges.”

Lore could just as easily have blinked me, but I fix the redcap with a look when he would’ve suggested it. Drystan shakes his head but says nothing, and Jaro offers a small smile of support.

This—flying together—is important to Bree. I’m pretty sure he’s using it as an excuse to touch me. He’s pushing himself.

I’m not sure if it’s a wise idea, but I’m also going to support him in any way I can.

I want him just as fiercely as I want the others. I selfishly want to wipe away the touch of every one of the fae who used him and replace it with my own. The moment he left at the beginning of the fever is imprinted on my mind, and I don’t think I’ll be able to stand it a second time.

So when my púca opens his arms, I don’t hesitate. Pressing my palms against his exposed chest sends a buzz running through me, but I pretend not to notice as his wings—already out like he planned this—swoop powerfully up and down to propel us up into the sky.

Pressed against him like this, it’s all too easy to imagine lifting my head and placing a kiss to his jaw, claiming casual intimacies.

“I can’t wait until I can fly, too,” I whisper, trying to distract myself from the urge.

“You will.” Bree sounds so confident. “It took me years to learn, but your muscles have recovered well. You’re already nearly hovering.”

My fingers absently pet the smooth lines of ink across his chest as a small burst of excitement fills my chest at the thought of taking off by myself.

So far, my toes have left the ground for seconds at a time, but it’s progress.

Too soon, we drop from the sky onto the small wooden platform that’s been built before the tree. There’s a tiny altar here, littered with offerings, among them a doll, a comb, and a simple beaded necklace. Fae honestly brave the broken steps and rickety bridges simply to bring those trinkets here? Is this another mourning tree, or one for wishes? I could ask Bree, but I turn my focus to the task of blessing the shrine instead.

My hand makes contact with the smooth bark, and I whisper the now-familiar words under my breath while bracing myself for whatever dramatic display Danu has in store for me this time.

Nothing.

It comes just as I begin to believe it won't. The old pine creaks, then the rock beneath us shudders.

Earthquake?

Goddess, is the pillar of rock collapsing?

A particularly vicious shake knocks my balance, and I grab for something to hold on to. Too late. My foot slips. I'm falling, plummeting as my arms scabble for something to hold on to. There's nothing.

My wings snap out, and I try my hardest to flap them in the pattern Florian taught me. The wind is too strong. They're not doing anything, and the ocean is rapidly rising to meet me. My muscles are paralysed, breath caught in my throat. The membranes on my back refuse to battle against the fierce gusts.

The sea is getting closer. Minutes ago, I thought the crystal shade was beautiful. Now it's menacing.

The muscles on my back tense and release, and for a second, I think I'm managing to slow myself.

It doesn't last.

This fall will kill me. The impact of my body on the water will break every bone in my body.

Come *on*, wings!

Hands clasp my waist. A savage burst of air beats against my skin.

Bree. Thank the Goddess.

"I've got you, dragonfly. You did so well. Bring your wings in now."

The stubborn appendages refuse to answer at first, fluttering with lingering fear until I manage to pull them down against my spine.

Finally, my lungs remember to work. I drag in a breath and let it out shakily. With that first inhale comes a sudden flare of pain in my back, but I don't mention it.

"I thought... I thought I was going to die."

If I die now, it messes everything up. My pilgrimage is taking enough time without me being reborn in Elfhame, and probably recaptured by the Fomorians.

"You were so close to saving yourself," Bree argues, cradling my head into the crook of his neck. "And look, Danu's blessing is spectacular."

Curiosity piqued, I glance over his shoulder and gasp. The roots of the pine have spread out in an intricate web, surrounding the perilous steps and bridges and reinforcing them. There's even a railing to hold onto now.

Well, at least some good came of all that.

“It was good the shrine keeper wasn’t expecting you,” Bree adds. “I’m not sure I could’ve caught two fae.”

I try to calm my still-racing heart as we fly lazily back to the ship. I must not be the only one rattled by my fall because Bree holds me a little tighter than he did on the way to the shrine.

“Danu could’ve chosen a less dramatic way to show her approval,” I grouch as we land.

Most of my court is just where I left them, although there are clear lines of strain around Drystan’s mouth—no doubt from the effort of holding back whatever sharp words he wishes he could use to express his disapproval.

“Where’s Jaro?” I ask, noting his absence yet again.

This isn’t like my shifter.

“He shifted when he felt your fear,” Kitarni mutters. “Lore blinked him away before he could savage any of the crew.”

“Savage?” I blink. “But... why would he...?”

Before I can think through the answer to my question, Lore and Jaro reappear. The shifter is naked but uncaring as he searches me out.

“It was nothing,” he says quickly. “Just a little hiccough.”

Biting my lip, I frown at the gash still weeping blood across his side. “And that wound?”

“Persuasion,” Lore singsongs. “Wolfie needs to learn that my knives are bigger than his teeth.”

He... stabbed Jaro? My displeasure thrums along the bond.

“It was nothing,” the shifter assures me. “We both lived.”

I let it go but do my best to express with my eyes just how little I like them fighting. I’m not sure if it works, but I can hope, right?

THIRTY-TWO

JAROMIR

“You’ve got to tell her,” Bram says, leaning against the wall of the dimly lit cargo hold.

All of us have snuck down here while Kitarni is keeping Rose occupied with reading practice. I don’t like it, but Bram was right; if I’m going to be a liability, the rest of the Guard should know. When I went to the fox shifter for his advice, I hoped he would help me avoid this, but here we are.

“Tell her what?” Drystan asks, eyes narrowing.

“Wolfie lost control of his wolfie,” Lore singsongs, the lamplight glinting off his white hair. “And the foxie can’t fix it. Luckily, I’m a qualified wolf wrangler.”

“My wolf is feral.” It feels like an admission of failure and vulnerability all at the same time.

Ever since Rose charmed me and made me shift back, he’s been battering the walls of my mind. The playful, puppy-like creature who’s been part of my psyche for so long is gone, destroyed by visions he couldn’t understand. I’ve lost my best friend, and in his place is this wounded, terrified animal that just wants to rage and kill everything he sees.

The bond between us is warped. Nothing I do can get through to him.

“And her fear is a trigger.” Bram shifts closer to me, his posture supportive even though the words are grim.

“Fix it,” Drystan snaps. “We already have two unstable Guards—”

He cuts off as Bree’s ears flatten on his head, and my chin dips as I cringe in second-hand embarrassment. Damned unseele never mince words, do they?

“Why thank you,” Lore beams like the insult is actually a compliment.

The winter lord pinches the bridge of his nose. “You know what I mean. He’s the best equipped to protect her with his magic. If he’s off tearing chunks out of everyone he sees, she’s vulnerable.”

I slump down to sit on the crate and let my head fall into my hands. “I can’t fix it. I don’t know how. I thought Bram might but...”

“But my fox was never feral,” Bram finishes for me. “I retreated into it to

survive, but the animal was sane the entire time. Jaro's case is different."

"Every other feral shifter in history has been put down before they could become a danger to the populace." Drystan apparently feels the need to state the obvious. "You can't die."

"Which leaves eternal imprisonment as our only solution." My fingernails dig into my scalp, drawing blood before I realise that they've part-shifted to my claws.

"But feral shifters are only put down because they never shift back." Bram pushes his spectacles up his nose and brushes silvery strands of his own fur from his jerkin. "Jaro did. He's already in uncharted territory. No one except a Nicnevin could've forced him to return to his fae form."

"You want to rely on her gift to keep him from shifting? She'll never agree to it."

"Just as a last resort," Bram continues to outline his idea. "Lore can force him to shift back by knocking out the wolf, but that's unnecessarily traumatic for the beast. Imprisoning it forever will only make it worse. From my own experience, and everything I've read about shifters with traumatised animals, it needs to feel safe. In Jaro's case, it may even be helpful for it to interact with Rose, to remember its mate is still alive. If he gets out of hand, Rose charms him into shifting back."

"You honestly think that will work?" Bree is asking me rather than Bram.

My wolf growls in my mind, and I shrug. "I have no other ideas. If... if it doesn't... I'll have to ask Rose to charm me. Maybe she can charm the wolf into going back to how it was."

I don't want to tell her—and not just because my pride stings at the thought. Rose has a soft heart. She'll blame herself when she shouldn't.

Bree comes to sit beside me, not touching, but sharing the same crate. "That's not how her magic works. She can compel you to do things, but reading and manipulating emotions requires the gift of empathy, not charm. She could make you act calm, but inside you'd still be a mess."

Not for the first time, I wonder how he knows so much about the gift. Who used it on him before?

"You were happy to let her go ahead and charm Caed, knowing that he'd still feel the same way about her underneath it all?" Drystan asks.

Bree shrugs. "If anyone deserves to suffer in silent agony, knowing their choices are being stripped from them, it's him."

"Oooh, sounds fun." Lore grins. "You handle the Fomorian's mental

agony. I'll dish up the physical torture."

Bree sighs. "That's unnecessary. Besides, I was planning to work on forgiving him."

That admission stuns the entire room into silence. "Forgiving him?" I finally choke out. "Caed. You want to forgive *Caed*."

Bree's ears twitch. "It's inevitable they'll be drawn together. They're mates. I agree with what Kitarni says: Caed's trial from the Goddess is intended to make him prove himself, but Danu wouldn't have bothered creating such a task if she intended for him to die. She could've simply removed his Oath and let nature take its course if that was her goal."

I... hadn't thought of it that way.

My wolf snarls, and a little of the sound escapes before I can trap it. "She's still afraid of having anyone touch her wings. *He* did that to her. Her Guard."

"Elatha did that to her. He failed to prevent it," Bree corrects, then holds his hands up when I snarl again. "I understand your point. He has a lot to answer for. I am simply prepared to forgive him, if he proves himself and Rose wishes me to. Doing anything else would simply cause her more pain."

Drystan scoffs, pacing away from us. He can't go far before his way is blocked by a neat stack of dusty barrels, but when he does, he thunks his head against the wood.

"There is nothing in this realm or the next that can convince me that the Fomorian has changed his ways," he retorts. "He's a threat. That is all he will ever be."

A huge part of me agrees, but Bree seems unfazed by the rebuke.

"He's a male who has never once been in control of his own life. His father controlled everything he did. The only act of rebellion he ever committed until he deserted the army and brought Bram back to Elfhome was swearing the Oath. I... I can understand that. I can even sympathise—more than I care to admit."

The entire group falls silent, and I sigh. "As fascinating as this is, we should get back above deck. Just because the southern seas are quiet, doesn't mean that there aren't still Fomorians sailing them."

"All the more reason for you to remain below deck," Bree reasons. "Unless you want to shift mid-fight."

"I'll keep him under control."

They can't stop me from fighting. What other use do I have? I've been a

warrior all my life.

It's hard not to squirm like a bug under the intense stares they're all levelling at me. "I can still protect her."

"So why are you avoiding her?" Drystan asks.

"A better question might be, why are you *all* avoiding me?" a soft voice answers.

All of us stiffen, and my eyes widen with panic. Shit. How did she get down here without us noticing?

The others look at me, putting me on the spot.

How much has she heard? How much does she know? Did she really think we were avoiding her?

Yes, Jare, because that's the important issue here.

Her scent washes over me, and my wolf goes fucking crazy in my mind. Elation, panic, joy, and mourning battle in the creature's mind. I don't need a mirror to tell me that my eyes have shifted, and I turn away to hide it.

Once upon a time, her touch sent my wolf in giddy circles. Now he howls at the light pressure of her hand on my arm. In his mind, she's still in danger. Protect her. Mate her.

Mate her?

I blink at the thought, then push back at the wolf in rebuke.

We definitely can't just mate her. She's a Nicnevin, she needs a proper mating ceremony, with witnesses and Kitarni at the high temple. A huge dress and a thousand fae watching her blood exchanges with her full Guard. Yet, to my wolf's mind, that's the only solution. The only way we can always keep tabs on her and know that she's safe.

"What's going on?" she asks. "No one has really approached me in *that* way since my fever." A painful pause. "I know men—males—have needs. Did I do something wrong? Was I...?" she trails off, but I hear the unsaid plea.

Her fledgling confidence in her sexuality is waning, and now that she's brought it up, it's obvious why. All the work we did to make her feel comfortable before her fever hit was abandoned as soon as it was over. We were waiting for her to make the first move. Normally, a fae female spends a few days after her fever healing, and it's up to her to re-initiate sexual contact after that.

I assumed her guides or Kitarni would've said something, but apparently, they haven't. Which has given rise to mortal ideas about male 'needs' being

the only important ones in the relationship.

Bree's outraged hiss makes her flinch back, her touch disappearing from my arm.

She thinks we don't want her? Is she mad? My wolf wants me to throw her down, shred her skirts, and fuck the daft notion out of her head.

Shit. I have to get out of here.

Bram, perhaps sensing this is a conversation Rose needs to have with her mates in privacy, slinks away with awkwardness written into every line of his face.

"Needs?" Drystan spits out, but Lore is already there.

"Feeling needy, pet? Remember what we said, you've got to ask for what you want. Your fever was divine, but if you want to reenact it without the deliriousness and cramping, I'm at your service."

"Rhoswyn," Drystan snarls. "Fae males do not use their 'needs' as an excuse to pressure a female for sex. Especially one whose only interactions with them were driven by biological necessity."

"What he means to say," Bree cuts in, saving Drystan's ass once again. "Is that no one wanted to pressure you."

"And Jaro?" Those too perceptive violet eyes are boring into me. I can feel them on the back of my head.

I open my mouth, but the words to tell her I'm fine won't come out. Shame, sharp and sour, coats my tongue as I realise I've just tried to lie to my mate.

Shit. How did everything go so wrong? Her scent is filling my lungs, making it hard to think past the panic beating beneath my skin. The wolf has started pacing, pushing for a shift. His demands circle my brain on repeat.

Mate her. Mate her.

"I need some air," I mutter as I flee the hold, headed anywhere, as long as it's far away from my stricken mate.

THIRTY-THREE

RHOSWYN

The graceful archway that forms the foundation for the capital of the Summer Court looms slowly closer as the ship's sails flap above us in the breeze. The sun is just setting, framed perfectly by the hole in the rock, making the entire city glint with gold.

So beautiful. I soak it in along with the salt of the sea air and do my best not to think about the conversations my Guard has been avoiding having with me. Ever since Jaro fled, they've been even more careful, which isn't what I wanted.

I went down into the hold after Maeve interrupted Mab's report on the worsening conditions inside Elfame to tell me my Guard were holding a secret meeting without me. I hoped that confronting them about their lack of interest would open up a conversation, but then I got down there, and they were already talking about me... behind my back.

"I get the sense that you're thinking too much into it," Mab mumbles, from her perch on the ship's taffrail between Maeve and Titania. "Your Guard will always be there for you."

Grimacing, I turn my focus beyond my three guides to the sunlit city. Eero is in there somewhere, along with a hundred other fae. By all accounts, the summer king keeps an impressively large court, and this time he's extended an invitation to stay in the palace. Kitarni accepted it, because without my fever as an excuse, there was no reason to stay in the temple.

"There's an escort approaching," Captain Byrne mutters, hooking his spyglass onto his belt as he clops up beside me. "Flying royal colours."

"The king?" I ask, nervously.

"Nah, it's the standard of the crown princess." The captain shrugs. "If you don't mind me saying, you should probably change into something more... queenly, Nicnevin."

I glance down at the tunic and leggings I put on this morning. If I've learned anything in the last few days, it's that skirts simply aren't practical on a ship. Still, they're fine clothes, and we're still a ways from Siabetha.

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

He shrugs, as if he doesn't understand it either. "You'll be torn apart by

those vipers at court if you're not wearing the latest silks from the Fair Isles."

Seriously? Elfhame still smoulders, the Fomorian are preparing a full-scale invasion armada, and these high fae aristocrats only care about something so banal?

"A fine way to describe the lords and ladies of summer," Kitarni reprimands subtly, coming up behind us. "He is right, though. We should prepare for—"

"I want to wear armour," I decide, cutting her off.

"That's my girl!" Maeve fist pumps the air.

Kitarni stares, then nods slowly. "That will be a statement. Are you sure —"

"We're at war," I say, cutting her off before she can convince me out of it. "It's time the Summer Court remembered that."

I turn away, looking back at the arch. "Last time I came here, I burned down a brothel. They'll talk no matter what I wear."

I've been searching for a solution to prevent myself from feeling so useless, and this is the best I can come up with. If I've got to do this pilgrimage, I'm going to do it while reminding everyone of its purpose. This isn't some flower-studded parade to show off Danu's blessing. I'm going to use it to drum up support for my home.

If the people believe that defending the queendom is the right thing to do, perhaps they can pressure the remaining minor royals into offering their vows faster than Aiyana.

"Is the crown princess the heir?"

"Presumed heir," Kitarni corrects. "Eero has two daughters, and fae succession is dictated by the reigning monarch's belief in their suitability rather than by the order of their birth."

"So she's the most suitable."

"She's who he favours," Kitarni corrects. "Eero has never taken a queen, only concubines. His two daughters have claims to the throne, but should the king take a mate and have a trueborn female heir, that child's claim supersedes theirs. So, to keep his daughters from trying to murder him, he plays at setting the two princesses against one another for his approval instead. Currently, Ciara holds the title, however, I'm told that Máel will always be his true favourite."

I... I can't imagine living in such a family. I glance back at the dryad with a grimace. "So she's coming to meet me to bolster her standing?"

“Either that, or her father has asked her to get into your good graces in order to have some advantage over you,” Titania warns.

“Or she wants your help to overthrow him while she’s ahead.” Maeve twirls one of her daggers as she thinks about it. “If Eero turns out to be another prick, at least he has heirs. We can kill him and pick your favourite to rule.”

“That’s not how diplomacy works,” Titania sighs. “But I’ll admit, there were times when I wished it was.”

Nodding to the two living fae, I disappear down into my cabin to change, cursing when the armoured plates require me to twist in unfathomable ways to get into them.

“Let me help,” Maeve whispers, as I curse the buckles for the hundredth time.

“I’m not sure this is what the Goddess gave me this gift for,” I reply, funnelling Danu’s power to her.

“Danu gave you the power,” Maeve mutters. “But you decide what to do with it. If you want to hold ghostly picnics, that’s your choice.”

I snort at the memory. “I was four.”

She buckles the strap behind my shoulder, securing the metal bustier in place. “You were a tyrant. You made us dance.”

“It could’ve been worse. Imagine if I’d been raised in Faerie.”

