

LINDSEY DEVIN



BOUNTY
CAPTURED

SOLSTICE HUNTRRESS III

Bounty Captured

Solstice Huntress: Book 3

Lindsey Devin

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Chapter 1

I slowly blinked into consciousness. Groggy didn't even begin to cut it—I felt like I'd been thrown off my mare Hannie's back and then run over by a truck for good measure. Every muscle in my body ached, my head was full of cotton, and my throat burned like I hadn't had water for a week. Like a hangover magnified by a million.

I slowly pushed myself up onto my elbows.

The room was unfamiliar. The mattress below me was plush, sinking under my weight, a far cry from the rock-hard mattress I preferred at home. I was buried under silk comforters, surrounded by silk pillows, and the dark fabric was detailed with gold thread that glowed in the warm candlelight of the room. The immense stone fireplace was unlit, but the elegantly carved wooden chairs and plush fur rug still looked inviting. Overhead, the vaulted ceiling was fogged over in ethereal darkness, and enchanted pinpricks of light twinkled like stars.

My head began to clear, and as it did, dread began to creep through me.

The last thing I remembered was the heavy, cold press of Daniel's magic around me like a vise. Even when I'd fought back with my magic at full power, it wasn't enough to overcome his.

Where the fuck was I?

I scrambled out of bed and stumbled toward the immense wooden door. The handle didn't turn an inch, even when I pushed all my weight against it.

"Fuck," I hissed as I pushed fruitlessly at the door. "Come on, come on, come on." Assuming the lock was magical in some way, I reached for the power in my core.

And found nothing.

The dread turned to terror, icy in my veins. This wasn't like the usual dampening I did in the Den, nor was my magic deeply hidden like it had been with Mala's cuff. I could barely, barely feel it, so deep inside it was almost nothing, giving off the tiniest bit of energy like a single faint ember where there was once a wildfire.

I stumbled away from the door. Where was I? What had Daniel done to me?

I whirled around, looking for another way out, when my reflection in the huge orate mirror on the wall caught my eye. I was in a simple silk slip, finely made and detailed with the same gold thread as the sheets, and it looked ridiculous with the thick dark leather collar around my neck. I'd been so groggy and confused I hadn't noticed it before, but now I couldn't seem to pay attention to anything *except* its weight.

I stepped closer to the mirror and lifted my chin to see it better as nausea roiled in my gut. The collar was two fingers thick, with an embossed vine winding around it, elegant and understated. Hell, it looked like something Carla would've worn for a night out on the town when she was trying to pick up. Right at my nape, there was a heavy metal buckle, warmed from my skin. I hooked my fingers under the buckle and then yelped in pain as electricity rocketed over my skin. That was a serious fucking shock—it made my eyes rattle in their sockets. I took a shaky breath.

The thing was spelled—seriously spelled. There was no way I'd be able to get it off without help. I'd pass out before I could even start to figure out the lock on the buckle. As long as it was on, I'd have no access to my magic. And no way to defend myself.

“Fuck,” I swore, louder now. “Fuck!”

There was one thing I knew for sure: I had to get out of here. Fast. There had to be another way out, something my captors had overlooked, an unlocked window or a stashed key or a servants' entrance or something. Shit. I had to figure something out.

I rushed to the window first, shoving aside the heavy dressings only to find it sealed shut with the same impenetrable magic that locked the door. Hell, I didn't even know if the scene outside the window was real at all. Maybe the lavender grass was just as enchanted at the stars twinkling on the ceiling, intended to keep me calm. It wasn't fucking working.

I searched the drawers of the dresser next, tossing fine linen clothes aside carelessly until they were piled on the stone floor like gorgeously colored

abandoned snakeskins. I ran my hands over the seams of the drawers, looking for anything that might help me. A key, a stashed knife, *anything*. Then I searched the huge wooden armoire in the same way, shoving the hanging silk gowns aside to root around the seams and corners like I might find a secret door in the back.

No dice. Of course not. That'd be too fucking easy.

Burning with frustration and fear, I slammed the drawers back into place and kicked the piles of clothes aside. Then I stood in the center of the fine bedroom, nearly vibrating with rage—at Daniel, and at myself.

How could I have let this happen?

How could I have done this to Gram?

After everything I'd said about staying safe. All the times I'd promised her over and over that I'd be fine. And now here I was, trapped somewhere in Faerie without any power. Alone.

Completely alone. Where the hell was Corbin?

We'd been together in that terrible room with Ralnor—and then Ralnor had engaged some awful spell that had transported me to Faerie before I'd even realized what was happening. It'd just been me and Daniel in the woods of Faerie. If Corbin had been there, I would've felt him. I know I would've. I'd know his ozone aura anywhere. That forest had been empty of anyone except Daniel.

Was Corbin still Earthside? Or had he been transported somewhere, too? Was he in a different part of Faerie? Or somewhere else?

Somewhere worse?

I exhaled hard and shook that thought from my mind. Corbin could take care of himself. Right now, I needed to focus on getting myself out of here. My hand fluttered back to the collar, but I resisted the urge to tug on it and shock the hell out of myself again.

The lock on the great wooden door clicked open.

My fingers ached for a knife, for my jewelry—for anything. No weapons. No power. At least if push came to shove, I still had a haymaker of a right cross.

Daniel breezed into the room like he owned the place—he probably did, I realized—and shut the door behind him. His long, dark coat brushed his shins, moving in some breeze he appeared to have brought in with him. His aura was no less infuriating than it had been in the forest. He still had that terrible reptilian look about him, with his sharp, severe features and his green

eyes boring into mine with predatory interest. It was a scary kind of handsomeness. It wasn't rare to see that in UnSeelie, but in Daniel it was kicked up to a notch, and it made my skin crawl.

I took a step back instinctively, with my hands balled into fists at my sides.

"I see you're awake," Daniel said. He cast his gaze disdainfully around the clothes piled on the floor. "And that you weren't pleased by the fine clothing I've provided for you. Have the accommodations been suitable otherwise?"

"Go fuck yourself," I hissed. "Where the fuck is Corbin?"

Daniel's mouth twisted into a sneer. "And why is that mongrel your first concern?"

"Where is he?" I barked, rage boiling inside me as my voice bounced off the crisp stone walls.

Daniel sucked his teeth, then took a moment to check his nails, like he was waiting for a toddler to wear themselves out from having a tantrum. That only made me angrier. I felt like Oscar when I was trying to corner him into climbing into his carrier. Pissed off, disrespected, and trapped. I wanted to lunge at Daniel. I wanted to rip his throat out with my bare hands.

"The thing is," Daniel said languidly, "Corbin's not important to me. The only thing I required of Ralnor was getting you transported to Faerie in one piece. Whatever he did with Corbin is none of my concern. As long as he's out of the way, Ralnor can do whatever he wants with him."

Fuck. My heart sank. That was even worse than Daniel having Corbin locked away in Faerie somewhere—if that were true, at least I could try to find him. If Daniel was lying, he was doing a seriously good job of it. He didn't give a shit about Corbin. "What the hell does Ralnor want with him?"

"I don't care," Daniel said. "This isn't about him. This is about us, Temperance. You and me. Finally, we can start to build a future together." He smiled at me, and his sharp teeth caught the low gleam of the candles.

"Fat fucking chance," I said. "There's no us at all, and definitely no fucking 'future.'"

"You know, Tempie, things will be a lot easier for you once you accept your life here with me. The sooner you start behaving, the better things will be." His tone was soft and condescending, like he was trying to bribe a child into climbing into his van. It made my stomach turn.

"Better?" I laughed sardonically. "The only way this would get better

would be if you took this fucking collar off me. Either way, I'm not going to sit around here like a helpless maiden and let you suck me dry."

"Oh, Tempie." He shook his head. "I'd never do that."

He took a step closer. I tried to step back, but found my feet were too heavy on the floor to move, like I'd suddenly been sucked into mud up to my ankles—not unlike the way his power had enveloped me in the forest. My breath caught in my throat as he approached. What the fuck was happening?

He paused in front of me and sighed, almost dreamily, as he let his gaze rake hungrily over my body. He took his time looking at me, head to toe and back up, memorizing every inch of me. It made goosebumps rise on my arms. I wanted so badly to throw a punch, but my arms were too heavy, like my blood had been transmuted into lead.

"You're not supposed to be drained in one fell swoop." He placed the tip of his forefinger onto the skin of my throat, the barest, gentlest touch, but I felt it like a knife. "You're supposed to be savored."

He dragged his touch down slowly, over the leather of the collar; he lingered at the soft hollow of my throat before his touch went lower, tracing over my sternum down to my solar plexus, tugging the lace of the slip down slightly.

"Consumed slowly, with care, like a fine whiskey. Not a cheap beer. The blood in your veins is more precious to me than drink in this realm, or any other."

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't *spea*k—and I didn't know if it was his magic, or the bleak reality of this situation slowly setting in.

I was fucked. I wasn't going to die here and now. I was going to be drained slowly, perpetually, for as long as he could wring the blood out of me.

Daniel dropped his touch and took a step back. Whatever hold he had on me was suddenly broken, and he stepped back briskly. I slumped, then took a gasping breath like I'd been underwater.

"Our new life together is just beginning," he declared. "We have a lot of time to spend together. I suggest you adjust your attitude so it's a more pleasant experience for the both of us."

He left just as quickly as he'd arrived, stepping out the door and locking it behind him. I grabbed the lamp off the dresser and hurled it at the door with a roar, feeling more and more like a trapped animal. "Asshole!"

Fuck. I sat down on the edge of the bed and pressed the heels of my hands

into my eyes, then took a few deep, steadying breaths.

Okay. I was trapped, I had no access to my power, and Daniel had just told me he wanted to drain me slowly. At least I knew what I was dealing with.

I'd figure something out. I had to.

What if Corbin needed my help, too?

I passed the next few hours flat on my back on the too-soft mattress, staring at the twinkling fake stars overhead, racking my brain for something, *anything* I could do. Any way to get out of this room and out of Faerie. When I came up with no good ideas there, I closed my eyes and tried to access my power, like if I focused hard enough, maybe I could sneak past the spell the collar had put on me. Of course, that was a bust, too. All I got out of that was a headache pounding behind my eyes like it was taking a jackhammer to my skull.

I was massaging my temples, still flat on the bed when there was a sharp rap of knuckles on the door before the lock clicked open again. "Good evening, Temperance." The speaker was a small UnSeelie who looked like a grandmother who'd been shrunk down to about three feet tall. She was dressed in a plain canvas dress with a white half-apron, and despite her small stature, she carried herself with an air of haughtiness. Was that just an UnSeelie thing? It was really starting to get on my nerves. She adjusted the round glasses perched on the tip of her nose and peered at me. "It's time to prepare for dinner."

I rolled onto my side, so my back was to this UnSeelie. "I'm not going to dinner," I said. "And I'm not eating anything here. Tell Daniel to shove it."

She tutted. "I certainly won't. Now, I'll give you one more chance. Are you going to get up and get ready for dinner?"

Jeez, this reminded me a lot of when I was growing up with Gram and whining about having to get up and go to school. I rolled back over and sat up.

"I'm not doing a damn thing with that scumbag," I said. "If he wants me to show up for some kind of 'dinner,' he'll have to come down here and drag me there himself."

"Well, that won't do," the servant said with a sigh. "He did warn me you might insist on being difficult."

I sneered.

The servant tutted again, then picked her way carefully through the piles

of clothes on the floor. She disappeared into the bathroom, and I heard her knocking around and muttering to herself in a way that made me more than a little nervous.

She stepped out of the bathroom with a towel swung over her shoulder and her glasses fogged with steam. “I’m at least relieved to see you didn’t trash the items in the wardrobe, too.” She nodded to the armoire in the corner, and suddenly I regretted not dumping all the clothes out of that, too. “So I shouldn’t have to do any emergency care on your gown for this evening. Now, we don’t have all the time in the world.”

“I said--”

The servant tutted again, and her eyes flashed a flat yellow.

Suddenly I was standing. “Hey!” I barked. “What the fuck--”

“Language, please, Temperance,” the servant said, and my jaw snapped closed. My voice was trapped behind my teeth as my feet walked awkwardly across the floor and into the small bathroom. I was a passenger in my own body—the servant hadn’t taken control of my body, exactly, but it was like she’d attached marionette strings to my limbs and was manipulating me from the outside. It was unnerving, but more than that, it was degrading.

I really was *owned*. It made me nauseous.

The bathroom was tiny, and now there was a large copper tub filled with steaming water and fragrant bubbles.

“You’ll want to make a good impression at dinner,” the servant said as she followed me into the bathroom. “First we need to get all that Earthside filth off you.”

I pulled off my slip—not of my own accord—and stepped into the bathtub. At least the water was the perfect temperature, just hot enough. Small favors, I guessed. The servant busied herself with a spread of soaps and other toiletries on the small shelf in the bathroom. She handed me a washcloth and a bar of soap, then arched one narrow eyebrow at me. “Are you going to behave now, or am I going to have to do the dirty work, too?”

The marionette feeling dissipated, and I snatched the washcloth out of her hand. Receiving a bath by someone else’s hand—even if it was just a spell—was definitely not on my bucket list. “Fine.”

“Hair, too,” the servant said.

“Hey,” I said, “my hair’s curly, I’ve got a whole routine set up, and I’m not due for a wash--”

She waved a hand, and I dunked my head under the bathwater. I came up

sputtering indignantly, my hair wet and plastered to my head. “Great,” I said, “now I’m going to look like a frizzy mess at this dinner you’re acting like is so fucking important. Good job.”

“That’s enough from you,” she said, and then my lips were glued shut again. As if this entire setup wasn’t degrading enough.

I finished bathing, but the servant forced me to remain in the tub while she wrapped a fine white towel around my hair and fastened it in place. Only then did she allow me to step out of the water, briskly handing me another, larger towel.

“Dry off and moisturize,” she instructed. “And don’t waste any time.”

Of course, I tried to waste time, drying off slowly, tugging on the fancy underclothes, and then sniffing all the powders and creams on the small shelf. Everything seemed nice, but like hell I was going to put mysterious UnSeelie makeup on my skin if I wasn’t forced to. The servant seemed to have an idea of what I was doing, though, because it didn’t take long for that terrible marionette feeling to return as she marched me out of the bathroom, in just my underclothes with the towel around my hair.

“Daniel has requested you wear this, tonight,” the servant said. She pulled a flowing gold gown from the wardrobe.

I wrinkled my nose. Gold? Seriously? After all the finery I’d seen in this bedroom, I’d at least think that UnSeelie knew some basic color theory. Gold was going to just wash me out. Too bad the servant still had the magical grip on my jaw so I couldn’t make any of these obvious facts known. She had me step into the gown and then expertly laced up the corseted back. The silk was soft and light on my skin, with a square neckline and cap sleeves that didn’t suit me at all. The gold was detailed with white embroidery, which only served to make my pale skin look paler. Awesome. Then the servant waved a hand at the armoire, and a small pair of white shoes with a low heel skittered over like eager puppies. I scowled deeply, but my feet stepped into them at the servant’s instruction. So now my feet would hurt after dinner, too.

“Lovely,” the servant said, but she sounded more bored than interested. Likely she was just glad to be done dealing with me—that much was mutual. Then she grabbed the towel and slid it off my hair.

My curly red hair flowed down to my shoulder in perfect shiny waves, more tamed than it’d been in years. Hell, it looked like I’d just spent six hours in the studio getting a keratin treatment like the rich ladies in York City. I blinked into the big mirror hanging on the wall.

“Don’t question the way we do things here,” the servant said.

“Hmph,” I said. I shook my arms out a little, still itchy from the spell.

“This way,” the servant said, “unless you’d like me to do the walking for you.”

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” I said. I needed to get my bearings—needed to figure out where I was in the palace, and how the hell to get out. That’d be a lot easier without the servant’s magic on me. So for now, I’d behave.

For now.

Chapter 2

“Who all is in attendance at this dinner?” I asked as the servant led me the halls of the palace. We’d made our way up a few narrow flights of stairs (why was I always in the basements of these places?) and finally into the wider, more elegant hallways of the palace. “Besides Daniel. I assume if I’m wearing something like this, there’s a reason.”

The servant said nothing as she walked briskly just a pace ahead. Despite my height advantage on her, I had to navigate the stupid gown and wearing a heel instead of my combat boots, so I wasn’t exactly the picture of elegance and grace. I’d been pestering her with questions the whole time, but she hadn’t said a word in response. That made me more nervous than her shutting me up with magic, honestly. I didn’t like not knowing what I was about to be walking into.

I tried to get a sense of where I was in the palace, but we were moving quickly, and there were a lot of turns. Like the servant was leading me directly to the minotaur in the heart of the maze. And every hallway looked the same: same dark polished floors and walls, gleaming and reflective, same vaulted ceilings, same heavy doors. Here and there, we’d pass other servants or workers, or other UnSeelie dressed a bit finer, like court members or townspeople, but it wasn’t crowded. It was weirdly empty.

By the time we arrived at two large, ornately carved wooden doors, I had no idea where the hell I was. I didn’t even know if I was above ground or under it.

The servant knocked sharply on the door and didn’t wait for a response before she heaved it open.

Inside was an immense wooden table, set with delicate glass plates and glasses, and silverware so shiny and delicate it looked like it might dissolve if I touched it. The table was nearly full of unfamiliar Fae, all engaged in low, polite conversation over wine. I stumbled over the threshold, and all of their sharp gazes flickered to me with mild interest. Shit. I felt like the mouse that'd just been dropped into the viper's den.

"Ah, good," Daniel said with a huge smile. His teeth were back to normal now, but it didn't make him look any kinder. He pulled the empty seat next to him out and gestured for me to sit down. "You've decided to join us. Perfect timing."

I gritted my teeth, then took the seat. "Decided, my ass," I muttered, just low enough for Daniel to hear.

He only smiled, then reached for my hand where it rested in my lap. I snatched it out of reach. At his side, one of the UnSeelie women in a rich blue gown hid a laugh behind her hand.

Daniel's expression was briefly thunderous, and then melted back into an easy smile. "She can be a finicky thing," he said to the rest of the table. "As all redheads are."

"You always did have a type," a man at the end of the table said. He rested one elbow on the table and propped his square chin in his hand. He had a serious, but curious face, with deep-set brown eyes and not a single line on his smooth olive complexion. His dark hair was styled in smooth braids along his skull, neat and crisp in the candlelight. He shot a smirk at Daniel, but then his gaze flickered to me a little more curiously.

"What can I say, I like it when my pets have a little spunk to them," Daniel said. He smiled at me. "Now, I believe it's time to bring the food in."

He waved a hand, and then two doors on either side of the dining room swung open. Fae servants swept into the room, all carrying silver platters of mind-boggling dishes: suckling pig, crusty bread, fragrant cheeses, steaming soups, bright vegetables, jugs of wine. My mouth watered at the smell despite my frustration. Part of me was human, after all, and I was hungry.

"So, Temperance," the woman in the blue dress purred as the servants doled out the food, "tell us a little about yourself. You grew up Earthside? Must've been awful."

"Yes," I said through gritted teeth.

The woman raised her eyebrows expectantly, but I said nothing else. I'd sit through this, sure, but I wasn't going to be pleasant about it.

“Daniel has told us you have Seelie heritage,” another Fae said from across the table. “How far back?”

“I don’t know,” I said flatly.

“You must be excited to be here, then,” another woman said from the foot of the table. “Most humans, even with Fae blood, die before they get a chance to experience Faerie.”

“Right,” I said.

Daniel patted my knee and smiled condescendingly. “She’s just hungry,” he said to the table. “You know how humans get.”

“Can’t say I do,” the woman in the blue dress said. “This one seems difficult.”

“Just have to break her in, like a wild horse,” Daniel said. “Don’t worry.”

“Never said I was,” the woman said. She turned her attention to the other Fae at the table. The conversation moved away from me and back to the boring social realities of the court—alliances and betrayals, rumors, gossip, and jokes.

I didn’t touch my wine, but I couldn’t resist the food. It was even better than it smelled: the meat so tender it melted in my mouth, the vegetables spicy and garlicky, the bread tasting fresh out of the oven no matter how long it’d been sitting on the table. Still, satisfying as it was, it didn’t hold a candle to the breakfast special at Manny’s. I suppressed a sigh. I was going to have to get used to dinners like this, with the UnSeelie sending looks my way, in turns curious, hungry, and pitying.

The man with the braids at the far end of the table kept looking my way, even as he was pulled into conversation by the blonde UnSeelie at his side. There was a continuous flicker of interest in his brown eyes, but not the objectifying curiosity I’d seen in the others. It was different. But no one seemed to notice any difference in his behavior but me. I sniffed and focused my attention back on my meal.

“Tell me, Daniel,” a gray-eyed man in red jacket so fitted it looked like his shoulders might burst out of the seams, “has the queen revealed why she’s requested your human’s presence at the gala?”

Startled, I dropped my fork with a clatter onto the floor. The woman in blue laughed behind her hand, and before I could reach down to grab it, a servant had swept in and given me a new one. I cringed.

The man in the red jacket laughed heartily. “I see you haven’t told her.”

“It’s none of her concern, Robert,” Daniel said sharply.

“Actually, I think it’s extremely of her concern,” the man in the red jacket—Robert, apparently—said with a smile. “The gala is no laughing matter.”

“Please,” the man with the braids said from the end of the table. “The queen has some sort of gala every month, it seems.”

“And that makes them no less important,” Robert said. “So, Daniel, what will your pet be wearing for this affair?”

Daniel scoffed. “I’ve never seen you so interested in one of these galas.”

“Well, rarely do we have a human in attendance.” Robert took a sip of his wine. “And never a human that the queen has specifically asked to see. I hear she’s met this human before, too. What’s piqued her interest so much, I wonder?”

“You think I’d keep a boring pet?” Daniel shot back. “Of course, the queen is interested in my humans. I’m her right hand and she trusts my taste.”

“Right,” the woman in blue said, dripping with sarcasm. “That’s why she’s interested.”

“Elena,” Daniel snapped. “Watch your tongue.”

She just smiled and took a tiny bite of suckling pig.

“Curious,” Robert said. “I must say, I’m looking forward to this gala more than usual.”

“Careful,” the man in braids said, “or you’ll end up getting your invitation rescinded.”

He smiled winningly, and the tension at the table broke with a smattering of laughter. Robert clapped his hand on Daniel’s shoulder, and the conversation turned away from the gala and to a planned foxhunt later in the week.

I swallowed. The meal now tasted like sawdust in my mouth, and my ravenous appetite had disappeared. Meeting with the queen once had been bad enough—and now I had to do it again? As Daniel’s ‘pet’? I picked at my plate, tuning out the shallow conversation around me. The collar felt heavy around my neck. How much did the queen know about me? How much did Daniel *want* her to know? There was something going on between them—that much I had discerned from Elena’s snide little remark. Apparently being immortal and in the court led to some complicated interpersonal dynamics, and all I knew was that I wanted to stay as close to the edges of that as I could, if I wanted to make it out of this alive.

I felt eyes on me, and when I looked up, the man with the braids was watching me again. His lips twisted into a small frown, and then his gaze slid

with some reluctance away and back to the conversation.

It wasn't a lead, but I wanted to talk to him. He knew something—about me, or about Daniel, or about this gala. But there was nothing I could do while I sat stuck at this table as the UnSeelie around me prattled on and on.

No one was coming to help me. I was going to have to get out of this situation myself.

Chapter 3

“Up, up, up,!” a high-pitched voice called, rousing me from my restless sleep. I pulled the covers over my head with a groan, but it was quickly wrenched off me.

“You again?” I asked.

“Yes, me again,” the grandmotherly servant said. She adjusted her glasses on her nose. “Get up if you don’t want me to do it for you. You have plans today, Temperance.”

“Is this going to be a recurring thing?” I asked as I sleepily sat up.

The servant just huffed and busied herself moving about the room, picking up the clothes that were still a mess on the floor and tossing them into a basket she’d brought, and then moving to peer through the armoire. “I’m indentured to Mr. Rutherford,” she said. “The recurrence is up to him.”

“Well, that makes two of us,” I muttered. “What’s your name?”

“Spurn,” she said with a glance over her shoulder. “Though that’s no business of yours.”

For a moment, I felt a swoop of pity for Spurn. Being indentured to Daniel sure seemed like a shit way to live, if my past few days were anything to go by. And who knew how long Spurn had been in this arrangement? I didn’t see many old-looking UnSeelie. I was about to say something, but then Spurn waved her hand and that degrading marionette-feeling returned as she hauled me to my feet. Any trace of pity I’d felt swiftly disappeared.

“Hey!” I said. “I’m up. Fucking hell. I’ll do it myself.”

“You’re lucky you’re not in Hell,” she said, but dispelled the magic. “Go clean up. And wash your hair.”

“Again?” I asked.

Spurn gave me a look that made it very clear I would be getting an UnSeelie waterboarding if I didn't listen to her. I hurried into the bathroom, where the tub was filled with steaming water again, and bathed briskly, including dunking my head under and working my fingers through my hair. I spent as much time as I could get away with luxuriating in the warm water, until Spurn called for me to get my ass moving.

"Coming, coming," I shouted back, before she could engage that stupid spell again. I hurried back out into the bedroom in my underclothes with my hair wrapped up a towel again.

Spurn arched a brow.

"I'll get dressed," I insisted. "None of that bullshit. Please."

"But it's so fun," Spurn said with a smirk. "Here, this is what you're wearing today."

I took the white linen dress from Spurn's outstretched hands and held it up. "Seriously?"

The marionette feeling tugged at my hands threateningly.

"All right, all right," I said. "It's fine. Even though empire waists don't look good on anybody. Seriously, I'm going to look like I'm trying to hide a pregnancy."

"The mouth on you," Spurn said disapprovingly. "You'll be joining Mr. Rutherford at a brunch gathering in the manor garden this morning, so it's important you're dressed suitably."

I pulled the dress on over my head and stood still as Spurn fastened the buttons on the back. The hem hit just over my ankles, and the pale pink ribbon just under my breasts really did nothing for my silhouette. It was modest—demure, even—which I supposed Daniel wished I was. Too bad for him.

"Here," Spurn said, summoning a footstool closer with a flick of her hand. "Sit."

I sat. She pulled the towel off my hair and again it fell in perfect shiny waves. I sighed as she began to work her fingers masterfully through my hair, speedy and only slightly painful as she tugged it into a complicated French braid. When she finished, I risked a glance in the mirror. The dress still looked stupid, but the braid itself was gorgeous. Not that I would ever tell Spurn that. At least the shoes she summoned were flats this time, so I was in less danger of falling onto my ass in the mud.

"Lovely," Spurn said, peering at me like I was a well-set dinner table. She

was clearly pleased with her work. “Daniel will be meeting you at the gardens. This way.”

She led me out of the room and up the same narrow staircases we’d taken yesterday for the meal. Again, we moved through hallways that looked the same, but this time, Spurn led me through a heavy wooden door into a hallway made of glass.

I nearly gasped in surprise. It was an atrium, lush and humid and teeming with Fae plants that looked tropical. Huge heart-shaped green leaves caught a delicate mist from unseen sprinklers, and pink lilies the size of my head bloomed under their speckled shadow. Through the glass, I could see the gardens, with the purple grass cut low, rosebushes in neat rows, and topiaries shaped like rabbits, with a large but subtle fountain in the center. Behind the fountain, there were a handful of gorgeous white tents erected, and a small band was playing violins as people milled about under the tents and on the blankets spread out on the grass.

And then I saw the palace on the horizon, its obsidian spires reaching toward the cotton-candy clouds.

I whipped around. The building behind me wasn’t the palace, obviously, but a smaller wood and obsidian manor. Still impressive. But not the palace. I wasn’t sure if that made me feel better or worse, that Daniel had his own place and was preferring to keep me off-site.

“There you are,” Daniel said as he swept into the atrium. “Come with me, we’re just getting started with the luncheon.”

“Great,” I said darkly. Spurn turned on her heel and strode back into the manor. I missed her already—at least in comparison to Daniel. His powder blue jacket looked ridiculous.

He extended his arm.

I cringed.

His expression darkened. “Now,” he hissed, eyes flashing, “before I force you.”

I had a feeling that would be his reaction. I was willing to go along with this little charade to ensure I had my wits about me—but I still wanted him to know I wasn’t happy about it. Small victories. I linked my arm into Daniel’s and walked with him over the plush grass toward the party.

The scene was unnerving. Not because of any ominous aura, but because of the sheer *lack* of one. UnSeelie were the bloodthirsty ones, the ones that thrived on blood—especially blood like mine—and lurked in the Den and

dealt their dark deals and generally caused problems for people like me. But here, in garden of Daniel's manor, everyone looked so normal. The sun was shining high overhead, and the weather was perfect, warm with a sweet cooling breeze that ran over my neck like a touch. UnSeelie in fine white gowns and elegant linen suits lounged on the blankets, snacking on fruit and pastries under parasols and in the shade of the tents.

The band played softly, adding to the relaxed, elegant air of the event. Daniel led me at an ambling pace through the garden, pausing to greet attendees with a smile like he was a king making his way through his own court. It was kind of pathetic, honestly. I kept the snide remarks behind my teeth in a genuinely impressive show of self-restraint—made easier by the fact that a *lot* of UnSeelie gazes were landing with curiosity on me.

Daniel led me toward the biggest white tent, where a wooden table was set up with a few chairs and a spread of fruit and pastries. He guided me to a seat near the head, and he took the one at my left. It was the perfect place for him to oversee the entire luncheon with a pleased smile on his face.

A servant Fae stepped up wordlessly and poured us both a glass of sparkling white wine. Daniel took a handful of cherries from the spread on the table and began methodically working through them, sucking the flesh from the pits with pleasure. Gross.

"There you are, finally," Ronald said, approaching from the other end of the table. "Thought you weren't going to show up to your own party."

"It's not a party," Daniel said with a grin. "Just like to provide a little fun for my friends, you know?"

They got pulled into another vapid conversation about the weather and the apparently fine food available for the guests. Daniel shot me a look, and so I pulled a Danish from the pile and took a bite. As much as I wanted to be difficult, at this point, I didn't exactly have the means to feed myself. I had to take the meals when they came. My wine remained untouched even as Daniel started to guzzle his. Gram had warned me about Fae wine.

Gram had warned me about a lot of things.

That was the problem with Fae myth—there was so much of it, and I was still pulling apart what was real and what wasn't. Some of the stories stood out in my memory, like the one Gram told me on a spring day just a beautiful as this one, about how a Seelie snatched a girl from our realm and brought her through the portal. He fed her Fae wine until she was drunk with happiness, and the drunkenness drove her to dance and dance and dance,

flush with magical joy until she dropped dead where she stood.

The bubbly wine in the crystal flute in front of me reminded me of that story. Fae were enticing. Their invitations were always gorgeous, always elegant, always sweet and promising—and there was always something dark lurking under the surface. Some toll that would eventually have to be paid. I was here for one reason and one reason only: my blood. All the picturesque luncheons in the world wouldn't drive me to forget that fact.

“Lovely to see you, Daniel.” The man with the braids, the one who'd watched me so curiously at dinner, strode up to the table, dressed in a fine ivory coat and tall riding pants, like he'd just come back from a polo game.

Daniel did not look pleased to see him. “Good to see you could make it.”

“Well, I couldn't miss one of your famous picnics.”

“It's not a *picnic*--”

“And Temperance,” the man interrupted. “Glad to see you are enjoying your time here in Faerie.” He extended his hand.

I glanced at Daniel, who glowered at me. I wasn't exactly sure what would piss him off more, but I'd put my money on being nice to this stranger, so that was exactly what I did. I reached out, and the man took my hand and swept it toward his face for a kiss so polite, his lips did not actually touch my knuckles at all.

His eyes met mine as he pressed a slip of paper into my palm.

My heart stilled. I closed my fingers delicately around it and dropped my hand to my lap.

“Had a lovely time riding with the boys this morning,” the man continued jauntily, “but of course we all wanted to make it back in time for the luncheon...” From there the conversation spun out vapidly again, this time about horses. Eventually the man caught my eye again, holding my gaze for a long moment before he snatched an apple from the spread of fruit and strode away with an easy smile.

I waited for another Fae to capture Daniel in conversation before I dared uncurl my fingers around the paper. It was tiny, crumpled, and in neat script it simply read: *meet me in the atrium*.

“Daniel,” I said quietly.

He broke away from his conversation with a small, irritated furrow in his brow. “Yes?”

“I need to use the restroom,” I said quietly, channeling the spirit of an embarrassed, feeble child as best I could.

His irritation flared, now tinged with disgust. “Humans,” he said condescendingly. “So inefficient. And needy. Go ahead, there are facilities just inside the manor. Spurn will take you; I’ll summon her.”

“It’s urgent,” I said, and swallowed hard.

“Hell’s bells,” he said. “Fine, go, Spurn will meet you inside.”

I nodded and rose to my feet, making sure to look a little embarrassed and unsteady just to seal the deal. It was an award-winning performance from me, honestly. I hurried across the lush grass toward the atrium, back into the air dense with humidity and the tall, tropical plants.

I glanced around the atrium for another presence, anxious, but I was alone.

Where was he? What was this about?

Another trick? Another misstep? Someone who wanted me as their property instead of Daniel’s?

The door opened a crack and Spurn’s shrill voice filtered in. “Yes, it’ll be just a moment, Mr. Rutherford has requested--”

A hand clapped over my mouth and hauled me backward, into the dense foliage of the oversized ferns. Adrenaline surged through me and I slammed my heel back and down, hard onto the toes of my captor’s boot, and he hissed in pain.

“Quit it,” he said sharply into my ear. “I’m a friend of Corbin’s. I’m trying to help you.”

Behind the ferns was a small, narrow door, and the man shouldered it open and hauled me inside. It was a gardener’s closet, low-lit and musty, with the shelves packed with all kinds of plant food and tools for the maintenance of the atrium and the garden itself. “Shh,” the man with the braids said, carefully dropping his hand from my mouth like he didn’t trust me.

“Temperance?” Spurn called. Then she huffed with irritation. “Fool of a girl. Must be distracted at the luncheon.” Her sharp footsteps clacked on the atrium floor as she hurried toward the garden.

“We don’t have much time,” he said in a low, serious voice. “Listen. I’m Maxwell—I’m a close friend of Corbin’s.”

My heart jumped to my throat. “Do you know where he is?” I asked immediately. “I was with him before I was transported into Faerie, but I was alone when I got here. Is he okay? Where is he?”

“I have my suspicions,” Maxwell said. His expression darkened. “The details aren’t important right now.”

“The details--”

“Please,” Maxwell said. “Please. Listen to me.”

I took a breath and crossed my arms over my chest. As much as I wanted to pick his brain and know exactly where Corbin was and what had happened, I wasn’t exactly the one holding the cards here.

“You need to lie low,” he said. “Like you’ve been doing. Keep Daniel happy and engaged.”

I grimaced. “Great.”

“I know, he’s an ass,” Maxwell said. “But we need him thinking he’s in control.”

“What’s the plan?” I asked.

“At the gala, the queen is going to ‘ask’ you to track Corbin down,” Maxwell said. “Corbin’s her finest enforcer, and she wants him back. She knows you two were working together, and that you’re the best bounty hunter working Earthside, so she thinks you’ll have the best shot at getting him back.”

“Daniel’s not going to be happy about that,” I said.

“I know,” Maxwell said. “But the queen will overrule him. Don’t worry about that part. I’ll take care of the rest. Just agree to what the queen says.”

“Like I have any other choice,” I muttered. I hated being told what to do—but I had to admit this was already sounding better than being locked up in that underground bedroom waiting for Spurn to force me to wash my hair. “So where is he?”

“We need to get you out of here,” Maxwell said. “Out of Faerie. It’s not safe for you here, and it’s not going to be safe wherever Corbin is. But at least--”

“At least I won’t be waiting for Daniel to break the seal,” I said grimly. Then I tapped the leather of my collar. “And at least I might get this piece of shit taken off.”

But why wasn’t he answering my question about Corbin?