“I’m glad you weren’t, kid.” She does the other side and pats my back before fading back to her ghost form. “Necromancers don’t usually survive long. Fae children are a blessing, but who better to swap for a changeling than a babe with unwanted magic? Even if they were kept, children don’t stay children for long.”

Grimacing at the thought of fae abandoning children just for being able to speak to ghosts, I move towards the door, giving a last twirl as I go.

“How do I look?”

But when I check Maeve’s expression, I’m surprised to find the unflappable warrior misty eyed. She wipes the water away the second she catches me looking, then clears her throat.

“Like you actually paid attention when I tried to teach you to kick ass. Now, go teach those seelies that the Fifth Nicnevin isn’t to be trifled with.”

I don’t want to fight the summer king, but I don’t bother telling her that. Although I intend to make a point, I’d also like this to go well. Since Eero hasn’t imprisoned my mate, I don’t have to worry about Danu’s rage

screwing this up for me. The summer king may be a difficult person to deal with, but my mother managed. Maybe I can, too.

My gut tightens as I remember the taunting gift he sent to my coronation. Okay, so perhaps it won't be so easy.

"We'll be with you," Titania promises. "We'll stay unseen, so we don't distract you, but we're always here."

Fisting my hands, I nod. It will be hard, but I owe it to my people to try.

True to her words, the three of them fade away as I walk up to the deck, my mind racing. I'm so caught in my thoughts of what I might say to the crown princess that I draw up short when I find two females wearing golden circlets staring warily at Wraith as they wait for me.

They couldn't be more different. One is slender, with graceful limbs and long thin braids woven across her skull, while the other is curvy, with much darker skin and short hair that halos her head in a soft cloud. Both of them are wearing flowing white gowns, decorated with exquisite, beaded embroidery that hugs their breasts and exposes their middles, contrasting beautifully with their gleaming skin, rich brown eyes, and black hair. Their ears and noses are pierced with golden hoops, and their arms are wrapped in hundreds of bangles.

They look regal, and the tilt of their chins says they know it.

I don't think anyone is prepared for me to walk up onto the deck wearing my leggings, a pale blue tunic, and the silver breastplate, least of all my Guard. Drystan's mouth purses with disapproval, Bree's ears flick with agitation, and Jaro jerks like he's been struck.

Lore simply beams, flashing so much fang that it makes me shiver at the memory of him sinking them into me.

Not the thoughts I need right now.

Both of the golden princesses dip their heads the second I approach, pressing one hand to their hearts while extending the other behind them in a graceful flare.

"Nicnevin," they intone gracefully.

"Nicnevin, may I introduce Princesses Máel and Ciara of the Summer Court, Daughters of Eero, Son of Lark," Kitarni says.

They each nod as they're announced, telling me without words that the long-haired princess is Máel and the curvier one Ciara.

"Good evening," I reply dutifully.

"Our father sent us to escort you to Siabetha," Máel says, smoothing the

lines of her already immaculate dress. “He sends his apologies that he can’t attend to you himself. There are rumours of a white hart along the northern border.”

I frown. *Eero isn’t even here?*

“Our father is a great hunter, Nicnevin,” Ciara hastens to add, her words falling over each other with nervousness. “He won’t take long to find the beast. In the meantime, to apologise for his absence, he’s instructed us to see to your every need. I’ve even taken the liberty of preparing a tutor for you while you wait for him... You are still learning to read, are you not?”

How did they know? More importantly, is this a jab? Their open expressions don’t seem to hold any hints of guile or smugness, but I can’t say for certain. They’re not lying—fae can’t—but also...

“Has he forgotten there is a war going on?” I ask them, honestly. “Remaining here for however long it takes him to chase a deer around the forest is costing lives in Elfhame.”

“The white hart is a sign from Danu,” Titania murmurs, reappearing beside me. “It bestows wisdom on the fae who finds it. The quest to capture it is a noble one.”

“If it’s even really been seen,” Maeve grouches, picking imaginary lint from under her nails. “There have been rumours of a white hart before, and it turned out just to be some off-world shifter—”

“Still bitter about that one?” Titania arches a brow. “What would you have done with a gift of wisdom? Stabbed it?”

“I might’ve listened,” Maeve grumbles, though we all know that’s unlikely.

“It won’t be long,” Máel promises. “And until he returns, we’ll show you every hospitality that Siabetha can offer.”

Sighing, because I don’t really have a choice unless I plan to order Eero back to his city—which will do nothing to endear him to me—I nod. This delicate balance between playing nice and being firm with the minor royal is giving me a headache. I have to observe the formalities and give them what they want, because their vows are supposed to be freely offered, but I can’t let them walk all over me and forget that I’m supposed to be in charge, either.

It leaves too much room for me to second-guess myself. All I can do is trust Kitarni, my Guards, and my guides to know whether I’m doing this right.

“Your things will be brought along shortly,” the captain promises. “And

your horse, sir knight.”

Drystan gives the faun a look that promises a hundred years of pain should Blizzard lose so much as a whisker during transport before tilting his head in acquiescence.

“It’s been lovely sailing with you,” I comment, accepting his bow with a slight nod of my head.

“An honour, Nicnevin,” the faun replies.

With the niceties out of the way, there’s nothing left to do except follow the two princesses onto their glimmering pleasure boat.

The ship is small—clearly not intended for long voyages—and holds only a single burnished throne beneath a canopy of rich purple with nothing on either side to prevent a fall. The oars dip beneath the crystalline waters the second we’re all aboard, and I take the seat before the rocking of the sea can upset my balance.

Still, this is a good start and gives me hope. Eero might not be here, but they’ve acknowledged I’m worthy of a throne, which is more than can be said for Aiyana.

The princesses take stools on either side, leaving my males to stand around us, with Kitarni and Bram behind and Wraith to look balefully at the lack of space before settling at the prow, mouth lolling open. Maeve and Titania keep close to my sides, their translucent bodies wavering in the breeze as they perch on the arms of the throne, forcing me to look through them to address the princesses.

“What an unusual beast,” Ciara comments lightly, giving Wraith a wary once over. “They’re very rarely seen in the south.”

“He’s already moulting.” Máel is less than impressed as she wipes nearly invisible fur from her gown.

“He’s perfect,” I counter, offering my barghest a soft smile, which he returns by going still, ears flicking before licking his lips and turning back to stare at the city.

Both princesses fall silent, and the pause doesn’t take long to become awkward.

Damn it, powers of diplomacy, this would be a great time for you to kick in...

“Forgive me, princesses, I thought our brother might’ve accompanied you.” Bram shifts behind us, and I turn to grant him a grateful glance for changing the subject. “Is Dare well?”

“I believe he remains at the palace,” Ciara says. “The royal day boat isn’t suited to hosting such large groups.”

True, the deck is quite small, as you’d expect of a pleasure craft. Still, that’s disappointing. Madoc and his family were incredibly sweet and welcoming, and meeting the rest of my brothers is one of the highlights of this pilgrimage.

“Does he not have a home of his own?” I ask, confused.

I thought Florian mentioned he had a house out by the water, but perhaps I’m getting him mixed up with Roark, my brother in the Autumn Court.

“Nicnevin, during times of strife, Eero chooses to keep his entire court in residence at the palace,” Kitarni interjects. “Most of his trusted and close family lives within the walls.”

That’s different to Elfhame and Pavellen, where the palaces are personal residences.

“It’s safer that way,” Máel adds. “We have no city wall, but our father is keen to defend his most important citizens from our enemies.”

“Or he has them all in one place, so they’re easier to manipulate and spy on,” Mab murmurs, appearing beside the other two.

She takes their shoulders, trying to drag them away. “We said we weren’t going to distract her, remember?”

Maeve rolls her eyes. “And I told you, we’re not distractions; we’re an advantage.”

Suppressing a grimace at Mab’s analysis of Eero’s motives, I can’t help but feel she might be right. My guides bicker quietly amongst themselves as we approach the city, but we don’t turn for the shore like I expect, and there are no crowds like there were when I arrived in Pavellen. There are no boats at all as we make our way beneath the enormous stone archway. No fishermen. Not a soul on the water.

Strange.

I’ve barely opened my mouth to challenge the princesses about it when water cascades from above us in a waterfall that gradually expands and morphs, falling to the sea below in the outline of a rectangle just large enough for the boat to cruise into. The canopy protects everyone beneath from getting wet as we come to a halt, and Jaro summons a shield to keep Wraith dry as the barghest amuses himself by snapping at the droplets.

A grinding noise makes me wish the canopy wasn’t there. The heavy fabric impedes my view of what’s happening above.

“It’s a marvel of engineering,” Ciara tells me, perhaps sensing my irritation. “Rather than ride through the city and take that risk, all we need to do is wait for our servants to lift the boat directly into the palace.”

Risk? And what does she mean ‘lift it’?

I get my answer a second later when silver chains splash down into the water, spraying everyone close to the edge of the barge, and causing Wraith to shake out his fur with a yip of annoyance. There’s a *clunk* and the ship jerks, rising upward with a speed that nearly unbalances Bram. His hands grip the back of my throne for a second before he releases it with a murmur of apology.

The sea disappears beneath us, and we rise through the sky like we’re weightless. Now that the initial jolt has passed, the journey is smoother. Enjoyable, almost. I can see miles of beautiful white beaches in every direction, and the sunlight casts them in a hundred shades of burnished gold.

Siabetha truly is beautiful. The kind of idyllic paradise that I would never have dreamed existed before I came to Faerie.

Pity I’ve also seen firsthand how cruel the fae here can be. My hands clench on the arms of my throne as I recall how they cheered with every scream of pain that echoed from the Toxic Orchid.

Finally, the view is stolen by thick chiselled walls, and then we burst back into the dying sunlight in a courtyard that’s heady with the scent of Siabethan Nightshade and tinkling with the sound of polite conversation.

We appear to have emerged right into the middle of a party, and as soon as we make our appearance, the conversation ceases.

Dimly, I’m aware of someone announcing me and of Drystan stiffly offering me his arm to lead me off the ship. I do my best to offer polite smiles to the gathered fae as we walk amongst them, following the princesses.

Polite. Diplomatic. Friendly. I can do this.

My smiles are returned, and I begin to relax.

“The *púca* is losing it,” Maeve comments.

THIRTY-FOUR

BRICRIU

The creeping dread only grows worse the longer we're in their presence. Unbeknownst to Rose and the others, I've been doing my best to prepare for this moment since we left the Spring Court. I knew we'd inevitably cross paths with Máel—although the princess would never ever admit to fucking an under fae—and I wanted to make sure I did nothing to embarrass Rose when we did.

It doesn't mean the breath isn't stolen from my lungs at the sight of her. All the preparation in the world can't stop the memories of what she did to me flashing before my eyes. Chains. Whips. Blades. Her voice is a serrated knife edge against my spine, and—

Drystan moves, taking Rose's arm and leading her down into the crowd, breaking my spiral. I look up, realising I've missed the entire trip up on the chain lift, and then freeze. Beside me, Jaro stiffens, followed by Lore. The tail of Drystan's coat catches fire, then winks out.

My brain ices over, the runoff trickling down my back until I jerk.

So many familiar avaricious eyes look up from bowing faces. Hundreds of nightmare memories rush forward until my skin prickles with the urge to draw a blade from the ink there, and I cross my arms to hold the urge back.

Don't say anything. Don't make any strange movements. Nothing.

Why would anyone...?

I knew. I knew it had to be a good portion of the nobility who had made use of my *services*, but it seems every second face in the gathered crowd is one of them. If Rose finds out... If Danu breaks through...

Eero will have a very valid reason to withhold his vow of allegiance if the Nicnevin slaughters the crowd assembled to greet her before even talking to them.

"Why is Amberlea here?" Jaro mutters under his breath.

"More importantly," Lore adds, not bothering with any kind of subtlety. "Why is every whore I've fucked in the last three centuries here?"

Rose stiffens.

Don't turn. Don't turn. Please, don't turn. If she turns, there's no hiding how my nails are digging half-moons into my arms, or the way my tattoos are

swirling across my skin. My ears are flat against my skull, and the moment Rose sees...

There's nowhere to hide, either.

My vision narrows, and as a last resort, I fix my gaze on the back of her rose-gold hair and make myself count the beads someone has woven into the braided bun nestled at the nape of her neck. Heart pounding sharp and fast, I follow as Drystan escorts her through the crowd.

There's nothing but her. Only her. She is all. She is *all*.

The final sealing words of the Oath play on repeat, and I match them to my mechanical steps.

The princesses, maybe even Eero himself, must be behind this. It's not just every single one of my regular 'patrons,' but Lore's and Jaro's words make it clear their old lovers are present, too. Those must be the faces I don't know.

No fae would be stupid enough to do something like this. As a species, we're fiercely territorial of our mates. Unless...

Unless they want Rose to lose it.

What could they possibly gain from her slaughtering what must be hundreds of noble fae?

My mantra seems to hold until a tanned hand reaches out of the crowd.

I go to flinch—or perhaps to strike back; I'll never know. Before I can, the hand drops to the floor, sliced clean off.

"Whoops!" Lore whistles innocently. "My knife slipped." The redcap looks around the silent but watching crowd, cocking his head before sighing. "And I'm afraid it might slip again if anyone else tries to touch what belongs to the Goddess Incarnate."

The owner of the hand, a high fae male with deep blue eyes who once delighted in carving my tattoos from my body as he rode my cock, finally realises what's happened. Lore's blade must have been sharp for the pain to take this long to register—or perhaps it's simply shock.

He opens his mouth wide and releases the most girlish scream I've ever heard. The crowd moves away from him, distancing themselves.

Good. No one came to help me when I screamed, either.

"Lore?" Rose's voice cuts through the savage satisfaction surging through my veins.

"Just topping up my hat, pet!" he calls, dragging his bright red bucket hat through the mess on the sun-bleached flagstones.

“Control your under fae, Nicnevin,” Máel advises. “They are obviously not yet acclimatised to the rules of civilised society.”

Rose shrugs, but those beautiful purple eyes are living flames. “Neither was the fae who decided to touch my Guard without consent. Danu would’ve done worse than remove his hand.”

She was watching? Wait. She’s a necromancer. What am I thinking? She doesn’t have to watch.

The three past Nicnevins must be keeping her up to date on everything as it happens. Just like they’ve been keeping her updated on Caed and Florian.

Shit.

“Wine, Nicnevin?” Ciara tries to defuse the situation by selecting an amphora from a nearby table and tipping the pale pink fizzing drink into the glass.

The Summer Court is famous for its vineyards. My mother’s family owns a few, not that I’ve visited beyond that one terrible incident when I was a teenager. As Rose takes an obliging sip, I watch her shoulders relax and her lips crease into a soft smile.

“It tastes like...” She cocks her head in thought, then shrugs as if it doesn’t matter. “It’s delicious.”

Someone presses a glass into my hand before I can recoil in distaste, and I have to resist the urge to drop it.

“To the Nicnevin,” Máel calls out, though technically Ciara should’ve been the one to make the toast. “May she enjoy her time amongst the finest citizens the Summer Court has to offer.”

Her elitism isn’t even subtle, but I don’t really care. There are high fae who believe that their very nature makes them special rather than a simple reference to the fact that, thousands of years ago, most of them had wings.

Of course, many of them still do, but it’s impossible to tell because of the number who glamour them to conceal their perceived weakness. Apparently, their numbers have fallen since Danu poured life into the realm. Fae like Eero would have everyone believe that it was mingling with the under fae that was responsible.

Personally, I think it’s inbreeding.

The fae around me are all drinking, so I force the glass to my lips and pretend to sip, keeping my lips sealed to prevent the liquid from touching my tongue.

Perhaps it’s bad luck not to drink to my mate, but...

No. Not thinking about it.

Someone raises a wreath of nightshade high and drapes it gently over Rose's head, followed by the rest of us—well, they try to. Drystan glares at the fae holding his until they back away slowly, Lore takes his, then immediately transfers it to Wraith's neck, and Jaro growls until they back off.

A look and a head tilt towards the redcap stops the one headed for me in its tracks.

I turn to regard the others, but they're already gone, following Rose deeper into the crowd. The high fae are still giving me looks but give me a wide berth as I follow Jaro's head—easily visible, thanks to his height—through the crowd.

Wait.

I stop as a familiar black ponytail flicks in the corner of my eye.

By the time I turn, a shout bubbling in my throat, the ghost is gone. I glance at Jaro's head, moving away in the crowd, then back at the spot where I could've sworn I saw...

I should follow Rose, but then... No. There's no 'but.' I'm following Rose, not some figment of my imagination. Turning, I hasten after them, rubbing my hand over Espen's tattoo on my forearm as I go.

My tongue flicks out, forked. A thousand times more sensitive to smell than my nose.

A second later, in the back of my mouth, the familiar sharpness of sloe gin hits me, followed by the subtler pine scent of rosin from his fiddle bow beneath it.

Only one person has that scent. I'll never forget it. Even when the male in question should be dead.

Torrance Lyarthorn. Once renowned as the best bard in all five courts. And... my father.

THIRTY-FIVE

RHOSWYN

The servant who walks us to our room is a high fae with bland features who refuses to answer my questions with anything but the shortest answers. I'm not sure if it's the sweet scent of the flowers around my neck, or the delicious wine I had to force myself to sip slowly, but my head feels a little woozy, and my breasts are aching.

Wraith nips at Lore's heels, and the redcap frowns. "Still hungry, puppy? Shall we see if any of those nobles are willing to provide a midnight snack?"

And before anyone can say anything to stop him, he's gone.

"Damn redcap," Drystan growls. "I'm going to—" He cuts off strangely, then looks at Jaro. "You have this?"

Jaro pushes ahead of me, his shoulders set in a determined cast. "I'll sweep her room for strange scents. Don't worry about it."

They exchange those masculine chin nods before Drystan spins on his heel and takes off on his latest attempt to corral Lore.

Surely, by now, he should've realised that the redcap is uncontrollable.

He's gone before I can point out the futility of his actions, leaving the three of us to step into my room.

Jaro gets to work, opening windows and closets, nostrils flaring as he searches for some threat. Now that we're not staying in the temple, he's clearly on high alert. I don't blame him. Staying in Eero's palace makes me uncomfortable.

Without thinking, I step up behind Jaro and hug my arms around his waist, pressing my cheek to his back.

He stiffens, and I sigh. "I'm sorry. I just... I miss you." I pause, summoning my courage. "Would you make love to me?"

The pained whine that tears from his throat has me releasing him, apologies springing to my lips, but he turns and crushes my mouth with his before I can utter a single syllable.

His hands claw my back, fisting in my tunic with a wild desperation that makes me melt. Claws sever the straps of my armour, and it falls to the tiled floor with a loud clang that neither of us notice. The prick of wolf canines scrapes lightly against my tongue, and I moan a little at the added sense of

danger it brings.

Yes. *This*. I missed this.

All too suddenly, he yanks away, shoulders heaving as his eyes flash with the presence of his wolf.

“Púca,” he growls. “Guard her.”

For the second time in as many days, Jaro flees the room.

I fall to the bed, the thin covers crinkling beneath my weight, as I stare at the space where he stood, seconds ago. Did I do something?

No. He was kissing me like he would die if he didn't. This isn't a me problem. I refuse to believe it.

“He is dealing with the aftermath of Aiyana's trial,” Bree says, breaking the silence. “I... I don't wish to break his trust, but he wouldn't want you to blame yourself.”

I nod, pulling the wreath of flowers from my neck and throwing it in the direction of the dressing table without care.

“I wish I'd never let it happen. I should've just...”

“There was no other way.”

I look up at him. “Does it make me a horrible person that I think, after this is over, I still might kill her?”

“I think it makes you fae,” Bree admits, slowly moving closer to the bed, though he won't touch it. “I believe Lorcan would worship you even more than he already does were you to ask him to murder her on your behalf. He has the skill to make it look like you were never even involved.”

It shouldn't feel as good as it does, I'm sure of it.

Thankfully, Bree distracts me. “There is another matter. Something urgent.” He takes a deep breath. “My father is here.”

My furrowed brows must clue him in to my lack of comprehension. He sighs, ears drooping. “He... he also has the gift of charm.”

I reach out, meaning to draw him into a hug, like I would anyone else wearing such a vulnerable expression, only to stop when he stiffens before I can make contact.

“Bree... Is he—” I cut off sharply at the pain that glazes his eyes. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry. If you think I should be wary of him, I'll take you at your word.”

“He's a powerful fae, and a damned fine bard.” Bree runs his hands over his arms. “But he's also a liar, a cheat, and a weasel. Before today, I assumed he was dead because there was always some bounty hunter or another after

him. If he's here, it's because Eero has paid him good money to be, and that's not a good sign."

"We should warn the others," I say. "I know you said it takes focus to resist, but is there any way I could learn?" Otherwise, he could charm me into using my powers for anything.

With Danu's bottomless well of power at his disposal, there are almost no limits to what he could accomplish.

I'd rather die than have the realm at the mercy of whoever put that haunted look on my mate's face.

"It takes decades of practice," Bree replies. "Your best bet, if you ever find yourself face to face with him, is to charm him first. Nothing massive or invasive," he hastily adds, noticing my moue. "Just a simple request that he not use his magic on you."

"How will I know what he looks like?" I don't want to accidentally charm the wrong male, and with fae glamour, he could be anyone.

"He's too vain to use a glamour." Bree reads my thoughts. "If you see another púca with long dark hair, assume it's him."

Grimly, I nod, and the two of us lapse into silence.

"Bree, I—"

"Did you want him because he's Jaro, or because you're horny?" The question is so unexpected that I blink for a second, trying to figure out how to respond.

"Both?" I answer, confused. "You're not interchangeable to me, but I feel..." Heady. Needy. And being around them doesn't help. Even without my fever, I want them. "Perhaps it was the wine."

"More likely the nightshade around your neck," Bree replies. "It's an aphrodisiac."

"I'm not sure I can blame it all on the flowers." I glance over to where the wreath is glimmering in the moonlight. I pause. "I've been thinking..."

"About?"

"You still stiffen when I touch you."

He opens his mouth to object, but I raise my hand until my fingers are barely brushing his lips.

"I don't mean it in a bad way. I just don't think what we're doing is working. Would you... Would it be better if you touched me instead?"

He swallows, throat moving as those piercing green eyes stroke up and down my body, taking in the rumpled tunic I wore beneath the breastplate

and the way the neckline has fallen open to expose my cleavage.

“Dragonfly, I...”

“It’s okay,” I rush. “I shouldn’t have said—”

His hand takes mine, pulling it away from his lips, thumb rubbing over my knuckles as he thinks through his next hesitant words. “It’s not that. I want to. It’s just been so long since I chose to touch anyone, and even longer since I wanted to. I’m not sure I even remember how.”

My heart breaks, shattering into a million pieces.

“Do whatever you want,” I whisper, bringing our joined hands to my cheek. “Whatever feels good. I’ll tell you if I don’t like it, but I won’t interfere. In fact.” I push myself farther up the bed and wrap my hands around the headboard. “I won’t touch you.”

My breasts are heaving as I try to breathe through the nerves writhing beneath my skin. This feels like a bold move—too bold, perhaps—and for a second, I wonder if I’ve pushed him too far.

“Dragonfly,” he murmurs, taking in my body as he runs a shaky hand down his face. “I... What if I...” Stopping, he drops his hand and locks eyes with me. “No sex,” he finally says. “But I want to give you pleasure. I almost went insane before your fever, watching the others touch you, wanting you.”

He did? But he gave no indication he was even affected.

“Have me,” I whisper. “I won’t move.”

Goosebumps bloom across my skin as he takes one step closer, then another. He pauses, hands stroking over his tattoos one last time before they travel up to the collar of that open, ripped black coat he wears.

That comes off first, then his boots. Perhaps he does it to give himself the security of having more access to his tattoos, but for me, it’s like watching a piece of art be unveiled. Knives dance across his skin, waltzing with the instruments and even... “Is that a lockpick?”

Bree looks down at the tattoo beneath his arm and grins. “I have a lot of useful tricks under my sleeve.”

I want to chuckle, but it dies in my throat as he reaches down and pulls a small, curved blade from his lower back and crawls up to me. He wields it like a claw, tucked between his fingers.

“Can I see you?” he asks softly, catching the blade against the collar of my shirt.

The contrast between the gentleness of his words and the sharp prick of metal against my skin makes me shiver as I nod.

“Yes.”

The knife is sharp, cutting through my tunic like butter. Fabric flutters apart, leaving skin peeking through. The blade returns again, flicking aside each half until my breasts are exposed to the warm summer air and the heat in his gaze.

He swallows again, and my nipples take that as a sign to harden painfully into tight little pink buds that rise and fall with my shallow breaths.

“Perfect.” His voice has gone hoarse again. “I... You have no idea how unworthy I am of this. Of you.”

Tears prick my eyes. “I promise to spend the rest of my life teaching you that you’re wrong.”

His whole body jerks, his blade disappearing into smoke as his hand hovers painfully close to the exposed skin of my ribs.

Touch me, I beg silently, unwilling to pressure him with the words.

A single finger skates the air above my chest. So close. I can feel the heat of him searing me across the distance.

When he finally does touch me, it’s to trace a line down from the tip of my ear to my jaw. The anticipation has built so much that my body arches from the bed, pussy clenching with frustration.

Instead of demanding he continue, I say, “You can stop whenever you want. I don’t mind.”

He shakes his head. “I couldn’t stop, even if I wanted to. Goddess, the taste of you haunts my dreams. I have to make sure it’s as good as I remember.”

That finger travels to my chin, pulling it up to angle my lips just so. His mouth descends on mine, and my eyes slip closed before I can help it.

“Keep them open.” His breath sighs over my face. “No one else has your eyes. It helps me remember it’s you.”

Doing as he asks rewards me with the faintest brush of skin against skin. Then another. My hands tighten on the headboard, solid wood doing nothing to steady me as he dives in and finally kisses me properly.

That’s when I realise his tongue is shifted. The forked prongs twine inside my mouth with so much more agility than any normal male could hope to achieve. Clumsy at first, perhaps, but within seconds he regains his confidence, stroking against me with a skill that steals my breath.

I’m breathless when he pulls away. Arousal coils low in my belly as he dips his head again, this time pressing a chaste kiss to my cheek as the hand

still holding my jaw shifts lower to cup the back of my head. His fingers thread into my hair, tugging lightly at the roots until I gasp.

He freezes. "Okay?" he checks.

"More than," I promise. "Feels good."

Beside us, a candle bursts into flame, and both of us startle. Bree's weight leaves me before Drystan drops his glamour. He's sitting casually in the chair by the door, in full view of the bed and the two of us.

"I didn't mean to interrupt." His words are calm, the tone similar to the one he uses when he's speaking to Blizzard and he thinks we can't hear. "I just thought you might want someone here in case you push him too far."

"She's not pushing me," Bree hisses, tattoos swirling on his skin in response to his agitation.

At the same time, I say, "Good idea."

The corner of the dullahan's mouth twitches. "I'll go if I make you uncomfortable."

Bree looks down at me, head cocked in question. "Do you want him here?"

I could ask him the same question. "I want you to feel safe." I blink, looking away from both piercing pairs of eyes as I make my next admission. "I trust you both."

Drystan has seen everything I have already, and he's cold and analytical enough to watch without getting caught up, which means he'll see if Bree gets uncomfortable.

"He stays," Bree decides. "But... keep your distance."

"I won't leave this chair," Drystan promises, settling back and steeping his fingers beneath his chin. "You have my word."

With his promise secure, Bree's attention falls to me once again, and I sigh as he dips his head again. This time that forked tongue flicks out, tasting the sweat blooming against the crease where my neck meets my shoulder.

A line of kisses follows, and soon I forget all about Drystan as I struggle to keep my hands in place. I want to drop them to his hair and anchor him against my body. Force him lower like I would with any of the others.

Except this is Bree. He needs to be in control right now. He needs to take this experience back for himself, and I would never, ever, jeopardise that.

So I pin my body in place, allowing myself the tiny shuddering gasps of pleasure and nothing more as Bree slowly maps the contours of my throat with that snake's tongue.

When his hand comes up to cup my left breast, I almost weep. The first squeeze is almost infuriatingly gentle, and I bite my lip to hold back a plea for him to knead the flesh harder.

“Harder,” Drystan mutters. “She likes it a little rough.”

I want to glare at him, but I’m distracted when Bree follows the instruction. The moan that slips free is involuntary, and it only gets drawn out as he bends his head and takes the other nipple into his mouth. His tongue swirls, smooth and cold, while the other hand pinches.

“Bree,” I moan, chest lifting to follow his retreating mouth before I can stop myself. “That feels so good.”

He shifts, moving from beside me until he’s straddling my upper thighs. The new position frees up his other hand. Now both of my breasts receive equal attention as his mouth alternates between them. That serpentine tongue is cool and agile, circling and lapping faster than I can process.

He keeps going until my hips start to buck, and I begin to wonder if I can come like this—from nothing more than his hands and mouth on my breasts. His pace is agonisingly slow, and soon frustration begins to gnaw at me. I’m so close. My core is weeping, clit pulsing in time with my heart as my hips strain towards him.

Then, right when I’m about to give in and demand he move faster, he stops.

I pant, looking up at him through watery eyes as I fight the urge to beg, to plead. If I do that, I might charm him, and I promised I never would.

So I bite my tongue and simply stare at him as he traces the line of my waistband slowly before tugging my leggings and panties down to my knees. I go to kick the garment away, but my boots prevent it. Bree doesn’t seem to mind, grabbing the fabric between my legs and using it to lift me.

When he’s finished arranging us, he’s trapped his head inside the triangle made by my thighs and clothing, propped up on his elbows with his hands palming and raising my ass to his mouth.

The first brush of that forked tongue against my clit makes him groan against my soaking wet flesh. It also has me forgetting my promise entirely. My hands leave the headboard, only to be pinned back into place a second later.

I glance up, blinking at the whip of fire and bone that’s holding them in place without burning me or the cushions beneath me. I follow the line of vertebrae back to the dullahan in the corner, who raises a single scolding

brow.

I'm immobilised. Completely at their mercy. My knees are caught over Bree's shoulders, my legs unable to do more than hang there limply as he teases my slit with the barest flicks of that serpentine tongue.

"Relax," Bree murmurs, and I wonder idly if he's talking to me or himself.

His hands clench on my butt, and I hiss out a breath as he finally works his way up to a full lick. Unlike a normal fae, this snake tongue is cool against overheated flesh, and I gasp as it darts between my folds.

Bree's eyes roll back in his head. "Fuck. Just as delicious as you were before."

Then he attacks in earnest, his tongue flicking over my clit faster than I can process, before taking a leisurely lick down to my entrance, only to skitter away again.

My púca is the master of teasing. I'm pretty sure I hate him for it, or at least, that's what I tell myself as he rings my clit, then lashes it with the lightest licks.

Is it possible to die of gentleness? His exploration is riding the line between pleasure and frustration, the two blending until I can't tell which is fuelling the urge to scream.

"Bricriu," I moan, head falling back. "Harder, I'm begging you. Please."

My eyes are screwed shut, but I still feel it when he freezes. His tongue leaves my skin all together, and I almost weep at my own stupidity.

"You could blindfold her," Drystan suggests smoothly. "I'd suggest a gag, but I'm partial to the way she cries out when she comes."

Bree's tongue slips out again, brushing against me of its own accord. "No. I... I trust her."

"You risk pushing yourself too far—"

"No offence, unseelie, but would you kindly shut up and let me tongue fuck our mate's pussy in peace?" Bree's eyes flash bright between my thighs.

Said tongue sinks into me, going deep on the heels of that statement. Whatever Drystan might've said in reply is cut off as I clench hard around the intrusion. Bree's answering groan vibrates through my soul and makes my toes curl. I'm not sure if it's his sound magic to blame, or just the natural baritone of his voice rumbling through me.

I can't last. I don't even want to try. A few licks later and the orgasm that's been building finally crashes over me in a wave of light that leaves me

panting and trembling.

Softer licks draw me down, extending the pleasure without stoking the flames again. I shut down on the tiny part of me that wants to go again.

Drystan is right. Pushing Bree might only set him back in the long run. I'm still cursing myself for my slip up of begging him earlier.

So when he moves out from between my legs, tongue darting out to savour the last of my release shining on his chin, I flop back against the mattress, exhausted. Bree moves up until he's lying next to me, and I watch as his tongue returns to normal midway through licking his lips. The second he's free of my legs, Drystan's whip uncoils from around my arms, and Bree takes them in his hands, rubbing the skin even though the whip left no marks.

"Better?" he asks.

My smile is shy, despite what we just did. "May I..." I gesture at the bulge in his ripped leathers, and he stiffens.

"Not today." He looks over his shoulder at the Winter Court fae still sitting in the armchair. "But I think I know someone who might appreciate the attention."

"Her fever is over." Drystan's tone is hard, dousing the ember of interest simmering beneath my skin. "She has no need to—"

"Drystan," I say, silencing him. "I want to."

His body turns rigid. "Rhoswyn, you may not like what I prefer."

Bree shifts closer, his voice a whisper. "He wants to control you. Would you let him?"

"Yes." I don't even hesitate. "I want that."

So much of my life is spent making big decisions that handing over control in this would be a relief. I've already proven how bad I am at initiating any kind of romantic activity with my mates, and while I'm sure I'll get better at that with time, it's not something I want to worry about on top of everything else.

"You say 'stop' in the mortal tongue and everything stops," Drystan promises. "But if you mean it, get on your knees and crawl to me."

THIRTY-SIX

RHOSWYN

This is a test. I know it. That still doesn't make it any easier for me to make that first move. Abandoning Bree—who seems content to watch—I shimmy to the edge of the bed, then hesitate at the sight of my shoes and leggings still in a mess around my legs.

A flash of heat later, they're gone. Incinerated.

There's nothing in the way of me doing exactly as he asked, except my pride and the kicking of my heart in my chest. The tiles of the floor are dark and foreboding in the moonlight.

"You can still back out," Drystan murmurs, sensing my thoughts.

He doesn't mean it to be a taunt, but it feels like one, anyway.

Bree comes up behind me, pressing a kiss to the back of my neck. "This is just here, just now. Outside of our chambers, you're the Nicnevin, and we'll follow your orders to the grave. But when you're in here, with your clothes off, you belong to him."

"To us," Drystan corrects, absently.

"And we have the Call. The second you feel afraid, he'll stop."

Drystan's eyes haven't left my face the entire time. For an instant, I'm glad that my aura made it impossible for him to look at me directly before. Had I been subjected to the full force of that burning gaze from the second I stepped into Faerie, I don't think I would've been brave enough to leave the inn after my first night.

There's so much intensity there, all of it laser-focused on me as I take a breath and slip from the safety of the mattress and onto my knees.

"Look at me," he demands the second I dip my head to avoid facing the intimacy of the moment.

When I look up again, something in his expression twists, and he looks over me at Bree.

"She's not ready for this."

Bree answers before I can. "I think Rose and I are both sick of people trying to tell us what we are and aren't ready for."

I nod. "I want to."

Drystan's shoulders relax. Not much, but enough that I gather myself and

crawl towards him. The whole time, I'm painfully aware of my breasts hanging beneath me and my ass in the air, and the view that Bree must be getting—that both of them must be getting.

From down here, the armchair appears to be a throne, and Drystan, a cruel lord sitting upon it, watching me debase myself at his feet.

I'm so in my head that I don't notice my dullahan unlacing the front of his trousers until I come face to face with his pierced dick.

"Come here," he beckons, spreading his thighs to make a space for me between them.

The distance shouldn't feel so intimate, given that we've been pressed up against one another on horseback for weeks, but looking up at him now makes me feel small, vulnerable.

He's holding his length in one hand, and the dim light of the candles catches on the metal around the head of his dick.

"Holy shit," Bree murmurs. "Is that a king's crown?"

Drystan grunts an affirmative. "I don't want to talk about it right now. I want to teach her how to suck my cock properly."

Bree hisses, but for once I don't take the callous tone to heart. Drystan isn't telling me anything I don't already know about my oral skills. My fever was a mess of passion, and while it was hot, I wasn't exactly in the frame of mind to master my technique. I'm still learning how to please them, just like they're learning how to please me.

"Teach me how to suck your cock?" I ask, tracing the line of piercings down the underside of his shaft with my eyes.

"Stick your tongue out."

The smell of smoke wafts over me as I do what he says, opening my mouth and offering my tongue. His hand comes up to cup my chin as the other angles his cock so the pierced head rubs along my taste buds, filling my senses with the salty sweetness of his pre-cum and the cool bite of metal.

The head of him slides deeper, invading my mouth.

"Breathe through your nose."

I startle, not from his words, but from the lightest of touches on my shoulders.

"It's just me," Bree promises, gathering my hair in his hands and holding it back. "Can I stroke your wings, dragonfly?"

"Mmpf," I try to nod my consent around Drystan's length, but he's at the back of my throat, making talking impossible until he draws back. "Yes,

just... keep talking to me?"

I've barely gotten the words out before Drystan surges forward again, seating himself so deeply that I have to work hard not to gag.