“Here.” Maxwell reached into his pocket and withdrew a small compact mirror. It was circular, barely the size of my palm, with a design of a snake biting its own tail winding around the edge. “Use this. Speak my name, or Corbin’s name, and the power of Faerie will reveal us to you.” He must’ve caught the eager gleam in my eye, because he added, “And not here. Wait until you’re in private.”

I nodded and tucked the mirror into the pocket of my dress. “All right.

Thanks.”

“Just try to play along with everyone,” Maxwell said. “We’ll get this show on the road soon enough.”

Before I could ask him what that meant exactly, he shoved me out of the closet and back into the atrium.

“There you are!” Spurn said as she re-entered from the gardens. “This way, I’m to chaperon you--”

“I found the facilities,” I said with an apologetic smile, then smoothed the nonexistent wrinkles out of my dress. “Sorry, it was kind of, uh, pressing. Sometimes this Faerie food doesn’t agree with my constitution.”

Spurn wrinkled her nose. “That’s not appropriate for polite conversation,” she chastised. “Return to the luncheon now, please.”

I nodded obediently and hurried back to the table, where Daniel was waiting to show me off some more. The mirror was a burning weight in my pocket. It was easier to sit there and pick at the pastries and smile at the approaching Fae, knowing something was going to happen. Whatever ‘show’ Maxwell was talking about—it had to be better than this.

Somehow, Maxwell made his way back to the garden and sprawled onto one of the picnic blankets, immediately sucked into a laughter-filled conversation with one of the women there. Mid-conversation, he glanced up, and shot me a conspiratorial smile.

It wasn’t really a lead. But, man, it felt fucking good to have something similar.

Chapter 4

“If you’re to attend the gala,” Daniel said as our carriage rattled to a stop, “you need an appropriate outfit.”

“Nothing that’s already in that huge armoire is appropriate?” I asked in disbelief.

“Those things are secondhand,” Daniel said. “Castoffs. The queen has a long memory. I’m not going to bring you to her gala in something she’s seen before.”

I suppressed an eye roll. I knew Fae had a lot of social rules, but this was next level. “Fine. Lead the way.”

I had a feeling it was less about my outfits and more about Daniel having a chance to show me off. I grimaced as I clambered out of the carriage, nearly stumbling on the hem of my plain blue dress. Daniel had on a simple black jacket, but with blue detailing to match my dress. That was a little much.

“We’re seeing my preferred tailor today,” Daniel explained. “She’s the only one I trust to have a gown for you made on limited time.”

“Made?” I balked.

“Of course,” Daniel said. “I won’t risk you wearing the same gown as anyone else at the gala.”

I’d never thought I’d long for the singular weddings-and-funerals black dress in my closet, but here I was. Daniel closed the carriage door and held out his arm.

This time, I took it without complaint. It was only Maxwell’s words earlier that day that kept me from sneering. *Play along*. My acquiescence did seem to please Daniel. Maybe he thought I was getting used to his control.

When Corbin had initially brought me to Faerie, we’d entered the palace

through the forest and the servants' cottages and workshops behind it. I'd assumed the town Daniel had insisted on taking me to would be similar, squat stone buildings and hard-packed dirt streets, but it was nothing like that at all.

The town was like something from a fairy tale—the real fairy tales. The ones where the kids *do* get eaten. The wide cobblestone streets were lined with gorgeous stone buildings, detailed with the same gleaming obsidian I was now familiar with from both the palace and the manor, and the windows glowed with warm orange lights. Some shops seemed innocuous, selling spellbooks or herbs, and others had window displays of animal skulls unlike any I'd seen Earthside and strange unfamiliar runes carved onto the doors.

The buildings were packed close together, with a few alleyways that looked inky-dark despite the afternoon sun. The streets were crowded with UnSeelie of all kinds: gorgeous men and women in the fine silks of the court, androgynous workers with coiled muscle and soot-stained aprons, house Fae like Spurn. Some non-Fae walked among them, too, werewolves in full shift and trundling trolls, and imps speaking rapid-fire to each other in an unknown tongue as they darted around at knee height.

We drew looks as we walked, but not too many, and Daniel seemed pleased by them regardless. Gazes flickered from my red hair—that did stand out here—to the collar around my neck. Maybe I was imagining it, but it felt like there was an undercurrent of hunger to the curiosity. Like even though my power was so fully locked down, there was something still there that drew UnSeelie attention.

I had to be imagining it. They were probably just curious to see what a high-ranking court member like Daniel wanted to do with a human like me.

As far as I could figure, Daniel hadn't told anyone I was half Solstice nymph—the last one. If he had, surely I wouldn't be able to walk through the streets undisturbed like this. Surely, he wouldn't be able to bring me to the gala.

That was it, I realized suddenly as we walked at an irritatingly slow pace down the cobblestones. If anyone knew what I was, it was sure get back to the queen. If I was reading that lady right, she wasn't exactly the most giving and selfless of leaders. She'd want me for her own. If she knew Daniel was hiding me from her...Well, likely that wouldn't end well for me, and certainly not for Daniel. If the queen knew what I was, I had a feeling she wouldn't hesitate to kill Daniel to get to me.

In a weird way that made me feel a little better. Most likely, Daniel

couldn't out me without outing himself. I had no defenses here—no magic, no weapons, no nothing—but at least I had the secrecy.

For now.

“Here we are,” Daniel said. He rapped twice on a plain-looking wooden door, which opened with a creak at his command.

The shop inside was an explosion of rich, luxurious color. The hardwoods were polished to reflection, and the walls were lined with rows and rows of fine silk dresses and jackets, as well as reams of fabric in all colors and patterns. There were shelves too, filled with shoes and accessories, and enormous plush chairs scattered around since there was so much to browse, it might make one exhausted. In the back was a carpeted platform in front of three enormous mirrors, so the unlucky patron—meaning me—could stand up there and see an outfit from all angles.

“Ah, Mr. Rutherford, my assistant informed me you were heading this way.” From the back room, an UnSeelie woman marched out. She was a head shorter than me, with silver hair falling to her shoulders and huge, unblinking eyes whitened and unseeing. “What brings you to the shop today?”

“Happy the short noticed worked out, Sylvia,” Daniel said. “I need you to dress my pet here. We're to attend the queen's gala and she needs the proper attire.”

I blinked at Sylvia, and then at Daniel. A blind tailor was new, but what was I supposed to do, request someone else?

“This way,” Sylvia said. “Up on the platform, we'll need your measurements.”

Sylvia snapped her gnarled fingers, and two assistants appeared from the back room. One was a small sprite in thick glasses, and the other was a gangly UnSeelie, taller than me but with spindly limbs like a teenager.

I stepped onto the platform and the two were on me like vultures, murmuring to each other as they got all up in my business measuring everything from my ankle circumference to my inseam, to my bust and my arm length. I cringed and stood still, even as my skin crawled with the closeness.

“I'll need a bridal collection, too,” Daniel said idly.

“A what?” I asked, my eyebrows shooting up as I stared at him in the mirror.

He tapped his forefinger to his chin, ignoring my reaction as he gazed at my reflection contemplatively. “That's not as urgent as the gown, though,” he

said to Sylvia. “But I will need the full collection, you know, the daily outfits, as well as the wedding gown and the lingerie.”

“Lingerie?” I squawked. “If you think--”

Daniel waved a hand dismissively. My jaw snapped shut, words trapped in my throat. His magic felt worse than Spurn’s. It was heavier, like it was his hand clenching my face and not his magic. I hated it.

Play along.

I exhaled hard through my nose and stared at my own reflection as the assistants finished up their measurements. If Maxwell was right, I’d be on my way to finding Corbin long before Daniel got to plan his little storybook wedding.

I wondered if this was the wedding he’d planned for my mother. The thought soured my mood even further.

Sylvia stepped onto the platform with me with dozens of fabric swatches and began to methodically hold them against my skin. The fog in her eyes began to shift and swirl as she tested the swatches, while Daniel prattled on about his ideas for the gown.

My mother was Seelie. How had Daniel even met her? How had he determined that she was to be his ‘prize’? Had Daniel hunted her down? Or did they meet at a meeting of the courts? Was Mom part of the court? Or was she just a commoner living in town?

I wondered what my life could’ve been like if I’d been able to grow up in Faerie. The kind of person I’d be. Or would I have met this same fate—standing around with my jaw locked shut as a show of power while I was decorated like a plaything?

“Green is the finest color for a redhead, of course,” Sylvia said. She held up a swatch of green silk so dark it was almost black, the color visible from certain angles in the low light. “We’ll do a simple gown with a high neck since you refuse to do anything about that gaudy collar. I suggest you purchase a gold chain overlay for it, at least, to conceal the leather.”

“That can be arranged,” Daniel muttered.

“Long sleeves,” Sylvia continued. Her assistants scratched notes rapidly. “With gold detailing. We’ll have a fairly high slit in the skirt to balance out the long sleeves, with gold lace for modesty.” She nodded satisfied. “She’ll look lovely but not gaudy, as you requested.”

“Perfect,” Daniel said.

“And will you be matching?” she asked.

“I’ll take an ascot of the same green silk,” Daniel noted. “Otherwise, I’ll be in black.”

“Acceptable,” Sylvia said. She flicked her hand at me like I was an irritating fly. “Off you go.”

I stepped off the platform. This stupid blue dress seemed like it had enough space in the skirt that I could kick Daniel in the face if I really wanted to. And fuck, I really, *really* wanted to. I wasn’t going to last much longer as his show pony. Pretty soon, something was going to make me snap.

Play along, I repeated to myself. I thought of the mirror tucked in the drawer of my dresser, waiting for me. I just had to play along long enough to find Corbin.

Money changed hands and seemingly endless pleasantries, too, and then finally Daniel led me out of the shop and back into the street. We’d been in the tailor’s shop for so long that the sun had sank down below the horizon, and in its place the twin moons had risen behind the clouds. The activity on the street had picked up. Errands were complete, and now the taverns were beginning to light up with noise and activity.

The carriage pulled up, and Daniel opened the door. “In you go,” he said. “Spurn will escort you back to the manor.”

“Great,” I said. “I love hanging out with Spurn.”

“I have business to attend to,” Daniel said. His gaze cut to the rowdy tavern nearby. “You’ll be taking dinner in your quarters this evening.”

I nodded in response, biting back the snarky remark lest he decide to send me some company as punishment. Time alone in that room was exactly what I needed.

Daniel nodded, then closed the door to the carriage and locked it. I sank down into the cushioned seat and kicked my feet up onto the bench across, legs spread and head tipped back. Fuck, I was exhausted. And really fucking tired of having to strut around being all ladylike. Thank God Spurn was up front with the driver.

The carriage set off, the movement on the cobblestones rattling my brain in my skull. Soon I’d have the mirror in hand.

Soon I could ask where Corbin was.

Chapter 5

Spuern left me alone in my room with a tray of dinner – a rich meat and vegetable stew and more freshly baked crusty bread. That was the thing in Faerie, even the half-assed meals were better than the shit I could whip up in my own kitchen. But not even the smell of perfectly cooked beef could entice me now. I left the tray balanced precariously on my dresser and glanced around the room. Not a lot of options for privacy, considering the fact that both Spuern and Daniel had a tendency to just bust in here whenever they felt like it.

I stepped into the tiny bathroom, then grabbed the stool by the tub and shoved it under the doorknob. Maybe excessive, maybe pointless, but hell, I needed all the help I could get at this point. Then I pulled the compact from my pocket and flipped it open.

“All right,” I muttered to myself. “Let’s hope this isn’t some kind of crazy trap.” Not that the situation I was in could get any worse. I steeled myself, peered at my reflection in the tiny mirror, and said clearly: “Show me Maxwell.”

At first nothing happened, and I was just staring at my own exhausted reflection. Immediately, I felt like a fool. Of course, this wouldn’t work. Maxwell was just fucking with me. Likely he didn’t even know Corbin at all—this wasn’t helpful at all, it was probably part of some annoying scheme, like a tracking device or something meant to make my life even more difficult than it already was—how could I be so *naive* as to think he’d actually want to *help me*—

Then a white fog swirled over my reflection, like a cloud rolling in and obscuring my face from view. It lingered there for moment, swirling, and

then shifted until there nothing but the edges of clouds lingering around the silver frame of the mirror.

No longer was my reflection in the glass. Instead, it was a tiny image of Maxwell, sitting in an overstuffed armchair by a crackling fire with an old leather-bound book in hand. He was dressed more casually than I'd seen him yet, in a soft long-sleeve cotton shirt and his feet bare in front of the warmth of the fire.

Weird. This was fucking weird. And honestly, kind of invasive. I felt like I was a security guard watching him through a television screen. How exactly did I cut this view off to look for Corbin? Was it like an old cell phone where I could snap it closed and then start a new call?

Then Maxwell looked up.

"Oh, shit," I said.

He smiled, then closed his book and stood up from the armchair.

White fog spilled from the mirror, flooding the room speedily like a pipe burst. It quickly consumed me, obscuring my vision, light and cool on my skin, and smelling faintly of lavender.

Then with a *whoosh* it disappeared, sucked back into the mirror just as quickly as it appeared. Maxwell stood in front of me with a demure smile on his face.

"Fucking hell!" I stumbled backward, knocking into the door, which sent the stool sideways and clattering onto the floor. "Warn a girl before you show up in her bathroom, Jesus Christ."

Maxwell glanced around. "Well, you're the one who used the mirror in the bathroom."

"You didn't tell me it could act as a *portal*," I said.

"It doesn't, really," he said. "Just for specific people."

"Would've been nice to know," I muttered.

"I wouldn't have pegged a bounty hunter as so jumpy," he said. "Do we have to have this conversation in the bathroom?"

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Yes," I said, "since my captors like to just wander into my room whenever they want."

"Ah." He cringed. "Good point."

"Will this work for Corbin?" I gestured at Maxwell demonstratively. "Can he just poof in here if I ask for him?"

"Wouldn't that be convenient," Maxwell said with a sigh.

"Figured as much," I said. "So let me in on this little plan of yours. I

assume you have one. How are we going to find Corbin?”

“I’ve got some bad news for you.”

“Add it to the pile,” I muttered.

“He’s in the Demon realm.”

My heart dropped to my feet. I stared at Maxwell wide-eyed. “You’re shitting me.”

“I wouldn’t joke about this,” Maxwell said seriously.

“He can’t be in the Demon realm,” I said. “What if someone there figures out his—his heritage? His *power*? He’s like--” *he’s like me*, I almost said, but I caught the words behind my teeth before they spilled out. “He’s too powerful. Someone will want to tap that for their own.”

“I know,” Maxwell said. “That’s why the queen wants him back, pronto.”

“The queen,” I muttered. “Shit. Right. He’s her favorite guard dog, isn’t he?”

“Yep, and if any of the Demon royalty figure out how to muzzle him and use him for their own means—well, it’d be bad for all of us, to say the least. And even worse for Corbin.” His expression darkened. “He can hold his own over there, but I don’t know for how long. He was never supposed to travel to the Demon realm—ever.”

What would happen to him in the Demon realm? Would it be like the first time I visited Faerie, when the power flooded me suddenly and unexpectedly, nearly taking me over? I couldn’t imagine what that would be like for someone with Shax heritage. I could only hope he’d be able to control it.

Why would Ralnor send him there? Just to sow a little chaos? I pressed my lips together, shoving the questions down.

“The problem is, none of the usual court enforcers can travel there to retrieve him,” Maxwell said.

“Why not?” I asked. “It’s not like he went there by choice.”

“Obviously,” Maxwell said, “but the demons don’t know that. The peace between the Demon royalty and the UnSeelie Court is tentative at best. If the enforcers cross over and make a bunch of noise, it’ll incite a war. As badly as the queen wants Corbin back, that’s not a risk she wants to take.”

“Which is why she’s going to ask me,” I said.

“Exactly. You’re an accomplished bounty hunter. There’s a real chance you might be able to actually bring him back. And if you can’t, well, that’s no real loss to the queen.”

“Love that vote of confidence,” I muttered.

“This is about more than just getting Corbin back for the queen,” Maxwell said. “This goes way back.”

“Of course it does,” I said. “Nothing is ever simple with you guys.”

“She wants you away from the court,” Maxwell said. “Everyone is too interested. It’s taking away interest from her.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Come on. Is this high school?”

“I’m not sure what you mean by that,” Maxwell said.

Right. Thousands of years old and all that. “The only reason people are interested in me is because you’re all bored.”

“That’s part of it,” Maxwell said. “But…” He sighed. “It’s complicated.”

“Try me,” I said. “If there’s some weird ancient interpersonal dynamics that are going to affect my job, I think I deserve to know about them.”

He sighed, then smoothed one hand over braids carefully, taming the nonexistent flyaways. “Years ago, before the queen ascended the throne, she and Corbin were lovers.”

My eyes widened. “What?”

“There wasn’t any real affection there,” Maxwell said, “as far as I know. The queen was always coldhearted, even before she was the queen. She was curious about Corbin—about his status as a hybrid. She used him. Led him on. Broke his heart.”

“You’d think this kind of info about the queen would stop surprising me. But she really is an asshole.”

“Shh,” he muttered. “Even talking like this in this realm is risky.”

I snapped my jaw shut as cold fear rushed through me suddenly. He was right. No matter how disgusted and a little (I mean a little. The tiniest, smallest, most microscopic amount) jealous I was, I couldn’t let my guard down.

“Even though it’s been centuries since then, the queen is still possessive. Corbin has shown interest in you, so the queen wants to remove you from the equation as quietly as possible.”

“Letting Daniel control me doesn’t seem to be a good way to do that,” I said.

“That’s because the queen underestimated Daniel’s own interest again,” he said. “Daniel is the queen’s right-hand man, as you know, but he wants more than that. He wants to sit beside the queen as her king. He’s jealous of the queen’s continuing interest in Corbin, so *he* sees something Corbin likes, and wants to claim it as his own to rub Corbin’s nose into it. And he thinks

by controlling you, he'll eventually be able to leverage that into more power with the queen."

"Corbin warned me about this," I said with a sigh as I slumped back against the door. "That I'd end up as a bargaining chip."

"It's how things work around here," Maxwell said.

"It's giving me a headache."

"Imagine how I feel," Maxwell said. "It's not easy living under the queen. Corbin and I figured that out a long time ago. It's why Corbin spends so much time Earthside—it's not just the job. He hates being here. Hates living under the queen. It's worse for him than it is for any of us." Maxwell's expression darkened. "A lot worse."

My heart clenched. He'd been living like this for so long—and now he was lost in the Demon realm.

Not for long, though. Not if I had anything to say about it. Determination straightened my spine like steel.

"I'll find him," I said. "If the queen thinks the Demon realm will kill me, she's got another thing coming." She didn't know who I was, or what I could do. Once I got this collar off—game fucking on.

Maxwell nodded. He looked unsure, but maybe there was a flicker of hope in his eyes, too. "She's going to insist you have an escort," he said. "I'll volunteer. I'm low enough in court ranking that I should be able to avoid Demon acknowledgment in the realm. And it's not like court members will be chomping at the bit to risk their lives for Corbin."

"But you are," I said with a tilt of my head.

"We grew up together," Maxwell said. "He's the closest thing I have to a brother. There are a lot of assholes in this court, and I'm not letting him leave me to handle them alone."

"That's good enough reason for me," I said. "We'll find him."

Again, he didn't look exactly confident, but he nodded. "Good," he said. "Hand me the mirror."

I handed it over, and he flipped it open. He glanced up at me and grinned. "See you at the gala."

Then he spoke an unfamiliar incantation, and that same cloud-like fog rushed from the mirror and surrounded me. I heard the mirror clatter to the floor, and then the fog rushed back into it like bathwater swirling down a drain. It snapped closed, and I was alone in the bathroom again.

"Well, that's dramatic," I said. I scooped up the mirror—a sturdy thing,

apparently—and then sank down. I slid my back down the door of the bathroom until I was seated on the cold bathroom floor, leaning against the wood.

I opened the mirror, peered at my reflection, and whispered, “Show me Corbin Frost.”

This time, the white fog didn’t swirl over the mirror. It was darkness instead, swirling and liquid like ink melting over the glass. It shimmered and shifted for a long moment, and then slowly cleared until it was moving like a snake around the edge of the mirror.

The image in the mirror wasn’t clear, like Maxwell had been. It was distant, unclear, like I was looking at Corbin through deep, dark water. It wasn’t the Corbin I was most familiar with, either. He was in his Shax form, the one I’d seen a handful of times in the heat of battle. In the Demon realm, though, his Shax form was more solid, instead of the dark flickering shape I’d seen before. He *was* his Shax form: taller, broader, with horns on top of his animalistic head and his eyes glowing red. But his posture wasn’t that of a beast. He was crouched somewhere, the details of the landscape I couldn’t make out, and he looked like he was in pain. He held his head in his clawed hands, and his back heaved with each strained breath.

“Corbin,” I said to the mirror, hoping against hope that maybe, like Maxwell, he would hear my voice. That something would connect us through the Realms, and he would look up and see me. “Corbin, I’m coming.”

There was no reaction. Just his breath stuttering and uneven.

I closed the mirror and hauled myself to my feet. I shoved down my despair and rage, packed them away into a neat box deep in my chest to deal with later. I couldn’t hurt for him right now—not until he was safe. That was the most important thing. I was going to find him, and whoever did that to him—whoever made him clutch his head and shake in pain—I was going to make them hurt a hundred times worse.

Chapter 6

“Hold still,” Spurn hissed as she adjusted the laces on the back of my gown. “Before I force you.”

“I don’t understand why we have to do a fitting at all,” I said. “Wasn’t that lady a magical tailor? Shouldn’t it all fit?”

“Of course it fits,” Spurn scoffed. “This is to see if Mr. Rutherford wants any last-minute adjustments before the gala.”

I huffed and grimaced down at the gown. Even I had to admit it fit perfectly, snug around my hips and then loosening into the lush skirt with the gold lace detailing that showed a bit of skin. And it was definitely not my style. At all. I was a trophy to be shown off, that much was for sure.

As if on cue, Daniel swept into my room without knocking. He had a tray in hand, with a mug of coffee and plate of fruit and yogurt. I wrinkled my nose. “What’s a girl got to do to get a real breakfast around here? Like, eggs and bacon and all that?”

“I can’t believe you’re letting her speak, Spurn,” Daniel said. “Doesn’t it drive you crazy?”

“You learn to tune it out,” Spurn said. “Good morning, sir.”

Daniel paced in a circle around Spurn and me like a predator, peering judiciously at the dress. “Good, good,” he said. “Yes, it’s just as I envisioned.”

“Miss Sylvia does good work indeed, sir,” Spurn agreed.

“As expected,” Daniel said. “Any suggested improvements, Spurn?”

“None, sir,” Spurn said. “Would you like to see the jewelry?”

“Of course.”

Spurn waved her hand briskly at me, locking me in place like a statue as

she and Daniel peered at the jewelry, still at home in its dark velvet box. They discussed it in low voices. My stomach turned, bile rising in my throat, like since my body was pinned in place, the rage had to manifest in other ways internally. Being held in place like this was so fucking degrading, it was worse every time I experienced it. My fingers itched, longing for the hilt of a knife or even better, my jewelry.

My power.

The collar felt so fucking heavy. A bit of gold chain over it wasn't going to make that feeling any better.

"All right, Spurn, that'll be all," Daniel said.

Her spell broke as she left, and I coughed at the burn of bile in my throat. I rolled my shoulders, biting back the urge to launch myself at Daniel and break his nose.

Play along.

Daniel locked the door behind Spurn, and then approached me with a scowl on his face. "I've been informed of the reason why the queen has requested your presence at the gala," he said.

"Oh?" I asked. "It's not just to be your arm candy?"

He narrowed his eyes at me. "She's heard about your little business Earthside," he said. "Your bounty hunting."

"It's not exactly little," I said. "I'm basically the best one working."

"Everything Earthside is little to Fae," Daniel said.

God, this guy was condescending. "Okay," I said. "So...?"

"She wants her hound back," Daniel said. "And she needs someone to go fetch him who won't cause a stir like a Fae would. So she's going to ask you to use your skills to do just that."

"I'm guessing I'm not getting a paycheck, either," I said.

Daniel sneered. "You should consider yourself lucky that I haven't drained you where you stand," he said. His eyes flashed with sudden anger, and hunger.

I took an unsteady step backward. "I was under the impression there would be no draining," I shot back. "What was it you said about savoring?"

"You will agree to whatever the queen asks of you," Daniel went on, ignoring me. "And you will not embarrass me with any snark. You will act with respect, speak only when spoken to, and ask no questions."

"If she's going to ask me to a *job*, I can't just stand there like a piece of art," I said. "I need to know what the fuck I'm getting into. It's not like she's

giving me a gift by asking me to work for free.”

Daniel struck me hard across the face, an open-handed slap that left my ears ringing and my cheek stinging. I reeled, knocked off-balance not by the act itself, but by the sheer disbelief that I’d just been slapped. It was so fucking disrespectful—I’d honestly rather take a solid punch to the face than an open-handed slap like he thought he was some kind of pimp.

I snarled, “If you think--”

Daniel’s thick, greasy magic wound around me and snapped my mouth shut.

“In fact, you ungrateful whore,” Daniel snapped, “it *is* a gift. It’s a gift that the queen even cares to speak to you at all. And it’s a gift that I’m allowing you to live and interact with the court at all, instead of keeping you locked up in much less pleasant circumstances to be used solely as a blood bag for me.” His eyes flashed, and he bared his teeth at me, newly elongated and sharp. “Your behavior at this gala will determine if that is your fate after your little job for the queen. Do you understand?”

Unable to speak, I nodded. I wasn’t stupid enough to cause a scene in front of the queen, and I wasn’t going to press the queen for details about the job, either. I just wanted to make Daniel get a little antsy. If I had to go through the motions of being his little plaything during this gala, I would at least put him on edge a little bit.

“Good,” Daniel said. His little show of dominance had appeased him, it seemed. I wrinkled my nose in disdain. “Spurn will be by later this evening to help with your full outfitting before the gala. Until then, you’re to stay in your room. Lunch will be provided later.”

I nodded again.

Daniel grabbed my chin roughly and turned my face toward his. “Behave tonight.”

It’d be so easy to spit in his face. The fact that I didn’t was a real testament to my sheer iron will.

Daniel released me, and then left the room, taking his magic with him. I grimaced. His magic seemed to leave a residue on my skin and always left me wanting to a shower—a real shower, not a weird bath like I always had to do with Spurn. I wrestled out of the dress and tossed it over one of the nice armchairs by the unlit fireplace. Silk be damned, whatever happened to it, Spurn could fix. I grabbed one of the coffees Daniel had brought—small wonders—and crawled back into the uncomfortably soft bed.

I pulled the mirror out from where I had stashed it beneath my pillow, and then sank lower into the bed and pulled the covers under my head, like a teenager hiding from her parents.

I flipped the mirror open and held it close to my face. Then I whispered, “Show me Corbin Frost.”

Just like the night prior, the mirror flooded with darkness, thick and inky, which swirled and shimmered before it dissipated. I saw Corbin again, but this time, he was in his familiar Fae form: same broad shoulders, same blond hair, though it was streaked with dirt or blood. I couldn’t see his face, rolled onto his side as he was, while an immense demon stood above him, laughing, like a schoolyard bully who’d just beat someone up for their lunch money.

No matter how many times I cried out his name into the mirror, nothing happened. All I could do was watch as the demon laughed and threw kick after kick into his ribs.

I couldn’t bear to watch anymore, not when I was stuck in this bedroom with no way to help him. I snapped the mirror shut and shoved it back under my pillow, then crawled out of bed into the bathroom to splash cold water onto my face. I stared at my reflection and tried to clear my head.

Focusing on the pain wouldn’t help me find Corbin. That was what was most important—getting this job, and getting to the Demon realm to find him. Every minute that passed was another minute he was at the mercy of whatever demons had him there. Linger on my own fear, my own pain, my own anger—none of that would help me find him.

But at the same time, I couldn’t deny the truth.

I’d never felt this way about anyone before.

Never this all-consuming anger. This protectiveness. This—well, there wasn’t really another word for it—*devotion*. I’d tear the Demon realm to shreds myself if that’s what it took to find Corbin.

I could only hope he knew, somewhere in his heart, that I was coming. He and I, we were like cockroaches. We’d do what it took to survive.

The rest of the day passed in a boring blur. I exhausted myself fruitlessly trying to summon my power up just a little, but it was no use with the collar on. That led me to need a nap, and when I woke up there was a small meal waiting for me and another cup of coffee. And, unfortunately, Spurn was in the room, too.

“I was about to have to shake you awake myself,” she said derisively. “Get up, eat, and get cleaned up. I need to get you dressed.”

The getting dressed process was a whirlwind of snide remarks and marionette spells, but after an hour of misery, I was dolled up and ready to go. The gown was just as gorgeous as Sylvia had promised to Daniel. It was rich green, with gold detailing and a high neck that did a decent job of hiding the black leather collar. The jewelry finished the job, concealing the collar behind fine gold mesh. The gold lace in the slit of the dress showed a flash of leg as well as the gold heels Spurn had brought for me. She'd tied my hair up into a complicated updo, with tiny gold flowers tucked into the bun and glinting like stars.

"Lovely," she said, stalking around me like she was the tailor herself. "This will be adequate."

"That's what I'm going for," I said. "Adequate."

"Spurn?" Daniel asked as he strode in without knocking, as was his way. "Is she ready?"

"Perfect timing, sir," Spurn said. "Is this to your liking?"

I crossed my arms over my chest.

Spurn swatted me, then snapped her magic back into place and forced my arms in position, demurely clasped at my lower back. I grimaced.

Daniel examined me carefully, like he was trying to determine if a painting was counterfeit. He was dressed in high-waisted black dress pants and a black jacket, with a shimmering gold shirt beneath it to match the details of my dress. Apparently, he'd changed his mind about the green detailing. Regardless, we looked appallingly Christmassy. Not that I could say anything of the sort with Spurn's magic keeping my jaw shut.

"This will do," he said. "Thank you, Spurn. Prepare the carriage."

Spurn hurried away, and her magic broke as she left. I said nothing, just recrossed my arms over my chest.

"Remember what I said about tonight," Daniel said. "Your fate depends on it."

"I'll behave," I said coolly. That seemed to appease Daniel, and he led me out of the bedroom and to the carriage waiting outside the manor.

The ride was short, and despite my nerves, I was still astonished by the beauty of Faerie. The twin moons hung in the starry sky so dark it was almost purple. The obsidian palace reflected the moons back on every panel, so it was an endless gorgeous collage of moons. The carriage approached the gates of the castle, and the Fae guards simply waved us past.

At the door to the castle, Daniel hurried around first and opened the door

for me in an irritatingly theatrical show of chivalry. The guards at the immense obsidian doors slid them open with magic. We strode down the hallway to the next set of immense doors, where another set of Fae guards opened those, too. I halfway expected to see another set of doors, just to complete the set, but this one opened directly into the throne room.

My heart rocketed into my throat.

I'd been in the throne room once before, but never like *this*. It was decked out in decorations—for what, I didn't know. There were high golden tables dotting the floors, and the enchanted, starlit ceiling glowed with an enchanted aurora borealis. Under the enormous glass windows, the twin moons glowed, and a small band played delicate stringed instruments, permeating the space with elegant, gentle music. The room was full of UnSeelie in fine gowns, silks and lace, with flutes of champagnes and small plates of appetizers that appeared to be mostly meats, mostly raw. House Fae in plain jackets and dresses moved around the room with plates of food and bottles of drinks, refilling glasses, offering more bites of meat to anyone who dared have an empty plate. As we stepped over the threshold, all eyes in the room seemed to land on us—on *me*.

I swallowed. Daniel led the way across the throne room with his arm tight around my waist, like he was afraid I was going to bolt and run for the door. Maybe last time that was on my mind, but this time, there was nowhere I could escape to. My best shot at escape was to be on my best behavior and use this opportunity to get a read on the court and the UnSeelie that occupied it. At one of the tables near the back of the throne room, in conversation with an UnSeelie woman, Max sipped at his wine. He was in a simple jacket and trousers, a white shirt, much less noisy than the gold atrocity Daniel was wearing. Even as he continued his conversation, his eyes tracked me as I moved across the throne room. His presence did make me feel better, though. At least I had one ally here.

From her seat on top of the dais, the queen smiled.

She was dressed in a gown that was darker than the night sky, black as ink, as the abyss, and it seemed to shift and shimmer with each step as she slowly descended the stairs. Her dark hair was just as dark, flowing over her bare shoulders, white as eggshells.

Daniel bowed deeply, and I did the same, mirroring his posture.

“Rise,” the queen said in a smooth, silvery voice. “Daniel, how nice of you to bring your pet.”

“Of course, my Queen,” Daniel said. “She is honored to be here.”

“Is that true?” the queen asked with a cruel smirk. “She’s honored?”

“My Q--”

“I’m speaking to Temperance,” the queen snapped, her eyes flashing white for a brief, terrifying moment.

Daniel pressed his lips together and nodded.

“Does our Daniel speak the truth?” she asked me. “Are you honored to be here?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Hm,” the queen said. Her gaze drifted to my hands, where they were clasped in front of my body.

She was looking for my jewelry.

I kept my face carefully neutral, letting her look. Did she know about the collar? Did she care?

“Generally, my galas are for UnSeelie Court members alone,” the queen said. “It’s rare that I would ever allow someone of mixed blood to enjoy my galas at all, let alone a human.”

I swallowed. Was I supposed to say something? I felt like I was standing in front of a wolf that might snap and bite my head off at any moment.

“I asked you to attend this gala for a reason,” the queen continued. “You work as a bounty hunter, correct?”

“Yes,” I said.

“You were working with my hound, correct? The half-breed, Corbin Frost?”

She said the words with such venom in her voice, like the words themselves tasted foul in her mouth. Hadn’t they been lovers? Even if was centuries ago, like Daniel had said, did she really have to say it with such disdain?

“Yes,” I repeated.

“He’s gone missing.” She sighed and took a moment to examine her nails, like this was all a big inconvenience and not a matter of Corbin’s life or death. “And I need him back. Since you’re supposedly good at what you do Earthside—good enough to work with Corbin on similar cases, at least—I’d like for you to find him and bring him back to me.”

“I can do that,” I said.

“Good,” the queen said. “I assume you know Corbin intimately. That will help you find him as well, especially if he is where I suspect he is.”

Beside me, Daniel stiffened. I had a thousand fiery comebacks on the tip of my tongue, but I said nothing. The queen stared me down like she was waiting for something—confirmation or denial—but I wasn't going to tell her either way. Whatever connection I had with Corbin, I already knew it wasn't the kind she thought it was.

And honestly, it was none of her fucking business.

The queen huffed, then shot a dark look at Daniel. "You'll have access to whatever you need in order to track him down, of course. Tech, weapons, whatever the court can offer you."

"That's very generous," I said.

"Of course, I can't allow you that level of access individually," she said. "Can I trust you?" She stared at me, unblinking, her perfectly symmetrical face so beautiful as to be slightly uncanny.

"Yes," I said.

The queen sighed. "If only it were so easy. I'll have to send you with a chaperone. Can't have you running off with UnSeelie technology, obviously."

"I'll go," Daniel said immediately. "I can keep her under control."

"Absolutely not," the queen said dismissively. "I can't trust you to stay on task. And I need you at the court."

Maxwell appeared at the queen's side out of nowhere—how did he do that? "I'll chaperone," he said easily. "I'm familiar with Corbin as well, as you know, so together we should have a good chance at finding him."

The queen nodded. "Yes, that's acceptable," she said. "You shouldn't cause a stir across the Realms, either, the way my right hand would."

Daniel straightened up. "Good thinking, my Queen," he said. What a loser. Just the mention of causing a stir was enough to soothe his ego. "I'll have my scribe draft the contract," she said smoothly. "Of course, Temperance, you'll be bound to the UnSeelie Court with a blood contract. If you find Corbin, you'll bring him back to the court. Try to take him elsewhere, and you die."