"Relax your throat," Bree coaches, his fingers trailing softly down my back, right between the membranes of my wings. "Breathe through your nose. Goddess, you look so beautiful like this. So perfect."

My eyes are watering, but I do as he says. Without meaning to, I swallow convulsively around Drystan, drawing him deeper.

"Fuck," he curses, fingers gripping my jaw a little tighter before he realises and releases me. "Use your tongue."

"Everyone thinks it's about speed or suction," Bree murmurs in my ear. "But really, it's all about keeping him nice and wet and having a good rhythm. Can you do that for him, dragonfly? Can you keep bobbing on his cock until he comes down your perfect throat?"

I want to reply, but I end up just drawing back and relaxing my throat as Drystan rocks up into my mouth again. Instinctively, I flutter my tongue along the underside of his length, letting him wind his hand into my hair and take over, guiding me up and down.

It feels like I'm in a dream. I could never have imagined Bree or Drystan initiating such a thing, and yet here I am, trapped between the two of them. I'm not sure if my eyes are burning from the tenderness with which the púca is stroking my wings or the savagery with which the dullahan is fucking my throat. Feather-light kisses pepper my shoulder as my own drool slips free of my lips and runs down my chin.

I love it, and I don't understand *why*.

Bree's fingers skim over the veins in my wing, and the membrane shudders.

"So much dust," he mumbles, pressing another kiss to the tip of my ear as Drystan pulls my head back. "All for us. Coat us with it, dragonfly. Let them all know who we belong to."

Something deep in me clenches, then purrs in satisfaction. My wings flutter, propelling another waft of the sparkling glitter across all three of us.

Bree traces the curve of my shoulder with a flick of his tongue, tasting it, and he groans. "Delicious. Only your pussy tastes better."

Drystan releases the base of his cock to swipe his own hand through the mess I've made and groans his agreement as he licks the dust from his hand. His hips buck as he swallows, throat bobbing as he goes even deeper.

Bree's fingers leave my wings, and deep in my abdomen something pangs with disappointment. I didn't even realise how close I was until he stopped. From just having my wings played with. I arch my back, trying to tempt him to return, but his hands are travelling lower, stroking over the curve of my ass to the sensitive backs of my thighs.

One finger traces the seam of my sex, playing in the dampness across my clit, then he pushes two inside, thrusting into me, rubbing and curling his fingers against my G-spot.

I detonate, crying out around Drystan's cock as my muscles tense and then release. I swallow reflexively, and he roars in answer, the sound so loud that the crystal chandelier tinkles. His cock jerks, his release jetting down my throat and filling my mouth until a little spills from the corner of my lips.

"Fuck," he says, the second he catches his breath and pulls free. His hands leave my hair, and his thumb catches the tiny bit of escaped cum, feeding it back to me. "Don't waste any of it."

I accept the offering, sucking on his thumb until the tips of his ears catch light.

"Beautiful," he praises.

His thumb leaves my mouth, and then he hesitates.

"This is the part where you cuddle her," Bree mutters, moving back. "Or does aftercare not exist in the Winter Court?"

"No one cuddles in Calimnel," Drystan scoffs, but the harsh lines of his derision fade as he looks at me. "Do you... do you need me to hold you?"

All the words seem to have dried up in my mouth.

"Of course she does, you idiot." Bree tugs his jacket back on. "She was a virgin no more than a few weeks ago, and you just face fucked her like a professional whore. She might've enjoyed it, but can't you see how confused that's making her?"

Watching Drystan slowly open his arms is so painful it's almost amusing, and once I've climbed into his lap, it's painfully clear he doesn't know what he's doing.

"You've never hugged anyone before, have you?" I ask, quietly.

His arms tighten. "What makes you say that?"

My heart thumps sadly at the lack of denial. "Most people don't hold their elbows out and..."

"And?"

"You're deliberately avoiding eye contact," Bree notes. "Goddess, you

look so awkward right now. Just hold her. Relax. You just had your cock in her mouth. You don't have to touch her using only your fingertips."

It takes a second—and me snuggling into his chest as if he's Jaro—but eventually the stiff winter lord melts just a little.

"Are you unharmed?" he asks.

"I think he's trying to ask how you're feeling," Bree comments, taking a cautious seat beside us and stroking my hair out of my face.

How am I feeling? Honestly, I have no idea. "I liked it." I settle for. "I..."

"You feel like you shouldn't?" Bree asks.

My noise of agreement gets stuck in my throat, so I settle for a nod. "Does that make me a whore?"

Both of them hiss. "No."

"Never." Drystan's arms actually tighten a little around me. "It's perfectly normal to want to hand over control for a little while. It's perfect, actually."

"It made me feel safe," Bree admits. "Knowing you wouldn't demand things and that I was in control. I couldn't have done what we just did if you wanted to be in charge. I would've lost my nerve."

"There's nothing wrong with that either," Drystan advises. "While I don't have your history, I... I have also not always been in control over what happened with my body. I find being in charge in the bedroom allows me to relax and enjoy sex."

"You suspected I would be the same." The púca's eyes narrow.

"I suspected if you attempted to make love to her like an ordinary fae, you would find yourself facing triggers you hadn't considered." *Are Drystan's fingers playing with my hair?* "What would have happened had she asked to be on top? Did you think about the chance that she might try to reciprocate without warning you?"

Bree looks away. "I thought I could handle it."

"She's too precious to risk making assumptions. Fortunately, she's a natural submissive."

I bristle. "I can take charge."

"I didn't say you couldn't," Drystan retorts, evenly. "As Nicnevin, you are in command of hundreds of lives every day. Your trust and willingness to let us take the burden away is a gift. We both understand that, and we're grateful for it."

I lapse into silence.

"That's why you came to supervise," Bree murmurs. "You believed I'd

hurt her.”

Drystan doesn't deny it.

“How much did you hear before?” the púca continues.

“Enough. Your father charmed you into that brothel, I assume?”

“Not like you think.” Bree picks at a rip in his trousers. “He was always gambling, always drunk, always racking up debts and relying on me to get him out of them. I did it because I was only interested in the music, and he would use his contacts—his magic—to get us the best gigs. We landed good patrons, and patrons meant I could do what I loved. It was all I ever knew. He used to make it out like it was the two of us against the rest of the world.” A pause. “Really, it was only ever about him and who he could use to get the fame and recognition he'd never been talented enough to accrue on his own.

“I needed him, though. I was never charismatic enough to score patrons on my own. I don't have that spark that makes others like me.”

“A difficult position to be in,” Drystan acknowledges.

“Eventually, I decided it wasn't worth it,” Bree says. “I cut him off. I knew enough people to get by playing in inns, and I was fed up with fixing his messes. I wanted to seek out my mother's family.” He scoffs. “For all the good that did me.”

It's so hard not to reach out, to offer comfort through touch, but I know he won't want it. “Your mother...”

“Died in childbirth,” Bree confirms. “She was high fae. Her parents took one look at my tattoos and refused to raise me. I suppose I should be grateful to my father for not sticking me in an orphanage and being done with me.” He sighs. “He wasn't so bad when I was younger. I thought if I cut him off, it would help him realise that he needed to get his life back together.” His voice cracks a little.

“He didn't, obviously.” Drystan seems completely unaffected. “I assume his debts became overwhelming and so he charmed you into taking them on in his stead.”

“It wasn't so bad in the beginning,” Bree murmurs. “They made more money pitting me against other under fae in fights than they did trying to whore me out. Most high fae won't touch an under fae's cock with a ten-foot pole, but I was good at surviving, and the more I fought, the more my tattoos started to appear. I used to dream of which instrument I'd wake up with next. Which songs I'd be able to play with it, but I never gained another after they forced me into those pits. It was always a new weapon. A new instrument of

death.”

“Bree,” I murmur.

“Then your Call came,” he continues, as if I haven’t spoken. “I was free. For the first time in *centuries*, I was free. Do you know what that’s like? How terrifying it is? I ran, but I had no idea how to survive in the real world anymore. I don’t think I lasted longer than a fortnight before bounty hunters dragged me back. It didn’t take long for someone to notice I was suddenly indestructible. After that... after that, I made more money in the brothel. I could survive things that would’ve killed or maimed other whores. I was a priceless product, and the high fae delighted in the opportunity to indulge their perversions.”

“I’ll kill them all,” I promise, and Drystan raises a brow in disbelief. “Anyone who took advantage of you.”

Bree looks up, green eyes haunted. “I plan to do that for myself, dragonfly.” He pauses. “But that’s not the point of telling you all of this. My father is ruthless and motivated solely by greed. If he’s involved with King Eero, we can assume it’s not for anything good. We need to be careful.”

Drystan nods. “When the redcap returns from wherever he blinked Wraith, we’ll warn him—though it shouldn’t be an issue, given how easily he shrugged off Rose’s charm. Where is Jaro?”

I stiffen. “He needed some space.”

“Rose’s advances triggered his wolf,” Bree notes. “I’m pretty sure he was five seconds away from biting her and starting a mating bond before he ran off.”

“Great, so there’s a mentally unstable shifter roaming the halls of the Summer Palace with no idea he’s at risk from a *púca* with charm magic.” Drystan stands, lifting me effortlessly before depositing me on the bed. “Stay here. I’ll sort it.”

He’s out of the door in the next second, and Bree shakes his head. “Perhaps if he lost the overdeveloped sense of responsibility, he’d be a little less...”

I shake my head, drawing the covers around me to fight the sudden chill. “No. I’m pretty sure that’s just how he is.”

THIRTY-SEVEN

JAROMIR

Every single step is a battle. The wolf is snarling in my mind, demanding that I turn back, take what Rose is offering, and then sink my teeth into her neck and demand she do the same in return. High fae murmur as I rush past them like my ass is on fire, headed in no direction in particular.

Before I know it, I'm outside in the enormous courtyard, skidding past the immaculate stone gardens draped with heavy vines of ripening grapes. The night air is heavy with the chirping of insects and the scent of the sea, but my wolf can't get the sweet floral scent of our mate out of his nose. The sounds of her little gasps as we devoured her mouth chase me farther from her.

Can't mate her. She won't know what's happening. It could screw up the bonds with the rest of the Guard.

"Sir, the king has—" The portly Guard at the gate cuts off as I let out a roar worthy of a lion shifter, rather than a wolf.

The acrid smell of piss hits me as I run past him, shoving the wooden doors of the palace wide as I flee through the winding, steep roads of the city, searching for a park, an open space, somewhere I can shift and let the beast roam.

I just need him to wear himself out. Once he's calm, I can reason with him. I hope. He doesn't really want to upset Rose. If I can just get him to listen...

The meadows and forests of the Summer Court blur past me before I realise how far I've run, and my wolf isn't waiting anymore. Dirt shifts beneath my paws, erupting with a hundred different scents as I shed my clothes and shake out my fur.

I'm gone. A passenger in my own body in a way I haven't been since I was a teenager struggling with control. It takes a lot to wear out an adult shifter, and the sun is already climbing in the sky by the time my wolf finally stops to drink from one of the streams we pass. I'm drifting, holding on in case he decides to do something stupid like race back to the city and burst into Rose's room, but I don't think he will.

Sure, he's furious at those who 'killed' her, but even he recognises those

threats aren't here now. Mostly, he's... sad. Rejected. Disappointed in me and in Rose.

"It wasn't her choice. None of this is her fault."

But the wolf doesn't understand.

As he curls up on the bank, all he knows is that I've told him our mate doesn't want us. That he's not good enough. The loyal heart of the beast is convinced it's because we failed to protect her a hundred times over, unable to believe that none of those deaths were real. All he wants to do is slaughter her enemies. Prove his worthiness. Mate her.

Slaughter. Prove. Mate.

The instinctive chant becomes a little more hopeless each time.

There's no Lore here to hurt me until the wolf submits either.

I'm so caught up in trying to force a shift that I don't notice the hunters at my back. And my wolf? He no longer cares as the net comes down. Darkness follows shortly after.

"SIR JAROMIR."

I know that voice. Where do I know that voice from? Why is my head so foggy? Did my sisters get my wolf drunk again?

"Sir Jaromir, you have to wake up."

One eye opens, but my vision is so blurry that I have to blink several times to clear it. My wolf is hiding, almost silent in my mind, and all I can garner from him is a general sense of shame that makes no sense. The wind is buffeting, ruffling my hair, and chilling my bare skin. The scent of the sea is everywhere. I must've shifted back in my sleep.

Rose. Where is Rose?

My head whips up so fast that it makes me dizzy, and I vomit before I can realise where we are.

This is a cage, suspended in the sky. An *iron* cage. Barely big enough for my wolf to stand in. It's Fomorian made—and for a second, I have the insane thought that our enemy has somehow set up a prison in the sky. Below, the jewel-bright sea crashes on familiar beaches, and above...

Familiar tan stone. We're beneath the archway of the sun. How?

Glamour. It must be.

“Sir Jaro—”

I push up onto my elbows, groaning as the iron makes the task more onerous than it should be. “Prince Dare?”

It’s been some time since I last saw Nicnevin Diana’s second youngest son, but there’s no mistaking the silver blond hair he shares with Florian, or his ice-blue eyes. He hangs in a cage that’s a similar size to mine, his clothes dirty and unkempt. A banshee female I vaguely recognise as his mate is curled up in his arms. He’s doing his best to shield her from the impact of the metal, but she’s not coping well. Neither of them are. They’re emaciated, their usually tanned skin is wan and glistening with sweat, and I’m pretty sure those are black lines tracing up his mate’s arm.

Shit. Iron poisoning.

“My sister,” the young prince says. “Has she arrived in Siabetha? Can you use your bond to warn her away?”

Swallowing, because every instinct in me screams that this is a bad omen, I reply, “Even if this iron wasn’t an issue, she’s already here. The princesses welcomed her yesterday.” And without a full mating bond, I can’t warn her of anything.

Dare’s expression crumples. “Then we’re too late.”

Dread hits me. “Too late for what?”

“Eero’s planning a coup.”

“What?” How could he be so stupid? We’re in the middle of a war!

“He’s even got the grand clerics on his side.” Dare’s hold on his mate tightens, and he strokes a greasy lock of her hair out of her face. “We tried to get word out before you came, but we were betrayed.”

What? “Betrayed? By whom?”

Before Dare can answer, his mate jerks in his arms like she’s been struck by lightning. Her back bows, mouth falling wide as her mate desperately tries to shield her stiffened limbs from contact with the bars.

Then the banshee screams.

Rose. Her name echoes through my mind in a terrified loop as I clamp my hands over my ears to try to stifle the haunting screech.

THIRTY-EIGHT

RHOSWYN

“This is preposterous,” Kitarni says, the bright green leaves of her hair trembling in the baking summer sun. “What right do you have to prevent the Nicnevin and her high priestess from visiting the city temple?”

Beneath their glamour, my wings flutter, and I do another repetition of the exercises Florian taught me while I wait for the dryad to sort this out. The heat is beginning to make me uncomfortable, and I wonder idly about moving closer to the small strip of shade beside the wall as they continue to argue.

Our first real day here, and we’re already hitting obstacles. Why am I not even surprised?

“Orders, Your Worship.” To his credit, the palace guard does look deeply uncomfortable. “King Eero has ordered the palace sealed due to the reports of Fomorian ships. There are even rumours that the blade prince is headed for Siabetha.”

“It’s our honour to keep you safe, Your Majesty,” the second guard promises, bowing again. “We heard what happened in Pavellen, but rest assured, no Fomorians will breach these walls.”

Great. Caed is part of the reason we’re stuck here. Ignoring the tiny flutter in my chest—which is not eager for news of him, damn it—I massage my temples.

“I’m sure I’ve never felt safer,” Kitarni says, and I may be imagining it, but I think there’s a hint of dry sarcasm in her tone.

“There’s always the palace chapel,” his female counterpart suggests, tugging at the chin strap of her helm. “You’re welcome to pray there, Nicnevin.”

“The Nicnevin’s pilgrimage requires her to visit the temple,” Kitarni tries again. “Surely, you’ve heard the blessings Danu has been bestowing upon temples through her? Why would you not want that for your city?”

“We do, your worship.” He bows again. “But we swore to the king that no one would enter or leave.”

Kitarni swings to look back at me and at Lore beside me. The redcap holds up a dagger, silently offering to kill both of them and be done with it,

and the dryad shakes her head.

“I will speak with the king on his return.” Her tone makes it clear how she expects the conversation to go. “Any news of how his hunt—”

“Lady Nicnevin!”

Oh great, it’s Máel again, and on her heels is her sister.

I don’t need to fail at charming the heirs to the summer throne today. I’m already worried about Jaro’s and Drystan’s continued absence. I’ve not seen either of them since last night, and Bree has taken off to search the halls for his father.

Even Bram is gone, searching for news of our brother, Dare, and his mate in his fox form.

Now I’m supposed to play nice with these princesses?

“We missed you at breakfast, my lady,” Ciara says, bowing low as soon as we’re close enough to hold a conversation. “The tutor we hired for you is awaiting us in the palace library, if you’d like to meet him.”

“And the entire court is throwing a banquet tonight to welcome you.” Máel grins like that’s a good thing, but I’m just confused.

“I thought we were welcomed last night.”

“Not thoroughly enough, apparently,” Lore comments, dropping his cap onto my head where it turns into a wide-brimmed sunhat.

“Dismiss the under fae, Nicnevin,” Máel continues. “He’s positively uncivilised.”

“My Guard stays with me.” And I’m already sick of the attitude she has towards everyone around me. “If your father is so concerned for our safety that he’s ordered his soldiers to keep us prisoner in this palace, then surely you understand the need.”

Lore comes up behind me, kissing my neck. Máel averts her gaze, lips turning down in disgust, but her sister can’t seem to look away.

“It’s—”

I cut Máel off with a look. “We are not friends, princess. I do not need your opinion, nor did I ask for it, so keep it to yourself.” I turn to her sister. “Lead the way to this tutor.”

It’s not until we’ve taken several steps away from the gate that Máel bows stiffly and excuses herself.

“You must forgive my sister,” Ciara says, leading us back into the cool, white-washed corridors. “She can’t help our upbringing. There are not many under fae in the summer palace.”

“That’s what makes it so boring,” Lore quips, and Kitarni suppresses a snort.

“I’m aware of the Summer Court’s attitudes to our kind,” the high priestess admits. “Eero has never made any secret of his distaste.”

“Máel hangs off his every word,” Ciara sighs.

I stay quiet. I’m not sure I trust this princess any more than the stuck-up rude one, for all that she may claim to be different.

“I think it’s nice that you’re so open about your relationship with an under fae. When the Nicnevin had an exclusively high fae Guard, it just gave fae like my father an excuse to believe themselves better than everyone else.”

“What made you choose to believe otherwise?” Kitarni asks, curiously.

Ciara’s expression turns guarded. “Faith in the Goddess,” she answers smoothly. “She doesn’t have favourites, so why should we?”

“Indeed.” Kitarni seems mollified, and I suppose it’s not like Ciara can lie. “Besides, isn’t Prince Dare’s mate under fae?”

Ciara stiffens. “Yes. Yvaine is my cousin on my mother’s side, a banshee, since she takes after her father’s side. She’s one of the few under fae courtiers, and only by virtue of her mother’s nobility.”

So we’re technically related? Biting my lip, I can’t help but soften a little towards this princess. Perhaps her mother’s ties to the under fae are why she seems so much less abrasive and prejudiced than Máel.

“Here we are,” the princess says, with a final bow, interrupting the obvious follow up question about where Dare and her cousin are now. “I’ll leave you with Master Cyreus. He’s a good male and truly gifted. He’s taught me a great many things.” Her cheeks darken slightly. “You shouldn’t need to worry about being disturbed while in the library. Not many of our court still value reading.”

That last is said sadly as she turns and leaves that I have to crush an errant pang of sympathy for her as I push open the door and come face to face with a green-haired fae for less than a second before Lore is in front of me.

“Merrow.” I’ve never heard such anger in his voice.

The fae in question raises webbed hands in surrender, showing off more apple-green scales across his arms. “Redcap, I pose no threat.”

Lore doesn’t believe him. He sinks down, palming a second blade. “Pet, take my hat and run.”

“Lorcan. This merrow already has a cap,” Kitarni murmurs. “He has nothing to gain from stealing yours.”

“I swear to Danu, I bear you and your mate no ill will. I am simply a scholar, hired to teach.” The merrow bows. “My cap was a gift from a dying friend many centuries ago. I mean no harm, and even if I did, I am no match for your skill.”

The hat he’s wearing is soft and crocheted, barely pink. The vast majority of his hair is tucked away inside it, with only a few strands slipping free to frame his face.

“Titania,” I whisper under my breath, caught in the middle of a standoff. “Want to explain what’s going on here?”

“Merrows are sea dwellers,” my grandmother explains, popping into existence. “They normally cannot come on land. A redcap’s hat contains their soul, the soul of a land-dweller—and there is enough magic in one to give them the ability to walk on land too. In the past, merrows would ambush ships and drown redcaps for the privilege, and as no redcap can survive without their cap... It has led to some serious animosity between the two races.”

They can’t survive without their cap? Then why does Lore keep giving me his?

In front of me, my Guard is still surveying the room like he expects more merrows to jump from the towering shelves full of scrolls, but the scholar is backing away.

“I didn’t know where you were with your reading, my lady Nicnevin,” he says. “I’ve prepared lots of material for you, but if you’re already making good progress...”

“She is,” Kitarni says, clearly following his lead and trying to pretend that Lore isn’t a hair’s breadth from murdering him. “Nicnevin Rhoswyn is a fast learner.”

Taking a deep breath, I put my hand on Lore’s shoulder. “I promise, I won’t let him touch your cap, but I do need to learn.”

“Princess Ciara suggested me because I have the magic of imparting,” Cyreus admits, as if I should know what that is.

“He can literally bestow knowledge,” Titania explains. “It’s a sought-after gift. With his magic, whatever he teaches you will stay with you.”

“I’m quite good,” he promises. “If you permit me to help, I believe you may be nearly fully literate by the time you leave here.”

“Is that not cheating?” I ask, even as everything in me begs to take him up on his offer.

“It won’t last,” the merrow admits. “My magic fades over time, but once I’ve imparted the knowledge to you, assuming you begin reading regularly, you’ll be practising without even noticing it. By the time it does wear off, you won’t know the difference.”

“You’ve already worked hard to master the basics,” Kitarni says. “And besides, were you not saying only a little while ago that there was simply too much to learn? This is a gift—one far better than I would’ve expected from Eero and his daughters.”

I hesitate some more, during which time Lore finally relaxes enough to pull me into his side.

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, pet.” He nuzzles my ear, and it feels oddly like he’s staking a claim. His hat clinches a little tighter around my head. “No one will force you.”

He’d kill them if they tried.

“And what does the princess ask in exchange for this gift?” I ask, because I don’t believe any of this can be so simple.

“Nothing,” Cyreus answers. “You’ve already done more than you know for fae like me in this court. I swear to Danu, there is no debt.”

“An illiterate queen serves no one,” I mumble, eyeing the scrolls on the table. “Very well. I accept.”

THIRTY-NINE

CAED

Siabetha. Fuck, I forgot how damned hot the Summer Court is. The sea breeze is the only thing about this city that's bearable, and even that's only a fleeting relief when you factor in the sticky humidity. There's no escape from Prae's whining either. She despises the hot weather and seems to think she needs to remind me of it every few minutes.

"My tits are so sweaty," Prae complains, rubbing the fabric of the gauzy fae top she's wearing. "How the hell do fae live with wearing so much fabric? I'm boiling alive."

I must not murder my cousin. I must not murder—

"It's supposed to be winter, for Ancestors' sake. And the—"

"We're here," I snap, the words sharper than I mean them to be. "Now shush before the city guard overhears you."

There is no city wall, unlike Pavellen, but there must be double the number of armoured fae patrolling around. It's almost like they've declared martial law.

"You there!" A soldier calls to a gnome on our left. "Where's your permit?"

"Permit?" the little guy stammers. "We're just following the Nicnevin's pilgrimage. We didn't know we needed a permit. I swear—"

"No permit, no entry to the city. Get lost."

The gnome turns, dejected, then turns back. "Will you at least tell us what miracle she's performed at the city temple? I just need to know."

"Miracle?" The soldier looks at him like he's lost his mind. "The lady Nicnevin is being kept safe in the palace. She isn't swanning about the city performing miracles."

A wailing noise splits the air a second later, and the soldier on the right withdraws a shimmering brass whistle from her pocket. The second it's free of confinement, the damned thing grows wings and soars overhead to a spot on our left.

"Remove your glamour!" she snaps, hurrying after the whistle.

A goblin drops her invisibility glamour, holding up shaking hands. She squeaks as she's tackled to the ground. "I just need to see the Nicnevin!"

“I’m arresting you in the name of the king for attempting to enter Siabetha without a permit,” the guard says, wrestling the much smaller fae down.

Shit. There goes that idea.

“We don’t have permits,” Prae hisses at me.

A smudge of black catches my eye, sandwiched between crates. A vulpine nose and a pair of twisting ears disappear quickly around the corner.

“This way.” I pull her around the side of one white-washed house, down an alleyway, and behind a cart.

“Wait, where are we—” Prae cuts off as she comes face to face with a naked Bram.

“What are you doing here, lad?” he hisses, eyes darting around behind us, making sure we weren’t followed.

“I could ask the same of you,” I retort. “Aren’t you supposed to be with Rose?”

“I’m looking for one of her Guard,” Bram replies. “He ran out of the city in wolf form a week ago and hasn’t returned.”

“The goody-two-shoes knight left Rose?” Prae sounds as incredulous as I am.

Bram twists his hands together. “As part of the distraction that allowed your escape, he was tortured until his wolf went feral. No one wants to worry Rose, but there’s been no sign of him since...”

“Since...?” I press, but Bram isn’t going to answer me. I know that look. “Fine. Can you get us into the city?”

“Why?”

Ancestors, is he really going to make me say it?

“So I continue my wonderful tour of the five courts. Why do you think?” I run a hand through my short hair, cursing the unfamiliar lack of length for the hundredth time. “She’s in danger. A priest rode here ahead of us. He knew about me, and he’s convinced we did something to screw up Rose’s Guard. He was talking about grand priests or some bullshit.”

“Grand clerics?” Bram’s eyes sharpen, and his ever-present fidgeting stops. “They’re trying to turn the temple against her.”

He paces, fur sprouting across his body as he tries to calm himself.

“This is worse than a missing shifter and an uppity priest, isn’t it?” I demand. “What’s going on?”

“Eero isn’t here,” Bram mutters. “My brother, Dare, and his mate, have

lived in this city for decades, but now no one seems to have heard of them. The princesses are keeping all the nobles locked up in the palace and are throwing parties every night while they pretend the city isn't in lockdown. Someone is up to something, and if the Temple is involved..."

"Then Rose has no power," Prae murmurs.

"What? Of course, she has power, she—"

"Not that kind of power, idiot." She shakes her head, and it's weird as hell to see both of her eyes roll with the glamour over them instead of the one good eye like I'm used to. "The temple has an army that serves the Nicnevin and guards the temples. If Rose is being cut off from those fae, then she has nowhere to flee and no one to back her up."

"The other four Guards—"

"Three," Bram corrects. "We've still heard nothing from Sir Jaromir. We have to assume he's either completely feral or otherwise distracted."

Rose's loyal lap dog, distracted? I can't see that happening.

"Ancestors," I mutter. "This is a shit show. You have to get us into that city. I can—"

"If what you say is true, and this cleric is using your position in her Guard against her, what good can come of you being discovered nearby?" Bram asks, seriously. "Look, lad, I get what you're trying to do, but you're not going to win any favours by landing her further into this mess than she already is. Just... go kill some Fomorians or something. Spy on your piece-of-shit father. Do something useful that's not..." He wrings his hands together. "You can't stalk her into accepting you back."

I scowl at him. "No. But I can be there if she needs me."

He puts his hands in the air. "You're just as stubborn as your damned mother."

My mother...? I frown, but he's already shifting, escaping the questions I want to ask.

The fox scampers down into the alley, then scurries through a crack in the wall we have no hope of following him through.

"Ancestors balls," I groan. "Well, there goes our one chance of getting into the palace."

This was a stupid idea.

"What now?" Prae asks, hefting her pack on her shoulders. "We can go back, get the horses. His suggestion about spying on Elatha has some merit. You have your glamour, and bringing Florian information on the armada

could win you some—”

“No. She’s in danger. I’m not about to just—Oh, stop looking at me like that! You know if she gets hurt and I’m not here, they’re just as likely to blame me for being absent as they are if I cause it.”

“True,” she admits. “So, what do you want to do?”

“We sneak into the city. Bram mentioned his brother and the shifter are missing. Maybe they’ll take us finding them as a sign of good faith.”

Last time, returning Bram to Rose at least got me a proper audience with her. And as crazy as it sounds, my gut is telling me that I can’t go too far from her right now. Whether that’s some stupid quirk of the Call keeping me close when I know she’s in danger, or simply some buried intuition, I don’t care.

Eyeing the side of the arch, I cock my head to one side.

“Remember that time we decided to climb the cavern walls to sneak food?” I ask.

“How could I forget?” Prae retorts. “You almost fucking killed us both with that stunt when you slipped and almost took me with you.”

Rolling my eyes at her this time, I point at the rock arch over the ocean. “At least we didn’t starve to death like my father intended. Look, the gradient is doable. We can climb.”

“And if we fall into the water and get eaten by some creepy fae fish, I will personally ensure you are remembered as the Ancestor with the dumbest ideas,” Prae mutters.

“That’s not a ‘no.’”

In answer, she just huffs and leads the way back down the road towards the white sandy beaches. “There better be one of those fancy spas I’ve heard about at the end of this.”

“We’ll pick an inn with one,” I promise.

“And that fancy wine.”

“Yes, that too.”

“And hot fucking whores to massage all my aching muscles.”

I draw up short, brows rising. “You’d fuck a fairy?”

She stiffens, then shrugs. “Can you really talk? I mean, we both know they’re pretty to look at. The males with wings...”

“Wings, huh?” I don’t know why I’m working so hard to keep the smirk off my face when she’s refusing to look at me. “Does it help if they’ve got pale hair too? Muscles for days... a bit like a certain—”

“If you finish that sentence,” Prae murmurs darkly. “I will take his fancy sword and run you through with it.”

“But would you really want to get blood on such a heartfelt gift—”

That quickly, there’s a knife at my throat, and I lose the ability to hold back my smirk. “Touchy, cousin?”

“I know you struggle with not being a cocky know-it-all,” Prae hisses. “But shut your mouth.” She sheathes her dagger and drops her pack to the sand. “We’re here because of your sad excuse for a love life, not mine. Let’s keep it that way.”

“If you say so.” Sand sinks beneath my feet as I take over the task of leading the way down to the beach.

Fae are everywhere, so I throw up a hasty invisibility glamour. “Stay close.”

“This climb is impossible,” she says, as we canvas the area.

“You know most invisible people don’t talk,” I hiss back.

I regret the snark in my words the moment I say them, but it’s borne of frustration. She’s right. The arch is too steep, the rock jagged, and the places where we could have ascended are already carved with steps that are well guarded by armoured soldiers.

“If only I brought my workshop,” Prae groans. “I was working on a grappling claw fired from a crossbow that might’ve—”

“Well, we don’t have that, do we? How else can we get up there?”

She shrugs. “Fly?”

I growl in frustration. “Let’s try the other side.”

We pass under the archway and onto the quieter beach on the far side. From this angle, it’s even more impossible. The fae have their homes hanging over the edge of the damned arch, creating smooth patches that would be impossible to traverse.

“Fuck,” I spit.

“We could try going back to the outer districts and sneaking through,” Prae murmurs, dodging a small barnacle-encrusted fishing boat that’s been abandoned on the sand. “We can glamour.”

“They caught the goblin,” I remind her. “It’s not going to help my case if Rose has to free me from *another* dungeon.”

Sighing, I plop my ass down in the sand, switching the invisibility glamour for my fae one. “Fine.”

“Fine?” Prae echoes, shading her eyes as she stares down at me in

confusion.

“I’m not leaving.” Fucking sand is already in my socks—of course it is. I take off one shoe, then the other, intent on ridding myself of the annoying grit. “I’ll sit here until she leaves.”

If something happens, I’ll charge the damned palace gates.

“As romantic as that sounds...” Prae says, rolling her eyes. “The tide is coming in, idiot. At least move up the beach.” She jerks her hand towards the fishing district up the bank behind us. “Come on, it might stink, but I deserve a nice bed and a bath.”

I can’t argue that both would be nice right about now, so I follow her back over the dunes towards the ramshackle buildings and fish-strewn drying racks of Siabetha’s poorest district.

Glancing over my shoulder, I take one last long look at the palace before we head inside. Though the entire royal complex overlooks the sea, the main keep juts out over the edge of the arch, boldly flying the violet flags of the Nicnevin alongside the white and gold of the Summer Court. Only magic and the whims of the ocean keep it and everyone inside from plunging into the water. Somewhere in those teetering towers is Rose, and she’s facing a threat I can’t even warn her about.

My hands fist as I stride away. The rest of her Guard better be fucking careful.

FORTY

RHOSWYN

I glare into the mirror like my reflection has personally offended me. In a way, it has.

I'm dressed up for yet *another* of these insufferable parties because someone stole my armour after I turned up to the first one wearing it. My hair has been coiffed and braided in the latest Summer Court style. The neckline of the sleeveless dress I'm wearing droops so low that it practically follows the curve of my areolae—and I was only afforded that much coverage after I refused to attend the second ball with my nipples showing—with a slit so far up my thigh that I'm scared to move wrong.

For all that Kitarni urges me to see the endless social events as networking and diplomacy, the truth is I am no closer to extracting Eero's vow.

It's been two weeks, and all I've accomplished is learning how to read and walk in these ludicrous heels properly.

Two weeks since I last saw Jaro. Two weeks since we arrived at this palace where all anyone seems to do is drink wine and dance. Two weeks of looking around corners for a bard I'm beginning to think Bree might've hallucinated.

I bring it up daily, but every time the answer Drystan and Kitarni give is the same: fae aren't mortal. A fortnight to clear his head is 'short' when compared to others.

Bree is the only one who takes my worries seriously, but he's too distracted to do anything about them.

Eero isn't coming with us, and when I brought up leaving to bless some more shrines and then returning, the princesses made it clear we're not allowed to leave.

Which, surely, makes us prisoners.

I thought we were making progress when the palace guards finally allowed Kitarni to leave and visit the city temple yesterday. The high priestess was patiently petitioning everyone with even a speck of power to let her go, and when she was finally successful, I was hopeful that she'd bring back news from outside, but I've heard nothing from her since she left. It

wouldn't surprise me to learn they've decided she's too much trouble and won't let her back in.

The longer we stay here, the more isolated and anxious I become.

Winter in the Summer Court has brought thunderstorms and humidity beyond the norm, and the only good thing about our stay is that I have finally, with Cyreus's help, learned to read and write the fae language. As much as Lore distrusts the merrow, he's been true to his word, and his gift is so remarkable I can't help but feel a little jealous.

I only wish he could teach me to use my magic or my wings with the same efficiency. Perhaps then I'd be distracted from the fact that I'm trapped, with no choice but to wait until Eero returns from this stupid hunt.

Even if I let Danu overtake me and burned the palace to the ground until someone tells me where my wolf and brother are—as I've fantasised about doing several times—all I would accomplish is an end to these stupid parties, and Eero would still be no closer to giving me what I came here for.

And the soldiers still claim this is all because of some supposed threat from the Fomorians.

A humourless laugh escapes before I can contain it, causing Wraith to look up from where he's splayed out on the cool stone of my balcony. The soldiers have no idea that Caed is here. He's been right under their noses for a week, and in all that time, I still haven't figured out whether I should tell the others.

"You look beautiful," Mab murmurs.

I brush off the compliment, stepping away from the mirror. "How goes things in Elfhame?"

"The Hellebore Knights have helped to establish supply lines to get more food into the city," Mab reports, fiddling with her armour. "Neila made a kelpie bargain to reach the city in record time, and her tactics have bought them a few more weeks..."

"And Florian?" I slip the bracelets that Lore keeps finding for me over my hands, pretending they aren't shaking as I await her answer.

"Still alive and fighting," Mab answers, and the tension leaves my shoulders in a rush. "He works well with the selkie, but he got Bram's hawk today and has been fretting about Dare since he opened it. Bram shouldn't have sent it."

I turn from the chest of jewels with a frown. "What do you mean?"

"It's a distraction," she says. "A warrior needs to keep his mind in the

fight.”

Swallowing, I turn away. “I know. But it is his brother. He should know.”

Florian takes the safety of all his siblings to heart, and Bram isn’t taking Dare’s absence well, either. He’s been shifting and sneaking out of the palace to search for him, enlisting Bree’s help and my guides’ when he can.

Nothing.