"That's fair," I said, because what else was I supposed to say? "And if I don't find him?"

She laughed delicately, a sound like a distant bell. "There are really two options here, Temperance," she said. "You find him, or you die."

"Ah," I said. "Well, terms like that are familiar to me."

Her red lips curled into that curious smirk again. "Lovely. I expect this

will be a slightly more complicated contract than you're used to."

I said nothing.

"I've used my power to search for Corbin," she said. "Both in Faerie, and the Human realm. I've found no trace of him. That leads me to believe that he has somehow found his way into the Demon realm, where my scrying powers cannot go."

"The Demon realm," I repeated. I tried to keep my expression at the intersection of neutral and shocked.

The queen bought it. "Yes," she said. "Is that a problem?"

I shook my head. "I'll find him."

"Of course we will," Maxwell said with a flourish. "We'll leave tomorrow, Temperance."

Daniel sneered at Maxwell, but nodded his agreement.

"That will be all," the queen said.

Dismissed, we both bowed, and then Daniel swept me back into the party before I could even catch Maxwell's eye. He still seemed annoyed, but he already had his sights set on a table full of well-dressed UnSeelie and was marching me toward them. I'd been so fixated on the meeting with the queen that I'd forgotten about the really bad part of this gala—the schmoozing.

I exhaled hard through my nose. If I could make it through this, the Demon realm would be a piece of cake.

Chapter 7

After too many days of getting dolled up in silk gowns and heels, it felt really fucking good to gear up. I was in my room in the early hours of the morning, with a coffee and some plain toast that a house Fae had dropped off at my request. I had the clothes on that I'd been wearing when I'd been so unceremoniously dumped in Faerie: my good stretchy jeans, plain hoodie, and leather jacket. I laced up my boots, then stood to examine the weapons I'd requested from the UnSeelie armory.

What exactly did one take to the Demon realm when she couldn't use her power?

I'd signed the document the UnSeelie scribe had prepared for me—in my own blood, which was gross, I'd really thought that had been a metaphor. Even with that, though, the collar was still fixed around my neck. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. On one hand, it was likely good that the demons that prowled that realm wouldn't have a chance to sniff out my nymph blood. But, it also meant I was way less able to defend myself. And that made me itchy. I'd much prefer to have to fend off demons with my magic than try to stealth by with just my hand-to-hand skills to protect me. My hand-to-hand skills were good, of course, and I'd handled demons before—but that was Earthside. On their turf, it'd be a different story.

So I'd requested a pretty extensive amount of weapons. UnSeelie weaponry was gorgeously made, too, more intricate and decorative than the Seelie weaponry I usually used. I strapped a long knife to my thigh, with a fine obsidian blade that gleamed like the palace itself. I affixed a few more to my body, my hip and in my boot, just so I had enough to hurl if necessary. I'd also requested a gun, which the armory keeper had not been pleased

about, and had demanded the scribe add a ‘no-shooting-people-in-Faerie’ clause to my blood contract. I hadn’t even thought about that as a possibility, but I guess there was no rampage through the palace in my future.

I packed my remaining gear into my bag and swung it over my shoulder. The last thing I grabbed was the compact Maxwell had given me. I smoothed my thumb over the snake pattern on the silver.

Heading into the Demon realm wasn’t exactly on my bucket list. But if there was one thing I was good at, it was tracking people down. I’d find Corbin.

This was my most important bounty yet.

A gentle knock at my door pulled me out of my thoughts. At this point, I wasn’t really used to people knocking at all, what with the way Spurn and Daniel just barged in here whenever they wanted. “Yeah?”

“It’s me,” Maxwell said.

“Come in, come in,” I said. Maxwell opened the door, and I said, “Sorry, not exactly used to people waiting for permission.”

He cringed. “Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me, knowing Daniel.” Maxwell was dressed for the journey too, but he looked slightly more, well, Fae-ish, with his riding pants and boots, and a dark cloak fastened with an obsidian brooch at his neck. “You’re prepared?”

“As I’ll ever be,” I said.

“Good,” he said with a nod. “Come with me, and we’ll head to the palace.”

I balked. “The palace? Again?”

“Not just anyone can open a portal into the Demon realm,” Maxwell explained. “It’s not like we can just hop into the Portal realm and sidle in there.”

“I thought that’s exactly what we would be doing,” I said.

“Relations aren’t exactly good between Fae and Demons,” he said. “Which is why we’ll have to try to fly under the radar. Only the queen has the kind of skill necessary to open a portal that won’t be noticed by the demons in the realm. They like Fae magic—it’s a source of power to them.”

I was surprised to have Maxwell as an escort instead of Daniel, but once we made our way to the palace and back into the throne room, it made sense. Daniel was standing at the queen’s side like a sentinel, and he did not look happy to see me show up with Maxwell. Apparently, the queen was serious about wanting him to stick close to her side.

We both bowed to the queen and exchanged the expected formalities. She smiled demurely, looking as terrifyingly beautiful as ever in a floor-length silk gown despite the early hour. I could only assume she had various silk gowns for all kinds of events and gatherings.

“You have the weaponry you need?” the queen asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Thank you for your generosity.”

She nodded. “Bring my enforcer back to the court in one piece, or don’t come back at all.”

I had known those were the terms, but still, hearing it in the queen’s low, chilling voice made my skin crawl. She turned her back toward us and summoned a small house Fae from the shadows, who was holding a tray of elegant obsidian jewelry.

As the queen adorned her long, black-tipped fingers with the rings, Daniel strode forward to me with his brows pulled together seriously. “Remember,” he said in a dangerously low voice, “you can’t go far with the collar on. I’ll always know where you are. And if you make it back, you’re still my property.”

If this was a just world, I’d be allowed to kick Daniel directly in the face. But I just had to stand there and take it like a bitch.

That’s what he thought, though. Once I found Corbin, I’d figure out something about this collar. Daniel would get what was coming for him for doing this—since he was the one who worked with Ralnor in the first place. He was responsible for Corbin’s suffering. He wasn’t getting off the hook as easily as he thought.

That thought sustained me as I stood silently under his withering gaze. Finally, Daniel scoffed and turned away. If he’d thought he was going to get a rise out of me, well, he needed get used to disappointment.

Then, the queen dismissed the house Fae. She held up both hands, now gleaming with obsidian rings, and then turned so her back was to us all. She swept her hands in a wide circle, and where her hands moved, inky magic followed. It was so powerful, the atmosphere seemed to shiver with it. She was drawing the portal in midair.

The circle hung in the air like it had been drawn from a brush. Then the queen took a delicate step back and pushed both hands forward. That same inky magic rushed from her palms and filled the circle, until it was a swirling abyss. It was deep, ominous, shifting, like I was gazing into dark water. Except it smelled faintly of sulfur.

Innately, it repulsed me. It took all my focus to keep my boots glued to the floor when every animal part of my body was screaming at me to run the other direction. It was like my nervous system knew whatever was on the other side of that portal wasn't going to be good.

"Now go," she said breezily.

Maxwell bowed briskly to the queen, then grabbed my forearm. He glanced at me, and there was a mischievous, almost excited gleam in his dark eyes—no wonder he and Corbin got along.

Then we stepped into the portal.

I closed my eyes and focused on the grounding sensation of Maxwell's tight grip on my arm. The darkness of the portal closed around us, bringing with it an empty cold and increasing smell of sulfur. It was like that time in the Smuckers' backyard, when the skip I'd been chasing thrust me into a pocket Hell dimension—except this time I was heading there on my own. Willingly.

I kept my eyes tightly closed, the sulfur burning my nose as the portal dragged me like a wave. We traveled for what felt like an eternity but was probably only a few minutes, until finally there was a solid surface under my feet and the cold void dissipated.

In its place was heat. It was a dry, terrible heat, the kind that seemed to suck all the moisture from your skin and leave you cracked and miserable. The kind of heat that lingers in the back of your throat, that brings with it a thirst that never seems to go away. But there wasn't any sun overhead—the heat seemed to radiate from the ground itself.

We'd landed in the middle of a wasteland. The sky above was a deep, dark red, like a night sky tinged with fire, and the ground below my feet looked like a clay riverbed devoid of water for centuries. It was cracked and lifeless, empty of any plants or animals everywhere I looked. The whole place just felt *wrong*, like it was trying to suck the life out of me even as I stood here doing nothing. Nothing was supposed to live here. A Seelie like me—especially a life-giving Solstice nymph—was *definitely* not supposed to be here. Even with my powers locked down, I knew that much.

On the horizon, a sad-looking town stood, its buildings belching smoke into the night sky. "Let me guess," I said, "that's where we're headed?"

"Gotta start somewhere," Maxwell said.

"Lucky us." I pulled the compact from my inner pocket and flipped it open. "Show me Corbin," I whispered.

This attempt, it took nearly no time at all for the inky darkness to fill the mirror and then retreat, like it was easier for the mirror to find him now that we were in the Demon realm.

In the mirror, Corbin was crouched in the corner of some dirty room, looking like he was halfway passed out with his arm cradled against his chest. His forearm was bent at an unnatural angle, and his hand flopped uselessly; he grimaced in pain.

“Shit,” Maxwell said, peering into the mirror over my shoulder. “He’s not healing as quickly as he should be. We need to hurry.”

“What do you mean he’s not healing?” I asked.

“Let’s just move,” Maxwell said. “We need to find him.”

“Shit,” I muttered, following Maxwell as he took off at a brisk pace across the wasteland.

We walked. And walked. And walked. And the town didn’t seem to get any closer. “How far away is that town?”

“This realm is deceptive,” Maxwell explained. “Distances can be odd. Things are off. I’m sure you’ve gotten the feeling.”

“Yeah, like there’s something just...”

“Wrong,” Maxwell finished. “Yeah, you get used to it.”

“You’ve been here before?” I asked.

Maxwell’s expression darkened. “Unfortunately.” He sighed. “Occasionally, when he was younger, Corbin would be sent here for trainings, or for punishment. Here and there I’d sneak in to keep him company or try to get him out.”

“Seriously?” I asked. “Punishment?”

“I don’t know how much he’s told you about his... Role. In the court, and in Faerie in general.”

Corbin’s voice ran clear in my memory, just as cool and stoic as the day he’d told me about his past. “*I’m the product of a Shax demon raping my mother,*” he’d said, digging through drawers of his tiny palace quarters like this was completely normal. “*Had they followed the traditions of the realm, I’d be exiled, or killed at birth.*”

“He’s told me enough,” I said.

“When he was younger, it wasn’t so easy for him to control his Shax side,” Maxwell said. “You know how things are when you’re a teenager. He’d get angry, or upset, and then just lash out. The demon would just burst out, like he couldn’t help it. He never hurt anyone, but the queen hated seeing

it. She hated every reminder of what he was. So she'd tell him he needed to get a handle on it, and then kick him through the portal for 'practice.' But really, she knew it scared the shit out of him being here. She'd drop him in the wasteland and just let him get spooked. And sometimes he'd have to fight."

"Fight demons?" I asked. "He was going into town?"

"No, not demons," Maxwell said. "But—the point is, sometimes he'd get in over his head and I'd try to help."

"In over his head with what?"

Maxwell glanced around the wasteland almost anxiously. "Things are just strange around here," he said. "We'll cloak before we make it into town. But we should be able to move through town mostly unnoticed, as long as things go as planned."

"I'm glad you have a plan," I said with a shake of my head. "I was just going to go in guns blazing, so to speak."

"That's a really bad idea in the Demon realm," he said. "Just saying."

"It's worked for me as a methodology so far," I muttered.

"Stop," Maxwell said suddenly. He held his hand out, and I stopped as instructed.

"What?"

"Shh," he hissed between his teeth. "Stay close."

Immediately, I went on high alert. I stepped closer to Maxwell and pulled the obsidian knife from my belt, scanning the wasteland. There was nothing, though, just cracked red dirt all the way to the horizon.

"Shit," Maxwell said. "Fucking shit." From beneath his cloak, strapped to his back, he withdrew a long, thin sword with an obsidian blade just like my knife's. That didn't make me feel any better.

"What is it?" I demanded in a low voice. "What's happening?" Then I felt it. The ground was vibrating under my feet, like something was moving deep, deep underground. "Something's coming. Max, what the fuck is coming?"

He cringed. "Not a lot can survive in this realm," he said. "And the things that do survive are not very friendly."

"Can you be straightforward for two seconds?" On the horizon, a dust cloud formed. "Look, over here. Is that--"

Maxwell turned, then stood at my side facing it. "Yep, that's it," he said. "I was hoping we'd be able to avoid this."

The dust cloud grew bigger, and the tremors stronger.

“Stand behind me,” Maxwell said, so low and serious I did so without thinking. Power crackled on his skin like sparks as he infused the blade of his sword with UnSeelie power. “Your blade,” he said with his hand extended, eyes still on the dust cloud.

I handed it over. Maxwell pushed power into my knife, too, and when I had it back in hand, it thrummed with magic. Exactly what the magic would do, I wasn’t sure, but at this point I didn’t care. All I could do was trust Maxwell that it would help us survive whatever was rushing toward us.

“It’s a delver,” he said. “I’ll handle it. Then we’ll have to move—and I mean *move*.”

“That doesn’t exactly answer my—*holy shit*.”

The tremors grew so strong I was nearly knocked off my feet. I braced myself, knife in hand, as the dust cloud grew closer and closer, then whirled like a tornado. The tremors rattled under my feet, up into my bones, and then I heard it. Something was rumbling underground. Moving upward. Digging, digging digging—and then it burst from the cracked dirt.

The creature looked like a mutated cockroach, except it was the size of a horse. It hauled itself up and out of the ground, its huge, hairy insectoid legs hauling the weight of its rotund, armored body out of the tunnel it’d carved in its travels. Its back was scaly, shiny black and browns looking like protective plate armor over it. Its mandibles clicked together, and its long antenna lay back twitching down its body as it fixed its flat, shiny eyes gleaming with something I definitely interpreted as hunger.

“All right.” Maxwell sliced his blade through the air. “Let’s dance.”

He launched himself off the balls of his feet, straight at the delver, only for the thing to rear up and bat at him like a cat toying with its prey. He tumbled into the dirt and sprung back to his feet. He sneered at the thing, brandishing his blade as the roach flicked its antenna like it couldn’t decide if it wanted me or him.

Then the trembling returned.

“Watch out,” Maxwell shouted, “he brought a friend!”

Another roach-like delver burst from the same tunnel, crawling out curiously onto to the dirt. It turned its flat eyes on me and I couldn’t help but take a dizzy step back.

“Why roaches?” I called back. “Why couldn’t it be spiders or snakes or something?”

The first delver charged at Maxwell, and I saw him catch its snapping

mandibles with the blade of his sword, only the thing chewed right through it, shattering the obsidian as if it was made of sugar. The atmosphere crackled with cold UnSeelie magic, cutting through the heat of the air as Maxwell grunted and pushed magic into the creature's skull. It leaked rich blue magic from its eyes and its antenna but didn't die, trundling forward and snapping its mandibles at Maxwell as he held it off.

Snap. Snap.

The other delver was interested in me.

I took another step back. Its armored body was black and brown, and its underbelly shot through with red, like it had absorbed some of the demonic power of this realm to become so big and fat and hungry.

Staring it down, I felt the weight of my collar heavier than ever. If I had my power, I could burn this beast to pieces from the inside out. It wouldn't even take a lot—just one push of my light through it and the demon power would burn away like dead dry leaves in a fire.

“Come on, you fucker,” I said, lowering my stance and staring the thing down. “Try me.”

I didn't have my power now. I only had the knife in my hand.

Sometimes, though, that was enough.

The delver lunged at me. I leaped aside, dodging the awkward sweep of its immense, hairy front leg, and the snap of its mandibles. It turned, moving sickeningly fast, and one of the sharp hairs on its leg caught my calf, ripping the denim and leaving a long, thin gash. I hissed in pain. The blood seemed to make the roach even more interested, its eyes gleaming and swirling red as its antennae flicked like it could taste the iron in the air. Dark liquid dripped from its mandibles. I definitely didn't want to know what that was.

It reared up, mandibles clicking.

An idea occurred to me. No time to decide.

The delver launched forward again, and this time, I didn't try to dodge. I ducked low and slid toward the creature the same time it slid toward me; the dark liquid from its mandibles hit my back with a wet, heavy *thock* and I was deeply grateful for the leather protecting my skin. Its front feet hit the dirt hard, mandibles snapping as it spun wildly trying to get to me.

Which was a challenge for it, since I was beneath it, encased with those huge hairy legs around me and the belly close to pressing me into the dirt. Beneath the creature, it was hot and throbbing and smelled like rot, like sewage, and I knew I was about to make it a hell of a lot worse. I kept close

to it, shifting with its rapid movements so it couldn't reach me and snap me open with its mandibles. I took a deep, steadying breath, then thrust my knife upward and buried it in the fleshy underside of the delver's body.

It made a sound—I hadn't expected the creature to be able to make any sounds at all. But it shrieked, like a bird shot out of the sky, and lunged in an attempt to get away from the pinprick of pain. I pushed my arm deeper into its guts and hurled myself backward, the opposite direction of the roach, and the obsidian blade cut deep and opened the delver's body with surgical precision.

I lurched out of the way as best I could as entrails spilled from the gash in a thick, steaming pile of stomach-turning black gore that smelled like rotting hamburger left out in the sun. I scrambled backward, barely avoiding the body as it collapsed forward, then pushed myself up to standing. My boots were covered in the entrails but I'd avoided the worst of it.

"Tempie!" Maxwell groaned.

The clicking of the other delver's mandibles sounded like gunshots in the still air of the wasteland. I whipped around. Maxwell was pinned under one immense roach leg with the hilt of his destroyed sword jammed in its mandibles, just inches from his face as it dripped its dark saliva onto his forehead. He was pushing magic into its face but it didn't seem to be doing much, just slowing it down. The armored slats on its back shifted and lifted up, leaking UnSeelie magic out, like it was sloughing off the attacks.

I didn't have time to think—hell, I didn't have time to decide what the fuck I was doing. All I saw was the mandibles getting closer to Maxwell's face, and all I could think about was the possibility of being trapped in the Demon realm without access to my power and my UnSeelie guide dead under a massive evil roach. Not exactly an ideal situation.

I charged toward the roach and leaped onto its back. Its immense body was slick under me, the panels of armor still shifting and leaking magic. Its attention was still on Maxwell but its antennae flicked toward me. I caught one in hand—it was disgusting, thick and hot with the consistency of a cable wire---and hauled myself higher onto its back like I was trying to wrangle it to ride it.

At the base of its beady gross roach head, the armor shifted and revealed the brown fleshy joint between its head and its thorax, radiating heat and expelling UnSeelie magic. I gripped my knife in my already entrails-covered hand, and drove the stained blade with all my strength into the flesh. The

delver reared up and shrieked, that ear-splitting awful sound, and threw me off like a wild horse. I hit the dirt, landing on my shoulder hard enough to knock the wind out of me and send a rattle of pain through my bones.

Maxwell dragged himself up as the delver reared back—he was covered in its saliva and its blood oozing from the deep gash on its neck. Still its mandibles clicked around its enraged, pained shrieks, and Maxwell gripped the hilt of his broken sword and drove the ragged remainder of the blade into the underside of the thing's head.

The shrieking died out as the delver's body toppled to the side.

I flopped back down onto the dirt, supine, and stared up at the red-tinged sky with its solid white moon shining down, unconcerned as the smell of hot raw sewage filled my senses.

"Thanks," Maxwell said. He stood over me with my knife in hand, retrieved from the roach's neck. He wiped the blade on his cloak before offering the hilt to me.

I took it and slid it back into my belt with a sigh. "That sucked."

"There's more of them where those two came from," he said. "We need to move."

With some effort, I clambered back to my feet. "Will they be drawn here?" I asked.

"I don't think so," Maxwell said, "they're not that smart. But the demons might be."

"Aren't the demons in town?" I asked.

"Most of them," Maxwell said. "But there are some out here in the wastes—older, more feral demons. All demons are interested in Fae power. It makes them a lot stronger. They'll be able to smell what I did. Little traces of magic can slide under the radar, but this will capture some attention."

"Great," I said. I wagged my leg at him. "Is this going to get infected?"

The shallow gash on my calf was bleeding steadily into my boot. Maxwell cringed, then knelt down beside me. He reached into his pack and rooted around for a moment.

"Uh," I said, "listen, not to be ungrateful, but UnSeelie aren't exactly known for their healing magic--"

"You're right," he said. He pulled out a small jar from his pack and unscrewed it. "We're not. Hold your breath."

He scooped out a small amount of the jar's content: grayish and the consistency of mud. He rubbed it between his fingers, and then smoothed

them in one long motion over the gash on my leg. I gasped sharply and bit back a low sound of pain as the substance dried rapidly like river clay. It burned and throbbed, a worse pain than the gash itself had been—though at that point I'd been aided by the adrenaline, admittedly. But this felt like I was getting mauled by fire ants. Not exactly the lovely warm Seelie healing experience I was used to.

When the pain finally subsided, I realized I was gripping Maxwell's forearm hard enough to bruise. I unclenched my jaw and released him.

"There," he said. "You should be fine now. Trust me, that's better than dealing with the after-effects of demon blood mixing with yours."

"Thanks," I said through my still-gritted teeth.

The insincerity made Maxwell smirk slightly. "Can you walk?"

"Of course I can walk," I said.

Unsteadily, I stood up. My whole body ached from the fight, and the blood-sewage smell was all over me, from the entrails on my feet to the dark drool staining the back of my jacket. Maxwell was in a far worse state. He'd wiped the worst of the drool off his face, but it was all over the front of his clothes, and now there were entrails on his arms and feet, too.

"Quite a pair we make," I said.

"Won't even get a second glance in town," Maxwell said. "In all honesty, it might help us. Come on, let's move."

We made our way over the wasteland, moving fast and quiet to avoid catching attention from feral demons or more roaches shifting deep underground. Finally, the town loomed above us, walled off from the wasteland with tall, black stone walls, textured like natural cliffs. Before we approached the gates, Maxwell tugged me close to the cliffs, so we were tucked into a stone alcove out of view of the gates to the town.

"All right," Maxwell said. He exhaled hard and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Okay, give me a second."

"You all right?" I asked. I was worn down from the battle and the trek across the wasteland, but Maxwell had a drained, sallow look to him, like the wastes were sucking his magic away. For a brief moment I was almost grateful for the collar around my neck, if only to keep this realm from leeching my power.

"Fine," Maxwell said. "Was just a little too indiscriminate with my power out there." He cleared his throat. "I'm fine. Listen—we can get by unnoticed in town, but you have to play the role, okay?"

“Heard it before,” I said with a grimace. “Let me guess, I get to be your pet?”

He shrugged apologetically. “There’s only so much I can do. They’ll be able to tell you’re a human, so it only makes sense if you’re claimed.”

“Great,” I said. “And what about you? Wouldn’t a demon be interested in mauling a Fae for the power boost?”

“They absolutely would, thanks for the reminder,” Maxwell said. “I’d cloak us both, but I don’t think I can maintain both right now. Hence you being the pet.”

He exhaled and closed his eyes. A tiny, controlled amount of power crackled around him, and then a new appearance fell over him. It shimmered into existence like a mirage, then rapidly solidified. No longer was he the handsome UnSeelie man I’d slowly grown to trust. His features were sharper, teeth longer, and his eyes gleamed red with demonic power. His fine braids were gone, replaced with dark, stringy hair, and immense horns curled from the sides of his head like a ram.

“Not a great look for you,” I said. “The horns are a bit much.”

“Someone sounds jealous,” he shot back. “Horns like this are indicative of a low-level demon. Should ensure other demons aren’t interested in us.”

“Hope you’re right,” I muttered.

“Stay close,” Maxwell said.

We made our way through the unguarded gates into the dilapidated town in the middle of the wasteland. Despite the wall, ‘town’ still felt like an overstatement. It was more like a collection of decaying shacks and a few stone buildings that looked like they’d been abandoned in the wasteland to be taken back by the desert, except they were populated, with slow-moving disinterested demonfolk moving around in the streets and the buildings. There was an inherent exhaustion to the demons here, like they were halfway into hibernation. Like the wastelands sucked power from the demons who lived here, too. No wonder they craved Fae blood. I shuddered and stuck close to Maxwell’s side.

Tucked between what looked like the worst butcher shop in the world and a half-collapsed armory was a two-story stone building with tiny windows glowing with yellow light and a swinging wooden sign that read ‘Split Worm Inn’ with a stomach-turning engraving of a worm cleaved in half and growing heads from the wounds.

“Looks lovely,” I muttered.

Maxwell shushed me quiet through gritted teeth and led me through the rickety wooden door.

The Split Worm was even worse on the inside than it was on the outside. The long, communal tables were dark and stained, and a few demon clientele sat with big jugs of what appeared to be dark, frothy beer. The conversation between demons was low, except for occasional bursts of anger that went ignored by everyone else in the place. In the corner, the embers of a fire glowed, and on the stone walls hung trophies of the creatures that roamed the wastes: the roaches, something that looked like a cross between a wolf and an alligator, and even a few prehistoric-looking bird heads. Behind the bar stood a barrel-chested demon with a nose like a bull's, ring included. The apron stretched across his chest was stained with beer and blood.

“I need a room,” Maxwell said.

The bartender's gleaming red eyes slid to me.

Maxwell grabbed me roughly by the bicep and pushed me backward, so I was halfway behind him. “A room,” he said sharply. “And two meals.”

“Hm,” the bartender said.

Around us, the tavern quieted.

I swallowed and risked a glance around. All the demons were watching us with mild interest and what might've been mild hunger. By the low fire, a demon with a cloak pulled over his eyes and long, spindly fingers decorated with ornate obsidian rings stared at us with his mouth slightly slack. The place suddenly felt precariously balanced. Like however the bartender reacted to our presence would have the demons turn back to their drinks, or unleash the place into chaos. I'd had enough chaos for one day, thanks very much, and I held my breath with the desperate hope that I would simply be ignored. The weight of their gazes—especially that creepy guy by the fire—made my skin crawl.

Maxwell pulled out an impressive stack of coins and dropped them onto the bar.

The bartender scooped up the coins, peered at them, then peered at Maxwell and me for a long, tense moment.

Then, finally, he nodded. “The cook will take you upstairs.”

From behind the bar, a goblin appeared. He barely reached my knees, and he held a covered tray above his head.

We followed up a narrow, rickety staircase, down the pitch-black hall to a wooden door at the end. The goblin opened the door with a muttered

incantation, then deposited the tray onto the table, bowed, and left.

Maxwell shut the door behind him. His demonic visage shimmered like a mirage and dissipated. I exhaled a heavy sigh of relief, shucked off my coat, and sat heavily down on the floor to lean back against the threadbare mattress. Sure, this was a demon inn, but I wasn't going to dirty the sheets with my disgusting clothes. Small blessings.

"What's for dinner?" I asked.

He uncovered the tray. On it were two bowls of steaming soup, and a chunk of black bread. He took a tentative sip from one of the bowls. "Huh," he said with a curious expression. "This is actually edible."

"For me, too?" I asked. Honestly, I was expecting something horrible, like eyeball stew or something poisonous.

He nodded. "Yeah, it's kind of similar to a blood curd soup. You should be fine."

"Sounds tantalizing," I said with a grimace. "I better not die."

"We're in the Demon realm," Maxwell said with a sideways glance at me. "I can't make any promises."

I was fucking starving, though, and when Maxwell passed me a bowl of soup, I had to admit it smelled pretty good. Tentatively, I took a sip. It was edible, to my surprise—potatoes and garlic in a mild broth with chunks of spongy congealed blood floating in it. I wasn't sure what animal—or worse—this blood had come from, but I went for it. Protein was protein right now. Better not to ask.

We ate in silence, then took turns cleaning up as best we could in the basin of water in the corner. I was about two minutes from passing out cold on the tiny bed in the corner, partially clean and sated from the meal, when suddenly Maxwell shot up to standing and dropped his demonic visage back over his body.

"Someone's coming," Maxwell whispered. "And they don't want us to know they're coming."

I really fucking missed having my power. I hated having to rely on Maxwell to pick out these threats—I should be able to do it, too. I'd already proven I wasn't helpless by way of kicking the shit out of two giant roaches, but I still hated being so lost.

"...More than one," Maxwell hissed. His eyes widened, then he wrenched me up from standing and dragged me into the far corner of the room. His power shimmered as the demonic visage dissipated, and instead he shielded

us both in the corner, camouflaging us behind a sheen of magic that looked like the shadowy corner of the room. He kept a tight grip on my wrist as he stood in front of me, pressing me back defensively into the wall of the inn.

I was dead silent. I hardly breathed.

The door burst open with a clatter. The first to march in was an enormous demon with leather bracers on his muscular arms, and big horns—low level, I thought with mild terrified amusement. Behind him was another bracer-wearing lackey, and at their side was the skinny demon with the obsidian rings.

“It’s empty,” the biggest demon said, glaring around the room like he could manifest us into existence. “Where’s the girl?”

My eyes widened. Behind Maxwell’s protective spell, I went even more still.

“The bartender said this was the room,” the other bracer-wearing demon grunted. “This is the room, right?”

The ringed demon shoved them aside and peered around the room with a snarl. “Of course, it’s the right room,” he hissed. “Ardis wouldn’t risk our arrangement. Boss needs new merchandise—the girl’s perfect.”

Slavers. My blood was icy cold in my veins. If I thought being someone’s pet in Faerie was bad, I had a feeling being ‘merchandise’ in the Demon realm was a lot fucking worse.

“We paid a lot for this tip,” the big demon grunted, then shoved roughly at the ringed demon’s shoulder. He stumbled forward into the room. “We will get our money’s worth regardless.”

“They were here,” the ringed demon hissed. “I saw them! I saw them with my own eyes!”

“You’re always wasting our time,” the big demon said.

The ringed demon turned his pallid face to the corner, looking directly at the place we were shielded. He bared his teeth, red eyes flashing.

My heart stopped. Could he see through Maxwell’s magic? Could he sense it?

The demon reached out, dragging himself across the floor of the room toward us. He gnashed his teeth together. He was hauling himself toward us like an animal, like he knew something was there even if he couldn’t see us. Maxwell pulled me closer to himself, stiff as a board, his grip on my arm hard enough to bruise. If we had to fight—even if we managed to beat these guys back, we’d attract attention. And then demons would be looking for us.

For me.

The big demon grabbed the ringed demon by the back of his ratty cloak and hauled up to his feet. "I will teach you to waste our time," he grunted.

"No!" the demon howled. "They were here, I know they're here!"

The middle demon cackled maniacally as they dragged the skinny demon out of the room and down the stairs. He howled in rage the entire time, arguing fruitlessly as the slavers took him away.

From downstairs, the front door clattered shut and the voices faded. Maxwell dropped the camouflage and released me. "We need to get out of here," he said. "Now."

"I think you're right," I said wide-eyed. "Lead the way."

Chapter 8

We crept out the window of the room and inched down the protruding stone until we could drop onto the dirt in the alley below. I followed Maxwell through the back alleys of the town, avoiding the main streets until we found a crumbling stable built right up against the exterior wall of the city. The hay and the wood were rotting, and the place smelled like mold and animals long gone. But it was quiet, and there were no demons lurking around giving me weird looks, so it was already better than the inn. Maxwell checked the perimeter of the stable, then, satisfied it was really and truly empty, dropped his demon visage. At the back of the stable, we swept aside the worst of the hay and piled up the cleanest, least rotted bits we could find. Maxwell withdrew two squares of fabric from his pack and handed one to me.

I raised my eyebrows.

“You think I was going to haul around a full bedroll?” he asked. He tossed the square onto the clear space we’d made and with a crackle of magic, it unfurled into a full-size bedroll, firm and thick with a pillow and a quilt.

“All right,” I said, “I’m going to need to get me one or two of those.” I tossed mine down as well, and we had a pretty decent camping setup, all things considered.

“Well, it’s one-time use only, so hopefully the rest of our travels are a bit easier,” he said with a shake of his head. “I do need to rest, though, if we’re going to get out of here alive. Once I get a few hours of sleep, I should be able to maintain a glamour on both of us.”

I nodded. “I’d rather not get picked up by those guys in the inn. Didn’t

seem like they were interested in my well-being.”

We flopped onto our respective bedrolls. “I have to ask,” Maxwell said, “I know you and Corbin were working together Earthside, but... Just because you worked together doesn’t automatically mean you’d be willing to risk your hide coming to the Demon realm for him.”

“I didn’t exactly have a choice,” I said. “The contract the queen had me sign is not exactly a forgiving one.”

“It’s more than that, though,” Maxwell said. “It’s not just the contract. You’re too... Determined.”

“I’m trying to stay alive,” I said. “It’s a pretty compelling motivator.”

Maxwell narrowed his eyes at me.

I knew Maxwell and Corbin had been close in their youth, but I didn’t know *how* to explain what exactly was going on between Corbin and me. At this point we were more than just coworkers—that much was obvious. But there wasn’t an easy word to explain it, no neat definition. There was just the draw. Like we were locked in each other’s gravitational orbits, circling, waiting for some inevitable collision.

So I did what I did best. Deflected. “We have unfinished business between us,” I said. “I’m not going to let a bunch of raggedy-ass demons kill him before I get a shot at it.”

Maxwell’s curious expression melted into a smirk. “I see why you two get along,” he said. He paused like he wanted to say something else, but then just nodded and rolled over, pulling his blanket up around his shoulder. “Get some sleep. We’ll need to leave early.”

Sleep didn’t come easy, but it did come. A fitful few hours passed until the dim light began to leak through the slats in the stable roof, and the heat began to rise from the dirt and gathered uncomfortably under my bedroll. Maxwell stirred and awoke too.

“Let’s get moving,” I muttered. “The less time we spend in this realm, the better.”

Maxwell nodded in agreement and clambered to his feet. The bedrolls dissolved, disappearing like cotton candy in water. I blinked.

“One-time use only,” Maxwell reminded me. “Hopefully, we have better luck with accommodations from here on out.” He stretched his arms overhead, cracked his neck, then swept his cloak back over his shoulders and fastened it.

“Feeling better?” I asked.

He nodded. “Stay close to me and I’ll maintain both of our glammers. We should be able to move around unencumbered as long as we both look like demons.”

“You have enough power to do that?”

“You’d better hope so,” he said. “As long as we don’t get into trouble in town, it should be fine.”

“Great,” I said. “So far we haven’t had any trouble at all.”

He rolled his eyes. He established his own demon visage first: different than the one from yesterday, with wider-set eyes and smaller horns amid a mess of greasy hair. Then he held out his hand toward me.

The sensation of the visage falling over me was similar to the way it felt to wear one of Mala’s masks, but it was a little heavier and more uncomfortable. It felt sort of like an egg had been cracked on the crown of my head and was dripping down the back of my shirt. The skin on my hands was now a sallow gray, and my nails were long and claw-like. Our clothes looked different too—brown cloaks over stained, ratty canvas. I didn’t feel different, but Maxwell’s new, red eyes tracked over my face with satisfaction. So I knew I looked different.

“All right,” he said, satisfied, “we should blend right in.”

“Do I look awful?” I asked.

“Horrific,” Maxwell said with a grin.

We stepped carefully out of the stable. There was no one else out around in this rundown edge of town. The heat was terrible, and even though it was technically day, the sky was still dark. It shimmered, slightly redder, and dim light seemed to filter from the entire sky at once, as if a veil was pulled over a lamp. Maxwell straightened up.

“There used to be a guy in town who had a pretty good read on comings and goings,” he said. “That’s our best option for finding out where Corbin went. Well, that, or I can use my power to track him.”

“Yeah, let’s do that as a last resort,” I said. “I’d like to avoid more unnecessary attention. How do you have sources out here?”

He shot me a sideways look. “‘Sources’ is a generous term. When Corbin got chucked out here, we had to figure out how to deal with it. Honestly, this isn’t the first time I’ve had to track his ass down.” He grimaced. “Let’s go.”