My *púca* currently sits cross-legged on a woven mat in the corner, his cat ears twitching as he uses his gift to listen to sounds across the entire city. He’s been withdrawn since we arrived, avoiding the balls and parties whenever he can, but he looks up as I approach.

“Are you ready?” I ask.

He stands in answer, extending a hand towards me. His arm is bare, Espen no doubt slithering the halls in his smallest form to look for any sign of Dare.

“You shouldn’t worry yourself so much,” he whispers, reaching out to soothe away the tiny furrow between my brows.

“Jaro has been missing for *two weeks*,” I whisper. “That’s not like him, no matter what his wolf is up to. The bond is telling me nothing, beyond that he’s nearby, which doesn’t match up with what everyone says about him going for a run to clear his head. But when I say that, you all just ignore me.”

The last anyone saw of him, he was running into the forest with fur erupting from his skin.

“We’re not ignoring you, dragonfly,” Bree murmurs. “But is Jaro in pain?”

“No,” I admit, huffing in defeat. “But his wolf is restless. What if he’s stuck again? We need to find him. Lore could...”

“Given that the last time Lore persuaded Jaro to return to human form, he did it by stabbing him, are you sure that you want to unleash the redcap?”

“No,” Drystan says, having appeared in the doorway while I wasn’t looking. “We discussed this. It’s better to wait until Eero has sworn his vow, and then we get Jaromir and get out of here. It was a bad idea to have an out-of-control wolf shifter in the Summer Palace, anyway.”

Like it's any better having two under fae. At least shifters are high fae and Jaro wouldn’t suffer the scorn I’ve seen Lore and Bree enduring.

“It doesn’t feel right without him,” I say for the hundredth time. “I mean it, there’s just—”

“Feelings are inconsequential,” Drystan dismisses me. “Logic says he is

fine. He hasn't drawn from you, as he would if he were in true danger, and personally, I think him taking the time to make sure he's stable and not a danger to his mate is a decision that shows wisdom beyond his years."

I deflate, and Bree squeezes my hand in sympathy, but anger follows on the heels of my disappointment, and I shake out of his grip.

"That's bullshit." My harshness takes both of them by surprise.

Mab gives me a small, approving nod, then disappears, as my guides have begun to do whenever they sense the conversation is about to get personal. I don't mistake her absence for her not being there—I suspect none of them can truly leave me for long—but the illusion of privacy is a gift.

"Excuse you?" Drystan chokes.

"If you truly believe feelings aren't important, why have you all been walking around me on eggshells since Jaro left?" I meet his eyes with my own, steeling myself for an argument. "You haven't so much as kissed me since we learned he left the palace." Since he saw me fight back tears. "I think you consider my feelings more important than you want anyone to know. I think they *scare* you."

"They do n—" He chokes, physically unable to finish the lie, and then his eyes widen as he realises what I've said must be true.

"I'll meet you both downstairs," Bree murmurs.

Without giving Drystan time to demand that he stay, he flees the room, Wraith hot on his heels, as if the emotion thick in the air was hard for even the barghest to swallow.

Now that we're alone, the dullahan runs a hand through his long black hair, tugging on the ends with exasperation.

"I am not... Calimnel is..." For once, the high fae lord is lost for words, and I'm almost satisfied to see the change in him. "Winter Court fae do not embrace *feelings*."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"What else is there?"

Gah, this *male*. "An admission that you care wouldn't go amiss."

His eyes bulge, and in the corner, another chair catches fire, reduced to cinders. Then, without warning, the winter fae reaches into his pocket and jerks out his hand. "This is enchanted."

I frown at the mass of twisted metal in his palm. "What?"

Sometimes, following his thought process is more difficult than following Lore's, and that's saying something.

Wait... I study him a little harder. Are his cheeks pinker than they were a second ago?

“Lorcan spoils you with gems, and you consider that an act of caring, correct?” he asks. “Why can’t I do the same?”

Shaking my head, I back away. “Is this...? You can’t just buy your way out of admitting your feelings for me, Drystan.”

He sighs, closing his hand over the metal, those narrow amber eyes flashing with something that looks almost like regret.

This means something, I realise. Whatever this is, it’s more than just a gift.

“No.” I stop him, closing my hand over his before he can take the trinket away. “I appreciate the thought. I’ll wear it every day. I just... It’s nice to hear the words sometimes, too.”

Something unreadable passes over his face, and his palm slowly opens again. I stare at the tangled mass of silver chains and branching metal, trying to discern the shape.

His throat bobs as he swallows. “In my court, displays of frivolous emotion are considered... shameful,” he confesses, coming to stand behind me so I can’t see his face. “To withstand the cold fury of the mountains, you need to be practical. Logical. Weakness will get you killed. Emotional rulers are quickly overthrown.”

His fingers brush my carefully arranged curls back from my shoulder and the metal settles around my neck with a chill that startles me, hugging the curve of my throat as he arranges the necklace.

“What you are asking is not easy for me.” The clasp snaps shut with a tiny click, but he doesn’t return to face me. “My own mother has never told me she cares for me, nor has anyone else involved in my raising. They let me live and spent resources to keep me alive as a child. To them—to me—that is enough.”

My stomach plummets. How can anyone never tell their child they love them? How can I expect a male raised that way to confess his undying love to me?

“It’s okay,” I whisper, my earlier anger banished. “I understand.”

“No. You are fretting over Jaromir’s absence, concerned about everything else. I will not have you waste your energy on such a ridiculous notion as my lack of consideration for your well-being.” There’s a hint of the arrogance I’ve come to know so well in that curt statement, and he huffs out a breath

like he's preparing to walk to the gallows.

"Every part of you, right down to the dust on your wings, has always had, and always will have, my unwavering devotion and attention." He brushes my hair back into place. "That never changes, whether I am awake or asleep, happy or furious. It will remain so for however many centuries you decide to reign as Nicnevin, and I am almost certain it will continue when I follow you to the Otherworld."

My hand rises to my throat but tangles in the metal. I look down and realise quickly that the spikes I mistook for branches are actually a pair of silver antlers wrapped in tiny thorny roses that brush my throat like a collar. Suspended between them is a single glistening diamond snowflake that sparkles with something brighter than any normal lustre. Magic.

His antlers, I realise, wrapped up in my namesake and tethered with a symbol of his court.

"It's beautiful." I pause. "I won't take it off."

He comes around to my side and offers me his arm. "Good."

Good? I suppose that's as close to approval as I'll ever come from him. Sighing, I let him lead me away from the privacy of my room and into the hallways of the Summer Palace. The sweet scent of Siabethan Nightshade is everywhere, and Drystan wrinkles his nose a second before he sneezes.

"Goddess-damned southern courts and their obsession with flowers," he mutters under his breath.

Tonight's ball isn't in any of the many ballrooms but out in the expansive courtyard. I don't know how the palace staff have time to arrange and decorate a new venue every night, but they've outdone themselves again. The columns have been hung with golden streamers, and the fae below are dressed in glittering metallic shades that make my iridescent purple gown stand out.

"Nicnevin, there you are!" *Oh Goddess, not Máel again.* The princess is wearing a gold dress that offsets her skin perfectly, and her braids are woven with tiny sunshine beads of the same colour.

Not for the first time, I fight a stab of jealousy for her tall and slender frame and how at ease she looks. For all her faults, she looks, acts, and breathes royalty.

Tonight, however, she's accompanied by a woman on a leash.

A human. A naked human.

How did I never notice how... *dull* they appeared before? Did Tom look

like this? My human parents?

It's rude, but I can't stop staring at the rounded tips of her ears or the scars across the left side of her curvaceous body.

"I forgot. You've not been here long enough to attend our pet parties!" Máel exclaims, grinning. "This is my current favourite. Isn't she exotic?"

"Exotic?" I echo, stunned.

The human is beautiful for a mortal, but it's nothing compared to the otherworldly beauty of the fae. Her long hair is pencil straight and wrapped with copper wire into a high ponytail, and her body has been painted a dull bronze that barely covers her essentials, accented with metallic swirls that blend with the tattoos on her arm. For all the finery she's been adorned with, the look she's regarding the princess with drips disdain. If she had a blade, I have no doubt Máel would be dead.

"She hasn't given me her name yet or eaten any of our food," Máel continues, oblivious to how stunned I am. "But it's only been a few days since she was brought to me."

"How is she here?" I ask, looking around and noticing for the first time that there are literally dozens of humans crawling about after their fae masters. Some are even doing tricks like juggling or gymnastics... and are those two fucking in the centre of the courtyard? "How are so many of them here?"

"Oh, the forests of our court are full of portals," Máel explains. "They stumble through or are brought back when they try to bargain. It's mostly the same things they're after: beauty, love, money, youth. This one fancies herself an explorer of the realms. She actually came from the portal in Calimnel. She was trying to use Faerie as a way to realm hop."

Mortals who realm hop? I can't imagine any of the residents of my old village being brave enough to try such a thing.

"It's good she was caught before she could get herself killed. They're so fragile, these mortals. They can't even fuck properly. Look how pathetic Jamie and Kerry look over there." She gestures at the middle-aged man who's red-faced and humping his partner on the dais. "He's boring her with his lack of skill, and she's faking every second in the hopes it earns her another drop of fae wine."

I don't look. I've seen enough.

"This is wrong."

"Come now." The princess attempts to laugh my words off. "This is our

way. We've kept the mortals for hundreds of years. You yourself were swapped for a mortal child. Surely you know that?"

"She wasn't swapped," Drystan snarls. "I had no use for a babe. The mortals fostered her in exchange for protection, gold, and a healing draught for their son."

Máel waves away his words. "Semantics. The point is, humans are fleeting. Barely better than animals. And we take such good care of them... when they behave." The last is aimed at her own human. "Won't you have a little wine, petal?"

"I would rather drink my own piss," the female retorts, and is rewarded for her crassness with a disciplinarian tug on her leash.

Máel actually looks embarrassed at the human's behaviour. "Sorry for her foul language, Nicnevin. She'll be better trained by the next party. For now, we'll take our leave."

"Whatever you're thinking," Drystan begins as the princess walks away, guiding her reluctant human behind her. "Don't."

"You can't actually agree with this?" I demand. "They're people."

"To most fae, they're amusements. They consider them treasured pets, not unlike your bond to Wraith." He raises a brow. "Regardless, no, I don't believe in it. Humans are inconvenient. But even if you free them, how do you plan on stopping them from starving to death now they've taken our food?"

I blink at him. "Those stories are true?" I half believed it was something Lore had made up to frighten me.

He nods. "How else do you think they're trained? They have no life outside of this now."

"What about her?" I jerk my head in the direction of Máel's human. "The realm hopper? She doesn't seem addicted yet."

Drystan sighs, then raises his eyes heavenward. "If you think freeing her will make a difference, then I would like to remind you that you have a crazy redcap at your disposal who enjoys making ludicrous romantic gestures and would consider breaking a human out of captivity and slaughtering her captors a fun evening."

I blink at him, trying to reconcile the words with the uptight male I know. "Are you...?"

"I will not repeat myself. Now, let's endure this party and continue to hope that Eero returns before tomorrow night, so we never have to attend

another.”

“There’s the grumpy fae lord I know and love.” My heart stutters, and I miss a step. I didn’t just say that out loud, did I?

The absolutely horrified look on his face assures me that I did.

FORTY-ONE

RHOSWYN

“Pet!” Lore blinks into the space between us, shattering the awkwardness of the confession. “Ooh, you’re flushed. Is it the wine, or has our favourite knight been teasing you again?”

“I’m fine,” I whisper. “We were just... discussing the humans.”

Lore grins. “Aren’t they boring!? Why anyone would want one as a pet is beyond me. They don’t even have fangs! Sure, some of their realms have fun stuff—like those tiny metal boxes that play magic projections of cats running away from cucumbers. Ooh! There’s that realm where they’re all kinky blood slaves to vampires. But, fun blood-soaked realms aside, honestly, the majority are just completely ignorant of the monsters hiding under their beds!”

He starts listing all the ways humans are boring and defenceless, but I can’t focus. Of all the members of my Guard to confess any kind of feelings to, why did I pick Drystan?

Perhaps he won’t see it that way. It was just an expression, after all. It’s not like I came out and said ‘I love you.’

“Redcap, why are you here?” Drystan asks, cutting through Lore’s rambles.

Goddess, even the sound of his voice is making me blush.

“I made a promise to always extract Rose from stuck-up high fae parties!” he croons, and I smile at the memory. “I’ve been remiss, and our date nights have suffered for it. Oooh! Can we find a place with less stuffy nobles and get her drunk again?”

“Redcap...” Drystan’s glower can’t possibly get any darker. “You cannot keep getting the Nicnevin drunk at under fae revels. It won’t always go unnoticed.”

He looks pointedly down the corridor, where an armoured guard is not-so-discreetly watching us.

“I have a better idea.” I remember Drystan’s suggestion and crook my finger at Lore.

He obliges me by bending down, stealing a deep, unhurried kiss that makes me want to moan.

“No, this is important,” I murmur, keeping my voice low. “I have a job for you.”

“Ooooh, do I get to stab someone? A bit of light maiming? Aha! It’s a murder, right? You’re finally unleashing me on your enemies...” His red eyes are glazed, expression dreamy.

“Not quite,” I hedge, wondering if he really wants me to ask him to do those things. “I want you to free the human who’s being kept prisoner by Princess Máel and take her to whichever portal she wants to leave the realm through.”

“Saving the humans now, pet?” He ruffles my hair.

“I wish there were more who could be saved...” I reply sadly. “She hasn’t given up her name yet...”

Lore is already gone. Swivelling, I look for Bree, but I can’t see the púca either. Strange, he said he’d meet us down here.

“Do you plan on outlawing the owning of humans?” Drystan asks, distracting me.

I swallow. “If I do that, all the ones who are already kept as pets will die. How many of them are there?”

For a second, I don’t think he’ll answer me. “Enough.”

“Then I’ll close the portals,” I decide. “I’ve done it before.”

Drystan tuts under his breath. “No one knows where all of the portals are, and there is a fair bit of off-world trade that goes on through them. Most of it is completely unregulated, of course.”

“You don’t think I should do it?” My hackles rise, but he shakes his head.

“I think that the majority of humans who wander into our world do so knowing the risks,” he answers tactfully. “And a lot of fae who are realm-hopping looking for their mates would be unable to return home. Cut off from Danu for too long, they’d probably go mad, or lose their power, or both. Freedom is a lofty goal, but there are deeper issues at play here. It would be prudent to consult those who know more about the subject once the Fomorians are dealt with.”

I sigh out a breath. “You don’t think I should do anything, do you?”

“I think it’s an unpopular idea, and you need to keep at least some fae on your side if you want them to follow you against Elatha. The fae trapped and enslaved by the Fomorians are your people, not the mortals.”

“I don’t know if I can make that distinction,” I admit. “It never feels like I’m doing enough.”

“You’re already addressing some of the biggest inequalities in our society simply by keeping the redcap and the púca on your Guard. You are young. You have hundreds of years to fight these battles. Expecting to solve all the problems of the realm overnight is ridiculous.”

We fall silent as I lapse into deeper thoughts. Our conversation has turned surprisingly philosophical. There are so many issues with Faerie, it’s overwhelming. I want to make changes for the good, but at the same time, my focus is supposed to be on defeating the Fomorians.

“I’m baaaack,” Lore singsongs. “But we might want to make a dash for it. I think the angry princess is on her way.”

As if on cue, Máel’s furious voice rises over the din, and I see the crowd beginning to part for her.

Winking at Drystan, Lore grabs my hand. “Good luck, *Lord Drystan*.”

In the next second, we’re in the library, with me pressed up against a shelf and the redcap’s hat on my head. His hips pinning me in place as he smiles down at me, eyes twinkling with mischief.

Lore’s hands grab my ass, lifting me higher until the hard line of his cock is pressed intimately against my core.

“Lore,” I gasp. “Did you just leave Drystan to deal with—*oh!*”

He cuts off my laughing question as one hand closes over my breast.

“You look edible in this dress, pet,” he murmurs. “Summer Court fashion suits you.”

As he says it, he drags the shimmering purple fabric down until my breast falls free, then dips his head to suck at my nipple until I squirm.

So good. But anyone could see...

“What if someone’s in here?” I hiss, scandalised.

“Do you think we have time for a quickie before the huntsman tracks us down?” he asks, ignoring my question. “Remember now, no screaming in the library.”

Shoving my hand against my mouth is my only answer as he nips at the rapidly hardening bud and then sucks again, harder this time. A bolt of desire arcs through me, making me tense as he rocks against me. The line of him presses hard against my clit as I tangle my free hand into his white hair and try my hardest not to moan.

“Ungh!”

I freeze.

“I said quiet,” Lore teases, then frowns as I shove us apart and start

desperately shoving my breasts back into the dress.

“Lore... that wasn’t me,” I hiss.

Another muffled cry splits the library, followed by the dull thump of books collapsing.

Lore’s brows rise.

“Let them watch,” he pleads. “Let them hear me making you come all over my cock.”

For a moment, I honestly consider it, and my pussy pulses, letting me know that my body, at least, is down for the idea. Then sensible Rose returns.

It could be Eero himself, for all I know. Aiyana may have used her pleasure as a power move, but I’m not quite at the point where I’m comfortable doing so.

“I’m not ready for that... yet.”

Lore’s eyes flash with something that looks a little like surprise before he breaks out into a new grin. Stepping back, he brushes his hand along the shelves, catching motes of my dust, which he then sprinkles carefully onto his cap. That done, he offers me his hand with a bow.

“Care to investigate what kind of deviants are using the palace library for their illicit liaisons?”

Before I can say anything to stop him, he’s dragging me between the shelves. We both stop short as we’re instantly confronted by two familiar people locked in a passionate embrace in a book-lined alcove on the far side of the room.

I’m not surprised to find the telltale green hair and the matching shimmering scales of Cyreus here, but the silver-clad female he has pressed up against the desk with her legs in the air is none other than...

“Princess Ciara?”

His hand has rucked up her skirt, palm splayed possessively over an opalescent tattoo on her outer thigh.

At my words, they break apart, shoving away from one another so hastily that Ciara almost falls off the desk before she manages to right herself.

“Nicnevin,” she gasps, still trying to catch her breath.

“You’re mated?” Lore coughs, staring at the tattoo on her thigh without shame as she hastily tugs the tight fabric of her skirt down to cover it.

That’s what those marks are? Mating marks? I’ve never seen them in person before, and a surge of longing hits me out of nowhere.

What would my males look like with mine across their skin? Do they

appear randomly, or do I get to choose? Curiosity derails me for a second before I realise what this means.

“You’ve mated an under fae,” I whisper, staring between the crown princess and the merrow with wide-eyed shock.