He was right about the glammers. Once we made our way back to the main stretch of road in the town, we didn’t warrant a second glance from the other demons going about their demonic business. First we ducked into a

tavern, which led us to a butcher shop (genuinely horrifying), which led us to a tiny meat cart standing on a corner at the far end of town.

The cart was selling bricks of dark, crusty bread and kebabs of meat: legs of some unknown beast, more congealed blood, and big rats stuck roasting on the grill. The demon running it was small, barely up to my shoulder, with big watery red eyes and a protruding snout that made him look sort of like a chihuahua whose owner had attempted to turn him into a real boy, but the spell had only worked halfway. Sort of cute but sort of unnerving.

Maxwell nudged me. So this must be the guy. He approached the cart with coins in hand. “Are you Zark?”

The demon sniffed. “Who’s asking?”

“I’ll take a kebab,” he said. Zark handed him one of the rats, and Maxwell dropped way too many heavy gold coins into his palm. Zark’s eyes widened. “I heard you might know about a recent newcomer in town,” he said. “Big guy. Little horns. Smells like a Fae.”

“Oh, yeah, that guy,” Zark said. He lifted the gold coin to his mouth and bit it, then grinned. “Maybe I saw him. He caused a ruckus moving through town, you know. Makes a guy curious to know where he was going.”

“You know where he is?” Maxwell asked.

Zark shrugged. “Listen, I’m supposed to be manning the cart today... It’s a day’s income for me.”

Maxwell pulled out a few more coins and dropped them in Zark’s hand.

“But, you know, I think I remember where he went,” he said. “I can show you.” He glanced at me and blinked rapidly. His nostrils flared, and for a moment I thought he could smell me—what did Maxwell mean, smells like Fae?—but then he just grinned, tongue lolling out of his weird little snout. “Anything for you before I close up shop?”

“I don’t think so,” I said.

Maxwell took a bite of the rat-on-a-stick like it was no big deal. UnSeelie could be really fucking weird sometimes. “You can’t just tell us where it is?”

“No,” Zark said simply. “You think I will give any demon who asks unfettered access to my routes? Absolutely not.” He stepped back from the cart, tapped it in a complicated pattern, and then it shuttered itself and shrank down into a cart the size of the palm of his hand. He stuffed it into his pocket. “This way.”

Zark led us further and further away from town, weaving with expert ease through the crowd of demons until it thinned to almost nothing. As we

hurried behind him, the buildings became more dilapidated and abandoned, like the barn had been at the edge of town.

And with every step, we were further and further away from the portal in the wastes. I began to get itchy following this weird little demon. Where the hell was he taking us? Why did Maxwell trust him?

I was about to grab Maxwell and bolt when we finally reached a stone building near the exterior wall, with a heavy door that looked like the entrance to a mausoleum. He stood with his back to us, blocking our view from the door, and then tapped the door in a long, particular sequence. It groaned as it opened, revealing a narrow staircase winding down into inky black darkness.

“This way,” Zark said.

“Down there?” I asked. I was getting really sick of walking through creepy underground tunnels, honestly.

“Yes,” Zark said. “Unless you’d like to traverse the wasteland and roll the dice with the delvers.”

“The tunnel system is preferable,” Maxwell said. He shot me a look that even through his demon visage I could tell meant ‘shut up.’

We followed Zark down, down, down, until there wasn’t a single flicker of light in the tunnel system. I clung to Maxwell’s shoulder, matching his steps perfectly in the dusty, rocky dirt at our feet. Both the demon and the UnSeelie were able to see in this amount of darkness, but my eyes were accustomed to the light. Luckily, Zark forged ahead, apparently not taking any notice of my struggles.

We walked for what had to be at least two miles. The tunnel shrank as we went, until both Maxwell and I had to duck to keep from knocking into the ceiling. I was starting to get a little claustrophobic and a lot irritated—where the hell was this even going—when finally we reached another staircase.

“Up this way,” Zark said.

At the top of the stairs, Zark pushed the trapdoor open carefully. He peered around like a meerkat, then hopped up and motioned for us to climb out.

The trapdoor opened in the base of an immense, hollowed-out tree. It was long dead, petrified, and looked like a harsh breeze might send it dissipating into flakes of ash. I blinked hard as my eyes readjusted to the dim light and the shimmering heat.

“The guys who were with him often use that old slaughterhouse,” Zark

said, pointing to a cluster of buildings in the distance. “It’s abandoned. No one ever comes out here anyway so they can do what they want.”

“Except you,” Maxwell said.

“I run the tunnels,” Zark said. “I go where I want.”

There were a handful of other trees around us, just as dead and petrified, but it provided enough cover that we could peek around and see the old slaughterhouse without being seen ourselves.

As if on cue, the front door of the main building clattered open. Three immense demons stepped out, laughing loudly and talking among themselves. They were huge—broad, tall, with big horns and jutting teeth. They were armed, too, each strapped with knives and one with a huge stick with what looked like massive nails driven into the top.

“Well,” Zark said, “that’s it for me.” He motioned to the trap door. “This one’s unlocked, so you can come back this way. If you come back.”

“What do you mean?” Maxwell asked sharply.

“I mean I don’t recognize those guys,” Zark said. “Those aren’t the guys that were with the newcomer you were asking about. Who knows how many guys are hanging around the slaughterhouse.” He lifted the trapdoor and hopped inside. “You didn’t pay me enough to try to mess with them.”

“Fair enough,” I said.

The trapdoor clattered shut, and we were alone in the hollow trunk of the tree. Maxwell waited a few minutes, ensuring Zark was well down the tunnel, and then dropped our glamours with a sigh of relief.

“You all right?” I asked.

He nodded. “Fine. That was nearing the limit of my ability to hold the glamour, though. You were about to have to punt Zark down the stairs for me.”

“Good timing, then,” I muttered. I peered at the slaughterhouse again. “You think he’s in there?”

“Zark’s information is good,” Maxwell said. “And this seems like a good spot to haul a hostage.”

Hostage. The word made me shiver.

“We’ll wait until nightfall,” Maxwell said, “and then get inside. Hopefully he’s being held somewhere we can just break him out. I know we handled those delvers pretty well in the wastes, but...”

“But that’s nothing compared to five or six demons,” I supplied.

“Right. Best to avoid it if we can.”

I nodded in agreement. As we settled into the hollow trunk to wait out the light, I had the creeping suspicion this wasn't going to be that easy.

Chapter 9

N ight fell, as much as night could fall in a realm that was always a little dark. The dim light faded, and the white moon rose in the dark, red-tinged sky.

I checked and rechecked my knives, then tied and retied my boots. The slaughterhouse loomed, bigger and more ominous than it'd seemed in the dim light of day. I'd done a lot of crazy shit for cases before, but this felt bigger. More dangerous. I didn't know how many demons were in there waiting for me—hell, I didn't even know if I'd be able to make it out.

But if Corbin was in there, I was going to get him out. That was why we were here. Couldn't turn back now.

“No glamour this time?” I asked.

Maxwell shook his head. “Even if we were disguised, we wouldn't be able to talk whoever has Corbin out of letting him go,” he said. “Fae blood is a high prize out here. It's force or nothing.”

“Well, at least that simplifies things,” I muttered.

“We should try to stay unnoticed for as long as possible,” he said. “Stealth is our only advantage here.”

“Only?” I asked.

He shot me a wry smirk, then held up his shattered sword. “Pretty much, yeah.”

“You've got magic, though, right?” I said.

“You saw how well that went last time.” His expression darkened. “The delver in the waste was able to withstand my power without much trouble. I don't know if that was a trick of the delvers, or if demons have a new resistance to UnSeelie magic. Either way, I'd rather be prepared for the

worst.”

“The worst being...?”

“We rely on our weapons more than my power,” he said grimly. “So let’s try to take out the demons one at a time instead of causing a big ruckus all at once.”

I rubbed at the collar on my neck, and it sparked threateningly under my skin. Maxwell’s gaze tracked the motion, but he said nothing. Corbin hadn’t told anyone about my power. All Maxwell knew was that I had enough Fae heritage to get into Faerie without the portal shredding me into bits.

I had no idea which was more dangerous. Was it worse to try to take on the demons with no magic at all, or should I try to get Maxwell to break the lock on my collar? If UnSeelie magic was enough to draw demon attention, what would a dose of Seelie magic do? I cringed at the thought. If we wanted to make it out of the Demon realm alive, I had to keep my power under wraps.

If I could take down delvers by myself, I could handle a few demons. I took a deep breath and nodded.

“One at a time,” I agreed. “Piece of cake.”

Under the cool cover of darkness, we crept our way across the cracked wasteland toward the slaughterhouse. A few demons lurked around the perimeter, supposedly guarding but they seemed more interested in whatever card game they’d spread out on the table between them. Maxwell still maintained the barest hint of a cloaking spell on his, so we blended in with the darkness as we crept around the slaughterhouse to the back of the building. The back door was locked, but a narrow window nearby wasn’t. Maxwell boosted me up; I peered inside.

What I could see of the slaughterhouse was abandoned. It was vast, but empty, with dust on the stained wood floor and unused hooks hanging at regular intervals from the beams across the ceiling. I cringed at the sight. Though there wasn’t much to see, the weight of what the space had once been used for hung over it like a shadow.

“See anyone?” Maxwell whispered.

“Nope.” At the far end of the room were two doors and what looked like a trapdoor, too. From the seams of the door, a faint glow spilled into the room. “I think there’s another level.”

“Demons love basements,” Maxwell grumbled. “Pop the window.”

I pushed the door open and clambered inside, wriggling through head first

and very nearly causing a ruckus by hitting the wood floor a little too hard. Maxwell, being taller, hopped in neatly after me and landed gracefully in a crouch. “Show-off,” I muttered.

“Shh,” Maxwell hissed. He glanced around, alert like a cat. “Do you hear that?”

I crouched down beside him, both hands on the wood floor. I focused, trying to hear what he was hearing, frustrated again by my lack of power. If I didn’t have this stupid collar on, I’d be able to sense what was happening, much better than I could through hearing alone.

“No,” I admitted. “What is it?”

“Voices,” he said. “Below.”

My heart pounded. “Corbin?”

“I don’t know,” Maxwell said. “I can’t pick them out. But they’re downstairs.”

We moved carefully over the killing floor, testing each footstep to try to avoid the worst of the creaking. The hooks overhead were eerily silent, but ominous, and my skin crawled like I could feel the ghosts of whatever had been killed here knocking against my shoulders as we walked. When we approached the doors at the far end, I could hear it, though—the faint sound of dark, cruel laughter. Under that was a muffled cry of pain.

In a voice I recognized.

“It’s him,” I whispered. “It’s Corbin.”

Maxwell glanced at me. “You’re sure?”

My heart pounded hard and fast in my chest. I hated that I recognized the sound—I’d been at his side when he’d taken too many blows from too many erstwhile skips. But I knew that voice, even when he was trying to hold it back, and I knew he was trying not to give his captors the satisfaction of hearing him suffer. Which was stupid, but I knew I’d be doing the same thing. “I’m sure.”

I pulled open the trapdoor slowly. The narrow stairs below were lit by a single flickering candle. They descended into inky darkness, but the voices carried.

Slowly, we descended the stairs, knives drawn. I went ahead of Maxwell, despite his whispered complaints. All of my fear had been washed away by the flood of adrenaline, and the flood of determined *rage*. Corbin was close. He was right there. And they were *hurting* him.

Over the loud, demonic cackling, Corbin’s groan of pain sounded low

like he'd done his best to trap it behind his teeth. My grip tightened on the hilt of my knife.

At the bottom of the staircase, I carefully, slowly peered around the edge.

In the center of the room, four broad-shouldered demons loomed over a table. Empty bottles littered the floor at their feet, and the demons were laughing and swaying with drunkenness under the dim bulb hanging from the ceiling. Strapped to the table like a sacrifice on an altar was Corbin.

He was in his Fae form. His skin looked sallow and pale, and his fine blond hair was streaked with dirt and blood, and his bare chest was marred with gashes oozing blood all over the table. A big, tusked demon laughed and dragged one nail down his chest, right over his solar plexus, its big claw leaving a shallow gash in its wake. Weak demonic magic crackled over his skin too, making his body clench and twitch sporadically as another groan fought its way from his throat.

"This is taking too long," a smaller demon whined. "When do we get to eat?"

"The pain will make him taste better," the tusked demon said. "It's been a long time since I've gotten my hands on a Fae, I want my money's worth."

"I'm getting sick of just standing here watching you have all the fun," the smaller demon huffed. "How long will this take?"

"As long as I want!" the demon snarled.

"Tharg's right," the smallest of the four demons said. "You said if we helped we'd get our share of Fae blood. We've done enough!"

"Do you want to waste this?" the tusked demon sneered. "I said *wait*."

The middle demon, a mid-sized guy with a scar right down the center of his face, peered between the tusked demon and the smaller demons curiously. "I don't want to wait," he said slowly.

The tusked demon shot him a dark look. "Shut up," he said. "You'll do as I say."

"You're always telling us what to do," the smallest demon said. "I'm sick of it!"

"Yeah," the scarred demon said. "I'm sick of it."

Maxwell and I glanced at each other. If this devolved into a mutiny, and the demons took each other out of the equation, that would make our lives a lot easier. With the tusked demon distracted, Corbin slumped back onto the table, pliant. I fought down the urge to rush toward him.

The tusked demon whirled on the smaller one, baring his teeth. He raised

his hand like he was about to strike the smaller demon across the face.

Then, the scarred demon withdrew a long steel knife from his belt. He held it curiously in his hand, like he wasn't sure what his plan was. He stared at the tusked demon with his eyes flat. I gripped my own knife tighter. The scarred demon was going to attack the big guy. Then it was going to devolve from there. Once the big guy was hurt, we could take the littler guys, and get this situation dealt with before the demons on watch outside even realized anything was happening.

This was going to work. We were going to get Corbin out of the Demon realm tonight.

And then everything fell apart.

The scarred demon gripped the hilt of his knife and slid it into Corbin's side.

The room exploded into chaos. Corbin howled in pain, thrashing like an animal in a trap, limbs straining at the bonds around his wrists and ankles. The tusked demon roared in rage, launching himself at the scarred one, and then smaller demons shrieked and reeled back from the table.

"What have you done?" the tusked demon roared as he tackled the scarred one. "You're wasting the product!"

"Tempie—" Maxwell hissed through his teeth, and he went to grab my forearm, but it was too late.

Rage ripped through me like a wildfire. All I could see was the knife embedded in Corbin's side and the blood gushing from the wound around the hilt, the way his face contorted in pain as he thrashed against the restraints. The demons were scrabbling but the smaller ones were interested, too, nostrils flaring as the iron smell of blood filled the air. I launched forward, obsidian blade in hand.

The tusked demon looked up from where he had the scarred one pinned beneath his knee. I wrenched the smallest demon away and threw him with all my might toward the wall of the room; his skull cracked against the stone and he slumped motionless to the ground.

Corbin's foggy blue eyes blinked open, shot through with amber. He blinked a few times, brow furrowed like he wasn't sure if what he was seeing was real.

"No," he murmured. "No, you—you can't be here—"

My gaze was caught in his for one lingering moment, and then the tusked demon was on me. He fisted his hand in the fabric of my hoodie and jerked

me forward, snarling in my face. “And what do we have here?” he sneered. “A human? Come to my realm? I think I’ll enjoy you before the Fae.”

“No,” Corbin said, his voice barely audible, but like thunder in my ears. “Fuck—no--”

“Hell’s bells,” Maxwell swore loudly as his knife clashed with the smaller demon’s. He managed to strike the demon in the temple, sending him reeling. The scarred demon hauled himself up to his feet and staggered toward Maxwell with his flat eyes interested and saliva dripping from his mouth.

“Max,” I shouted as I struggled in the tusked demon’s hold, “break my collar!”

“No,” Corbin said again. “No, no—”

“What?” Maxwell asked as he ducked under a huge, slow punch from the scarred demon.

“Break it!” I said. “The collar, do it now!”

Maxwell glanced at Corbin, and then at me, and then at the tusked demon’s snarling face. He ducked another punch, then raised his hand and flung a crackling dart of UnSeelie magic at me. The spell latched onto my collar and wormed into the lock; Maxwell’s expression pinched with concentration as his fingers twitched. He manipulated the spell as he dodged the scarred demon and the smaller one, too.

“Shit!” The collar shocked me hard, rocketing through my body like a lightning strike. I dug my teeth into my lower lip so hard it bled as the pain made my muscles seize and convulse. The tusked demon howled in pain too as the spell shocked him, too, and he dropped me into a heap on the floor.

“Sorry, sorry,” Maxwell said. “I almost-- almost--”

“Hurry,” I choked as I hauled myself backward, trying to get away from the staggering and extremely pissed off demon. I worked my fingers under the leather of the collar as if that would help whatever Maxwell was doing. The lightning reduced to sparks, flickering over my fingers and nape as Maxwell’s magic overwhelmed it.

Then the lock clicked open.

I wrenched the collar off.

My power roared to life. It was like the first time I’d entered Faerie—it was a *flood*. The golden light of my magic rushed through my body from the crown of my head to my toes, lighting up every nerve ending and every sense. I took a breath and all the sensations I’d been closed to flooded me as

well: the sulfuric power of the demons, the delicate icy aura around Maxwell, and the familiar ozone of Corbin's aura, tinged with blood and pain. The pain and exhaustion disappeared from my body, replaced with the sweet familiar rush of magic.

Fuck, it felt good—it'd been so long without it. Like I'd been walking around blindfolded this whole time.

The tusked demon's nostrils flared. "Seelie," he growled as a slow grin appeared on his face. "You're Seelie. Even better."

"Yeah, that's what you think," I said with a smirk.

He charged for me, eyes gleaming and drool flying from his mouth.

He barely made it a step.

I unleashed my power in one massive push. It was uncontained, raw, and in the Demon realm, it ripped through the atmosphere like a wildfire through a dry forest. And God, it felt *fucking good*.

I lit the room up. Golden light flooded the entire space, more and more until it was so bright it was almost white. I could feel every crevice of the room; I could feel Maxwell cowering under the power and Corbin breathing it in, and I could feel the demons shrieking in terror as the light closed in on them like a predator.

Breathing through it, using my power like an extension of myself, I shoved tendrils of power into the demons' eyes and mouths, letting it flow through them like poison. They shrieked in pain, a cacophony of noise, and thrashed against the hold my power had—but they were nothing compared to me. Nothing.

I exhaled.

And then I incinerated them from the inside out.

The shrieks disappeared, a sharp sudden cutoff of noise as my power burned through their bodies with ease. My light dissipated and I was left standing in the dim basement, my eyes adjusting as my power coiled back inside me. But no longer was my power locked down under the collar's spell—it was rich and strong rolling through me, more intense than ever before. I felt whole.

The demons had been reduced to ash on the basement floor. Maxwell staggered back, stunned and slack-jawed. I had no time or interest to attend to his questions, though. I rushed to Corbin's side and sliced through the restraints on his wrists and ankles.

"Hey," I said softly. "Hey, it's over now. I'm getting you out of here."

He swallowed hard. “You shouldn’t be here,” he said. His voice was scratchy with pain.

I immediately took stock of his injuries—and there were a lot. His body was marked with oozing gashes and his eyes were dazed, unfocused, like he wasn’t sure if I was real or not. His blue irises flickered between amber and red, like his body couldn’t determine what shape it was supposed to be in.

“Okay,” I said with frantically. “Okay, I can fix this.” My hand hovered over the blade embedded deep in his side.

I gripped the hilt and pulled it out in one quick, smooth motion. Corbin hissed in pain, his muscles pulled tight. The hilt was freezing cold and felt slightly electric in my hand, as demonic magic danced over my skin, the sensation like shoving my hand directly into an anthill. I tossed the blade aside and pressed my hand to the wound on Corbin’s side, now gushing blood all over the table.

“All right,” I said in an attempt to soothe him, but my voice was shaky with fear. “Almost done.”

I closed my eyes and tapped the power in my core, then pushed the light directly into the wound, to stitch it back together from the inside. This was the kind of magic I did a lot—with myself, with Oscar, and with Corbin. I’d done it hundreds of times. Healing was like breathing for a Solstice nymph.

Except it wasn’t working.

Anxiety climbed into my throat. I pressed my hand harder against the wound; the pressure made Corbin hiss in pain again. Yet despite the pressure and the healing power I kept sending into his body, the wound remained unchanged. His blood was hot against my hand, and there was so, so much of it.

“Max,” I said over my shoulder, “it’s not working.”

He picked up the blade from where I’d tossed it. “This is a cursed blade,” he said, low. “The wound is trying to worsen. Your magic is probably holding it in its current state—keeping it from chewing through his organs.”

“What do we do?” I asked frantically as I pushed harder on the wound. “How do we stop it?”

“I don’t know!” Max shouted. “I’m not the healer here!”

“Fuck,” I said. “Okay, shit—shit--”

“He’s losing a lot of blood,” Max said.

“I can fucking see that!” I roared. Under my hands, Corbin was beginning to flicker between shapes, the rich purple flame of his demonic magic licking

over his pale skin. He looked even paler than usual, and his breath grew shallow and fast as he lost more and more blood. “He’s losing too much, Max, he’s--”

Corbin’s fingertips ghosted over my hand pressed to his side. He was gazing at me, eyes glassy and half-lidded.

“Corbin,” I choked around the lump in my throat, “tell me, what can I do—how do I fix it--”

He said nothing. But I could tell from the faint smile on his face that there was nothing *to* say.

He was dying.

“No,” I said, my gaze flickering between the wound on his side and his face. “No, no, I can fix, this, you’re going to be fine.”

I’d come all this way. I’d survived Faerie and now I’d survived the Demon realm. I wasn’t going to lose him here, like this, in the basement of a disgusting old slaughterhouse because I was stupid enough to carelessly remove a cursed blade.

“All right,” I said. “Fuck it.”

I removed my hand from the wound, but just for a moment—just long enough to pull a small knife from my belt and slice a small gash on my inner wrist. Corbin had said before that drinking from me could make him too powerful—dangerously powerful. And that was the kind of power he needed now, enough to break the curse worsening his gushing wound. Enough power to keep him *alive*.

“Oh, shit,” Maxwell said. Even from across the room I could sense his aura spike with interest and hunger as the smell of my blood hit the air.

Corbin’s eyes widened minutely. I pushed my uninjured hand back to the wound and guided my wrist to his lips. “No,” he murmured, shaking his head, “I can’t--”

“You’ll die,” I said desperately. “I can’t fix this wound with my power and I’m not going to let you die. You need to regain your strength so you can heal it. Please.”

I hovered my wrist just above his mouth, and he gazed up at me with his eyes soft and still shifting between amber and red. A few drops of blood slid down my wrist, then dripped down to the swell of his lower lip. His tongue darted out, catching the blood, and then his eyes shifted to complete amber. His pupils dilated, and then his lips parted, revealing his elongated UnSeelie teeth.

I wasn't afraid, though. Relief coursed through me at his acceptance, and I pushed my wrist against his lips.

Corbin began to drink greedily from my wrist, taking mouthful after mouthful of my blood. The color began to return to his skin, and the bleeding in his side began to slow. He wrapped one hand tightly around my forearm, holding me in place as he drank.

The strange thing was, it didn't hurt at all. It felt—good, pleasurable almost, like I was getting drunk on the sensation myself. It spread through me, rich and hazy, and I rocked unsteadily on my feet.

Distantly, I heard Max say Corbin's name.

My eyes flickered closed. A chill fell over me, and then it was too difficult to stand up, so instead I slumped over the table, resting on his body as he drank from me. Dark spots flickered over my vision, disorienting me, and so it seemed like it made the most sense to just close my eyes. I sighed, my hand slipped away from his now-oozing wound, and darkness fell over me like a curtain.

Chapter 10

“**R**elax, just put her down, let me tend to the wound, okay?” Maxwell’s voice was soft and kind of distant, like I was listening to him from underwater. He spoke like he was trying to tame a spooked animal.

I struggled to open my eyes. I was exhausted and cold, but the arms holding me were warm. And huge. The hugeness of the arms was unfamiliar, but I knew it was Corbin, from the familiar ozone aura tingling my senses and the protective growl sounding low in his chest. He was in his demon form, sitting up on the table cradling me against his chest. The room still smelled of blood and sulfur, but I hardly noticed it being this close to him.

It sounded like he and Maxwell were arguing, but the words washed over me like rain. All I could think was: *he’s okay*.

Corbin was okay.

With that knowledge, I let my exhaustion overwhelm me again, and the darkness pulled me back under.

When I came to for a second time, I felt slightly less like I’d nearly been drained like a stuck pig. Also, I was pleasantly horizontal, on a soft surface, which was better than nearly anything else I’d experienced the entirety of the awful time I’d spent in the Demon realm so far.

I carefully raised myself up onto my elbows. My head spun with the motion—lack of blood will do that—but I didn’t black out again, so I counted it as a win. I was still in the Demon realm, that much I could tell from the blood-red sky visible through the curtains. The room was small and shabby, and I had no fucking idea how I got here. Everything after Maxwell and Corbin’s argument, or shouting match, or whatever that was, was completely

lost to the haze of unconsciousness. My power was locked down again, uncomfortably absent like a void inside me, and I touched my neck to find the collar back in place. This time, though, it didn't shock me. Small favors. I had no idea where I was or how the fuck I got here.

The details didn't concern me, though. Not right now.

Corbin was snoring gently in his familiar Fae form next to me on the mattress. He was on his back, with the blanket hiked up to his waist. He'd been cursorily toweled off, but blood and dirt still flecked his skin, though most of his shallow wounds had closed up already, leaving just thin pink marks where earlier there were long, nasty gashes. I carefully lifted the blanket just enough to get a look at his side. The wound was still present, it appeared, but neatly patched up and wrapped tightly.

I sighed in relief and flopped back down onto the mattress. Even dizzy, and exhausted, and sore—my bandaged wrist throbbed—I was so fucking relieved it overwhelmed all the discomfort. Seeing Corbin next to me, alive and not in pain, was worth all the hardship. Easily.

His brows drew together, and then he pushed a slow breath out of his nose as his eyes flickered open.

I rolled onto my side, facing him. "Hi."

He turned his head, but didn't roll over, due to the gash on his side. But he did reach out and brush a lock of hair off my forehead. There was still a bit of dried blood at the corner of his mouth. My blood. Despite that—or maybe because of it—I wanted to kiss him so, so badly.

"You're awake," he said softly.

"You're awake," I said. "For a second there I thought--" I swallowed hard. I'd intended to make some kind of joke, cut the tension, but how could I? "I'd thought I was gonna lose you."

"You saved me," he said.

"I almost killed you. I'm the one who pulled out that blade."

"No, the *demons* almost killed me," he corrected. "Since they're the ones who stabbed me in the first place." He sighed. "I can't believe you came for me."

"What, you thought I wouldn't?" I scooted closer and ran my hand gently over his bare chest, over the new pink scar tissue and the bandages wrapped around his midsection.

"I didn't know where you were," he admitted. "All I could do was hope you weren't in the Demon realm at all. Your power is like a beacon to the

demons—the light show in the basement will have attracted attention for miles. They’ll be looking for you.”

“Let them.”

He smiled fondly, then tapped his fingers against the collar around my neck. “That’s why Maxwell had to put this back on you while you were knocked out. Maintaining a glamour on you when you weren’t conscious to regulate your power was basically impossible.”

I wrinkled my nose in disdain but nodded. “Makes sense. I hate this thing, though.”

“Me too,” Corbin said. “But at least...” He trailed off.

“At least what?” I prodded.

“The first time you had your powers locked down,” he said, “I couldn’t feel them at all.”

“I remember,” I said. “It pissed you off.”

“It should be even worse, with that collar. But.” He swallowed, and his gaze flickered to the bandage on my wrist. “Now it’s more bearable. I can feel it, too, even when it’s so locked down.”

Something low in my gut tightened with fondness, and with desire, I leaned forward to close the distance between us, finally kissing him gently.

Even with the adrenaline still racing in my system and the irritation of the collar smothering my powers, relief overwhelmed it all. Under that, something else vibrated—something deep and connecting between us that I didn’t quite understand. Something that drew me closer to him.

“Listen,” he said, pulling away with his hand on my cheek, “I need to tell you something.”

“What is it?” I asked. I still felt dazed, both from the blood loss and the sheer relief coursing like booze through me, the closeness and the sweetness of having him so nearby. Finally. It felt a lot like coming home.

“There’s a reason I can feel your power now,” he said.

“I know,” I said. “You drank from me.”

“It’s more than that.” He shook his head. “Tempie, you’re my mate.”

“What?” I blinked. The words didn’t really register. “You can’t mean...”

He nodded, and kept his hand on my face, thumb stroking gently over my skin. “There’s always been something between us. You know that.”

I swallowed. That much was true. Ever since I met Corbin, there’d been something keeping us together, some kind of unseen thread that kept us drawing back toward each other even when all logic said it’d be wiser for us

to stay apart.

But *mate*?

It was like my brain had squealed to a stop right in the middle of my thoughts and couldn't get started again. Attraction, I understood. Desire, I understood. Even the pleasure of a good argument, I understood. Affection. Caring.

But this was something different. Something big enough to scare me.

Corbin must've seen the shock on my face, because he just leaned forward and kissed me again, gently.

I didn't know what to say. My brain stuttered, like an engine trying and failing to start. He couldn't be my mate. Working with me was dangerous enough. When things got more serious than that, it all fell apart. I knew that—it had happened to my mother—and it had happened to me. Maybe it was blood loss, maybe it was shock, maybe it was the way I trusted Corbin—but the truth just fell off my tongue.

"You can't be," I stammered. "I killed my last boyfriend. I had to."

Corbin's eyes widened slightly.

"When he found out who I was—what I was—he attacked me. He thought I had lied to him. He thought what I was was—something evil. Wrong. And he thought it was his duty to get rid of me. Or something." I closed my eyes, willing the memory away. "So I defended myself. But I was so—keyed up, you know, and it just—I lost control."

"Tempie." His hand was gentle on my face.

"Shit like that always happens with me," I continued. Now that I'd started, it was like I couldn't stop. "Everyone I care about gets put in the line of fire. It's been nothing but danger since we started working together, Corbin, and it's only going to get worse. It follows me around. If you think this was bad—it'll only get worse. Somehow. I know it will." I swallowed.

"Tempie." He interrupted my rambling with a brief kiss. "You think my life hasn't been nothing but danger until now?"

I cringed. "Well, you've lived a long time, I don't exactly know all of it..."

"I've been the queen's attack dog for most of it," he said. "I don't fit in Faerie or in the Demon realm. And you..."

"I don't fit in the human realm or in Faerie," I said.

"Being with you is the first time I've felt like I belong," Corbin said. "Anywhere. And I've had a lot of time to chase that feeling."

I surged forward and kissed him again. My heart clenched hard, with terror and disbelief and something that felt dangerously close to love.

A knock on the door sent a bolt of adrenaline through me, interrupting my racing thoughts. I tried to haul myself back up to my elbows and immediately went dizzy again. Corbin put a hand on my shoulder and pushed me back down gently.

“It’s Max,” he said. “It’s okay. Come on in, Max.”

I scooted back on the bed and leaned against the headboard. My head was still spinning, both from the blood loss and from the bombshell Corbin had just dropped on me. I pushed it out of my mind for now—we had more important things to worry about.

Max stepped into the room with a small tray of food: more dark bread and hard cheese. It was better than nothing, though, and it was only upon the sight of it that I realized how fucking hungry I was. My body was still recovering from the turmoil of using my power unrestrained, and then giving as much as I could to Corbin.

God, maybe he was right.

Again, I shoved the thought away. I couldn’t afford to be distracted right now.

“You’re both awake,” Maxwell said. “Good. Here, try to eat something, we need to get moving soon.” He set the tray on the foot of the bed, and I immediately dug into the bread.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“We’re still outside of town,” Maxwell said. “Outside of the walls, I mean. As far away as we could get from the slaughterhouse as quickly as possible. Your power is going to draw demons for miles around. And word is going to travel fast. I expect most of the demons in the realm will know there’s a Seelie hiding somewhere before tomorrow night.”

“Great,” I muttered.

Corbin cringed, pressing his lips together. “You shouldn’t have--”

“Stop right there,” I said. “You were about to die. We can handle a few hungry demons.”

“A few,” Maxwell repeated disbelievingly. “We should be safe here, at least for a little while.”

“Whose house is this?” I asked.

“Who knows,” Corbin said. “Max dealt with the owner.”

Now it was Maxwell’s turn to cringe. “Not my favorite thing to do,” he

said. "But the demon was ready to kill me to get to Corbin, since his reputation precedes him. I've warded it the best I can. It should hold at least a few days."

"A few days," I said. "Great."

"It'll be enough time for us to figure out how to get out of here without starting a war," Corbin said darkly. He shifted on the bed, trying to sit up to reach for the food, and then grimaced in pain, his hand flying to his side. He curled forward, and the dark purple flames of his demonic magic flickered over his skin as his eyes flashed red.

"He's unstable," Maxwell said to me. "It's going to take time for that wound to heal."

"Even with the boost I gave him?" I asked.

"That saved his life," Maxwell said. "It was a strong fucking curse."

"And what do you mean, war?"

Corbin sighed and relaxed as the wave of pain passed. "Yeah, war," he said. "I wonder if that was Ralnor's plan all along."

"Seems like something he'd do," Maxwell agreed. "Just for the fun of it."

"If you're found out," Corbin explained to me, "and the queen finds out that a bunch of demons got their hands on Seelie blood" –the look on his face made it obvious he meant my Solstice nymph blood-- "and she didn't, she'll be furious. And likely she'd send troops into this realm to retrieve us both, consequences be damned. Losing me to the Demon realm is one thing but missing her shot at Seelie blood is another thing entirely."

"So we have to figure out how to get out of here without too much fighting," Maxwell said. "To avoid that, and also because if Corbin takes one more good punch, he's going to shatter like a porcelain doll."

"Fuck off," Corbin grumbled, but there was no heat in it. "I need to get cleaned up. I feel like there's demon guts all over me."

"There probably is," I said.

"Bathroom's in the hall," Maxwell said. "You have enough juice to reheat the water?"

Corbin waved a hand dismissively, then hauled himself carefully out of the bed and padded out of the bedroom. I swallowed, missing him already, but I tried not to let that show on my face as I tore into the cheese.

Maxwell sat at the foot of the bed and watched me carefully. "How are you?" he asked.

"Been better," I muttered.

“You were in bad shape,” he said. “Seriously. How are you feeling?”

I sighed. “Tired. But I’ll be fine. My power—I mean, you saw it. It helps me recover pretty quickly.”

He nodded, then shook his head almost in disbelief. “Yeah, I saw it, all right.”

I watched him carefully. It was like he was reliving the events in the slaughterhouse in his mind, gaze distant as he stared into middle distance. I half-expected something in his demeanor to change—a hint of interest, or hunger, or something. He was UnSeelie, wouldn’t he want a taste of my blood, too? If he did, he wasn’t showing it. Corbin trusted him enough to leave me here with him alone, and so I instinctively wanted to trust him, too.

“What will you do when we get back to Faerie?” I asked.

He glanced up at me. “What do you mean?”

“About me,” I clarified. “I mean—will you say anything?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Of course not.” He sounded a little offended that I would even suggest it. “Not to get in your business too much, but it was pretty obvious what was going on when you were passed out. You’re Corbin’s mate. He’s my best friend. I’d never do anything to put you at risk.” He said this simply, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “The real problem when we get back to Faerie will be dealing with Daniel.”

That was like a bucket of cold water over my head. “Right.”

“Getting you out from under his thumb isn’t going to be easy,” Daniel said. “Especially without revealing your power to everyone else in the court.”

“Is that why you called for Ignacia?” Corbin asked as he walked into the room, still unsteady on his feet but a little more clear-eyed as he toweled off his hair. The dark purple flames still licked sporadically over his skin, like he couldn’t quite keep his power contained as he was trying to heal the wound.

“No, I called her because that gash is still nasty,” Maxwell said, nodding at his bandaged side. “But I think she should talk to Tempie, too.”