The blatant fear on her face confirms it. Lore has accidentally dragged us into the middle of something we weren’t supposed to see. Does anyone else know? Does Máel? Her father?

In a court that seems to despise high fae-under fae unions, this kind of secret could ruin both of them. Stupidly... I don’t want to see that happen. The merrow is a good male, from what I’ve seen. He’s always been respectful in our lessons and has indulged my endless curiosity about the underwater homes of the fae so many times with a patience that not many possess.

“Nicnevin... I... It’s not what it looks like.” Cyreus is busy buttoning up his trousers, his cheeks flushed a deep bottle green with embarrassment. “The Princess and I were...”

“Perhaps you were studying,” I finish for him, making the snap decision. “I’m sure you both spend a lot of time doing that together, given that you’re both such keen readers.”

“Oooh, are we keeping secrets now?” Lore grins. “I love secrets. One can never tell when they’ll just pop out...”

“This one won’t.” I pin him with a look. “It’s none of our business.”

The relief that crosses both of their faces is immediate. Ciara actually clutches the desk to remain upright.

“He is my everything,” she murmurs, not meeting my eyes. “Nicnevin, I haven’t been completely honest with you. You need to—”

The loud clanging of a bell peals through the room, cutting off whatever she might’ve said. It’s so loud that Lore’s cap transforms into a pair of earmuffs to save me from the ear-splitting noise.

“What’s going on?” I ask the second it finishes.

Ciara has gone slightly grey as she answers. “My father has returned.”

FORTY-TWO

BRICRIU

I should be at the ball. Rose will be missing me, but I swear this time I saw... My forked black tongue darts out of my mouth, tasting the air. In response, my ears flatten against my skull.

Sloe gin and rosin.

He's real. He's here.

I'm frozen in place for a second before I take off after him at a run. The corridors are deserted but for the gilded portraits staring down at me as I sprint after him. It feels like I'm moving through quicksand, chasing after the figure in a sunny yellow silk waistcoat, who's walking away calmly.

"Wait!" I demand, the lone word echoing off the walls.

He just keeps walking as though he can't hear me. I'm close enough now that I can see the slits up the side of his cerulean trousers flapping, revealing a familiar cluster of dice tattoos—all of them rigged.

He turns, taking a corner. I reach it seconds later, hand outstretched to grab his shoulder and force him to face me.

Nothing.

He's gone.

The noise that escapes my throat is pure frustration as I survey the darkened hall. Creeping vines are everywhere, casting shadows that make it difficult to discern the shape of a person. Running my hand across my ribs, I lean on Naris's eyesight, my pupils dilating to allow me better vision.

He's not here.

Wait. There's a door open a way down on the left.

I stride towards it, readying my magic. The best way to counter my father's power is to steal the sound so he can't form words and avoid eye contact. I have all my blocks in place, but if I'm caught off guard again, like I was last time... No. Better to be safe.

The noise of my own footsteps disappears as I summon a bubble of pure silence around me in all directions, stepping round the doorway with my hand already holding one of my daggers.

Flash.

Blinding light hits me so fast that I recoil, hissing as my sensitive eyes are

burned. I strike out blindly, only for my arm to be caught in a larger hand. The touch burns, my body revolting. All I can see is the giant sunspot in my vision.

Blind panic takes over before I can think better of it. I flail, stabbing outward. There's no sound to tell me if I managed to connect the blow, but the hand on my arm grips me tighter, and someone snaps a burning iron manacle onto the trapped limb.

My magic abandons me in a rush. Sound returns, and with it the cursing of several fae.

“Get his other arm.”

I have no daggers now. My ears are gone. That doesn't mean I make it easy for them as they force me to my knees on the floor, wrestling my free arm behind my back with touches that scald my skin.

“It's good to see you again, son.”

The blindness is receding, but I screw my eyes closed, unwilling to lose this last defence against him.

“Touring hasn't been the same without you.”

I wish I'd said, “Maybe because without me there, fixing your voice, the audience knows you're shit.”

In reality, all that escapes is a whisper of shame-filled pain. “Don't touch me.”

“You can look, son. I have no intention of charming you.” Lies. All lies. “We only require your absence, not your obedience.”

Nausea swells, threatening to spill. The only reason they can need me gone is because it will make Rose vulnerable.

“Don't you touch her.” My eyes snap open, but I manage to avoid looking directly at him.

The room we're in is obviously some disused dining room. It's packed to the brim with two dozen guards and...

Máel.

She stands there, her hands glowing with light. So they used her to stun me, and then brute force to capture me. This was planned.

“He's so much prettier without the animal ears,” she purrs, scanning me with appraising eyes. “Have him taken to my chambers. He can stay there while we deal with the redcap and the bastard prince of winter.”

My mind shuts down.

“Do you still want me to charm the Nicnevin?” Torrance asks, stroking

the pathetic goatee he's always been so meticulous about. "Or can I go now?"

Máel shakes her head. "She's pathetic. In the entire time she's been here, I've not seen her use even a spark of magic, and I doubt you'll be needed now that they've ousted that upstart dryad."

Kitarni too? Shit. They've thought of everything.

My father smiles. "Let's not forget the small matter of my payment. We agreed, all debts are absolved, and you'll pay off my tabs in the pleasure district."

"Done." Máel waves him off, and a soldier hands him a bag that tinkles with the heavy weight of blood money. "We both know they're not going to let you back inside their establishments after your latest run. Now, get out of my court, under fae, and don't come back."

Torrance shrugs like banishment doesn't matter to him. "I've decided that a holiday is in order. There are plenty of opportunities for a male of my talents in the Forest of Whispers."

Sold again. All to pay off new debts while he starts a new life in the Autumn Court with no consequences, just like last time. My hands curl into fists, and I lunge towards him.

"When Rose finds out what you've done," I begin. "And she will. I will do *nothing* to stop Danu ripping you into tiny bloody pieces."

Torrance shrugs. "Son, your defective Nicnevin won't be alive long enough to concern me."

I lose it. The threat of Máel's bed is nothing compared to the idea of harm coming to my mate. I thrash, using all the strength I have to wrench myself free. Tackling him to the floor, I snap at his face like a wild animal. I'll rip out his throat with my teeth if I have to.

Hands wrestle me back, then slam me face first into the stone tiles. Someone's fingers tug my hair, forcing me to look up at the bitch princess.

"Muzzle him." Máel snaps. "Quickly."

"I'll kill you if you touch me," I tell her. "If Rose doesn't do the job, I will."

"The threats were cute, but they're becoming tiresome." She flicks her fingers at her soldiers, then steps over me. Her skirts brush my face, and I snarl. "I have to attend to my father, but I'll be back to make use of you once we're done. Hopefully, the Nicnevin takes a while to die so that I can enjoy you one last time before your death."

Please Danu, I beg as they drag me from the room. Let me die. I would

rather death in the Otherworld with Rose than spend another second in Máel's bed.

“When the fae look back on this day,” Máel announces, her voice drifting to me even though she’s heading in the other direction. “They’ll recall with gratitude how the Summer Court saved them from the leadership of a weak Nicnevin and her Guard of freaks and outcasts.”

FORTY-THREE

LORCAN

Rose's stress is leaking down the bond, and I frown as she ignores the knife I hold out to her. Has she even slept?

"Stabbing stuff is good for nerves," I promise, trying again. "I'm a willing victim."

The blade is glinting in the early morning sunlight. Shiny.

Maybe it will stop the gentle thrumming of the Call in my chest if she can work the nerves out now. If she's lucky, we might even get a few drops on that pretty white dress she's wearing. White shows the blood best, after all.

I'm still buzzing over the fact that she said 'yet' last night. That one word holds so much potential. In fact, it's now my favourite word. 'Yet' means that there's a chance, in a hundred years or so, that it might happen. I have this daydream that one day she might sit on my cock while she grants audiences to her subjects.

"If you want to be helpful," Drystan grates. "Find Bricriu or Wraith."

For a long time, I've wondered how other fae do those meaningful looks. The silent ones which tell the other party to shut the fuck up. Sometimes—like now—simply stabbing the person to stop them talking isn't ideal.

But he needs to stop mentioning them.

Because I can't blink to them. That means one of two things. Either Jaro, Bree, and Wraith are all so far away that I can't get to them in one blink, or they're surrounded by iron—or I am, but I don't think I am... I wave a hand around myself just to check for glamourised iron bars.

"What are you doing?" Drystan is looking at me strangely.

You'd think he'd have removed the stick up his ass now that he's finally found a way to trick Rose into wearing his engagement necklace.

"Checking for invisible cages," I shrug. "None here, though."

Rose's fear pulses through the bond. "You think they're in cages?"

Drystan glares at me, and I can practically hear him reciting the 'don't worry Rose unnecessarily' lecture he delivers daily in his head.

"What? She asked!"

Our mate does the adorable head tilt she's not even aware she does when she's speaking to her guides, her mouth bracketed with lines of tension. Then,

without missing a beat, she stares at me.

“Lore, can you blink to them?”

Such pretty eyes... I drift in a sea of violet for a second before I realise she asked me a direct question.

“No.”

“What about Bram?”

I shrug. Why would I want to blink to some boring scholar prince? Oh, wait. She wants me to get him. Sighing, I picture the mousy male in my mind.

Blink.

I land in the rafters of a stinking inn in the fishing district, then pause. What is a descendant of Danu doing here? Drinking? I doubt it. It's early enough that even the inn-keep hasn't bothered coming down for the day.

I peer down, scanning the empty tables until I find a familiar trio. Bram, with a hooded cloak covering the fact he's mostly naked—likely due to shifting—is staring at a high fae with grey eyes I know is the Fomorian princess, which means the short-haired fae cleaning a crossbow on the table while he scans the room for threats can only be Caed.

Oooh, this is juicy. I blink closer until I'm directly above them.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet us,” Prae says. “I know you have no reason to believe a word we say but—”

“Members of Rose's party are disappearing,” Bram cuts her off. “My brother, Dare, and his mate seem to have been all but erased from the minds of everyone in this court. I don't have time for idle pleasantries. If you know something that's going to help me protect my sister, I need to know.”

“Me, too!” I shock them all by blinking down onto the bench beside Bram. “Because that means I get to stab people.”

“Redcap.” Bram sighs, glancing at the morning light streaming through the tiny window. “I trust she's looking for me?”

“And you're here committing treason.” I shrug. “I'm pretty sure she won't let me stab you for it, though.”

“Lorcan, focus.” Praedra snaps her fingers in front of my face. “While Caed was in the Spring Court dungeons, his mark was discovered.”

I cock my head to one side. “Seems like a responsible person would cut his hand off to stop that happening again.”

Excellent. More blood for my cap. It stiffens in anticipation, becoming a stovepipe top hat.

Caed's fists clench so tightly that the wooden bolt he's checking snaps in half. "Tempting, but why bother when we could remove the eyes from everyone who saw it?"

Oooh, the Fomorian speaks my language, and that offer is tempting. "Eyeballs *are* fun."

"I'm sure they are," Prae reassures me, shooting Caed a *look*. "But the problem is that one of the priests saw it. He rode to Siabetha ahead of us, convinced that Caed has poisoned Danu's Sacred Well to infiltrate the Nicnevin's Guard and take over Faerie from within."

I cock my head to one side. "Have you?"

Caed slams his hand down. "For fuck's sake, Lore. I was *twelve* when we took the Oath. How is any child supposed to mess with the magic of a Goddess?"

A shivering, skinny little thing he was, too. I still remember how he scrambled away from us all. I was so looking forward to killing him before Kitarni told me I couldn't. Spoilsport priestess.

"We all know that Danu picked you without outside influence." Prae lays a hand on her cousin's arm. "But this priest is determined to use Caed against her. He's been in the city for weeks."

Bram shoots me a look. Aww, Danu's tits, it's another of those meaningful looks. I try returning it with one of my own, but given the way he flinches, I may have accidentally pulled a scary face instead.

Wait... weeks?

"Jaro's been missing for weeks!" I put two and two together. "And my puppy, and the sticky prince, and now the púca."

"Bricriu is missing?" Bram demands.

"Missing for weeks?" Caed asks, incredulous. "What the fuck?"

At the same time, Prae asks, "Sticky prince?"

Bram sighs. "A fortnight isn't that long to most older fae, remember? You may all be young, but after a few centuries, weeks are nothing. As for the sticky prince, my brother's gift is adhesion. It... earned him a reputation. Our mother once came home to find that Dare stuck all the furniture in the palace to the ceiling in a tantrum."

"My favourite prince," I nod. "Didn't even blink when I was considering killing him. He just stuck my feet to the floor and tried to take my head."

Bram reels. "You tried to *kill* my brother?"

I shrug. "Cressidick considered it. He stuck her dress to the seat of her

chair when she took tea with Eero's court a few centuries ago." I liked the sticky prince so much I decided to let him live instead. "I brought her a different prince's head instead."

And another. Then a different fae named Dare. Then a prince covered in sap. The instructions kept getting more and more specific, and I loved finding ways around them.

Sometimes, even Cressidick has to bow to my genius. She gave up after the fifth random head.

"The point is," Bram mutters. "Eero has returned to the palace. If Caed and Praedra know something—"

"This priest was planning on informing the other Grand Clerics," Prae says. "Which means they planned to overthrow the dryad."

Bram stiffens. "Kitarni never returned from the temple last night."

Sometimes, a little sensible niggling at the back of my mind starts to irritate me. Almost like a warning.

"Exactly," Prae presses. "If they remove Kitarni from power..."

"Rose loses the support of the temple." Bram stands, shoving the bench that I'm sitting on backwards so suddenly that I blink away automatically. "It's a coup."

I smile. "Excellent! I do love a bloody slaughter!"

Caed shakes his head. "Even one where they're all trying to kill Rose?"

I snort. The key word in that sentence is 'trying'. "I'll give her their severed cocks! Wait. What about the females? Do you think she'd accept a severed tit?"

Prae shakes her head.

"We need to get back to the palace," Bram insists, grabbing my arm. "Now."

"Take us," Caed insists, hefting the crossbow onto his back. "You might need the backup."

Bram pushes his glasses up his nose. "No. Adding two Fomorians to the mix is just adding fuel to the argument that you've corrupted her. If the worst happens, Lore can blink her away."

"She's down two Guards and a high priestess," Caed argues. "I'll protect her with my life, and no one will know I'm even there. I swear on Balor's medallion."

Funnily enough, I almost... believe him. If he fails, can I stab him?

"You can't swear on something you don't own. That medallion is safe in

the vaults of Elfame Palace,” Bram replies evenly. “We will protect Rose. When this is over, I’ll tell her that you warned us, and she can make her own decision, but I won’t go against her orders. She’s my queen.”

“That’s not good enough.” Caed’s hand slams down on the wooden table, splintering it as I blink Bram to find some reinforcements.

After all, what’s a good coup without extra swords?

FORTY-FOUR

RHOSWYN

My hands are shaking as Drystan escorts me to the throne room. Lore hasn't returned, and my mind has come up with all sorts of reasons why he might be gone. I didn't want to go without him, but Eero sent a servant to summon us, and we couldn't stall any longer.

"Your nerves are distracting," Drystan says, tone quiet, like I'm some horse he's trying not to spook.

"That's a shitty attempt to calm her nerves, huntsman," Maeve retorts.

I heave a sigh of relief as we finally finish climbing the stairs to the top of the tower where the throne room is and enter a lavishly decorated foyer. My guides are trailing behind us, their outlines flickering in the dappled light from the stained-glass windows, but Drystan completely ignores all of them.

"Do not fret, dear heart," Titania says. "Mab has checked the throne room twice already. Everything is as it should be."

"And the redcap and Bram are on their way." Maeve bounces on the soles of her feet. "Your brother was putting on clothes when I checked on them."

"Then where is everyone else?" I ask.

The room is deserted, as were all the corridors and stairwells we used to get here, and the emptiness makes it seem as though the vine-strung halls are pressing in on me. The only other fae here is the page in fine gold livery, waiting by the door.

"In the throne room, awaiting your entrance." Drystan inclines his head in the direction of the large door looming ahead of us. "Calm yourself, huntress. Fear will interfere with your connection to the Goddess."

Calm myself. If only it were so simple. If it was just me in danger, perhaps it would be.

Drystan halts before the door, goes to say something, and then stops himself, looking at the page with suspicion.

"Breathe like your high priestess taught you," Mab advises, giving my Guard an eye roll. "Separate yourself from the anxiety. If you can learn to observe your emotions, and Danu's from a place of impartiality, you'll be closer to controlling your magic."

"They're ready for you, Nicnevin," the page mumbles, bowing.

“Let’s get this over with,” Drystan snarls. “Eero has kept us waiting long enough.”

The page nods, and the doors swing open, exposing the lavish throne room of the Summer Court. Sunlight streams in from a dozen giant windows, filtering through the golden leaves of aspens that form a ring around the edge of the room. The glow reflects off the faces of the gathered courtiers, enhancing the already otherworldly beauty of the fae.

They’ve left their humans behind today, I’m relieved to notice, as the whole room bows respectfully.

“Announcing Nicnevin Rhoswyn, fifth beloved daughter of Danu and High Queen of all fae,” the page calls. “And her Guard, Lord Drystan Snowchild.”

Beyond the crowd, I finally spot King Eero himself. He’s huge, almost as tall as Jaro. Even seated, his presence is impressive, made grander by his golden tunic and the enormous stained-glass window behind his throne, which depicts the sun like a halo around his head.

On either side of his throne, Máel and Ciarra stand demurely. No one says a word as Drystan and I walk towards them. The sound of the waves coming from below the royal tower and the cawing of gulls fills the air.

I almost stop when I catch sight of a familiar face—Mervyn—at the edge of the room. Butterflies erupt in my stomach, but Drystan is still moving, his solid presence forcing me to do the same.

He doesn’t falter, even when Eero shocks me by standing and moving aside, as Aiyana should’ve done that first day. Leaving the throne to me.

Maybe this will all be okay, I think to myself. Surely, no one would give up their throne unless they were preparing to speak the vow?

Drystan releases me at the bottom of the dais, turning to face down the rest of the room as I climb the two steps up to the throne by myself. Turning, I survey the room one last time, scanning for a threat. For anything amiss.

Nothing. My head is pounding, and I think I even sway a little.

“You’re doing great,” Titania urges, when my hesitation lasts a little *too* long. Her voice is so quiet, almost like she’s getting farther away, and it’s a struggle to hear her.

Maeve agrees, floating on my other side. “Once he’s spoken the vow, you can interrogate him about where the rest of your Guard has gone.”