“Who is Ignacia?” I asked, eyes widening.

“She’s a demon healer,” Maxwell said.

“And we want her to talk to me *why*?” I asked. I was under the impression that letting more people know I was a Seelie in the Demon realm was a *bad* idea.

“She taught me how to keep my demon side locked down when I’m in Faerie,” Corbin said. He eased back onto the bed, cringing in pain as he adjusted his position. “And she was basically my only healer when I was

growing up. UnSeelie healers didn't know how to deal with my hybrid status—and they were more interested in doing experiments on me than actually taking care of me. Since they worked for the queen. Ignacia is straightforward in what she expects.”

“Which is...?”

“She'll probably want a vial of your blood,” Maxwell said. “That's usually the cost for Corbin's care.”

“And that's safe?” I asked.

Corbin sighed. “About as safe as we're going to get in this realm,” he admitted.

An hour or so passed, and after eating and drinking a bit, I was beginning to feel more like myself. Enough that when there was a sharp knock on the door, I was able to climb out of the bed and move to a seat at the small table in the bedroom, instead. Maxwell went to answer the door, and Corbin, from where he was still stretched out on the bed, caught my eye.

“She's a bit, uh...” He searched for the right word. “Creepy. But I trust her.”

I grimaced. “I'll be nice.”

“Do try,” he said with a fond smile.

Maxwell strode back into the bedroom with the healer behind him. My eyes widened.

‘Creepy’ was an understatement. Ignacia was so tall, she had to duck her head walk under the threshold. Her skin was mottled gray, and her face was long, as if it'd been stretched uncomfortably, and her thin lips hung open to reveal her sharp, blackened teeth. Her clothes hung off her like a death shroud, and the top half of her face was covered by a plain dark cloth, wound around her eyes. But she moved with ease, like she could see in spite of it. She glided toward the bed and hovered over Corbin like a wraith.

“Hi, Ignacia,” he said. “Lovely to see you.”

“Now, Corbin,” she said in a delicate voice, “why are you back in my realm getting involved in nonsense again? And with a cursed wound?”

“Just a bit of fun,” Corbin said.

“And you have the Seelie with you. I should've known.” Her face didn't turn toward me, but still a shiver ran down my spine.

“Can you sense her?” Maxwell asked, eyes widening with fear.

“I can,” she said. “But others shouldn't be able to. I only can because of my prior work with Corbin. Heightened sensitivity to Fae power.” She bared

her teeth in a horrifying smile. “The others are searching, though. The old slaughterhouse is overrun. Ferals licking at the ground like they could capture a trace of the Seelie power. This will be the talk of the city for years to come.”

“Can you dispel the curse?” Corbin asked through gritted teeth. “I’d really like this to heal so we can get the fuck out of here.”

“Of course I can. The usual payment?”

He nodded.

From the pocket of her tattered coat, she withdrew a narrow glass vial. Corbin dutifully held out his arm, and the healer pricked his arm with one sharpened nail. His blood flowed into the vial, filling it, and then she smoothed her hand over the wound. It was gone just as quickly as it has appeared. Ignacia held the vial up to her face, smiled, and then tucked it back into her pocket.

“Go ahead and remove the dressings,” she instructed.

Corbin peeled off the bandages on the gash in his side. It looked bad—dark and pulsing with infection, spreading mottled red up to his ribs and down to his hip.

Ignacia peered at it curiously, prodded at the wound and its spread, making Corbin cringe and twitch.

“Stay still,” she snapped, and Corbin grimaced and did so. Then she withdrew her hand. With the sharp nail on her forefinger, she carved a rune into the palm of her own hand and murmured an incantation in an old demon tongue that made my skin crawl at the sound.

Behind the cloth tied around her face, her eyes glowed burning, terrible red, like the heart of a flame. The same light poured from the rune on her palm, too, and seemed to suck the rest of the dim light from the room, so shadows fell over the room, leaving only her work illuminated. Instinctively I drew backward, scooting back toward the wall, like the Seelie part of me knew I needed to put space between myself and this strange magic. Then she pressed the rune directly to the wound on Corbin’s side—definitely not normal practice for wound care Earthside—and a teeth-vibrating hum filled the air.

Corbin gripped the sheets of bed and gritted his teeth; his body coiled tight like a bowstring as he struggled to stay still. The red light poured into his body from the healer’s hand, like mine had, except this light seemed to stay close to the surface, visible and glowing beneath his skin. Ignacia

withdrew her hand slightly from the wound, but the beam of light still connected the rune and the gash, and then—my eyes widened in shock.

She began to pull the curse directly from the wound. It looked like black tar oozing from the gash.

“Shit,” Maxwell muttered. “Should’ve put down a towel.”

With an elegant gesture, Ignacia removed the curse. She was debriding the wound, and from the look on Corbin’s face, it was not a comfortable experience. His chest heaved with exertion as he stayed still, but the more she worked, the more the normal color returned to his side. The infected-looking part of his skin was shrinking in size with each wave of her fingers.

Finally, she had a mound of tar on the bed like a slab of unworked clay. The red light fizzled out as she pulled back, and Corbin collapsed backward in a pliant heap, sighing with relief. The shadows dissipated, and the room was again visible in the dim daylight of the Demon realm. Ignacia tapped the curse with her forefinger, and it hissed, fizzled, and then exploded into a burst of ash.

“A strong curse,” she said. “You’re lucky you had a Seelie with you to keep it at bay.” For the first time, she lifted her face toward me. Even with her eyes covered, I felt like she was staring directly through me. “Heal on your own, Corbin, it’ll be good for your immune system to learn to manage curses in the future.”

“I don’t exactly intend on getting cursed again,” he grunted.

“Best to be prepared.” Her attention was still on me. It was making me seriously fucking nervous. “Now, little Seelie, Maxwell has informed me you are incapable of managing your own power.”

“Max!” I said sharply. “That’s personal.”

“Hybrids are curious things,” she continued, as if I hadn’t spoken. “You lack the same control that Corbin did in his youth. Things that come naturally to demons, and to Fae—the automatic management of power—feel inaccessible to you. You live as if you have to consciously think about each heartbeat, instead of letting your heart beat on its own. I can show you a better way.”

“Why?” I asked quietly.

Again she bared that terrible smile. “For a few drops of your blood. That’s all.”

I looked at Corbin. He pressed his lips together but nodded. So I did the same, nodding at Ignacia before I could change my mind.

She swept forward, so she was towering over me where I was huddled in the small chair.

“If you weren’t so weak, I would request a vial,” she murmured. “But a few drops will be adequate for my research.”

I swallowed. This close, her aura surrounded me, despite my power being locked down, simultaneously sulfuric and cold. I held out my hand. She pricked my fingertip with her nail, and her eyes glowed behind the fabric around her face as she squeezed a few drops into the waiting vial.

True to her words, it was only a few drops. She sealed the vial then pressed the pad of her finger to the pinprick wound. When she withdrew her finger, the wound was gone.

“Maxwell,” she said, “come with us. We will ward the kitchen, and then begin.”

Chapter II

The method Ignacia taught me—or attempted to teach me—was not nearly as easy as I’d hoped. To start, it wasn’t exactly calming to be instructed by a towering demon with glowing hidden eyes who channeled her power by carving runes into her own flesh. Plus, Maxwell and Corbin were just down the hall, keeping a close ear, just in case Ignacia changed her tune once the collar came off. Or if the warding didn’t work. But the wards contained my power in the kitchen, and Ignacia hardly seemed interested in my power at all. She barely blinked when the collar came off.

The method itself wasn’t much different than what I’d cobbled together myself. Centering the mind, deep breathing, then focusing on the power where it bloomed deep in my core. Just incredibly more complicated.

“The runic work,” Ignacia explained in that low, unnerving voice of hers, “acts like a vessel for your power. Instead of the excess spilling out and drawing attention to your power, the runes turn it backward, inward. The energy becomes an internal loop—it reaches out, then is drawn back, over and over.”

“Don’t tell me I have to carve them into my skin,” I said, cringing.

“Seelie are so tender-fleshed,” Ignacia said. “The carving works best for demonic power.” She nodded meaningfully at Corbin. “Yours you just need trace on your skin. Of course, you’ll have to maintain them when necessary, until you have mastered the skill the runes allow without the runes themselves. Consider it training wheels.”

With Ignacia’s burning red eyes watching me with hawk-like, I mirrored the motion of her hands. She sketched the runes in-air, and I traced them on my skin. First at my throat, two zig-zagging lines like bolts of lightning

intertwined. Then at my sternum, three small concentric circles. Then at my navel, the two combined: the lightning slicing through the circles.

“Let the runes act as a channel,” Ignacia said. “Let the shield develop.”

I nodded, then closed my eyes. The runes felt strangely cold on my skin, like I’d stepped into a walk-in freezer. Behind my ribs, I felt the runes working, building a barrier between the glowing golden light of my power and the world outside. It wasn’t like the way the collar smothered my power and locked it deep inside. This was different. It was trying to enclose my power delicately. More like building a big enclosure for a wildcat. My power still glowed in my core, but now the barrier kept it hidden.

“Good,” Ignacia said. “Good. Establish control.”

I clenched my hands into fists as I focused on the barrier, letting it strengthen inside me. My power rocked in my core, glowing brighter, knocking against the barrier as if it were curious. It was a new sensation, and I didn’t know if it was the fact that it was demonic teaching, or simply the frustration of being hidden away, but something wasn’t working. My power grew stronger inside me, knocking against the barrier.

“Your power doesn’t like to be contained,” Ignacia said, sounding almost amused. “Control your emotions. Calm down. The runes are your friend.”

“Doesn’t exactly feel friendly,” I muttered. “Feels cold.”

“Tch,” Ignacia said. “Focus. You’re acting like a child.”

I tried to focus—tried to envision the runes on my skin, strengthening the barrier inside me. But the more I tried to turn my attention to the barrier, the more the golden light of my power grew restless, like it was demanding my attention instead. It knocked against the barrier, again and again, and the more I focused on the barrier, the more it shivered against each knock.

My power glowed bright inside me, burning sudden and overwhelming like a firework, and shattered the barrier.

“Shit!” I took a stumbling step back. I opened my eyes. The room was flooded with golden light, emanating from me stronger than ever, causing Ignacia to cower back, shielding her face.

Then Ignacia straightened up. Her spindly hands glided elegantly through the air, as if she were conducting an unseen orchestra. As her hands moved, the motion captured the light in the room, drawing it toward her in smooth ribbons. She coiled it into a tight, glowing orb floating between her hands, gleaming, allowing the red-tinged darkness of the kitchen and its powerful wards to return.

She extended her hands, and the golden orb flew toward me, hitting me straight in the chest, knocking the wind from my lungs as I stumbled back and crashed into the kitchen counter. I blinked. My body absorbed the power easily.

I was just as I'd started.

"Try again," Ignacia said.

I tried again. And again. Each time my power exploded out, shattering the barrier, and each time Ignacia drew it from the atmosphere and gave it back.

But each time, I was able to hold it a little longer.

After what felt like a million attempts, Ignacia finally stepped forward and snapped the collar back around my neck without any fanfare. The sudden exhaustion, and sudden containment of my power, sent me to my knees on the kitchen floor. Corbin burst in, eyes wide, and was at my side immediately.

"Tempie!" he said. "What happened?"

"M'fine," I said, leaning heavily against him. "Just tired."

"You're getting there," Ignacia finally said. "We'll continue tomorrow." She nodded at Corbin. "This will work. Both of you get some rest."

Four days later, I had a better handle on my power than I'd ever had before. I could trace the runes quickly, from the hollow of my throat down my sternum to my navel, and then focus on the repetitive sensation of my power moving, not like light flooding out, but like water in a closed tank, shifting and moving freely but never spilling out of containment. I'd learned to see the barrier as a tool—something friendly. It'd taken time, like my body needed practice accepting a prosthetic limb. It wasn't perfect, but it was getting easier every time.

"If you can maintain that," Corbin said, "there's a chance you could move through Faerie undetected. At least long enough to use your power when necessary to escape."

"I can do it," I said. We were packing up the bedroom while Maxwell was in the heavily warded kitchen, wrapping up the last of our food. I straightened up and caught Corbin by the wrist, pulling him away from his bag and closer to me. His expression softened as I wrapped my arms around his neck. I wanted to pull the collar off right now, so I could feel the connection between us unobstructed. But it wasn't worth the risk. Not until we were out of the Demon realm. "I can. Really. Ignacia is creepy as hell but she's a good teacher. As long as she doesn't do anything weird with my

blood.”

“She might,” Corbin admitted, “but she doesn’t have enough to start a war, or anything wild like that.”

“Reassuring,” I muttered, and pulled Corbin down for a kiss. Kissing him was so easy now. Natural. We hadn’t really talked about what this meant—us being mates—but I couldn’t deny there was a new ease between us. Something in my heart had stopped trying to resist so much. I guess a near-death, life-saving experience would do that. Or maybe that was just the potential for horrible death-by-demon nipping at our heels. “We’ll have a war of our own if we get caught.”

“We won’t get intercepted,” Corbin said, for the hundredth or so time in the past four days. “Maxwell has a good route. I’m strong enough to hold a glamour. It’ll only be two days of travel to get to the portal safely.”

I must’ve not looked convinced, because then he took my face in his hands and said, “We’ll be fine. We’ll be back in Faerie before you know it.”

“Out of the frying pan and into the fire,” I muttered.

“At least we’ll be in the fire together,” he said with a smirk.

“Are you two decent?” Maxwell rapped his knuckles on the doorframe before he stuck his head inside. “Stop canoodling. We need get a move on. Sun’s going down soon, and our safest bet is to travel during the night and try to sleep a few hours in the morning.”

We hiked our bags onto our shoulders. “Ready,” I said.

“We weren’t canoodling,” Corbin said.

Maxwell rolled his eyes. “Let’s go. We’re not doing this trek on foot.”

Corbin nodded and shifted into his demon form. It should’ve scared me—the height, his broad shoulders, the flicker of magic running over his skin, his red eyes—but all I could remember was the gentleness with which he’d cradled me in those arms after he’d healed himself with my blood. Maxwell glamoured himself into a smaller demon, and Corbin cast one on me, too. Suitably disguised, we made the trek from the shabby house to the closest town. Though calling it a town at all was stretching it. It was more like a sad outpost amid the sprawling wasteland. But there was a stable, like Maxwell had planned, and we did manage to get three skinny horse-like creatures to make the journey.

“Ugh,” I said, carefully patting the scaly side of the horse-thing’s neck. It was shaped like a horse, but with scales instead of hair, no eyes I could see, and big, flat, three-toed feet. “Is this a horse or a lizard?”

“Sort of both,” Maxwell said. “It’s called a wasterider.”

“Gotta be a better name for these things than that,” I muttered. When I hopped on its back, though, it barely reacted, simply waiting for my command.

“Will you be needing lodging for the night?” the small stable-keeper asked.

“No,” Corbin said as he climbed onto the biggest of the wasteriders. “We’ll be taking our leave immediately.”

The moon hung high in the dark-red sky as we started our way across the vast, empty expanse of the landscape as our wasteriders strode across the hard-packed cracked dirt. Their footsteps barely made a sound, their big flat feet distributing their weight as if they were walking across a fragile frozen lake.

“Avoids the delvers,” Corbin explained.

“We’re taking the long way.” Maxwell peered at a hand-drawn map as we rode. “There’s a collection of cliffs to the east of the city where we should be able to rest undetected during the busiest part of the day, and then make our way to the portal at nightfall tomorrow.”

Corbin nodded. “Good. Best to stay as far from the city as we can.”

After that there was nothing to do but ride. The steady, silent pace of the wasteriders lulled me into a strange kind of hypnosis, with just the moon to light our way and the land around us eerily silent. In my mind, I went over and over the runes, imagining them forming on my skin. Throat, sternum, navel. I imagined the runes changing my power to water, letting it shift and move safely. I imagined moving through the wasteland with my senses unobstructed by this godforsaken collar.

Maxwell and I could handle ourselves in hand-to-hand combat if push came to shove. But Corbin was still injured.

In the wasteland, we were all vulnerable to attack.

It was nearly dawn by the time we made it to the cliffs, and we hadn’t seen any other demons—feral or not—nor any delvers. I hadn’t realized how anxious I’d been until the small cave was in sight, and the tight coil of nerves in my chest suddenly released. The cave was tucked in between two cliffs, overlooking a small valley peppered with a few sad-looking trees and sadder-looking brush. Creatures snuffled around in the valley, what looked like boars, but inside the cave it was silent.

We dropped the glamours, and Maxwell tied the wasteriders outside. In

the cave, Corbin groaned and let his demon form dissipate, sliding off him like rainwater.

“You all right?” I asked, stepping closer to run my hand over the width of his shoulders.

“Yeah,” he said. “Just tired.”

“Not much longer now,” I said.

He pulled me into an embrace and sighed. “I know. Just need to get you out of here. At least in Faerie, I know how to protect you. Here, though...”

“Here anything goes,” I said. “I get it.”

“I need real food,” Max said. “I’m killing one of those boars.”

I blinked, breaking away from Corbin. “You’re what?”

“He’s good with a throwing knife,” Corbin explained.

“I’m sick of all this gross bread,” Maxwell said. “Corbin, will you make a fire? Tempie, you’re with me.”

“Who died and made you king?” Corbin said with a fond laugh.

“You, when you got stabbed,” Maxwell said. “Some real food will make us all feel better.”

Corbin wasn’t kidding—Maxwell *was* good with a throwing knife. We’d barely made our way into the valley before he’d hit a boar right in the neck, and we strung it up and carried it back to the cave. It was easy, then, to fall into an easy rhythm of making camp, something I’d done countless times before on hunts alone. Corbin tended the fire at the entrance of the cave while Maxwell briskly dressed the boar, and soon enough we had meat roasting on a spit I’d put together.

We ate quietly, huddled around our small fire. I leaned against Corbin’s shoulder and let gamey, tender meat melt in my mouth. It wasn’t the cutlet special at Manny’s by any means, but it was better than hard bread and cheese, and I savored every bite. Corbin’s body was strong and sturdy, holding me up, and even with the threats of the wasteland I felt almost safe.

The fire died down to embers, casting dramatic shadow on the inside of the cave. The meal was finished, and we shared a few cups of plain hot water. “You know,” I said, gazing at the remainder of the fire, “we make a pretty good team.”

Corbin chuckled. “All things considered, I guess I have to agree.”

“I don’t want to get ahead of ourselves,” Maxwell said, “but there’s a chance we might actually get out of this alive.”

“I think you might be right,” I said with a smirk.

With food in my belly, Corbin at my side, and the security of the cave around us, I really did feel like we actually had a shot. The portal was only a day of travel away. Back in Faerie, between the three of us, we could figure out what to do about Daniel.

“I’ll take first watch,” Corbin said. “Since you two did the bulk of the cooking. Get some sleep.”

Maxwell and I unfurled our magical bedrolls again. Maxwell knocked out nearly as soon as his head hit the pillow, curled protectively toward the wall and snoring quietly. I stretched out on the bedroll, sighing with pleasure at the thin layer of padding between myself and the dirt floor, with the warmth of the fire still on my skin and the security of Corbin being awake and on watch.

He knelt at my side and brushed a strand of hair off my forehead. His blue eyes, flecked with amber, were soft as he gazed down at me. “Get some sleep,” he murmured. He swallowed. “I’m ready for this shitshow to be over and done with.”

I laughed, quietly enough as to not disturb Maxwell, then reached up to grip his nape and pull him down for a kiss. I hardly even recognized I was doing it—it was just so natural now.

“It will be soon,” I said against his lips. “We’re getting out of here.”

He offered me a tentative smile, then levered gracefully to his feet and moved to the mouth of the cave to keep watch. I watched him for a few minutes as he made himself comfortable, leaning against the stone with his back to us, barely visible in the dim light of the fire and the dimmer light of the pale moon. Comfortable and safe, I let sleep fall over me like a sheet.

A few hours later, a gentle hand on my shoulder woke me up. “Hey,” Maxwell said quietly. “Your turn.”

I nodded, then sat up and rubbed my eyes, blinking in the darkness of the cave. Maxwell was already climbing into his bedroll, and next to me, Corbin was fast asleep with his face pressed into the small pillow. I took a moment to admire the fine bone structure of his face: his high cheekbones, straight nose, and the slight part of his lips at each exhale. He still looked a little sallow, sickly, and even in sleep the occasional flicker of demonic power danced over his skin. It reminded me of the way a dog chases rabbits in its sleep—uncontrolled energy.

He was still healing, no matter the brave face he put on to traverse the wasteland. I stood up slowly, careful not to disturb either of them.

We only had one day left of travel. Corbin was weak, and I was powerless. If push came to shove, we'd only have Maxwell's power and our own hand-to-hand skills to defend us. Tomorrow, we'd be closer to the city—and closer to the portal, where the demons would expect to find us. The demons who wanted not only me—but Corbin, too. They'd be tracking my Seelie energy, and they'd be looking for the UnSeelie hybrid who escaped their clutches.

I didn't have to be helpless anymore.

Outside the cave, I scanned the wasteland for threats, and saw nothing. Just the endless expanse of cracked clay, and the boars snuffling around in the valley below. No demons, no delvers. Even the wasteriders seemed to be asleep, their horse-like faces folded over each other's backs.

I sat down, then let my gaze soften, and traced the runes on my throat, sternum, navel. Even with my collar on, I felt the runes settle on me, reaching inside in search of my power.

Then, once I felt the runes strong and solid, I reached up and unhooked the buckle on my collar.

As soon as it was loosened, my power surged upward. Fear and adrenaline suddenly lanced through me—what if I couldn't control it? What if it all spilled out like light and drew all the demons directly to us?

I breathed through it. I knew what I was doing. Ignacia had taught me, and the runes were strong. I traced them again for good measure. My power surged and raced through me, warm and familiar, and knocked against protective walls the runes held up.

I opened my eyes.

Still there was nothing on the horizon.

But, folded together at my sternum, my hands were glowing.

I swallowed, then reached up and snapped the collar closed. Immediately, my power was drawn back down deep inside me, bundled away and hidden. The runic power faded, too, and I swallowed around a sudden surge of anxiety. It hadn't felt like any power had leaked out—it'd felt just like it had in the warded kitchen, when I controlled my power without the aid of the collar. Maxwell hadn't been able to sense it, then—Corbin could, even when it was locked down, but that was different. And Ignacia was different, too.

So it was fine. The glow was normal. The wasteland was quiet and remained quiet for the remainder of my watch. As the daylight hours passed, my anxiety ebbed and was replaced by a sense of relief—and of triumph.

I did it. I'd controlled my power without the collar. Even in the Demon realm I could do it.

We weren't defenseless. We were getting the fuck out of this realm, whatever it took. If this bond between Corbin and me was real—if we really *were* mates—I needed to figure that out Earthside. Until then, the details would have to wait. But I was going to get us the fuck out of here.

Chapter 12

“**S**hit,” Corbin said, drawing his wasterider to a halt. It tossed its head soundlessly.

Through the night, we’d made our way across the wasteland uneventfully. It was hypnotic, really, the smooth motion of the wasteriders and the sprawling landscape that seemed devoid of even a passing breeze. We’d taken a long, winding route back to the portal, so the walled town was always in the distance and never close enough to see any demons moving near it. Now, we were in sight of the portal—it wasn’t open, but still the air shimmered faintly. Corbin would be able to open it.

Or he would be, if it weren’t for the demons pacing around the portal like hungry dogs.

“Fucking hell,” Maxwell said. With the openness of the wasteland, they’d see us as we approached. They didn’t see us yet, but it wouldn’t be long. “How did they know?”

“Doesn’t take a genius,” Corbin said. “Eventually we’d have to get out. Should’ve expected it.”

“I dunno,” Maxwell said with a grimace. “Demons aren’t that smart.”

“What do we do?” I asked. “Not like we can get around them.”

Corbin was already in his demon form, tall and broad-shouldered and glaring with red eyes at the demons waiting at the portal. Maxwell dropped the glamours on us. No use hiding now.

“How fast can these wasteriders go?” Corbin asked.

Maxwell grinned. “Glad we’re on the same page.” He withdrew a long obsidian blade strapped to his back and handed it to Corbin. Corbin gripped the hilt and grinned, showing all his sharp teeth.

“Should I--” I touched my collar.

“No!” Corbin and Maxwell said immediately and simultaneously.

“All that will do is draw more demons,” Corbin said. “We can handle these.”

“Listen,” I said, “Ignacia showed me, I can tamp it down myself—”

“We can’t take that risk,” Corbin said. “Not when we’re so close. Your control might work in Faerie, but here, the demons will pick up on the smallest trace of Fae magic.”

Shit. I pressed my lips together. I could only hope this wasn’t my fault.

“All right,” Corbin said. He glanced at Maxwell and me. We all had our weapons drawn, and the wasteriders pawed at the dirt like they knew what was coming. “Let’s show them what we’ve got.”

I drove my heels into the wasterider’s flank. I took off first, the wasterider moving swiftly and silently across the cracked earth like it was flying, faster than any horse I’d ever ridden on. Four demons circled the shimmering portal, and as we grew closer, I could make out their terrible shapes: three that moved like enormous dogs, with their elongated snouts pressed to the dirt like they could sniff out the traces of power there. The doglike demons perked up when we were just a few hundred yards away, which caught the attention of the tall, muscular demon with immense tusks jutting from his lower jaw who seemed to be managing them.

Corbin’s wasterider suddenly overtook mine in a flurry of speed. An immense dog demon launched toward him, jaws open and snarling, and Corbin met it head on. He launched off the wasterider with a roar and drove his sword into the beast’s side, gutting it like a fish. The demon collapsed, its corpse open and steaming; the remaining two stopped and lingered near the tusked demon’s sides, watching us with their red eyes glowing. The tusked demon sneered, standing in between us and the portal.

“So my brother was right,” he said. “Not only was there an UnSeelie hybrid in the realm, there’s a Seelie, too.” Saliva dripped from his jaw. “I felt the Seelie power kill him. And then I felt it again, last night.” Maxwell shot me a dark look. “There are others crawling around the cave where the power was generated, but I know better. I knew you’d be trying to escape.” He grinned a huge, drooling grin. “And now I’ll get a payday for not one but three Fae. My brother would be so pleased.”

“You’ll be seeing him soon,” Corbin growled.

He sounded ferocious—looked it, too—but I could tell from his rapid

breathing that just that one attack on the dog-demon beneath him had taken a lot out of him.

“Let’s fucking dance,” Corbin said, and charged the tusked demon.

I wanted to stop him—wanted to let him take on a dog while I took on the big guy—but before I could get a single word out, I had an immense drooling dog-demon lunging at me with its tongue out and its hot, rancid breath overrunning my senses.

“Shit!” I leaped off the wasterider, and it barely avoided a collision with the immense demon. The wasterider stumbled, and then took off back into the wasteland even faster than we’d arrived. Smart creature. The demon got its claws in the dirt and regained its balance, then turned to face me, snarling.

I withdrew two knives and lowered my center of gravity.

The dog charged toward me, brisk and sloppy, like it was wild with hunger. Honestly, it probably was. As it approached, close enough that I could feel its hot breath, I jumped as high as I could, barely avoiding the snap of the dog’s jaws. I landed haphazardly on its broad, hairy back, catching myself by driving both knives into the flesh. It made a terrible wailing sound—pathetic, it couldn’t have hurt *that* bad. I wrenched the knives out and struck again. The dog howled and thrashed, and only by sheer force of will did I stay on its back like I was riding a bucking bronco.

Maxwell’s UnSeelie magic hissed and crackled in the atmosphere as he sent dark beams of power rushing toward the dog, pummeling its snarling face and slowing it down but not stopping it. Just in front of the closed portal, Corbin was locked in hand-to-hand combat with the tusked demon. Even in his demon form, the tusked one towered over him, and he dodged Corbin’s sword with ease. He even looked vaguely amused by it, smirking around his yellowed tusks as he toyed with Corbin like a cat with prey. Corbin was already beginning to look exhausted, too, his movements slowing down and growing sloppy.

The dog shook hard, effectively dislodging me from its back as I was distracted watching Corbin struggle with the tusked demon. I hit the dirt hard and rolled, and barely had time to get my hands up before the dog was on me again. I grasped its immense jaw as it pushed toward me, snapping at my face hungrily, its rancid breath rolling in hot, humid waves all over me.

Fuck. I was weakening fast, holding it back with all my strength—but we’d made it this far. I wasn’t going to die in the dirt right outside the portal.

Fucking around with my power had drawn this demon here. We weren’t

going to die because of me. I wasn't going to let Corbin die because of me. Not when we were so fucking close.

I held the dog's jaw with all my strength, then flipped the grip of my knife in the other, inhaled, and slammed it inside its mouth. I drove the blade as deep as I could into the creature's fleshy palate. Thick, dark blood poured from the wound, gushing thick and hot around my hands. I left the knife and scrambled back in the dirt. The dog reared back, howling and shaking its head wildly as it tried to dislodge the knife, sending blood arcing like a grotesque fountain until it staggered and collapsed.

"Fucking hell!" Maxwell called. "Nice!" He had the only remaining dog corralled in a cage of magic, but the crackling power flickered threateningly as the dog thrashed against it. He wasn't going to be able to hold it for much longer.

Covered in blood and aching with exhaustion, I staggered to my feet.

"Those were my pets," the tusked demon growled.

I flipped my knife. "You're next," I said, and bared my teeth like I was one of the dogs myself. Adrenaline surged through me, renewing my energy, making me feel simultaneously angry and a little crazy.

"I don't think so." The tusked demon moved quick as lightning, dodged Corbin's sloppy blow and wrapped his big hand around Corbin's neck. With ease, the demon lifted him off his feet, and Corbin's hands flew to the demon's forearms, clawing at the muscle deep enough to draw blood, but the demon hardly reacted. "First, an appetizer. Then you'll be the main dish."

Maxwell was still struggling to contain the dog demon; his eyes were wide with terror as he glanced frantically between his charge, the tusked demon, and me. Corbin choked and gasped as he thrashed in the demon's hold. I had my knives in hand and muscles coiled tight, ready to sprint forward, but then the tusked demon opened his mouth.

Like really opened it. His jaw unhinged and dropped low like a snake, revealing two rows of sharpened teeth slick with saliva and a long prehensile tongue suddenly visible and flicking. He dragged his tongue over Corbin's shoulder and Corbin thrashed again. He flickered between forms—suddenly he was in his Fae form, and then back to his Shax form.

The tusked demon laughed. "Scared, little Fae?"

"Do something, Corbin!" Maxwell barked. His own power flickered as the dog demon thrashed against the crackling cage.

Under our feet, the ground began to rumble.

“Delvers!” Corbin called. “We need to move, now!”

Corbin dug his claws deeper into the demon’s arm. The demon lifted him higher by the grip on his throat.

Maybe it was the adrenaline, or the rage, or the fear, or the sheer knowledge that this was the easiest way to win. I couldn’t save them both with my knives. The ground rumbled distantly beneath us—a delver. We didn’t have much time.

But I was the one who had lured this demon to the portal, and I was the one who was going to kill him, too.

I grabbed my collar and wrenched it off.

My power surged up in me, but this time, I was able to control it—or at least, partially control it. The rumbling worsened, like a minor earthquake beneath my feet, nearly knocking me off balance. The tusked demon’s gaze wrenched toward me, eyes burning red as he felt my Seelie power permeate the air.

“More than a Seelie,” the tusked demon said with a growl. “Much more.” He tossed Corbin aside like a forgotten doll. Corbin coughed, flickering between forms again.

“The portal!” I called, and Maxwell shouted acknowledgment.

The tusked demon stalked toward me, stumbling on the rocking dirt, moving as if hypnotized by the aura of my power. My senses were so open now, enhanced by my power, and I could feel the delvers careering toward us as they burrowed through the hard earth. I took a step back from the tusked demon and waited, waited, waited, until I could feel the delver and then--

“Now!” I called.

Max released his hold on the dog demon and leaped toward to Corbin’s side. He hauled him to his feet only to be knocked down again when the delver exploded from the cracked ground in a spray of dirt and a terrible crunching sound like a boulder being smashed into pieces. It dug its mandibles into the demon’s body and the thing howled and thrashed, turning its jaws to the delver instead of Maxwell.

The tusked demon roared in rage and charged me.

But this time, I wasn’t afraid.

I felt the power surging through me, golden and bright. I raised a hand and released it with a cry, sending a shining burst of light directly into the tusked demon’s chest. He staggered back, eyes wide as my light flooded him. It glowed under his skin and then began to pour from his eyes and his mouth,

and he let out one final roar before he was incinerated, just like his brother in the slaughterhouse.

The delver was still engaged with the dog-demon, and the ground rumbled with the promise of more. I knew that that display of power would bring more demons my way—if I squinted, I thought I could see them on the horizon, following the residue of my power like hunting dogs on a scent.

Maxwell heaved Corbin back to his feet. He held his hand over the closed portal and shouted an incantation, and the shimmer swirled and then opened into a dark abyss. He nodded at me. I grasped Corbin's hand and we leaped into the portal.

Chapter 13

I landed facedown in the long lavender grass of Faerie. Immediately, I took a gulping, gasping breath of the crisp air, and my power surged with joy at being back in the realm, galloping through my veins and glowing under my skin. Before it could get out of control, I quickly rolled onto my back and traced the runes Ignacia had taught me onto my throat, my sternum, my navel. I closed my eyes and breathed, drawing my focus to the runes and building the barrier, so my power could still flourish inside me, but wouldn't spill out and capture any unnecessary attention.

I had to hope that would work, since my collar was still in the dirt in the Demon realm.

"Everyone good?" Maxwell asked. Above us, the portal snapped closed. "Hell's bells. That was close."

With some effort I sat up. Already my power rolling through me, healing the aches and bruises I'd earned in the fight. "Corbin?" I asked. "You okay?"

Corbin was in his Fae form, flat on his back in the grass. He lifted up onto one elbow and pushed his sweaty, dirtied hair off his forehead. His clothes were shredded where the tusked demon had grabbed him, and a few thin, shallow cuts were visible on his neck. He looked sallow, his grimacing in pain as he rubbed at the wound on his side.

"Fine," he said. "Alive."

"And conscious!" Maxwell chirped. "That's not nothing."

"Your collar," Corbin said, eyes widening. He glanced at me, then to the castle on the horizon. "Someone will notice--"

"It's okay," I said. "I've got the runes in place. I'm controlling it."

"It's true," Maxwell said. "I can't sense it."

I knew from his expression that Corbin could, too. That was part of our new reality, though—our bond. Because he was my *mate*. That reality still felt shivery and unreal, like if I addressed it too callously or openly, it might shatter and break. But I felt it, still, that innate draw between us. Now that we were out of the Demon realm, and out of the line of fire, I ached to go somewhere private, to put my hands on him and let my power help heal the terrible wounds the demons had inflicted upon him.

But of course, it couldn't be so simple.

"You can't go to the castle, though," Maxwell said. "Even if you're containing your power, the queen will be able to sense it."

"He's right," Corbin said. "It's only a matter of time before she can feel a trace of your power, even from a distance. You're both too strong."

"So what now?" I asked. "I can just go back Earthside, right? Blood contract's fulfilled, right? I brought Corbin back."

Maxwell and Corbin glanced at each other.

"I can, right?" I already knew the answer, though. Nothing here could be easy.

"If you leave, Daniel will immediately be Earthside looking for you," Corbin said. "There's a chance he'd reveal your status to the queen, too, to get the resources to recapture you."

I sighed and flopped back down onto my back. "Or maybe the queen would just kill him for lying about me."

"Either way, you'd have Daniel after you, or the queen," Corbin said.

"And Corbin might get the chop for his trouble," Maxwell said. "For letting you get away. Also, I'd have to check the fine print on the blood contract, but you might die for skipping out regardless."

"True, and great point," Corbin said with a sardonic grin. "I'm no good to the queen if I'm letting targets skip through my fingers."

"Even when near-death from a cursed blade," Maxwell said.

"*Especially* when near-death from a cursed blade."

"I get it," I said. "I can't skip town. I can't go near the palace. I'm on a time limit until I'm found out. What's the plan?"

"We have to get rid of Daniel," Corbin said, low and angry. "We have to get you out from under his control by getting him dismissed from the court. It's only his favor with the queen that's letting him keep you in the realm. Because he's so high-ranking, if you escape, there will always be someone coming after you to bring you back."

Maxwell nodded in agreement. “You’re right. If he’s dismissed, then no one will care about what happens to you, Tempie. No offense.”

“That’s exactly what I want,” I said. “To be out of here and forgotten about.”

“You go back to the palace,” Maxwell said to Corbin, “and I’ll take Tempie back to Daniel.”

Both Corbin’s and my expressions soured. The last thing I wanted was to see Daniel again—but I knew they were right. I couldn’t just run away now. We had to put an end to this. A *real* end. Not just for me, but for Corbin—and for what Daniel did to my mother. As much as I hated the thought of going back to being his pet, it wasn’t going to be for long. And it’d be worth it if it meant I could see Daniel really pay for what he did.

“Great,” Corbin said, then with a sigh, heaved himself shakily to his feet. “The queen will be pleased to see me, at least.”

“Maybe not in this condition,” Maxwell said. “But she’ll get you fixed right up.” Then he took a step away and busied himself rooting through his pack. It was extremely obvious, but I was grateful for the illusion of privacy.

I stood up too, and pulled Corbin close. His ozone aura crackled around me, comfortable and all-encompassing, so wonderfully nuanced with my powers free. “Let me heal you a little,” I said, “it’s a long trek to the palace.”

“She’d sense it on me,” Corbin said with a sad sigh. “As much as I’d prefer your healing over UnSeelie healing.”

My heart twisted. I flung my arms around his neck and pulled him close, and then kissed him hard. Relief swept through me, relief and a feeling that this was *right*. This was where I was supposed to be. Here, with Corbin, with my power contained but free, and my soul reaching out for his. “We can’t catch a break, can we?”

“I’m genuinely shocked we made out of there alive,” Corbin admitted. He tipped his forehead against mine. “I never want to see you anywhere near there again. Hell, I don’t even want you to be *here*.”

“So where *do* you want to be?” I teased.

“Earthside,” he said, immediately. “Away from all this. With you.”

It was so earnest, it shocked me to silence. All I could do was kiss him again, and then admit against his lips, “That’s what I want, too.”

He pulled away reluctantly, then cast his gaze down my bloodied, dirty clothes. “You need to get cleaned up, too.”

“You’re one to talk,” I said, gesturing at him with a grin. We both reeked,

and the next few days—or however long it took to deal with Daniel—weren't going to be easy. But we were alive, and for this brief moment, we were together.

“We need to go,” Corbin said. “I can already feel your power growing. Keep an eye on the runes.”

I traced them again briskly, and felt the barrier inside me strengthen. “It's your fault,” I muttered. “You distracted me.”

We broke apart. Corbin wrapped Maxwell in a brief, hard hug, returned to my side for one more sweet, burning kiss, and then he headed into the woods to take the winding servants' path toward the palace. I swallowed down the immediate way I missed him like a physical ache, like a bruise spreading as his aura dissipated.

Maxwell clapped me on the shoulder. “Chin up. You'll be Earthside before you know it.”

I nodded, but it wasn't a really convincing interaction for either of us. We made our way on foot back to Daniel's manor, and during the trudge, I tried to wrangle my anger down and shift back into a headspace that could stand to look at Daniel's face without attacking him like a raccoon. I had to think long-term now. Just a little longer of playing his game. He'd get what he deserved. I had to keep telling myself that.

Maxwell knocked on the door to the manor, and Spurn answered. She took one look at my bloodied appearance and her face contorted into an open expression of disgust. Then her gaze rocketed to my neck, and the lack of collar thereof, and she gasped in horror.

“That will be all, Maxwell,” she barked. “We will take it from her. Master Rutherford!”

Before I could say a word to Max, or even look at him, Spurn was dragging me across the threshold. She slammed the door in Maxwell's face. She flicked her hand, but her marionette magic couldn't touch me without the collar on.

Daniel emerged from the back hallway, mid-eye roll. “What is it now, Spurn, I just—oh!” His irritated expression melted away, and was replaced by a cold, almost predatory smile. “Tempie. How lovely to see you again. I admit, I had my doubts about your ability to manage the Demon realm.”

“Her collar, sir!” Spurn said fearfully.

His eyes widened, then narrowed. Rage boiled in my chest—I wanted so badly to unleash my power on him and burn him to bits from the inside out.

It'd be so fucking easy. Sure, it'd doom me to a life of constant pursuit by the UnSeelie Queen, but for a brief moment, it seemed almost worth it. I took a steadying breath and restrained myself.

"I see," he said. "Like a dog who has escaped the enclosure. Luckily, I remain prepared. It's best to always have a contingency plan, wouldn't you agree? Spurn, please escort Tempie down to her bedroom."

Spurn huffed but did just that, hauling me down the stairs to my prison-slash-bedroom. Usually, she'd be ranting, talking my ear off about the ways I was difficult and disrespectful, but now she was quiet.

Like she was afraid of me.

Small pleasures. I'd take what I could get. Spurn hauled me into the room and then hurried into the bathroom to start a bath. Moments later, Daniel burst in without knocking as he always did, with a leather box in hand. I grimaced.

He stepped close, and his green eyes blazed with fury. "How dare you walk in Faerie without your collar. You will never take such a risk again."

Briefly, I let my power flare, just enough for Daniel to sense it. His eyes widened, and he rocked back slightly like he was trying not to take a step back.

"The only reason I haven't blown you to bits is for Corbin," I hissed. "Enjoy this while you can, because it's not going to last."

"If you think that mongrel can save you, you're a fool," Daniel said. He opened the box.

Even just sitting there in the dark velvet interior of the box, the collar seemed to suck the energy from the room. It wasn't leather like my previous collar—this one was unpolished metal, dull and heavy. He hefted it out of the box and set it around my neck. The metal was cold enough to make me hiss in surprise, and so cold it felt like it would be impossible for my skin to ever warm it. He closed it and muttered an incantation over the lock resting at the hollow of my throat.

The effect was immediate. The cold metal of the collar sucked all my power away. The leather collar had been miserable enough—it had diminished my power into almost nothing, so where I was used to the familiar warmth there was only absence. But this was worse. So, so much worse. The metal stole my power, continuously, like it was a vacuum around my neck greedily stealing every glimmer of magic. As it did so it seemed to take my soul with it. Immediately, I was exhausted, unsteady on my feet, like

I hadn't slept for weeks. My head pounded and my brain clouded with static and fog. It took immense effort to just stay standing.

"There you go," Daniel said. His voice sounded distant, even though he was standing right in front of me. "You see, if you hadn't lost your collar, it wouldn't have come to this."

"I have to admit, sir, she'll be much more manageable in this state," Spurn said with a cruel laugh. "I'll get her cleaned up."

"Please do," he said, "and tend to any wounds. I want her looking her best for dinner with the queen tomorrow."

"Of course, sir," Spurn said, with a gratuitous bow.

Daniel swanned out of the room. Spurn snapped her fingers, and the marionette strings were back on my limbs. This time, I didn't even care. I was so sapped of energy—of life—that without Spurn's maneuvering, it would've been barely possible for me to walk at all. She guided me into the bathroom, I sat motionless in the warm bath, soaking away the blood and the dirt of the demon realm while Spurn pattered around with washcloths and soaps, tutting and complaining about the state of my skin and my hair.

If I had known Daniel could reduce my powers like this, so drastically, so awfully, I would've taken my chances leaping through the portal. How long could I last in a state like this? How could I be any help to Corbin, with whatever they were planning, if I could barely form a coherent thought through the dense fog in my mind?

How long would I be able to survive with this collar slowly draining me of life?

Chapter 14

“Remember,” Daniel hissed into my ear as we stood in front of the immense ornate door to the palace dining hall, “be on your best behavior. Keep away from Corbin Frost.”

I swayed slightly on my feet, but Daniel’s firm grip on my waist kept me standing. His touch repelled me, but there was nothing I could do to shake him off. We were matching again, to my dismay, Daniel in a fine silk suit with a pale blue shirt, and me in a blue gown of the same fabric. The dress only made me feel worse, the silk distracting on my skin and the color making me look even more sickly than I felt. I hardly felt like a human at all. I felt like a shade, like I was halfway in a coma, watching myself from slightly outside my body. I couldn’t argue, I could hardly speak at all with the way the collar weighed on me.

Yet still part of me knew Corbin was on the other side of the door. If I could just talk to him—him—if he knew what was happening—he’d put a stop to all this. We’d figure something out together.

The door swung open and a small UnSeelie servant guided us into the dining hall. The table was set extravagantly, decorated with elegant flowers and china so fine it was almost paper-thin, lit with warm enchanted candles that illuminated the room perfectly but not enough to obscure the enchanted stars flickering in the elegant rafters above. There were at least two dozen court members in attendance, all lingering around the room, not yet seated, with glasses of champagne in hand as they spoke in low voices. All eyes turned to Daniel and me as we walked in.

Including Corbin’s. He was across the room, standing shoulder to shoulder with Maxwell, and his eyes widened as he saw me.

Daniel firmly guided me in the opposite direction, toward a servant with a tray full of champagne glasses. Daniel offered me one, and I took it in hand, but my grip was so weak, it nearly slipped. He exhaled in irritation, then took the glass away, leaving me empty-handed. That was fine with me. I still wasn't going to touch wine in this realm.

"Daniel." Corbin strode over, the heels of his fine leather boots cracking sharply on the stone floor. "What's all this?"

"What's what?" Daniel asked. "The queen requested that my pet be in attendance at dinner tonight, since she's responsible for your return to court." He sneered. "Glad to see you're making a recovery."

Daniel held me nearly flush to his body. I longed to reach out to Corbin, even just to touch my fingertips to his hand, but the difficulty seemed insurmountable. So I just looked instead, gazing glassy-eyed at him as his eyes briefly flashed red.

"Take this off her," he hissed, reaching for my collar. "This is absolutely unnecessary."

Daniel scoffed and swatted his hand away. "Keep your mongrel hands away from my property," he snapped.

"She's not property," Corbin said. He stepped closer. "Not yours. Not ever."

"I beg to differ." Daniel smiled. "I believe you've already lost this one, dog."

"Now, Daniel," the queen boomed. "Must you step into my dining hall and immediately start antagonizing my enforcer?"

She breezed into the dining hall, ethereal as ever in a fine white gown that looked it was made of lace layered atop lace. Her shining dark hair was tied up in an elegant braid, accentuating the sharp angles of her inhumanly gorgeous face.

"Corbin," she commanded, "to me, please."

It was like a dog trainer telling him to heel. Corbin exhaled hard, but then stepped away from Daniel and back to the queen's side.

"My apologies," Daniel said, sweeping into a bow. "I was simply defending--"

"I don't need excuses," she said briskly. "Pets are not so important. I won't have any more displays of aggression over something as foolish as a human. If you're so jealous, Corbin, I'll have one brought over for you."

Corbin swallowed. "That's not necessary, my Queen."

“Good,” she said. Then she took her seat at the head of the table, and motioned for guests to join her, which everyone did immediately.

“I’m simply glad that pet of yours was able to bring back my enforcer,” the queen said. “I’m not keen on having members of my court manipulated without my permission, even the low-ranking ones. It’s disrespectful, wouldn’t you agree?”

Murmurs of agreement sounded around the table. Servants appeared from doorways on all sides, bringing out a seemingly endless stream of dishes: pheasant, suckling pig, fresh-baked bread, roast potatoes, crisp greens. I couldn’t even smell it with how strongly the collar deadened my senses. I was simply glad to be seated, so I could keep my attention on Corbin and the queen, instead of trying to keep my knees from buckling where I stood.

“Which is why I had Ralnor executed,” the queen said demurely, as if she was discussing the weather. “That little ritual he pulled to transport Corbin garnered a lot of attention. The supernatural police were able to track him to his little hideaway, and Magda had him extradited back to Faerie.” The queen nodded gratefully at a tall, skinny UnSeelie woman in a structured jacket seated at the other end of the table. The woman nodded her acknowledgment. “Generally, I find execution to be a bit distasteful and dramatic, but Ralnor’s behavior was out of hand. He was useful in court, but not as useful as my enforcer.”

“A wise decision, Your Majesty,” Daniel said.

I slumped lower in my chair. So Ralnor was dead. Killed by the queen as easily as one euthanizes a rabid dog. That whole case, come to such a dissatisfying close, and here I was still trapped at her dining table with my life force being steadily sucked away by the heavy collar around my neck. Under the table, Daniel patted my thigh, then smiled at me.

All of this had been part of his plan—his plan to get to me. Ralnor had just been a pawn, and I’d played straight into his hands. I was so drained I couldn’t even muster up the energy to be violently angry. Rage just simmered deep and low inside me like magma, present but inaccessible. This was my life now.

“And it all worked out,” the queen said. “I’ve got my enforcer back, and you’ve got your pet. Honestly, I’m quite impressed that they both made it back alive. I certainly had my doubts.”

“She’s a fine pet indeed,” Daniel said.

I wanted to scream. I wasn’t a pet—I wasn’t property. The same rage

burned behind Corbin's eyes, too. But neither of us could do anything about it, we just had to sit on opposite ends of the table, so close but so far apart, and listen as the conversation turned from Ralnor back to the frivolous dramas of the court. The power and capability I'd felt in the Demon realm, and the connection I'd felt with Corbin, seemed so distant it was like a dream. The conversations around the table drifted in one ear and out the other, erased by the buzzing static in my mind. Would I ever be that capable bounty hunter again? Would I ever come alive under Corbin's touch?

Dinner passed in a blur. I didn't even have a chance to look to Corbin as the night wound down. Daniel kept a tight grip on my waist as he whisked me out of the dining hall and back into the carriage to the manor. In the foyer, he left me to Spurn, and Spurn guided me down to my bedroom and used her magic to ease the now-familiar nighttime bathing and dressing routine.

She dressed me in a fine white silk nightgown, so thin it was barely opaque, the straps as fine as spider-silk on my shoulders and only decoration delicate lace on the hem. My red hair fell in loose waves over my shoulders. In the mirror, the heavy collar was a stark contrast to the delicate finery I was dressed in otherwise.

"Mr. Rutherford will be in this evening," Spurn said. "Feel free to rest until then."

With her powers, she guided me to the bed in the center of the room and instructed me to lie supine on it. Then the spell broke, and I was in control of my body once again, but I didn't have the energy to move. The mattress was soft and comfortable, and there was nothing I could do, anyway. No way to escape or defend myself. So what other option did I have? My eyes drifted halfway closed as I waited, lost in the static of my own mind.

If I could get this collar off, it'd be a different story. I'd risk everything to kill Daniel where he stood. It was only Corbin's promise that he'd get what was coming to him that kept me from giving up entirely.

The door opened.

"Perfect," Daniel murmured. He closed and locked the door behind him. "You look lovely, Temperance. I have to admit, I'm beginning to think I should've chosen this collar in the first place."

I sighed deeply and closed my eyes. "I get it, you hate a woman with opinions."

"Or maybe I should've made it stronger," Daniel hissed. "I'm not going to tolerate any more talking back from you. I gave you a chance to live

alongside me as an equal” —I chuckled. What a crock of shit— “And you decided to toss that aside, lose your collar, and waste your time with that mongrel. My patience has worn out. From now you will serve the purpose you were meant to serve. My pet, and nothing more.”

He sat down at the edge of the mattress. I opened my eyes just enough to glare at him. He was dressed in what counted in Faerie as casual: a linen shirt and slacks, like he was about to go to one of his extravagant garden parties. He carefully brushed my hair away from my neck and traced one forefinger down, from the curve of my jaw to the still-cold metal of the collar.

“This is the most frustrating part of this collar,” he said. “I prefer to drink from the neck, where the blood is close to the heart. It tastes better, fresher, richer with oxygen. As if the human body suffuses the blood in the carotid with its best qualities.” He sighed. “But, having the collar so close makes it an unpleasant experience. Perhaps as time passes, we’ll be able to shift you to a lesser collar for my benefit.” He nodded, as if noting that to himself. “For now, though, I’ll have to make do.”

He took my wrist in hand and lifted it.

I knew what was coming. Even through the haze and the static, I struggled, weakly trying to pull my hand out of his grip. But his hold only tightened, and his gaze narrowed. Then his eyes flashed with his power, and though I couldn’t see his dark, slimy magic, I felt it holding me down, on my chest like a weight. It pinned me in place. It was hard now to even draw a breath.

“I’ve been waiting for this moment for a long time,” Daniel said. He pressed his nose to my wrist and inhaled. “I can smell it, the same way I could smell it on your mother. The Solstice power. Remarkable.”

Then he bared his long, sharp UnSeelie teeth and sank them into my wrist.

Pain shot through me like lightning. It wasn’t just the physical pain of his teeth sinking into my wrist—it was poison spreading from the bite, racing through me, attacking my nerves from the bite all the way the crown of my head and my toes. I wanted to thrash, to fight, to pull away, but I couldn’t move. His magic kept me pinned as he drank greedily from the wound on my wrist.

And drank. And drank. And drank.

I thought I couldn’t feel any worse than I already did, but the blood loss proved me wrong. The feeding seemed to last for hours, a terrible blend of

awful pain and disgusting faux-intimacy as Daniel interspersed his gulping mouthfuls with performatively tender kisses on the skin of my forearm. Finally, right as spots started to dance in front of my eyes, he pulled away with some effort.

His eyes glowed with power—my power—and his teeth were still long and sharp despite the feeding being completed. He dragged his tongue over the wound on my wrist, and the blood congealed, stopping the bleeding. His breath was hot over my skin, and he pressed more kisses to my skin, but it felt like he was trying to resist biting again. My blood had made him twitchy and animalistic. His grip was too strong, and his power heavy.

Then he stood up. His mouth was stained red, and he'd drunk so sloppily it even stained the pale linen of his shirt. He reached out and traced his finger down my neck, over the collar and to the neckline of my nightgown. He hooked his finger in the neckline and tugged slightly, making my stomach turn and my skin crawl, but then he withdrew his hand. As he withdrew his hand, the gross weight of his power withdrew, too, and I took a gasping breath like I'd been held underwater.

“So beautiful,” Daniel mused. “I’m looking forward to our lives together.”

His eyes raked hungrily over me once more, and then with what looked like a lot of effort, he turned on his heel and swept out of the room.

Sometime later, Spurn arrived to clean up my arm and force me to drink a thin, warm broth. The broth warmed my deprived body, dispelling the worst of the blood loss dizziness. I kept my eyes closed and Spurn tended to me, leaving me feeling more like a piece of meat than a person. That's all I was to Daniel—a bloodbag. Just like Corbin had warned me, what felt like an eternity ago.

Chapter 15

Time passed in a haze.
Hours. Days. Weeks.

It was all a blur. Occasionally, Daniel would trot me out for a dinner or a luncheon—ones without Corbin—but those days were growing rarer and rarer as my condition worsened. His friends realized something was wrong with me, and Daniel was starting to receive pitying looks instead of impressed ones. So he left me in my elegant prison, where all I did was move from the armchair by the fire to the bed to the bathroom and back. Spurn was the only constant in my life, bringing me broth and bread and tending my wounds.

Daniel never drank too much blood to fully incapacitate me. He kept me teetering right at the edge, though, so I always felt sick and weak. Every other night he drank from me, from my wrists, sometimes my biceps, and on the worst nights, my thighs.

It was only thoughts of Corbin that sustained me. I knew he was working something out—figuring out a way to get us both out of here and free from Daniel and the queen for good.

Something had changed between us in the Demon realm. The longer I spent in Faerie without him, the more I began to believe he was right.

That he *was* my mate.

I didn't just miss him, I *longed* for him, like a phantom limb. My body and soul ached to be close to him again. When he'd drank from me, it'd felt so different than when Daniel did—Daniel could only steal what I wanted to freely give to Corbin. My blood had connected Corbin and me. Two halves of a whole. Thinking of him brought me hope and pain simultaneously. It was

all my fogged, static-filled mine could focus on.

I was lying in bed, and the fire was low, which meant it was evening. Spurn had left my broth half-finished on the small table, and I was buried under a heavy pile of blankets. I was always cold, because I was always suffering from blood loss.

The door creaked open, and I winced, instinctively turning my face away. Daniel had fed yesterday—why was he here again? Had his addiction grown stronger? Did he need to drink from me every day now? With some effort, I rolled onto my side, curling in on myself like I could disappear before he approached me. Like I attempted every time, to no avail.

“Tempie,” a familiar voice said quietly. It wasn’t Corbin’s low, soothing voice, but it was welcome nonetheless. “It’s me.”

I blinked. Had I gotten to the point of hallucinating? I rolled back over.

If I was hallucinating, I was doing a really good job. Maxwell stood at my bedside, in a fine green jacket, with his braids as neat as ever and his brow furrowed deeply with concern. “Hey,” he said, kneeling to be at eye level with me. “Hell’s bells, he’s really taking a lot from you, isn’t he?”

“Understatement,” I murmured. Fuck, it was good to see someone beside Spurn or Daniel. I even managed to smile. I didn’t know how he’d managed to get in here—Daniel kept things on lockdown, as far as I could tell—but I was so grateful to see him I didn’t even care.

“I didn’t realize it was this bad,” he said. “Can I...?” he tugged questioningly at the blanket pulled up under my chin.

I shook my head. “Please don’t,” I said. I knew how I looked under there—pale and bruised and chewed to pieces. I didn’t want him to see that. The only one I’d let see me like that was Corbin, when he was able to get the collar off, and I was able to heal myself. I didn’t want more of Maxwell’s pity.

He pressed his lips together. “Okay,” he said. “Listen, I brought you something.”

From his pocket, he pulled out a small compact, similar to the one I still had tucked away in my drawer. This one was smaller, square, and gleaming gold. He opened it, revealing mirrors on each side.

“Keep this under your pillow,” he said. “You’ll understand tonight.”

He slid it gently beneath my pillow. I nodded. I was too tired to ask him what exactly it was—if he said it’d make sense later, I trusted him. Maxwell had more than proven he was trustworthy in the Demon realm. “Okay.”

My acquiescence only made him look more worried. “Just hang in there a little longer, okay?” he said quietly. “We’re working on something. We’re going to get out of here.”

“I know,” I murmured. But admittedly it was growing harder and harder to believe that. I had to hope we would—but remembering what life was like before the haze of the collar and the horror of the feeds was getting harder and harder.

Something caught Max’s attention, something I didn’t hear, and he jumped to his feet. “I have to go,” he said briskly, “just don’t move that mirror. I promise. We’re getting you out of here.”

Maxwell left the room just as quickly as he had arrived. I burrowed deeper under my pile of blankets and slipped back into the familiar fog, and then eventually, drifted into a fitful, unhappy sleep.

I opened my eyes into a vast, open meadow. The grass was the tall green grass I was familiar with from Earthside, but the air was the crisp, clean air of Faerie. As if was the best of both worlds. I wasn’t dressed in the silks of Faerie, but my own clothes: simple jeans and a t-shirt. The clothes I was comfortable in. My arms were absent of any of the bruising and bite marks from Daniel’s feedings, and I felt alive. I felt like myself again. It’d been so long, I’d nearly forgotten what that felt like. I took a deep, hungry breath. God, it felt good to just *breathe* the open air.

“Tempie!”

The voice was warm and sweet in the quiet air. My heart soared as I jumped to my feet and spun around to find the source.

It was him.

Corbin.

He was handsome and familiar in his Fae form, dressed in the fitted but comfortable clothes I was used to seeing him in Earthside, not the flowing silk shirts and high-waisted riding pants of Faerie. His blond hair was pushed back off his face, his eyes were that beloved icy blue, and he was smiling.

I ran toward him, my heart still leaping in my chest with joy. He met me with open arms, and I crashed into him like a wave, nearly knocking him backward into the grass. But he regained his balance, laughing, and wrapped his arms around me. The embrace lifted me off my feet as he swung me around. I wrapped my arms tight around his neck and burrowed my face there, laughing as well as I breathed in his familiar scent and his wonderfully strong, sharp aura. Finally, he set me back on my feet, and he pulled back

enough to hold me by the waist and gaze concernedly at my face.

“I’m fine,” I said. “At least—I am right now.”

“After what Maxwell told me, I was worried this wouldn’t work at all,” he said. “That you wouldn’t be well enough.”

“Wait.” I blinked. “This isn’t just a dream?” I’d assumed it was—there was no way I’d feel this good and be so unhurt otherwise.

“It’s a dream, yes,” Corbin said. “We’re sharing it. The mirror Maxwell gave you allows us to meet here, in this dreamscape he built for us.”

“So it’s really you,” I said, still half-disbelieving. “You’re really here.”

“As close as I can be, yeah,” he said softly. “You’re still in the manor, and I’m still in the palace. But we’ll both remember this when we wake.”

“Wow,” I murmured. Then I wrapped my hand around his nape and pulled him closer for a kiss. Even though I knew this dreamscape wasn’t real, that my physical body was still trapped in Daniel’s manor, it *felt* real. The familiar soft press of his lips, the sigh of his breath, the drag of his teeth over my lower lip—it was all so real I briefly got lost in it. Better than real. It was a reprieve from reality.

“How are you?” he asked, with one hand on my cheek. “Really. Maxwell told me a little, but he said you weren’t—weren’t very talkative.”

I sighed, then pulled him down to sit in the grass. He wrapped an arm around my shoulder, and I leaned heavily against him, matching my breaths to the steady, familiar beat of his heart.

“I don’t know, really,” I admitted. “Between the collar and the feedings, there’s not much to me. This dream is the best I’ve felt since we got back from the Demon realm.”

“He’s feeding on you that often?” Corbin asked, low.

I nodded. “Every other night. Never enough to knock me out or anything, but enough to keep me really weak. The collar already does a good job of that anyway—you know that, you saw me at that dinner with the queen.”

“I try not to think about it,” Corbin said in a low growl. “Makes it hard to resist my urges to lash out.”

“My days are just fog,” I said. “I don’t remember much. It’s just the passage of time. Dreading the feedings.” I shifted closer. “Thinking about you.”

“I’m going to get you away from him,” he promised furiously. “I knew it was bad, but I didn’t realize—I didn’t realize he’d go to lengths like this. He seemed so keen on making sure you were still able to be pranced out like a

prize. The fact that he's kept you so incapacitated..." He sighed. "Well, it shows how strong you are. You scare him."

"Well, I don't feel strong," I admitted.

Corbin paused for a long moment. His thumb traced circles on my upper arm.

"I can hear your mind working," I said, nudging him. "What is it?"

"We're working on a way to get you free," he said. "Almost got it finished. But now I'm thinking—I mean, it's not going to be easy."

"What do you mean? I was never under the impression that it would be easy. Come on, I'm smarter than that."

He laughed and pressed a brief kiss to my temple. "I know, I know. The only way to get you out of the court is to get Daniel expelled. Once he's dealt with, then the queen won't care about what happens to you. So Max and I came up with an idea to get him kicked out, but it's not pretty. And it requires you."

"At this point, I'll do anything," I said. "What is it?"

"It's not a question of willingness," he said. "I didn't realize how weak you are. I don't know what kind of damage it will do."

I thwacked him on the thigh. "Will you quit talking around this plan and just tell me what it is?"

He laughed again. "Fuck, I missed you. I'm getting too used to talking to persnickety Fae." He pulled me impossibly closer. "We're going to poison him," he said. "Through you."

I blinked, shocked enough to overtake the warm feeling of knowing that Corbin missed me as much as I missed him. "Through me. Through the feedings."

"Yes," Corbin said. "I've been in communication with Ignacia."

"She's willing to help with something like this?"

"I promised to trade her more of my blood when we make it Earthside," he said. "That's why I trust her, really—everything has a price with her. That's honesty in the Demon realm."

"Why is that?" I asked. "Why didn't she just kill us when she had the chance? With all three of us, the power boost would've been insane."

"It's not her style," Corbin said. "I mean—it's true what they say about most demons. How the slightest smell of Fae blood can make them go crazy with hunger. But Ignacia's old. Very old. She's playing the long game. She's mentioned ideas before, briefly... Things about wanting to become involved

with the court. She wants power, sure, but she doesn't just want pure violent power. She wants the kind of soft power that comes with connections."

"Somehow that's even scarier," I muttered. "So what is it? A spell?"

"Yes," he said. "It'll temporarily infuse your blood with demonic power. Like a poison. Daniel won't be able to tell, but then it will infect him with demon-sickness."

"Demon-sickness," I echoed. "What the hell is that?"

"Demons get a strong power boost from Fae blood," Corbin explained, "but if UnSeelie consume demon blood, it induces brief bouts of madness. Rage and violence. Kind of like rabies."

I nodded. "So the idea is we give him demon-sickness, and then he does something to get himself excommunicated."

"Right," Corbin said. "During that process, we should be able to sneak you out without much fanfare."

"Excommunication doesn't really seem like enough," I admitted. "Kind of want him to get killed."

"Well, you're not alone in that," Corbin growled. "One step at a time."

"Listen," I said.

"Listening," Corbin said with a smirk in his voice.

I huffed a laugh, half-annoyed and half-delighted, then climbed into his lap so I was straddling his thighs. His hands fell to my hips like they belonged there and he looked up at me smiling despite the worry in his amber-flecked eyes.

"I'm not in great shape back in the manor," I admitted, "but if this plan gets us a real shot at getting out of here, I want to do it."

"I know. But it's dangerous," Corbin said.

"What do we do together that's *not* dangerous?" I asked.

Then he smirked. "Well, I have an idea."

"All right," I said with a roll of my eyes, "I walked into that one."

After that it was easy to push him backward into the grass and silence any further discussion with kisses. I didn't want to talk about Daniel anymore—I didn't want to think about anything in the waking world at all. I wanted to take full advantage of this brief window of safety. This time with Corbin, my *mate*, finally together and finally unimpeded.

For a little while, the rest of world could wait.

* * *

More days passed in that same terrible haze. With each passing day, I grew weaker, with a foggier mind, and less hope. I'd promised Corbin I could pull off this plan, but when I was alone in the bedroom after a feed, I began to wonder if that was a mistake. If the spell they'd put together was as bad as Corbin had suggested, would I really be able to survive it? How bad would it be? And would it even work?

I closed my eyes, turning my head away as Daniel's sharp UnSeelie teeth pierced my wrist for what seemed like the hundredth time. There was no more faux-intimacy or nuance to his drinking anymore—no more did he leave kisses on my skin or whisper possessive epithets as he maneuvered me.

He was addicted. Every other night, he came in wild-eyed, nostrils flaring, and tonight was no different. If he was getting a power boost from my blood, it didn't seem like it.

When he was finished drinking gulping mouthfuls from my wrist, he pulled off with a gasp, his eyes nearly rolling back into his head. Every time he drank from me, it became more like this—like an alcoholic taking desperate pulls from the bottle. Then he stood and staggered back, wiping the excess blood from his mouth with the back of his hand, then licking the remains off his hand like a cat bathing. It was disgusting. He grinned at me, like he always did, and then turned and left the room without a word.

Spurn followed, for the cleanup and the broth, but this time I couldn't even keep the broth down. I was getting weaker and weaker. The broth tasted rancid in my mouth, and I pushed it away. Spurn could've forced me, but she just tutted and left the bowl on my nightstand. It seemed like she could recognize how much I was weakening, too. Maybe she was afraid her magic would accelerate the decay process. Whatever her motivation, I was grateful to be left alone. When Spurn left, my thoughts returned as they always did to Corbin.

Corbin. Where was he? How much longer would I have to wait? The memory of our brief time together in the dreamscape was all that was sustaining me through the worst of the feeds. His memory, and the promise that it would be over soon. Even poisoning my own blood would be better than this purgatory.

I left the broth untouched and fell into a hazy, restless sleep.

When I opened my eyes again, it was beneath a wide, dark sky, dotted with twinkling stars and the twin moons of Faerie gleaming high above. The grass was soft beneath me, and the air was crisp and clear, but I didn't feel as

healthy and energetic as I had the first time I'd been in the dreamscape. It was like even in the dreamscape I couldn't fully recover my strength.

"Hey," Corbin said gently. He was at my side already, like he'd materialized there. Before I could attempt to haul myself to my feet, he was kneeling beside me, helping me up into a seated position.

I sighed and leaned against him gratefully, nearly overwhelmed with relief. "Hi. I was just thinking about you."

"I'm always thinking about you," Corbin said. "It's getting worse, isn't it?"

I nodded. No point denying it. "The feedings are worse," I said. "I don't know if he's taking more, or if my body just can't keep up with the replenishment anymore."

"I'm so sorry it took so long," he murmured. He gently ran one hand through my hair, then tilted my face up to meet his for a brief, sweet kiss. I still wanted him—desperately—but the exhaustion was too much for me to do more than sigh against his lips.

"Is it happening?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes. Daniel's been avoiding court."

"Doesn't surprise me," I muttered. "He hasn't been looking his best."

Corbin paused. "What do you mean?"

"He's feeding from me," I said, "and I can tell his powers are getting really strong, but it's not without a cost. He's looking all crazed and weird afterward. I think it wears off, but immediately after, he looks really bad."

"That's good," Corbin said. "That's great. The sickness should take really well. The queen has requested his presence—and yours—at the gala."

"What's the gala for?" I asked.

"Nothing," Corbin said with a roll of his eyes. "The queen just gets bored and has to throw a party every few weeks. This one's the day after tomorrow."

"Great," I said. "No promises about me being able to walk around."

"You won't have to for long." He pressed a kiss to the crown of my head. "It's going to be chaos, but I'm getting you out of here."

"Chaos sounds nice after my stint in Daniel's manor," I admitted. "The monotony is almost worse than the feedings."

"You don't mean that."

I huffed a laugh. "You're right, I don't. So what do I need to do?"

"Before the gala, I'm going to have one of the kitchen staff bring you a

meal,” Corbin said. “There’s going to be a potion, and a spell.”

“I can’t do any spells,” I noted. “The whole collar situation, remember?”

“It’s runic magic,” he said. “Ignacia prepared it. She knows your style. It’ll work.” He nodded, like he was convincing himself. “I promise. It’ll work. Just make sure you drink it in the morning, so it’s in effect when Daniel feeds on you in the evening.”

“I can do that,” I murmured.

“It won’t feel great,” Corbin said.

“What, you mean intentionally poisoning myself is going to have side effects?” I teased. “Just promise me you’ll get the collar off me as soon as you can.”

“I swear it,” Corbin said. He cupped my face in hand and kissed me again. “Tempie, I swear it.”

He meant every word. I was renewed, refreshed with the confidence that things were moving. Things were *happening*. We were getting out of here. The feeling wasn’t unlike that rush of uncovering a really good lead in a case.

I smiled into the kiss. I couldn’t wait to kiss him outside of the dreamscape—uncollared, healed, and free.

Chapter 16

“It’s from the queen,” an unfamiliar voice behind the closed door. “In celebration of the gala this evening.”

“I wasn’t informed of this!” Spurn snapped irritably. “Temperance is on a careful diet instructed by Mr. Rutherford himself--”

“Are you suggesting Mr. Rutherford’s preferences outweigh the queen’s?”

“I—of--of course not!” Spurn sputtered. “Simply that I wasn’t *informed* of this change and it has effectively *disrupted* what is a very carefully managed routine--”

The door opened. A young-looking UnSeelie boy in an apron held a small tray balanced on one hand, and he threw a disdainful look back at Spurn as she stood in the doorway frowning.

“I’ll return later with dinner,” she huffed, and then scurried down the hall.

I managed to pull myself up into a seated position, with my back to the headboard.

“Good morning,” the kitchen boy said as he gently placed the covered tray on the bed next to me. “I’ve brought your gala breakfast. I hope you’ll find it’s suited to your needs. I do suggest a brisk pace, unless you deign to share your meal with your nosy caretaker out there.”