Swallowing the dry lump in my throat, I do as they say. The backs of my knees hit the surprisingly cold metal of the throne first. I lower myself

carefully, arranging my skirts as soon as my ass hits the cushion.

When I'm seated, my hands rest lightly on the arms, and I turn my attention to the king in front of me.

Chink.

My guides disappear, gone like they were never there. Looking down, I find my wrists encased in shackles.

Iron shackles. They've sprung from inside the chair, pinning my hands down so tightly that I can't move. Suddenly, my guides' quietness and my headache make a sick kind of sense.

Already, my skin is blistering, though the pain takes longer to register. My eyes water, and I hiss out a pained breath.

Drystan notices, whirling on his heel. When he sees the cuffs, his hands catch fire.

"You dare—!" he growls, striding forward, drawing his sword.

That's when the glamour drops.

What I'd thought were a hundred tightly packed beautiful courtiers is quickly revealed to be a full contingent of armoured soldiers. Drystan hasn't noticed—he's too busy swinging the blade at Eero's head.

It connects and—

Shatters.

What? No! How?

"Seize him." Eero scratches at the spot on his neck with a grimace. "Quickly."

"Release the Nicnevin, you traitorous—"

Lore blinks into the room, Bram and a handful of other redcaps at his side. My youngest brother is wearing armour and all of them are carrying swords of their own. The Summer Court soldiers, realising that things are getting out of hand, immediately leap into action, and the battle is on. Chaos erupts. Redcaps whoop in glee at the promise of bloodshed, and Bram dodges out of the way.

My youngest brother may be a scholar, but it's clear he's had training. His sword—a delicate needle of a blade—flashes like lightning between his opponents.

Lore, however, ignores all of the bloodshed and heads straight for me, gripping my shoulder as he blinks... and I go nowhere.

"Their hats!" Máel cries. "Take their hats!"

"It's the iron," I whimper, tears staining my cheeks. "I need..."

In a blink, Lore is gone, and then he's back with Drystan beside him. "Melt them," the redcap says. "Once she's free, I can—"

He's forced to cut off his sentence as a sword swipes out of nowhere, almost taking his head. He blinks away, defending us from Eero as the king swings his greatsword again.

Drystan grimaces, examining the mechanism. "This is going to hurt."

Gritting my teeth, I nod. "I can take it."

The metal heats, but it's too slow. Iron is resistant to magic, and I can read the strain in Drystan's face as he tries to force it to bend. The gold of the rest of the arm is melting faster than the cuff, dripping onto the floor.

Trying not to react is the hardest thing I've ever done, but if I move, it will only be worse. I look over his head, trying to distract myself from the scent of my own burning flesh, and catch sight of Máel blinding the redcap that's cornered her with a burst of starlight, before ripping the hat from his head. The under fae clutches his chest as Máel's dagger swiftly slices the scarlet fabric to ribbons.

There's no warning. He just keels over. Dead. His mouth caught in a final scream of defiance.

No.

"Hurry up!" Lore yells, blinking in front of me, then away, as a throwing knife sails through the spot where he was and shatters one of the huge windows on our left instead.

"I'm trying." Drystan snarls, making me look down, but he shakes his head. "Don't look, huntress."

He hisses out a breath as he pulls the now-pliant metal of one cuff apart and reaches for the other.

A glint catches my eye. My lips part in warning, but the blade has already lined up with the ribbon around his neck. The fabric offers surprisingly little resistance as it's sliced clean through.

I shriek as Ciara takes Drystan's head in front of me. Forgetting momentarily that he's a dullahan, my heart shatters as I watch her rip his head away by his long hair.

He can survive that, I remind myself, furiously, as the shadows swamp the place where the wound should be.

"I'm so sorry, Nicnevin," she murmurs, eyes watering. "I have no choice."

Without waiting, she darts away.

Drystan's body freezes with shock, his glowing eyes narrowing amongst the shadows that have replaced his head. Then he reaches down and finishes the job, yanking free the final manacle.

"Run!" his head says, as his body grabs my arm and practically throws me out of the melting chair. "Now, Rhoswyn."

He lets free a wave of fire, so hot that it melts the rest of the throne, turning it to a pile of molten gold. I have to dodge away or risk more burns. My guides reappear, swarming me in concern as they try to usher me away from the melee and towards the giant sun window.

I have to help. *Clang*. Two swords clash, so close that the noise rattles my teeth.

Where is Ciara? Drystan's head is somewhere in amongst this pandemonium.

There—by the wall. She's not fighting. If anything, she looks like she'd rather be anywhere else. I take a step towards her before I realise she doesn't even have his head anymore.

I reach for Danu, trying my best to fight through the panic, but I can't.

Looking down, I gulp as I take in the mess that is the skin of my arms. The shackle has left black streaks in my flesh. Iron poisoning.

"I wouldn't try anything if I were you."

I've barely taken two steps by the time Eero's words sink in. Turning on my heel, I stare in horror as he holds Lore up by his throat. The redcap is stabbing blindly—and still somehow smiling past a face-full of blood and broken teeth—but all of his efforts are for naught.

Every single blow glances off Eero. How? The summer king isn't even wearing armour. Drystan's whip curls around his throat, flames growing as it constricts.

Any other male would be dead, but Eero is completely unconcerned. He reaches out and, without even breaking a sweat, tugs the whip free, before pulling hard enough to unbalance the dullahan. Before Drystan can recover, three more soldiers leap on him, slapping iron cuffs around his wrists. He's forced to the ground beside Bram, both of them struggling.

All of the redcaps Lore brought with him are dead. Slaughtered. Their corpses—and several soldiers—litter the ground. Some of their hats are still sucking up the blood, leaving clean patches of marble beneath the slain.

And Eero stands above it all, victorious.

With one, callous move, he twists his wrist and Lore's head falls to the

side. Neck broken.

“No!” I shriek, as his body is thrown to the floor.

His blades hit the marble with a loud *clank*, and I have to remind myself that it isn’t a killing blow. Lore will survive.

But he’s definitely out of the fight.

“The gift of unbreakable skin,” Maeve growls, the room finally quiet enough for me to hear her iron-muffled voice. “Fucking hate that one.”

Máel darts forward, grabbing Lore’s hat from his head—a difficult job given that it appears to try to shrink wrap itself onto its true owner—and lifts it high like a trophy. In her other hand, she’s holding Drystan’s head, and my gut sinks.

“Nicnevin Rhoswyn, tell your males to stand down,” the princess orders. “And don’t even think of reaching for Danu. We have all of your poorly chosen Guard, your disgusting pet, the false high priestess, and both of your brothers.”

“Shit.” Maeve voices exactly what I’m thinking. “Fucking shit fuck shit.”

“Back away,” Titania says. “Your Guard will survive everything.”

But my brothers won’t. Wraith won’t.

“What do you want?” I ask, reaching for Mab.

I can’t touch her. Please, Danu. I strain towards my connection to the Goddess, but the cuffs did their job well. Just like in Fellgotha, I can see and hear them—and even that is getting harder by the second—but I can’t touch them.

Mervyn steps forward, clearing his throat as he looks to Eero for permission before beginning to speak.

“After the dryad, Kitarni Dogwood, was defeated in challenge yesterday, the conventicle of Grand Clerics met to discuss the corruption that’s spreading through your court. After much prayer and deliberation, our holy wisdom has led us to believe that Fomorian interference has led to the malformation of your Guard.”

“That’s bullshit.” Drystan’s head sways as Máel lowers it. “Danu chose Rose’s Guard. You’re just elitist pricks who can’t stand that she has under fae in it.”

“It’s not the under fae who are the issue,” Eero booms. “They, at least, are Danu’s creations, even if they are lesser. But you cannot possibly say the same about the blade prince. No true Nicnevin would *ever* Call a Fomorian to her Guard. This is their foul magic at play, and I, for one, will *never* bow to a

Nicnevin who takes the enemy into her bed.”

My mouth falls open. “I haven’t—”

“Do you deny that Prince Caedmon is a member of your Guard?” Mervyn presses.

“Y—” I can’t finish the lie, and the silence that follows is damning. “Danu chose him. The Goddess—”

“Has been the victim of the Fomorian’s plans to infiltrate the most holy office of Nicnevin and take down our society from the inside.” There’s a feverish light in Mervyn’s eyes, and it scares me almost as much as the sight of Lore’s limp body on the floor does. “I appreciate this might be shocking to you, Rhoswyn, but if you care for Faerie, you will die and you will ask the Goddess to send a new Nicnevin who can be raised by the temple and whose Guard will be properly formed of respectable fae.”

“My Guard are respectable!” I retort, swaying slightly.

“The only respectable member of your Guard is Sir Jaromir,” Mervyn retorts. “King Cedwyn’s unclaimed bastard, a whore, and an assassin are little better than a Fomorian general.”

“I have no desire to hurt any of Diana’s sons,” Eero adds, almost magnanimously. “In fact, his unfortunate mating aside, sometimes I even find Prince Dare’s antics amusing. I swear that they will be released as soon as you and your Guard journey to the Otherworld.”

“The fact that you haven’t done this already shows how committed you truly are to ending this war,” Máel hisses. “You could’ve killed Caedmon and ended the siege of Elfame before the first wall was even lost.”

“Enough, Máel.” Eero takes a step towards me, dagger outstretched in offering. “I promise, I’ll make it quick. It’s not your fault, after all. You’re an innocent in all this.” He cocks his head to one side, false sympathy shining through his eyes. “You must know, surely, that this is the best option, not just for you, but for everyone. A Nicnevin who can’t even fly...” He shakes his head, piercings glinting in the light from the window behind me.

“Rose, run.” Bram shouts. “Don’t worry about us. I’d rather be—” A soldier kicks him, *hard*, and whatever he might’ve said is lost to a coughing fit.

I back up a step, tears flowing freely now. Eero presses his advantage, moving closer. “Our people can only survive with the right leader.”

My guides gather close, sticking to my side resolutely, despite the way their outlines are flickering.

“Rose,” Drystan’s voice is calm. “When you die, you come back, you hear me? Get to Florian. To Aiyana. A Temple...ughk.” His words taper off, and a glance reveals it’s because Máel has shoved Lore’s cap into his mouth as a gag.

When you die. He doesn’t see any way out of this.

My terror ratchets up a notch as Eero flips the blade until he’s gripping the handle in a practised hold.

A scuffle breaks out behind Eero. Drystan and Bram are struggling against their captors, but it won’t make a difference.

“Dear heart,” Titania murmurs, fighting tears. “Breathe. Close your eyes and think of your mates.”

“Fuck that,” Maeve snarls. “Kick him in the balls so he has something to remember you by.”

“Dodge!” Mab yells.

I dodge to the left, crying out as Eero drives the blade home. I don’t know why I bothered. He’s hundreds of years old. A warrior. He won’t miss.

A blur of movement and a brush of fur is all the warning I get before a black fox dives between us. Bram shifts, his body slamming into me, driving me back as the knife comes down.

The strike reverberates through his body and into mine like a punch as I’m shoved into the window with enough force that the glass shatters.

I barely have time to process the sight of my brother staggering, then falling to his knees. Beyond him, Eero’s satisfied expression morphs into one of pure rage as I topple backwards in a shower of colourful shards.

Into empty air.

FORTY-FIVE

RHOSWYN

“Spread your wings!” Mab cries.

Fuck, I’m trying, but the wind is buffeting me. It steals my screams as they escape. The fabric of my dress is tangling everywhere, and the glass from the window is falling with me, scratching everywhere it touches.

The sea is getting closer.

Spread, damn you, spread!

Finally, they snap open, and I flap them desperately. Tense and release. Come on. Come on, come on, come on.

Am I slowing down? Is it even enough to stop the sea from shattering every bone in my body?

The sea spray hits my face, and I close my eyes, determined to keep focusing on the rhythmic pattern of tense and release.

“Hey,” Maeve calls. “You’re not dead, but you might want to rotate those wings, throw up a glamour, and get the fuck out of here before someone else realises it.”

Snapping open my eyelids, I almost lose control at the sight of the water roiling a mere foot below my face. I take a shaky breath, then force myself to do as she says.

“What about Bram?” I demand, then curse as talking saps concentration, and I wobble in the air. It takes a minute of focus before I try again. “I could go back—”

There’s a heartbeat of silence. A grim look shared between the three of them that speaks of a truth I’m not ready to accept.

“You don’t know where the others are being kept,” Mab reasons, flying closer so I can hear her. “Maybe, with Danu’s help, you might be able to free the redcap and the huntsman, but if anyone escapes...”

Wraith, Kitarni, and Dare will be dead before I can find them.

“You need to get off your wings before you strain them from doing too much flying too soon,” Titania encourages. “Get to the beach.”

“Landing will probably be rough,” Mab warns me. “And the iron in your system isn’t going to make it any easier.”

“Sand is soft.” Maeve brushes both of them off. “Come on, angle your body like this and rotate your wings like—yeah. That.”

I’m moving. I’m actually flying. It aches like hell, and Goddess, I’m tired already, but I’m actually flying.

If not for the horror of the last hour, I could cry out with joy.

Instead, I let out a sad little half-sob.

The sea spray stings the raw burns on my wrists and the cuts from the glass. What should have been an experience surrounded by my Guard and full of joy has been turned into a flight for my life as I force my wings to carry me across to the mainland.

I tug a glamour over myself as I reach the beach, then dig deep to find the energy to keep going until I find a deserted enough place to land. My breathing is ragged, and a stitch stabs at my side, not helped by the pounding headache and weakness spreading through my veins.

Stretching my legs out to stop my descent does nothing except bruise my knees. My legs buckle, and I careen face-down into the sand, no doubt getting grit into all of my open wounds. A second later, a huge wave crashes over me, adding salt to the painful mixture.

“Fuck!” I scream, forgetting silence, as I stagger away from the water.

“Keep moving,” Mab advises. “You need to get to the treeline and away from the road. They’re not going to wait for you to heal.”

“It sucks like shit, kid.” Maeve offers me a grim smile. “But you did it! You flew.”

“What now?” I ask, gritting my teeth as I stumble up a dune. “Drystan said go to the temple... but...”

Goddess, my head is so woozy.

“If what that slimy sack of shit said is true, at least some of the priesthood are on their side,” Maeve grouches. “That stupid fucking asshole. He’s turned the temple on itself, and the queendom into civil war, not to mention killing —”

“Not *now*, Maeve,” Titania hisses, as I stumble. “Just get to the trees, dear heart.”

They lapse into silence as I manage to scale the final dune and stagger my way into the forest. I cross the shaded threshold with a sigh of relief, and I make it three more paces before I stumble over a tree root and collapse against the nearest trunk.

Goddess. Everything hurts.

“What now?” I ask, belatedly realising I’m repeating myself.

My guides exchange a long look, and I get the feeling that they’re not sure either.

“You do have one last Guard,” Mab finally says.

“Are you kidding?” Maeve’s face is red, and she’s obviously shouting, but her voice is still hard to hear, and I realise with grim certainty that my symptoms are getting worse. “You think—?”

“I think it’s up to Rose to decide,” Titania steps between them. “Do you want to take that chance?”

Trust Caed?

No. I don’t. But I don’t think I really have a choice either.

Despite Drystan’s orders, I’m not stupid enough to believe I can make it back to Pavellen by myself, and Elfhame is under siege. Given the blackness branching up my burned arms at an alarming rate, I won’t last long either way.

“I might not trust him,” I begin, taking a deep breath as I sink down into the hollow formed by the ancient roots. “But Prae is with him.”

Against all odds, I trust her. Part of me hopes that if Caed were to betray me, she would at least give me a warning.

“And I trust myself.” I whisper, holding my head in my hands. “If he tries anything, I won’t hold back either.”

I have no powers to speak of right now, but holding back and not making a fuss is what led to this whole mess. If I’d strutted into Siabetha and demanded Eero’s vow straight away, forced them to summon him from his hunt—If I’d just been more confident...

None of this would’ve happened. Bram would still be—

I cut off the thought with a half sob as my chest tightens with grief.

Reaching inside myself, I find the five bonds to my Guard easily. More tears escape as I feel how subdued Lore’s normally eager one is, and the way that Bree’s sad melody has turned sour and evasive once more. I force myself to look past those, beyond Drystan’s horses and smoke and Jaro’s fur and teeth.

There, at the back, waiting for me, is the final bond.

The one that’s always felt like blades. Sharp, cutting. Full of rage.

Caed.

Taking a deep breath through a throat that suddenly feels raw, I tug.

“He may not come,” I whisper, as my body slumps. “I told him...”

“Gather your strength, anyway.” Mab presses an ephemeral hand against my shoulder. “Whatever happens, you will always have us.”

My eyes slide closed, and my head thunks back against the salt-weathered bark of the tree.

Please, Danu. Let this not be a mistake.

I’m too tired to even notice my eyes falling closed, but a snap nearby sends them flying open again.

How long has it been? I lift my head, which weighs a ton, and then freeze.

He’s here.

Standing amongst the trees, watching me with wild, wary eyes.

“You came.” My voice is hoarse, scratchy, and layered with disbelief.

He pauses, turquoise eyes raking over my body, cataloguing the burns at my wrists, the black lines in my skin, and the torn fabric of my dress.

Caed’s answer, when it comes, is a broken, resigned whisper.

“You called.”

To be continued in
[Beneath a Shattered Sky](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you so much for picking this book up. Whether you've been waiting a full year for me to write it, or just discovered the series, I'm so so grateful for your decision to give Rose's story a chance. I love writing these characters and their world, and I'm happy to announce book 4 should be out in spring 2024.

An extra special thanks goes to my wonderful Ream High Priestesses:

Lorysa

Stitch1079

BiancaRose

Circe

KSavege

Emily Devitt

Charlotte

Kira

Your continued support means the world to me, and I'm so happy to have you on board.

And to the team behind the book: You Rock! I couldn't do what I do without: my amazing Betas; Katie, my kickass editor; and Niky, my cover artist.

I can't forget to mention Snow, Candice, Stacey and the other authors who help me kept me going in the sprint room when I was crumbling under the deadline stress. You guys are the best.

And last but not least, I must thank my family, fur babies and friends for supporting me through a tough year full of moving stress, anxiety and scary new things.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marie Mistry is a reality challenged reverse harem romance author whose books are full of pirates, magic, and spicy adventures. When she's not writing, you can usually find her curled up with a game or a book and a large cup of tea. She lives in a wonky Kentish cottage with her other half and a super sweet German Shepherd named Meg.

She loves interacting with fans in her [reader group](#), and feel free to subscribe to her [Ream](#) for bonus artwork, stalk her on social media, or join her [newsletter](#).