He shot me a wink. I risked a small smile and nodded in gratitude. Corbin always had pull in the palace kitchens, and this was no different. The boy left just as quickly as he had arrived.

I lifted the silver cover to the tray. He was right—I needed to hurry before Spurn got back.

My breakfast was the usual black coffee, dry toast, and broth that I’d been

subsisting on ever since the feedings began. But alongside those familiar goods was a thin obsidian knife and a small vial wrapped in paper. I removed the paper, and in Corbin's familiar narrow scrawl was an elegant rune, an elegant spiderweb-like character with at least nine strokes, and a single word: *femurs*.

That made sense, I supposed. The bones created the blood, so the idea was to target the spell to the creation of the blood itself. I cringed at the knife. Of course, demonic magic had to be painful and dramatic.

I steeled myself, then took the delicate knife in hand and pressed it to the skin of my inner thigh, high enough to hide. I winced as I traced the shape of the rune just deep enough to break the skin with the tip of the knife. I hardly bled at all. The skin parted, and a bead of dark blood tried to form at my opened capillaries, but I was so chronically lacking in blood, it was like my weak pulse couldn't even force a bleed.

Once both runes were in place, I sat back and inhaled deeply. Even with my own powers locked down, the demonic energy was strong enough that I felt it oozing into my bones slowly, curiously, like the magic was a hyena slowly approaching a wounded beast to scavenge. I uncorked the vial and peered at the dark, viscous liquid inside.

Well. No turning back now. Just like taking a shot with Carla at Candy's, right? I held my nose closed and tossed back the potion.

It tasted like nothing, but it felt alive, like a snake crawling eagerly down my throat and into my core. I lay flat on the bed and waited for the horrors Corbin had warned me about: the pain, the burning, the self-poisoning.

But it didn't come.

Had it not worked? Had I carved the runes incorrectly? I checked, but the runes had already disappeared, any trace of the carving gone from my skin.

As I closed my eyes and focused, though, I could feel the spell working—moving through my arteries like a pack of hyenas now, sniffing around and making their mark. It felt strange but I didn't feel inherently weaker. It felt closer to those really annoying days on cases, when I was so wired on the hunt that I couldn't sleep and instead powered through by consuming way too much caffeine. I was buzzing and anxious, but not weakened.

Strange.

I had shared my blood with a half-Shax, though.

And now he was my *mate*.

Was it easier for me? Did my body recognize the demonic spell because

of my connection to Corbin?

I couldn't suppress my small smile of relief. Maybe this mate thing did have some benefits.

The rest of the day passed in a haze. I stuffed the empty vial and the knife under the mattress then drifted in between sleep and wakefulness as I usually did during the long, dull hours trapped in this tiny room. In the early evening, Daniel swept into the room in his casual linen clothes, eyes blazing.

"Good evening, Temperance," he said coolly as he pulled his usual stool up to my beside. "Our presence has been requested at the gala this evening by the queen herself."

"Okay," I murmured.

"I trust you'll be on your best behavior," he said. "You should be honored to receive a personal invite."

I exhaled. I felt like I'd had this conversation too many times before. Yeah, yeah, yeah, gala, invitation, great honor, et cetera, et cetera. "Of course," I said.

"Spurn will be in shortly to ready you."

"Uh-huh," I said.

"You will be expected to converse and charm during this gala," he said. "I trust you are up to the task."

"Yeah," I said.

He licked his lips and swallowed. Even though I was under a blanket, his hungry gaze still tracked over me like he could see every curve of my body. The attention made my skin crawl.

"To that end," he said, "perhaps it's best if I..." He clenched his hands into fists at his side.

Oh, shit.

I kept my face carefully neutral as my heartbeat spiked. After weeks of routine, *now* Daniel was considering changing things up? Seated at my side, he looked terrible. His skin was sallow, and his lips were chapped, eyes frantic and flickering with uncontrolled instances of his power. It was like the more he drank from me, the more power he gained—but it was eating away at him from the inside, too. It was too much for him to handle. How could I convince him to drink from me after I'd spent all that time resisting and hating it? If I made him suspicious, that'd only make it certain that he wouldn't.

I pulled both arms out from under the blanket and shifted, so it looked

like a simple gesture of getting comfortable.

“Sure,” I murmured, doing my best to sound slurred and half-asleep. “Then both of us will look like shit.”

Daniel’s gaze flickered hungrily to my wrist. He bared his teeth instinctively, lips pulling back like an animal’s as he revealed his sharp UnSeelie teeth. Then he shook his head, like he was snapping back to his senses, and stood up hard from the stool; the suddenness of the movement made him stumble slightly and hold the side of his head. He was dizzy.

Shit, he really was looking bad.

“Don’t even consider it, sir,” Spurn said as she hurried in with a fresh bowl of broth for me to take a few pathetic sips of. “You’ll be in much better condition to meet the queen if you take from the girl. She’s strong, she’ll be fine.”

“What are you saying?” Daniel barked. “I’m fine.”

“Sir.” Spurn gave him a knowing look that was almost pitying. “The queen would not be pleased to see you in such a state. In fact, she might become suspicious.”

Daniel’s expression darkened. “You mean to imply...”

“She sent a servant boy this morning to bring her breakfast.”

“What?” Daniel barked. “Without my knowledge?”

“She’s always had an interest in the girl,” Spurn said.

“She’s so manipulative,” Daniel hissed. “Trying to usurp my commands in my own manor. And for what? A pet? She’s the one who said pets shouldn’t matter!”

“Well, sir, you have been absent from the court for a while--”

“Enough!” Daniel roared. His power flared, slimy tendrils of power suddenly slamming into the atmosphere and knocking the lights out. For a moment, the room was shrouded in heavy darkness, stealing my breath away, and then it dissipated back to normal.

Spurn stared at him wide-eyed.

Daniel stood in the center of the room, shoulders heaving with exertion.

“My recommendation stands,” Spurn said curtly. She left the broth on the table and scurried out of the room.

“How fucking dare she,” Daniel hissed. He raked one hand roughly through his hair. “The queen always wants to take what is mine. Nothing is ever enough for her.” He whirled around and bared his teeth at me again. “Fine. If the queen wants to see me, I should be in top form. If you embarrass

me during, I'll simply deal with you onsite. Since pets don't matter, as the queen says."

He scrambled back onto his stool and scooted close; the legs scraped noisily across the floor. He grasped my wrist and wasted no time with the pleasantries once he did. No greasy words of affection, or unpleasant lingering kisses on my skin. He just bared his teeth and sank them into my wrist, taking a few long, greedy gulps. I half-expected him to taste something different about me, to sense that something about my blood was different—but there was no reaction. Either he couldn't tell, or he was so addicted to my blood he didn't care. Once he had his fill, he dropped my arm roughly back to the bed and stood up.

"Spurn will ensure you're ready on time," he said. "Drink all your broth. If you pass out at the gala, there will be severe consequences."

With my eyes closed, I nodded my acquiescence. The wound on my wrist had already healed, but I already felt the now-familiar post-feed sluggishness filling my brain with fog. I could only hope the spell worked—and that it worked as intended, and I didn't end up dead on the floor of the queen's throne room.

Daniel rushed out of the room, and I didn't have time to take a breath before Spurn had filled his absence. "The gala's in just a few hours," she snapped. "Sit up. Drink your broth."

Usually, I would try to sleep a little, ignoring her just to be difficult, but this time I did need to be as healthy as possible. The prospect of finally getting the fuck out of Faerie had filled me with renewed energy. I didn't feel as weak as I usually did after Daniel fed off me. Did he take less? Was it the spell? Or just the potential for escape? Probably a mix of all three. I did my best to hide the excitement from my expression, focusing on taking sips of the bowl in one hand as Spurn cleaned my wrist with habitual efficiency.

"This gala invitation came at late notice," Spurn huffed, "so unfortunately you'll have to wear one of the dresses you already have. Of course, it's best not to rewear gowns to galas but hopefully with your status as a pet, the guests won't notice."

I finished the broth. Spurn was pleasantly surprised, and as a reward, the bathing ritual was quick and efficient. Then she allowed me to dress myself. It was a test, I was sure. She watched me as I walked to the armoire, only a little unsteadily, and carefully pulled out the pale blue silk gown as instructed.

“Good,” she said as I stepped into it. I only needed one hand on the bed to balance myself—pretty good, considering how weak I was. Then she hurried forward to fasten the laces on the back. It was a thin silk gown, more like a slip than anything else, with ribbon fastening the back and long sleeves to cover the bruises and healing bites on my arms. The sleeves fell in a long bell shape over my hands. Good coverage, at least. My hair fell in loose waves over my shoulders, and with the simplicity of the dress, my collar almost looked like an accessory. Almost.

This time, Spurn directed me to wear silver flats. So she was impressed with my balance, but not enough to put me in heels. No complaints here. Grumbling, she dealt with my laundry scattered all over the floor, then stepped into the bathroom to briskly clean up. As she did, I pulled Maxwell’s mirror from my drawer and tucked it into the band of my bra. The metal against my skin felt like a promise. This was it.

When Daniel arrived back at my door, he was in much better shape. I rarely saw him after he fed on me—only when he was hungry. The difference was so stark, I suddenly understood why Spurn had been so insistent that he feed from me. His complexion was richer, his eyes sparkling, and even his posture was better. He looked strong and handsome, not sallow and desperate like he did when he clawed his way into my bedroom. He was wearing a white suit with a pale blue shirt to match my gown, which looked a little ridiculous in my opinion, but I’d learned that Fae conceptions of fashion were not something I was intended to understand.

“Come,” he said curtly. “We mustn’t be late.”

I nodded and took Daniel’s offered arm. He led me out of the manor and into the carriage, and as we rode in the rumbling carriage toward the palace, a sense of anticipation built and built and built inside me.

Daniel tugged at the collar of his shirt. Sweat beaded at his temples.

I glanced over at him but said nothing.

By the time the carriage approached the palace, Daniel’s sweat had worsened and was darkening the collar of his shirt. He exhaled in frustration, then stumbled out of the carriage.

“Come on,” he barked, not even bothering to open my carriage door and escort me out as he usually did.

It was working.

In my veins, the hyenas were still romping, animating me, even more noticeable now that I could see the effects on Daniel. Like the spell was

invigorated by the knowledge it had infected someone else—someone it could really damage.

I took his arm again. He squared his shoulders and sniffed, then a shudder ran through his body. He forcibly stilled himself. He reminded me of Bob when he got really drunk but was trying to pass himself off as sober.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s go.”

He led me through the carved obsidian doors of the palace and into the great hall that led to the throne room. At the end of the hall, in front of the even greater doors and the stoic guards, he lowered his voice dangerously.

“Remember what I said about your behavior,” he said. “I’m not in a good mood this evening.”

A dozen comebacks whirled in my mind, but I kept my mouth shut. It was a lot more than a bad mood. Another shudder racked his body, and he hissed in pain, but then regained his composure again.

The doors to the throne room swung open.

Inside, the throne room was filled with court members in fine clothes, lingering around dramatic displays of food and drink while a band played lilting, melodic music from their low stage under the immense windows through which the twin moons shone inside. Overhead, the enchanted stars glimmered in the rafters, and the conversation hummed as servants swept around the room offering crystal glasses of wine and champagne to the guests.

The queen’s gaze immediately landed on us. She was seated on top of her ornate throne in a shimmering golden gown, with her dark hair swept over one shoulder dark and gleaming like a river of ink. She descended from the dais with elegance, and the conversations died down.

At the foot of the dais, Corbin stood with his arms clasped behind his back. He was dressed in plain black, like a bodyguard, and his blue eyes were fixed firmly on me. I couldn’t look away—I wanted so badly to break away from Daniel’s grasp and run toward him, throw my arms around his neck, kiss him senseless. The dreamscape meetings hadn’t been enough—having him so close but so out of reach only made that clearer.

The queen summoned Daniel and me forward. Daniel took a step, then stumbled, then shakily regained his balance.

Corbin’s eyes widened minutely.

Daniel cleared his throat and then strode across the throne room, the solid heel of his fine white loafers clacking on the polished floor. He moved so

quickly, I nearly couldn't keep up, my heart pounding furiously as I tried to move at a brisk pace. By the time we were in front of the queen, I was sweating nearly as much as Daniel was.

But not quite as much. He looked terrible, tugging at his collar and periodically shivering.

Corbin caught my eye and raised his eyebrows. I ducked my chin minutely, in an affirmative nod, and he bit back a grin.

"Daniel," the queen said in a sweet, curious voice. "It's been so long since you've made an appearance at the court. I'm hurt it took a specific invitation to be graced with your presence again." She cast her gaze judgmentally down his swaying figure. "Are you in good health?"

"I'm quite well, thank you, Your Majesty," Daniel said. Then he coughed, a heavy cough that racked his body and had him doubling over.

The queen gasped and took a step back. "Has this been the reason for your absence? I haven't heard word from the healers that anyone on the court was ill."

"I'm not ill," Daniel insisted. He released my arm, and I took a step to the side. I lifted one hand and slowly pushed my hair behind my ear. The sleeve of my dress fell down, revealing the bruising on my arm.

The queen's eyes flickered to me, and then back to Daniel.

"Corbin," she said slowly, "to my side, please."

Corbin stepped forward, hands clasped behind him.

Daniel's knees buckled. The crack of his knees hitting the polished floor echoed through the space, garnering confused looks from around the room. Maxwell watched carefully from where he was engaged in conversation with the tall Fae from dinner. He looked just as excited as Corbin did, an expression that didn't seem to register to his conversational partner. How much did I know about Corbin and Maxwell that the court overlooked? No wonder Corbin preferred life Earthside.

On hands and knees, Daniel coughed again, his whole body shuddering. A dark mix of blood and bile dripped from his mouth and onto the polished floor.

"I knew it!" the queen shrieked. "You've been contaminated! Your pet was contaminated in the Demon realm, and you fed from her enough to catch it yourself!"

"No!" Daniel said shakily. "I'm fine—just—give me a moment--" He coughed again. More bile spilled from his lips.

“Corbin!” she squawked, taking a step backward. “Get this beast out of my court!”

Then Daniel staggered back to his feet. Blood spilled from his mouth, down the front of his shirt, a stark stain against the fine blue and white silk. His eyes were wild, burning red as he bared his teeth, sharp like he was about to feed. He growled low in his chest, then sprung at the queen like a wild animal.

She shrieked again, a wordless cry of horror. Gasps echoed through the throne room as the music ceased. The only sound was the queen’s echoing cry and the gnashing of Daniel’s teeth as he lunged; the demon-madness making him hunger for the queen’s own powerful blood.

Corbin stepped in front of the queen.

He met Daniel’s sloppy attack easily. He struck Daniel hard in the solar plexus with a quick punch, then grasped him by the chin and shoved him backward. Daniel made a low, hungry sound like an animal as he staggered back, then grasped desperately at Corbin’s arm in an attempt to dislodge the hold on his face.

“Don’t even think about it,” Corbin hissed.

I stepped out of the path of the fight. The other court members hurried closer, but lingered away, like no one knew exactly what to do. Their labored breaths filled the room as Corbin and Daniel struggled. Corbin released Daniel’s face only long enough to drive the heel of his hand into Daniel’s nose, easily breaking it, sending a rush of blood spilling from his nostrils. Daniel howled in pain.

Then Daniel’s gleaming eyes turned to me. He grinned, but it was more like a predator showing its teeth to the doomed prey. He slammed his shoulder into Corbin’s shoulder, breaking his hold and knocking him backward, then lunged at me instead.

Even through the demon-madness he remembered what I was, and how it felt to feed on me. He hardly looked like himself as he lurched toward me, blood still pouring from his shattered nose and staining his white clothes so vividly, it was almost cartoonish. I stumbled back, tripped over the hem of my gown, and hit the polished floor hard. I kept scrabbling backward, trying to get my grip as he approached me with a dark, hungry look in his eyes, mouth open and drooling.

There was no way I could defend myself from him now. Not with how weak I was, and not with how crazy he was.

Before he could reach me, Corbin barreled at him from behind, snarled his hand in the back of his white jacket, and jerked him backward. In one fell swoop, he wrangled Daniel to the floor, pinning him facedown. He dug his knee into Daniel's back as he thrashed, then gripped his head and slammed it once, hard, into the floor. The sound was like a watermelon being dropped. I cringed at the sound but couldn't deny the small thrill of delight. Seeing Daniel pinned under Corbin like that, even as he thrashed and hissed like a creature, was long fucking overdue.

"Cease this!" the queen roared. "Fetch the healer! Cease! Corbin, to my side, now!"

Corbin dug his knee a little harder into the small of Daniel's back. His kept his hand braced hard on the back of Daniel's skull, grinding his face into the blooming pool of blood. Under him, Daniel was still conscious, growling as he fruitlessly attempted to throw Corbin off.

Time seemed to slow down. The strange fragile silence of the room stretched between us. There were a few ways this could go—ways that made sense. Ways that weren't so risky or impulsive. But as my eyes met Corbin's, I found I didn't want to go that route. All I could think about were the endless nights trapped in his terrible manor, dazed and exhausted. Waiting for Spurn to come in and take control of my body, turning me into something palatable and ready for consumption. Waiting for Daniel to sink his teeth into my bruised flesh and drink from me until spots formed in front of my eyes. Surviving on watery broth while the collar turned me into a shell of the person I was.

Fuck this guy. I wanted this to be *over*. We'd figure out the consequences.

I held Corbin's red-flecked gaze. I nodded.

His eyes flashed fully red, briefly, then he smirked and turned his attention back to Daniel, prone beneath him. He kept one hand on his head and pressed the other into the center of his back. His ozone aura crackled so strongly I could feel a hint of it sparking over my skin despite my numbed senses. The queen took a step back, her eyes wide with disbelief as Corbin's power coalesced.

"Stop him!" the queen shouted at no one in particular. "Stop this now!"

No one in the court made a move to intervene. Dark flame danced across Corbin's fingers, barely visible. He bared his teeth and pushed his power into Daniel's body. Darkness leaked from Daniel's eyes and mouth like the blood

had, pouring from his orifices as he thrashed. Corbin held him in place, grimacing as his power burned through Daniel from the inside, until Daniel let out one final howl and went still.

He was dead.

I gasped, half-shocked and half-relieved.

He was dead, really dead—never again would I feel his teeth sinking into my flesh, or his awful grating voice, or feel his cold possessive touch. I was still trapped in this collar, but I was free.

Or on my way to free.

Corbin scrambled to his feet, leaving Daniel's body motionless in a pool of blood and magic. He rushed to my side. "Hey," he said, kneeling down as his gaze traveled over me, searching efficiently for any wounds. "You okay? Did he hurt you?"

"I'm all right," I said. For a brief moment, the rest of the world fell away. The noise of the court dissipated, the stench of Daniel's poisoned blood, the terrible aura of the queen's rage. It all disappeared, and for a moment all I could see was Corbin, his amber-flecked eyes filled with concern.

"I knew it!" the queen shrieked. "I knew I could never trust a mongrel like you!"

Corbin pulled me to my feet and pulled me close, his arm around my waist steadying me as my head spun from the sudden change from horizontal to vertical. "Your Majesty--"

"Silence!" she bellowed. Her voice carried an unmistakable crackle of power like a lightning storm. "You killed him!"

"He was a *danger*--"

"You could've incapacitated him, you half-breed," the queen said, low and dangerous. "I should've known. You let your feelings for this *pet* get in the way of your duties. You've chosen a *pet* over a Fae."

She cast her dark gaze to Daniel's body, collapsed on the throne room floor, and her power began to crackle across her skin like sparks.

Corbin's grip tightened on my waist.

Something was happening. Even with my power deadened by the collar, I could feel it heavy in the air. Around us, the court members began to gasp and whisper to each other, and some even ran for the doors.

Then the queen began to change.

Her black-tipped fingers lengthened into long, sharp claws. Her inky-dark hair began to hover, as if she was underwater, and she glided a few inches

into the air so the golden hem of her dress swept the floor. Her eyes rolled back and turned pure white, so white they nearly blended into her milky complexion, and her red lips pulled back as her jaw dropped like a snake's revealing her razor-sharp UnSeelie teeth. She was still beautiful, somehow, like something from a nightmare. Dark sparks of power danced over her skin, contrasting her pale arms and golden gown. Overhead her raven circled, crying out a terrible sound that echoed around the stone and obsidian throne room.

"You are disloyal!" she screeched. The sound was like multiple voices layered over each other, coming at me from all sides, and instinctively, I cowed toward Corbin and tried to cover my ears as her voice rattled my skull. "No more will you threaten my court! No longer will my palace be tarnished by half-breeds and *humans!*"

She raised both clawed, skeletal hands. Corbin gasped and pulled me tight against him, his back to the queen, as she unfolded an abyssal portal between her hands and threw it toward us the way a fisher unspools a net; the darkness fell over us freezing cold.

Then there was nothing.

The throne room was gone. The sounds of the court members were gone. The queen's powerful aura was gone.

There was no floor beneath my feet, no sky above, no open doorways to other dimensions like there were in the Portal realm—there was just freezing cold absence. I still had Corbin's arms around me, tightly holding me to his body, but I couldn't speak. It was like the abyss had frozen my breath in my lungs. I focused on the steady beat of Corbin's heart, fast and strong in his chest, and closed my eyes.

A cold wind swirled around us, and then suddenly there was firm ground beneath my feet. Corbin kept his grip around my shoulders, but slowly stepped back as we regained our bearings.

"Hell's bells," he said. "Are you okay?"

"I think so," I said. I was still exhausted and foggy-brained, but as I steadied myself and peered around our surroundings, it began to sink in.

We weren't in the throne room. I was with Corbin.

And Daniel was dead.

Couldn't celebrate, not yet—but I did allow myself a small rush of accomplishment. Never again would I have to suffer one of those terrible feedings. And I knew, wherever she was, my mom was finally at peace, too.

“We need to move,” Corbin said. “Lie low. And figure out how to get out of here.”

“Where are we?” I asked. We had landed in a narrow, muddy alley, between two squat stone buildings. We were still in Faerie, that much I could tell, but no more could I see the obsidian spires of the palace on the horizon nor hear the familiar murmurs of royal Fae going about their business. I peered around the corner of the alley. We were in a small town, more like a slum, populated mostly by sprites and goblins, with a few sick-looking UnSeelie lurching around in the shadows. It wasn’t unlike Ralnor’s hideout Earthside.

Corbin gripped the back of my dress and jerked me backward, away from the entrance to the alley. “Careful,” he said. “We don’t need to draw any more attention.”

His eyes flashed amber, then I felt the familiar feeling of a thin sheet falling over me as Corbin disguised us. We both looked like older, downtrodden UnSeelie in dirtied clothes—lifelong servants instead of royals.

“We’re far from the palace now,” Corbin said. “She’s sent us to the slums. Not quite a prison, but it’s cordoned off. Can’t get in or out without royal permission. She’ll send someone to retrieve us for our trials, or, more likely, just leave us here to rot.”

“Trials?” I asked. “Can’t say I have much faith in the queen’s interpretation of justice.”

“You and me both,” Corbin said with a laugh. “We won’t be here to find out, though. We’ve both been banished.”

“Banished,” I repeated. “So you’re no longer a member of the court... And neither am I.” The dots connected. “So the contract doesn’t stand anymore.”

“Exactly,” Corbin said. “We can go Earthside, if we can find access to a portal. Come on.”

We made our way through the muddy streets of the slum to a small, sad-looking inn. It wasn’t even a tavern, there was no one inside boisterously drinking, but there was a skinny sprite who accepted our money and gave us a tiny room with a twin bed and an unlit fireplace. I immediately sat down heavily on the edge of the twin bed and sighed with relief. I was so, so fucking tired.

“I know there’s a portal somewhere in this town,” Corbin muttered, more to himself than to me. He paced the length of the room. It was only four

steps. “The Royal guard has to be able to get in if they want to retrieve the banished. Someone in this town has to know, to manage it, but I don’t know—”

“Who would know?” I interrupted.

Corbin glanced at me. “Isidra, probably,” he said. “She doesn’t just manage the stables, she manages all the comings and goings of the court, both in Faerie and between Realms. But that doesn’t do us any good when we’re already *here*.”

I fished into the band of my bra, pulled out Maxwell’s mirror, and offered it to Corbin. “Just ask her.”

Corbin’s eyes widened. He laughed incredulously, a bright sound. He took the mirror from my hand, then leaned down and kissed me. It was a soft, sweet kiss, and he smiled into it as he cupped my cheek in hand.

“You’re amazing,” he said. “Get some rest. I’ll handle this.”

I nodded. Exhaustion swept over me like a wave. It was like he’d said the magic words—like my body suddenly realized that I was as safe as I’d been in weeks. Corbin was here. He was going to find the portal. We had a room of our own. For the moment, no one was coming for us—we were banished.

Corbin sat down on the floor, leaning back against the bedframe. He flipped Maxwell’s mirror open and murmured Isidra’s name into the mirror. I stretched out on the bed, uncaring of the too-hard mattress and the mud on the hem of my dress, and sank into sleep to the soothing low sound of Corbin’s murmured conversation.

I woke up a few hours later to the smell of broth and—could it be?—coffee.

“There you are,” Corbin said with a smile.

“How long was I asleep?” I murmured, rubbing my eyes.

“A few hours,” he said. “You have good timing, though.”

“We have a plan?” I asked.

Corbin nodded. “Isidra’s sending someone to meet us here to take us to the portal once it gets dark.”

“So there is a portal,” I said.

“Yep,” Corbin said. “Requires a lot of power to open, apparently.” He smirked. “That shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Sounds good,” I murmured.

“You should eat,” he said. “Have some coffee. It’s surprisingly palatable.”

Even though I'd slept, the exhaustion was still deep in my bones. We were so close to getting out of Faerie, but I couldn't even muster up a shred of excitement. And if we had to go through a powerful portal... "I need this collar off," I said.

Corbin balked. "I don't know if that's a good idea," he said. "We should wait until we're Earthside."

"I don't think I'll be able to survive going through the portal to Earth with this collar on," I said. "Getting transported here was bad enough. It's getting worse, Corbin."

He swallowed. "Your powers might attract attention. Like they did in the Demon realm."

"You said it yourself," I said. "Fae aren't as sensitive to my aura as the Demons were. I know how to contain my power now. I can do it with Ignacia's method."

"Tempie..."

"I need to heal," I said.

"What about the poisoning spell?" Corbin said. "What if that weakened you too much and you can't control your powers like you could before?"

Now it was my turn to laugh, a little surprised and incredulous. "It's strange. It didn't really weaken me."

"What?" Corbin asked. "The blood-poisoning spell? That was no joke—Ignacia said it was a huge risk. She implied it might damage you permanently."

I shrugged. "It felt weird, but not painful. Maybe it would've been worse in the past, but... But we're mates, aren't we?"

Saying it out loud made my heart pound hard in my chest.

"Yeah," Corbin said softly. He finally stood from the table and knelt at the side of my bed, taking my hand in his. "We are."

"I think that made it easier," I said. "Demon magic isn't so aggressive when you're mated to one."

"A half-demon," he corrected with a smirk.

"Right," I agreed. "A half-demon. Half-Fae. All mine." Then I tugged him closer and kissed him briefly. "But I can't heal with this damn collar on. Please, just trust me."

"Of course I trust you," Corbin said. "And if this draws a bunch of curious UnSeelie to us, you're going to be the one who has to deal with them."

“With pleasure,” I said with a smile.

Then Corbin gently placed his fingertips on the cold metal of the collar. His eyes flashed amber, then red, and the dark flames of his demonic magic flickered over his hand as his power wormed into the lock. The metal shivered and shuddered on my neck, sending tiny shocks dancing over my skin. He leaned closer, brow furrowed and eyes flashing red again as he focused. The electricity picked up, shocking me harder; I gasped and gripped the thin sheet of the bed as I struggled to stay still.

“Just a little more,” Corbin said, “I’ve almost got it.”

The collar shocked me again, and this time it was an intense bolt of pain that raced down my spine and made my eyes roll back in my head. I gasped, legs thrashing uncontrollably; I was moments away from shoving Corbin away and giving up on getting this damn thing off me when suddenly the pain stopped.

The lock clicked open.

“There,” Corbin said. “Fucking hell, that was a bitch of a spell.”

He carefully removed the collar from my neck.

I slumped back against the bed, eyes closed. Corbin took my hand. His presence grounded me as I inhaled slow and steady, feeling like I was taking a breath after a long, long time trapped at the bottom of the ocean.

My Solstice power unfolded slowly in my core, controlled this time, slow and steady like it was waking from a long slumber. Recovery wouldn’t be instantaneous, that much was obvious, not after such a long and terrible time with the collar. Corbin stroked his thumb in small circles on the inside of my wrist. The rhythm soothed me as I worked slowly, internally.

I didn’t need to trace the runes on my skin as I had in the past. I could simply feel them on my skin, and then used them the way Ignacia had showed me, building the barrier internally so my power could recover without revealing its existence. Then, I took a few deep breaths and drew in some of the power from Faerie itself, carefully bringing the realm’s power in to meet mine, strengthening it enough to send the golden light swirling through my veins. My power found the injuries Daniel had left on my skin, the bites and the bruises, and rapidly healed them.

It was like Daniel had never touched me at all.

When I opened my eyes, Corbin was watching me.

“How’d I do?” I asked. “Anyone on their way to knock down our door to get at me?” Though now, I knew, I’d be able to sense them, maybe even

sooner than Corbin could.

He shook his head, looking slightly awed. “I can still feel it,” he said, “but it’s not you—it’s our connection.”

His aura crackled around me, too, the familiar sharp ozone like a comforting blanket on me. “I can feel you, too.”

“Like it’s meant to be,” he said.

“Told you I could manage it,” I said. I was still exhausted, but this was a different kind of exhaustion—the kind of wear and tear I felt after a good fight, or a long ride on Hannie’s back. It was the kind of tired that meant I’d worked hard, and all I needed was a good night’s sleep. Not the bone-deep, unending exhaustion I’d felt with the collar on. “God, it feels good to have that piece of shit off.”

Corbin was still kneeling at the side of my bed, his arms folded at the edge of the mattress and his chin propped on his stacked forearms. I reached out and traced the ridge of his brow, then carded my fingers gently through his sweat-stiff hair.

“It’s funny,” Corbin said. “I didn’t realize how much I missed it.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Your aura,” he said. “I guess I’d gotten used to not being able to feel it. And now that I can, I don’t know how I managed without it for so long.”

I smiled, raking my fingers through his hair again. His eyes fell half-closed at the sensation. “What’s it feel like?” I asked.

“Warm,” Corbin said. “Like sunshine. But like—a crisp, sort of cold sunshine, like noon on a cold, snowy day.”

“Sounds nice.” My heart somersaulted in my chest.

“It is. It’s unlike any aura I’ve felt before.” He opened his eyes and smirked playfully at me. “You’re special.”

“Yeah, I know,” I teased right back. I tugged at his hair gently, then pulled insistently at his arms where they were folded. “Get up here.”

I scooted over on the bed, making space for Corbin to fit on the narrow mattress. He crawled onto the bed, lying next to me so we were face to face on our sides. Corbin just gazed at me, his blue eyes soft as he settled. He set one hand at the dip of my waist, his thumb moving in small circles over the silk of my gown. Despite the fact that we were still stuck in a slum in Faerie, I felt more at peace than I had since we first crossed into this realm.

“You know how we’re mates, right?” Corbin asked.

I laughed, low and surprised. “Yeah, I remember that little fact,” I said. I

scouted closer, tangling our legs together as best I could. “Kind of hard to forget.”

“When I was growing up,” he said, “finding your mate seemed like something out of a storybook. It didn’t happen to most Fae. Relationships were forged for political and economic purposes. I’d heard stories about people meeting their mates—somehow finding that person that they just knew they were supposed to be with. It didn’t feel real. But when I first met you... I knew it. I think the moment I first saw you I knew it.”

“That early?” I asked.

He nodded. “I denied it, of course. Pretended it was something else. Something caused by your power that I didn’t understand.”

“I’d always been drawn to you, too,” I admitted. “But I didn’t think I could *have* a mate. I thought that was for full Fae.”

“Me too,” Corbin said. “Guess things are different with us.”

“I guess so,” I agreed with a smile.

“It’s more than that, though,” Corbin continued. A flush colored his cheeks—was he *shy*? “Even if we weren’t mates, there’d be something between us.” He paused, glanced down, then back up at me. “I’m in love with you, Tempie.”

It seemed so obvious, really—everything we’d been through together, the undeniable connection between us, the way we kept taking stupid risks for each other, over and over again. But hearing it out loud still made my heart skip. I knew he loved me, even though we’d both denied it, but hearing it in his warm familiar voice meant the world to me, in ways I hadn’t expected.

“I love you, too,” I said immediately. The words spilled out with ease. “And you’re right,” I said. “Even without us being mates, I always—I always thought about you. Wanted to see you again. Be with you.”

“You have me,” Corbin said. “Can’t get rid of me now.”

“Good,” I said with a smile, then scouted closer to pull him into a kiss.

The kiss quickly deepened, lazy but intense. Corbin rolled onto his back and pulled me on top of him, until we were pressed flush together. The closeness was intoxicating, despite my exhaustion. I kissed him like I was starving for it, his mouth and his jaw and the column of his neck. He held me close, one strong arm around my waist while he grasped at my thigh with the other. This was different than the other times we’d kissed. It was slower. More intentional. Deeper. It carried the promise of more, and I wanted it, both my body and my heart. Heat rolled through me slow and easy with a

shocking intensity. It was like his kiss was burning through me, yet I couldn't get close enough.

Corbin broke the kiss. He gazed at me with adoration, brushing a loose strand of hair from my face. Then he smiled and rolled us, surprising a little 'oof!' out of me as I flopped onto my back. He was on top of me instead, knees straddling my thighs, forearms bracketing my face. He kissed me again, but it was softer this time. He ran one hand down my side, from the curve of my waist to my hip, making me sigh with desire.

"We'll have to continue this Earthside," Corbin said. He squeezed my hip pointedly. "Now's not the best time."

I wrapped my arms around his neck. "Now you decide to be responsible?" I only pouted a little bit.

Corbin laughed. "Our contact will be here at any moment," he said. "Unless you'd prefer to be caught in a compromising position by a sprite."

"I could be convinced," I teased. "This is a lot better than the dreamscape."

Our physical connection in the dreamscape had been lovely, but it was just that—a dream. When I'd woken up, I'd felt good, but the sensations had quickly faded into a fuzzy memory. It wasn't anything like this, like the real pressure of his hands, and the real heat of his mouth.

"It is," Corbin agreed. "It's better when it's real."

I kissed him again. Briefly, we both got lost in it again, hands wandering. I sneaked one hand under Corbin's shirt, slid my palm over the warm skin of his lower back, and Corbin made a low noise into my mouth. He pulled back, eyes burning amber and cheeks still flushed. I'd never seen him like this. I could really, really get used to it.

"Stop that," he said fondly, pulling back again. "You'll make me change my mind."

"That's kind of the idea," I teased.

He shook his head. "Not here. Just wait a little longer."

"Ugh," I said, pouting. Now that I had my collar off, and a private room, my rationality was getting slightly clouded by desire. But still, I wanted him. "You're no fun."

He rolled off and smoothed one hand from my hip to my thigh. "It'll be worth the wait," he promised. "You just got your collar off. I don't want you to get overwhelmed and lose control."

"All right, Casanova," I said through a laugh as I swatted at him. "Don't

give yourself *too* much credit.”

“We’ll see,” he said, with a waggle of his eyebrows.

My chest was tight with affection, like my heart was too big to be contained by my ribcage. Corbin climbed to his feet and pointedly adjusted his pants. At least I wasn’t the only one suffering here.

I tugged at the silk of my gown. “This thing is driving me insane,” I said. “Let me borrow your knife.”

He blinked in confusion, but then pulled a small knife from his pocket and handed it over.

“Thanks.” I fiddled with the silk some more, then haphazardly sliced the dress off at the knees. It still wasn’t ideal to be wandering around Faerie in a dress, but at least I wasn’t going to trip over the muddy hem anymore.

“Much better,” Corbin said with a grin. “That’s a good look for you. Might start a trend.”

Before I could offer a snarky rebuttal, there was a knock on the door. Corbin straightened up, then briskly glamoured us both into our sad, sickly UnSeelie disguises. The sprite at the door was bright-eyed and grinning, hand immediately extended for payment. Corbin hadn’t been kidding about the contact being on the way.

“Who sent you?” Corbin asked, eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“Isidra, obviously,” the sprite said. “I’m Magen, I run the stables on this end of the realm, and help transporting things that may not otherwise get transported. She suggested handsome payment for my help on such short notice.”

Corbin rolled his eyes, but did reach into his pack and fish out a handful of coins. Magen’s eyes widened, and his big pointed ears twitched with delight as he shoved the money into his haggard pockets.

“Excellent,” he said. “This way, friends.”

Magen led us out of the inn and back into the streets of the slum. We followed him at a brisk pace to a sad-looking stable, which was empty of horses but seemed to have a few card tables set up in their unused stalls. Magen caught me looking and grinned. “If you’re ever bored and want to throw some of that coin into a dice tournament, you know who to call.”

“Right,” I said. “Sounds like a blast.”

“Not much else to do on this side of town,” Magen said. “This way, this way.”

In the back of the stable, Magen kicked aside the rotting hay, revealing a

trap door. With great effort and a lot of unpleasant grunting, he heaved it up and back, then hopped down the narrow, rickety wooden stairs.

“Getting real tired of descending suspicious staircases,” I muttered.

“Join the club,” Corbin said. “When we get back, I’m installing an elevator in my house.”

“Here we are,” Magen said cheerfully. He lit a torch mounted on the wall, revealing yet another terrible basement. The rafters were so low, Corbin had to duck his head slightly to avoid braining himself. There wasn’t much in the basement besides the rusted old saws hanging on the walls, which didn’t exactly add to the welcoming air.

The back wall, barely lit by the flickering torch, shimmered with power. Just like the portal in the Demon realm, it was closed, but the suggestion of travel was there in the way power crackled around it.

“Ta-da,” Magen said, brandishing his arm at the back wall. “This is where the guards come in and out when they need to. You’re on your own from here, I don’t like being around the portal when it opens.”

“Why not?” I asked.

Magen mimed his head exploding, complete with sound effects. “Hurts my head,” he said. “I can’t hear for a few days after if I’m too close. That’s why I had to move the horses when the guards put the portal in here, they started going crazy whenever they used it.” He shook his head. “Real pain in my ass. But Isidra pays well, so I make it work. I’ll come check back in an hour or so and see if the portal’s killed you.”

“That’s really sweet,” Corbin deadpanned.

“It’s why they pay me the big bucks,” Magen chirped, and then hurried back up the stairs.

Corbin dropped our glamours. He stepped forward and smoothed his hand over the concrete wall where the closed portal shimmered, inspecting it curiously. Then he swept his hand back and forth a few times, and the portal swirled like the shallow surface of a puddle disturbed by his motions. He frowned.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Magen wasn’t kidding,” Corbin said. “This portal is very seriously locked. It’s not supposed to be possible to open it from this side.”

“You can open it, right?” I asked. “They locked it against banished UnSeelie. Not people with your level of power.” Despite everything, anxiety crawled into my throat. We were so close. “Right?”

“Let me just...” Corbin exhaled hard, then pushed his palm flat to the center of the closed portal. The room crackled with his ozone aura as dark flame licked over his skin, down his arm to his hand. He growled low as he pushed more power into the locked portal, the flames growing larger as the portal began to open, a small dark abyss in the center of the shimmer. The muscles in his back shifted as he widened his stance, pressing into the wall like he was trying to hold it up; his growl grew pained as the flames on his arms grew, and the abyss widened the barest amount...

And then snapped closed.

The force of the snap sent Corbin stumbling back with a gasp, his power dissipating as the portal returned to its idle, taunting shimmer. He nearly bowled into me, but I caught him before he could take us both out.

“Fuck.” Sweat beaded on his forehead, and his eyes still burned amber from the exertion. “That’s more intense than I expected.”

“You had it for a moment,” I said. I already knew how we were getting out of here. I knew Corbin wouldn’t like it, though.

“I know,” he said. “Shit. Breaking the lock on the collar took more out of me than I thought.” He sighed and pushed both hands through his blond hair. “All right. I can do this. It’s just stronger than I expected.” He bounced on the balls of his feet like he was hyping himself up. “I can do it again. Once I crack it open then it’s just a matter of channeling as much power as I can to make it bend to my will instead of the locking spell. Easy. Definitely.”

“Corbin,” I said.

“We’ll be out of here in no time,” he said. “I got this.”

“Corbin.”

Finally he turned around. He looked as exhausted as I’d felt with the collar on—sweating and a little wild-eyed, like he’d just run a sprint so fast he’d nearly passed out at the end of it. There was no way he was going to be able to open the portal again, not with how much that first attempt had taken out of him.

I swept my hair to the side and tilted my head, revealing the pale column of my throat. His gaze dropped to my skin immediately.

“No,” he said, even as he stared. “You’re not recovered.”

“I’m in better shape than you are right now,” I said. “You won’t need much, anyway.” I shot him a reassuring smile.

“How could I do that?” he asked, expression crumpling. “After everything Daniel did to you?”

My heart leaped into my throat. “Oh,” I said, suddenly understanding. “Oh, Corbin.” I wound my arms around his neck and pulled him close. “It’s not like that.”

“What do you mean?” he asked. “Of course it is. It’s the same. I can’t just—use you as a power boost. I don’t want to be like him.”

“Listen to me,” I said. I pulled away just enough to take his face in my hands. His eyes were closed, and he steadied himself with his hands on my waist. “When Daniel fed on me, it was miserable. Awful. He only saw me as a source of power—nothing more. It was painful. I never want to feel that away again.”

“That’s why—”

I silenced him with a finger to his lips. “Do you remember when I healed you?” I asked.

His eyes flickered open, revealing only that familiar icy blue. “Vaguely,” he admitted. “I only really remember—how it felt. Coming back to life. And how I wasn’t able to stop.” He dropped his gaze toward his feet. “I don’t want to do that again to you. Ever.”

Affection swelled in my chest like a wave. “That’s not what I’m talking about,” I said. “But, just to be clear, you *did* stop, once I passed out.”

That didn’t make Corbin look any happier. I patted his cheek, prompting him to look up at me, and then kissed him briefly. “What I was going to say,” I said, “was that when I healed you, it didn’t feel anything like when Daniel fed from me. It felt...” I paused. How could I explain the depth of that strange sensation? How the sensation was warm, welcoming, comforting, and sensual all at the same time? “It was like coming home.”

Corbin tilted his head to the side, listening curiously.

“It felt good,” I clarified, even as heat rose in my cheeks. “You’re not taking my power from me. I’m giving it to you. Because I want to.” I tipped our foreheads together. “Because you’re my mate.”

“It’s not that simple,” Corbin murmured.

“It is,” I said with a smile. “Now come on. Get us home.”

Again, I swept my hair to one side and showed my neck. This time, Corbin stepped closer and wound his arm around my waist. He pressed his lips to my neck in a soft kiss. “You’re sure?”

“Of course,” I said. “I trust you.”

Corbin’s breath washed over my skin, sending a shiver of anticipatory pleasure down my spine. Then, finally, he parted his lips, and the sharp tips

of his UnSeelie fangs pressed delicately to my skin. He didn't have a full mouth of sharp teeth like Daniel did, ready to rip into my flesh, but just the two sharp points of his canines. He sighed, then bit down, just hard enough to pierce the skin.

I sighed, slumping into his arms. He held me up easily with one arm around my waist and the other hand gentle on the back of my head. The bite didn't hurt at all. It was only warm pleasure that flowed through me, slow like honey, until the world narrowed to nothing but the strength of Corbin's body holding me up, and the sweet, intoxicating sensation of my power flowing into his body. One mouthful, two.

He stopped then, and gently ran the flat of his tongue over the twin wounds, ceasing the bleeding.

"You can take more," I said with a sigh. "I'm fine. Feels good."

"I don't need any more," he said. His voice was low and rumbling with satiation and desire simultaneously. "Not now." He pulled away, but kept his arm around my waist to hold me up, then with his sleeve he dabbed carefully at trickle of blood, the red dripping in a single tiny river down to the neckline of my dress.

I pulled him in for a kiss, shocking him with my eagerness, but the coppery taste of my blood in his mouth only made me want him more. I kissed him deeply, sighing into it, as my body thrummed with desire.

"Not now," I said into the kiss. "Later. Earthside. Preferably with a bed."

Corbin laughed low, then carefully stepped aside. I was steady on my feet—he hadn't taken enough for me to even feel the loss. But I could see the effect it'd had on him. His eyes glowed amber, and his complexion was brighter, his expression determined.

"Think that'll do it?" I asked.

"I think so," he said with a sharp-toothed grin, then turned back to face the portal.

He placed his palm flat at the center of the wall, widened his stance, and pushed forward. The dark flames of his power licked up his arm, but this time, the darkness was shot through with gold.

The portal shimmered. The atmosphere crackled with power; I raised my arms and saw sparks of both black and gold dancing over my skin. From the place Corbin's hand connected with the wall, the portal began to open, sending a spiral of abyssal darkness through the shimmer. This time it wasn't a small hole wrenched open through force. It opened slowly, but elegantly,

like Corbin was rolling a great stone away from the entrance of a cave. He pressed harder, and suddenly the dark flames on his arms flashed fully gold, filling the room with light.

When it dissipated, the portal was open, and Corbin was smiling, hand extended out to me with the swirling darkness behind him. I took his hand. All we had to do was step through.

Chapter 17

With my power unlocked, the Portal realm was no longer the dark abyss it had been before. When we stepped through, the Realms were all visible to me, doorways to places in Faerie, the Demon realm, and other Realms unfamiliar to me. And there, calling me like a beacon, like a lighthouse, was the doorway Earthside.

“You know where you’re going?” Corbin asked as I led us toward the portal.

“Of course I do,” I said, throwing him a grin, though I didn’t know if he could see it. He’d led us through portals before, but I knew what I saw now was more than what most could. I followed the easy tug of home, moving through the Portal realm as easily as if I were in Faerie.

There it was. Behind a small portal wreathed in fog was the familiar scenes of home.

Well. Not home exactly. The parking garage in the warehouse district. But still, after the Demon realm and Faerie, I was more than happy to see that cracked asphalt.

I stepped through with my hand still clasped in Corbin’s. I closed my eyes, halfway expecting something to go horribly wrong: to be chucked back to Faerie, or lost in between Realms, or even just show up in Todd’s bedroom or something.

When I opened them, we were Earthside.

“Holy shit,” I said.

The parking garage was empty, smelling like mildew and motor oil as usual. Corbin stepped through behind me, and the portal on the back wall of the garage swept closed. The air was still and silent, and for a brief moment

Corbin and I were both on alert, looking around for something to pop out of the shadows.

“Holy shit is right,” Corbin said, and then pulled me into a tight embrace.

“We did it,” I said, clinging desperately to him with my grip tight in the back of his shirt.

“We did,” Corbin agreed. He sounded just as shocked as I felt. “We actually made it back.”

“Knew we would.” I pulled away. “Now, where the hell is your car?”

As it turned out, Corbin’s car had been towed—not even a low-use parking garage will let you leave your car there for *five months*. Five fucking months had passed. I knew it’d been a long time in Faerie, but even I was shocked to hear that. Through a series of irritated phone calls and a long cab ride, Corbin got his sports car back, and in the mid-afternoon sun, we made our way back to my apartment. I slumped in the passenger seat, gazing out the window at the familiar streets of Warwick.

Corbin fiddled with the radio, then glanced over at me. “What are you thinking about?” he asked.

“Dunno,” I admitted. “It’s just nice to not be looking over my shoulder.”

“You feel okay?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said with a smile. “Tired. But better than I’ve felt in a long time.”

The good feeling didn’t last, though, when I made it back to my apartment to see my parking spot occupied and unfamiliar plants outside the door of my apartment.

“Uh-oh,” Corbin said. He pulled up to the stairs and left the hazards on as I rushed up to the landing, even though I already knew what this meant. I had to see it for myself.

I shoved my house key into the lock. It didn’t turn.

“Shit,” I muttered. “Come on.” I jiggled the key desperately, like if I could just make the key work, I could somehow change reality.

The lock clicked open—but it wasn’t my key that did it. The door swung open, and an unfamiliar woman with a collared shirt and her makeup half-done answered, her eyebrows raised.

“Can I help you?” she asked. Behind her, a small child peeked around her legs. What I could see of my apartment was completely different, too, all the furniture different and the paint freshened up.

“Sorry,” I said, and took an unsteady step back. “Ah, I, uh—shit.”

The neighbor's door opened. "There you are," Bob said. "Been long enough. Sorry, Anna, this one gets a little turned around. Get over here."

"Wrong apartment," I muttered to the woman. "Sorry."

"Sure," the woman said. She looked at me a bit strangely—which was warranted, considering I was a hot mess in a ripped-up blue silk dress with blood on the neckline--then shut the door in my face.

I leaned against the railing, staring at the closed door to what used to be my apartment. Bob dropped into the familiar chair outside his own apartment and lit a cigarette. He took a long inhale, then blew the smoke up toward the sky.

"Well, Tempie," he said, "finally you were so late on rent that the landlord evicted you. Damn shame." He shrugged. "New girl's kid is quieter than your cat was, though."

"Shit," I said again, and rubbed my hand over my forehead. Of course, nothing in my life could be simple. "When did that happen? Where's my stuff?"

"Three months ago," Bob said. "Your grandmother came and picked things up. Is she single, by the way?"

"God dammit," I muttered. At least Gram had come to take my things, and they didn't end up at an auction house. "Well. Guess that's that. See you later, Bob." I headed back toward the stairs, for what I guessed was the last time.

"Tempie, wait," Bob said.

I glanced over my shoulder. Bob looked surprisingly concerned. "You give me a call if you need anything, all right?" he said. "We'll get a meal at Manny's. Glad to see you're alive."

"Thanks, Bob," I said with a small smile. Losing my apartment was an unexpected pain—but leaving Bob behind hurt a little more than I thought it would, too. I'd gotten used to that jackass. "I'll see if I can't get another pack of those cigars."

"My birthday's coming up!" he shouted as I descended the stairs. "Just saying!"

Corbin leaned across the console and opened the passenger door for me. I climbed inside and groaned, leaning forward to rest my forehead against the dash.

"Seems like that went well," Corbin said. "Evicted, huh?"

"Yup," I said. "Just another joyous day in the life of Tempie Fleur,

bounty hunter.”

Corbin chuckled. “Well, lucky for you, I own my place. You can crash with me.”

“Thanks,” I said. I leaned back in the passenger seat and sighed. “My stuff’s with Gram. I need to go see her. Let her chew me out for all this.”

“Sounds like a good plan for dinner,” Corbin said.

We went to his place first, where I took the hottest and most necessary shower I’d ever taken in my entire life. I chucked the dress and traded it for clean clothes. They were Corbin’s clothes, sweatpants and a Henley, but after stomping around in silk for ages, being in pants made me feel like myself again. When I finally emerged from the guest bedroom, Corbin was waiting for me at his kitchen island, sipping a coffee as he scrolled on his phone. I paused in the doorway, toweling my hair gently as I watched him.

It was so normal. If it weren’t for, well, everything that had happened the past five months, this would look like a normal afternoon. A pick-me-up coffee in the kitchen, and Corbin looking at up me with a small smile on his face as he nodded toward the other steaming cup, waiting for me.

“Feel any better?” he asked.

I padded into the kitchen and wrapped my arms around his shoulders, kissing his temple before taking the coffee with a grateful hum. These little gestures were so easy now—so natural. How had I resisted the pull between us so long before?

“Yeah,” I said. “Preferably, I’d like to pass out for a few hours before I seem Gram, but I know I won’t be able to sleep.”

“Probably true,” he said with a nod. “Coffee should help.”

“Always does.”

We made our way to Gram’s house outside the city just as the sun was beginning to dip toward the horizon. Corbin drove, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. Finally, we drove out of the city and onto the narrower road to Gram’s, Corbin glanced over at me.

“I don’t think she’s going to be very happy to see me,” he admitted.

“Corbin,” I teased, “are you scared of her?”

He cringed. “Not scared,” he said. “Intimidated.”

I laughed. “After all the shit we handled in Faerie, and it’s my grandmother that makes you anxious.”

“Well, I don’t care what the idiots in Faerie think of me,” he said with a shrug. “It’s kind of important to me that your grandmother like me. Or at

least put up with me.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. My whole chest felt warm with affection. “She’ll be angry with me more than anything else.”

“That doesn’t exactly make me feel better,” he grumbled.

I laughed again. What a normal problem to have. God, it was good to be Earthside.

We pulled into the driveway of Gram’s welcoming, small house. My horse, Hannie, stood at the fence around the slightly overgrown backyard, tossing her head and nickering. Gram was already on the front porch waiting for us, with a heavy flour-dusted canvas apron on and both her hands clapped over mouth. The woman really was slightly psychic.

As soon as the car was parked, Gram rushed down the porch steps and across the driveway. I climbed out of the passenger seat and she barreled into me, wrapping me in a hard hug.

“Temperance Fleur!” she said in a shout that was half-anger and half-relief. “You scared me half to death! Are you all right? What happened? Where the hell were you?”

“Gram,” I said, “I’m sorry.”

She let me go, then gripped me by the shoulders and studiously inspected me like she was making sure I was real and actually unhurt. Her eyes were shiny with unshed tears, even as her mouth was twisted into an angry frown.

“Thank God,” she murmured. “I knew you’d show up eventually. If something had happened to you, I would’ve known. I would’ve just known.”

“That’s probably true,” I said with a weak smile. “I’m sorry it took so long to get back.”

“From where?!” Gram insisted.

Corbin climbed out of the car slowly. “Hi, Martha,” he said.

Gram huffed. “I’m not surprised,” she said. “Get inside, both of you. Have you eaten? I had an urge to make a big roast tonight. There’s plenty of food.”

“That sounds amazing,” I said. “I’ll tell you everything, I promise.” I nodded toward my bike, parked by the side of the house with a tarp draped over it. “Thank you for taking care of my things, too.”

“The rest of your stuff is in the shed by the barn,” she said. “Except for Oscar. You’re just in time, too.”

“Oh, shit,” I said. “Is he--”

“Mala came by and helped,” Gram said. “She’s not as powerful as you,

though, so it was more like a stopgap.”

I hurried into Gram’s house. Oscar was curled up at the far end of the couch, his body scraggly with old age, dark coat mangy and his spine visible through his skin. He blinked at me blearily, then bared his teeth and meowed the angriest, scratchiest meow I’d ever heard a cat emit.

“Aw, you poor thing,” I said, rushing to kneel by his side. “I’m so sorry I was gone for so long.”

Again he meowed, sounding like the cat version of a pack-a-day smoker.

“What’s wrong with him?” Corbin asked.

“He’s old,” Gram said. She crossed her arms over her chest. “And Tempie spoils him.”

I smoothed my hand gently over Oscar’s head, then down his bony body. His tail twitched. He really was in bad shape—I’d have to send Mala flowers for being able to keep him alive. “Tell Mala thanks from me,” I said.

“You can tell her yourself,” Gram said. “She’s got a new shop and apartment near downtown. I’ve been helping out a little there—she’s rebuilding business now that she’s no longer working in the Den.”

“Keeping busy,” I said. Life had continued in on Warwick while I was away, of course, but the thought of Mala and Gram having to navigate moving her out of the Den on their own still made my stomach twist with guilt.

I petted Oscar again, but this time, I let my power flow through me, the golden light glowing from the palm of my hand. As I stroked him, youth spilled from my touch, adding brightness to his eyes and a sheen to his newly thick fur. His body filled back out with muscle and fat under my touch, and as I petted his tail, it fluffed up with new long black fur. He rose to his feet and stretched dramatically, looking like his old self again. Then he looked at me and meowed, perturbed, walked in a circle, and lay back down.

I scratched him behind the ears and stood back up. “Good to see you too, buddy.”

Corbin shook his head mildly. “You’re sure that’s a proper use of your powers?”

“What?” I teased. “You gonna turn me in?”

“He can try,” Gram said threateningly.

“Gram, please.” I laughed. “Come on, I’ll catch you up.”

“I’ll let you two talk,” Corbin said. “Martha, does Hannie need anything?”

Gram peered at Corbin with surprise. “It’s about time for her to be put in the barn for the night,” she said. “If you wouldn’t mind.”

“Of course not,” Corbin said, and hurried out of the house.

I nodded, impressed. Smart man. The way to Gram’s heart was through chores, that much was for sure.

Gram led me into the kitchen. I immediately dropped into one of the familiar wooden chairs at the table as Gram pulled the roast out of the oven, then checked the mashed potatoes on the stove. My stomach growled at the smell—it was a lot better than shitty broth and dark bread, that much was for sure.

“Five months, Tempie,” Gram said as she fixed me a plate. “What happened?”

“Guess I should start from the beginning, huh?”

So over dinner, I told Gram through the important parts: being collared in Faerie, getting free in the Demon realm, learning to control my powers, getting out. I tried to leave out the worst of it—like the feedings, and the violence. The things I knew *she* knew happened, but it’d be easier for both of us if we could bypass those details.

“And after all of that,” Gram said, “you’re still working with that UnSeelie boy?”

“About that...” I took the last bite of my mashed potatoes.

Gram sat back with a sigh. “I’m not going to like where this is going, am I?”

Better to just bite the bullet and get it over with. “Working with him, yeah. And I’m staying with him, due to the eviction thing. Because...” I swallowed hard and steeled myself for Gram’s freakout. “He’s my mate.”

Gram dropped her fork. “Mate? You mean...?”

I nodded. “Yeah. In the Fae way.”

“Oh, good Lord above,” Gram said. She rubbed her hand over her forehead. “That’s the same thing your mother said.”

I blinked. “What?”

“She said she just knew,” Gram said. “That there was something larger than herself connecting her to your father. Is that how you feel?”

I nodded again. “It is, yeah. It’s like... It’s like our powers were reaching out for each other before we even realized what was happening between us.”

Gram sat back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. “Well, if there’s one thing I learned from raising your mother, it’s that I won’t be able

to talk you out of this.”

I bit back a smile. “That’s probably true.”

“But you’re sure,” she said. “With him?”

“We’re the same,” I said. “Him and me. Both hybrids. Both pulled between worlds, not really fitting in to either. But with him, I do feel like I have a place I fit. Does that make sense?”

She sighed. “It does. Really, it does.”

“I know it’s not what you wanted,” I said. “I—I know you worry about me a lot. I didn’t mean to make it worse. But this--”

“Tempie.” Gram reached across the table and folded her hand over mine.

Her soft tone made me snap my jaw shut before I could ramble myself deeper into a hole. My pulse raced with anxiety and more than a little guilt. Gram was only person I really wanted to be proud of me. I wanted her to understand this.

“All I want is for you to be happy and safe,” she said. “You know I don’t approve of some of the risks you take--”

“Understatement,” I said with a chuckle.

She rolled her eyes fondly. “If Corbin makes you happy, that’s enough for me. And if he’ll help keep you safe in this world, then hell, that’s even better.”

“He does,” I said. “I haven’t figured out much about what this whole mate thing yet, but I do know what we’re stronger together.”

“Perhaps you’re meant both meant for big things,” Gram said with a curious smile. “Two hybrids in a separated world.”

“You’re okay with this?” I asked. “Really?”

“Well, not quite yet,” she said. “I still don’t like the idea of you with an UnSeelie. Even though I know that, as a human, I’ll never quite understand the whole mate thing Fae do. But I’ll do my best to try.”

“Thanks, Gram,” I said. It did feel like a weight had lifted off my heart.

“Plus, him dealing with Hannie tonight gets him points,” she said.

I laughed. “Thought you’d like that.”

Corbin rapped his knuckles on the doorframe of the kitchen. “She’s in the barn for the night,” he said. “Can I help you clean up, Martha?”

“No, no,” Martha said. “Go help Tempie pack some of her things. Those sweatpants are way too big for her. If she’s staying with you, she at least needs her wardrobe.”

In my childhood bedroom, I sorted through the cardboard boxes of my

clothes chucked in haphazardly, pulling out the basic necessities—my beloved stretchy jeans, my hoodies, my good pair of boots. Corbin leaned against the closed door, since I kept shooing him away when he tried to help.

“Don’t touch,” I said. “You smell like horse.”

“What all did you tell her?”

“Everything,” I said.

“Including about us?”

I glanced up. Corbin still looked nervous, just as he had in the car.

“Yeah,” I said. “Don’t worry. She’s... I wouldn’t say *happy*, but she understands. Apparently my mom and my dad were mates, too.”

“A human and a Seelie?” Corbin asked.

“Is that any weirder than us?” I shot back with a smile.

He blinked, then shrugged. “I guess not.”

I thought about what Gram had said—that maybe we might be meant for something big. Something that would change the Realms. It felt strangely possible.

But that was a conversation we could have another time. I straightened up and then summoned him over for a quick kiss. Then I wrinkled my nose. “You really smell like the barn,” I said.

“There’s no way this is worse than how I smelled for the entire time we were in the Demon realm.”

“Probably,” I said, “but I guess my powers work better now.”

“Your powers are telling you I smell like a barn?”

I swatted his shoulder playfully. “Come on,” I said. “Help me carry these boxes and let’s get home.”

Chapter 18

By the time we made it back to Corbin's place, I was so exhausted, I was nearly asleep where I stood. I'd been running on adrenaline and survival instincts for five months, apparently, and now that I was safe, it was all hitting me at once. Corbin ushered me into his huge fancy shower first, where the heat and incredible water pressure almost knocked me out cold, and then I barely managed to pull one of his old t-shirts over my head before I collapsed into his king-sized bed and passed out with all the lights on. Hell, I didn't even hear him puttering around getting himself ready for bed. I was dead to the world before my head hit the pillow.

When I woke up, I felt like I'd slept for an entire day. The sun streamed in through the big window of Corbin's bedroom, falling in golden stripes across the bed. It was certainly late morning, maybe even lunchtime—so I'd gotten my twelve-plus hours in for sure.

Next to me, Corbin was still asleep, too. He was flat on his belly, with his arms folded under his pillow and his face turned toward mine. The white comforter had slipped to his waist overnight, revealing the tan, muscular plane of his back. I rolled onto my side, propping my head up in the palm of my hand, and then ran my hand gently down the slope of his back. His skin was so warm to the touch. Just being this close made desire swirl low and hot in my gut.

Finally, we had time. Finally, we had *privacy*.

Corbin exhaled long, then slowly roused into wakefulness. He hummed as he blinked his eyes half-open, then a soft smile spread onto his face. "Morning," he murmured, his voice still rough with sleep.

"I don't think it's the morning," I teased. "Probably closer to the

afternoon. Hope you didn't have plans."

"Plans?" Corbin asked. "Actually, I do have plans."

I blinked. "What? We just got back. What could you possibly have to do?"

He grinned, then reached for me and pulled me bodily atop himself. He wound his strong arms tight around my waist and kissed me hard. My hair fell in a curtain around us, getting in the way and making him sputter and laugh.

"This," he said between kisses. "I think we need to make up for lost time."

He rolled us just as he had in our small bed in Faerie, so I was flat on my back (and my hair was out of the way) and he could kiss me properly. This time, I didn't have to worry about a sprite bursting into our bedroom, or about my power attracting attention from demons or UnSeelie that would rather see me drained for their own purposes.

Here, all I had to think about was Corbin's kiss, his touch, his body against mine. We had nowhere we needed to be. Nothing we had to do. Just this—just us, together, *finally*.

Corbin slid his hands over my bare legs and the thin cotton of my underwear, under the hem of my oversized shirt (*his shirt*) then tugged it off me. He took a moment to break the kiss and look down at my bare body, his eyes burning amber. "Gorgeous," he murmured.

"Not fair," I said, even as I blushed under his adoring, serious gaze. "You too."

"If you insist," Corbin said with a grin, then tugged his shirt off as well. He was gorgeous—I knew he was, I'd seen him shirtless plenty of times. Hell, I'd even seen it in the dreamscape. But it was different to have him on top of me, Earthside, in a shared bed, with all that muscle on display for me to touch and explore. The heady force of my own desire made me dizzy. He dropped back down on top of me to kiss me deeply, and his hips rolled down on mine like he couldn't control himself. The motion made me sigh as pure molten want coursed through me. I wrapped my arms around him, pulling him impossibly closer. I carded my fingers through his hair.

"Corbin," I murmured into the kiss. "I want..."

"Hm?" Corbin asked. He broke the kiss to trail his mouth over the curve of my jaw, to my ear. "What do you want? Name it and it's yours."

I knew my face was burning—damn my fair complexion. But I wanted it,

I couldn't stop thinking about it—about how it had felt in front of the portal, how my body had melted in his arms, and how I hadn't been able to lean into it the way I wanted to. And like this, in his bed, it'd be even better.

“Come on,” I said sweetly. With my grip in his hair, I guided his lips to my neck. “Drink from me.”

Corbin pulled away, shaking off my grip. He lifted up just enough to gaze down at me, brows pulled together. “What?”

“Bite me,” I clarified. “Just a little. A small feed.”

“I don't need it,” Corbin said slowly, like he didn't understand. “I only did that to open the portal. I don't—I don't *need* to drink from you.”

I laughed, trailing my fingertips over the defined lines of his abs. This was so absurd, I couldn't help it.

“What?” he asked, still looking concerned. “What's so funny?”

“Nothing,” I said, still giggling. “Just—I spent all this time worried you'd find out what I was and drain me. And now I'm here trying to *convince* you to drink from me.”

“Quit laughing,” he said, even though he was smiling, too. “I'm trying to understand.”

“What is there to understand?” I tugged him back down to kiss him again. “It feels good, Corbin. Simple as that. It feels fucking amazing.”

“Yeah?” he asked. “You liked it?”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course I did,” I said, smiling. “You know how good the bite feels.”

“I didn't know if it'd be different for a Seelie,” he said. “Especially a Solstice nymph.”

“Might be even better than the human experience,” I said. “And I'm not just a Seelie. I'm your mate. Of course it feels good.”

Something about that sentence made Corbin shudder. He dragged his lips down my neck and pressed a hot kiss to the pale skin there. “You're sure?”

I didn't think I'd been surer of anything else in my life. I hooked one leg around his and rolled my hips up, hungry to feel the proof of his desire, too. He growled in response, a low, instinctive sound that made me shiver. “You gonna make me beg?”

“Tempting,” Corbin said in a low voice. “Maybe next time.”

Next time. There were a lot of *next times* in our future. I tipped my head to the side, revealing more of my neck. Finally Corbin sighed, and his breath washed warm and promising over my neck. I fit my hands at the defined

curve of his waist, then slid one to his lower back, fingertips dipping under the elastic of his snug boxer-briefs.

Then, finally, I felt the barely there press of his sharp canines against my neck. Unconsciously, I dug my fingers into the muscle of his waist lats and the dimples in his lower back, and arched up against him like I was the one who was hungry.

Corbin hummed, and finally, finally, bit down.

There was no pain. Instead, pleasure rushed through me, from the bite in my throat all the way to my fingertips and my toes. I sighed with relief as my body went pliant under him of its own accord. I gave myself up to him, luxuriating in the vulnerability of it: I trusted him. He'd make me feel good the same way drinking from me made *him* feel good. It was perfect. It was incredible.

Just like he had in Faerie, he only drank a few spare mouthfuls of my blood. Then he dragged the flat of his tongue over the wound, so the bleeding ceased. He hummed again, like a sated predator (which I supposed he was) and then took his time cleaning me up with his tongue. He licked every drop of blood from my skin, like a big lazy cat, and the sensation made me dizzy. Not with blood loss—he hadn't taken nearly enough to cause that—but with sheer pleasure. All I could focus on was the sweet sensation of it.

"Gorgeous," Corbin murmured. He trailed his fingertips over the twin perforations on my neck. Already I could feel my Solstice power coursing through me, alongside the heady intoxicating power of his bite, replenishing my blood and healing the tiny wounds.

Above me, Corbin was glowing with power. His eyes gleamed not their usual amber but something closer to my own golden light, and it seemed to emanate faintly from his skin, too. He gazed down at me, his lips faintly red with blood and his expression something akin to awe.

"How was it?" I asked, tugging him closer.

"You're amazing," he sighed, then sealed it with a kiss.

It was easy, after that, to divest each other of our remaining clothes and lose ourselves in the sensation. Everything was heightened, his touch like a delicious brand on my body, and when he finally slid inside me, the pleasure was so intense I barely lasted three breaths. He followed soon after me, with a gorgeous low groan half-muffled into our sloppy kiss. But that didn't matter to me—we had a lot of time to make it up.

The intensity of it must've put me back to sleep, because when I woke up

later—not too much later, judging by the amount of sunlight streaming into the room—the bed was empty. The sheets still smelled good, like sweat and sex, and I rolled onto my back with a happy sigh. The room itself was sparsely decorated, like the rest of his place: hardwood floors, all-white linens, a big closet and a desk that looked more decorative than functional. Since it was a lofted bedroom, I could faintly hear the sounds of breakfast/lunch. Corbin was playing music faintly, something soft and jazzy, punctuated with the sizzle of meat in a hot pan. The familiar smell of coffee wafted up, finally encouraging me to actually climb out of bed.

I pulled my oversized shirt and underwear back on, not bothering to get actually dressed, and padded down the stairs.

“She lives,” Corbin said with a grin. He looked edible, shirtless in front of the stove with his sweatpants loose and pooling around his bare feet. “How do you feel?”

“Hungry,” I said, dropping down into a seat at the kitchen island. “You have food in this place?”

“I’m always prepared,” he said primly. “There’s coffee in the pot.”

“Not going to get it for me?” I said with a pout.

He laughed and brandished the spatula. “I’m busy tending the sausages. I believe in your ability to pour coffee.”

With a dramatic sigh, I heaved myself out of my chair and let my hand trail fondly over his lower back as I made my way to the cabinet for a mug. “You know,” I said, “that coffee machine is nice, but it doesn’t hold a candle to my percolator.”

“Guess you’ve got to bring it over,” he said. “Show me how it’s done.”

I poured the coffee. Even after everything, a small curl of anxiety tightened in my chest. “So—about that...”

He glanced over his shoulder. “About what?”

“Should I be looking for places?” I asked. “To rent?”

“Of course not,” he said. He abandoned the sausages on the stove, then walked up behind me, sliding his hands over my hips to kiss the side of my neck. “You should stay here. As long as you want. We’re mates, Tempie—what’s mine is yours.” Then he paused and took a step back. “I mean, unless you *want* to get another place of your own, that’s fine with me if you think you need space--”

I laughed, then turned around and shut him up by pressing my forefinger to his lips. “No,” I said. “I don’t want my own place. I want to stay with

you.” I glanced around. “Plus, this place is a little nicer than the dump I was staying with. Water pressure’s better, too.”

Corbin kissed the pad of my finger. His shoulders slumped with relief. “We’ll have to go pick up Oscar.”

“He might shred your couch,” I said.

“No problem. I’ll buy a new couch.”

“How much money do you have, exactly?” I teased.

“Listen, when you’ve been alive as long as I’ve been, you get really good at investing.”

I set my coffee aside and lifted up on my toes to kiss him briefly. A good morning kiss, even though it was definitely the afternoon now. “You know that’s not going to stop me from taking contracts, right?”

“I wouldn’t expect it to,” Corbin said. “I’m gonna help, anyway.”

“Yeah?” I asked.

“You’re not the only one who gets bored,” Corbin said.

“I love you,” I sighed. It was so easy to say now, spilling out of me as easy as breathing. “I think we’re going to have a lot of fun together.”

“Sounds dangerous,” he said with a grin. “I can’t wait.”

Chapter 19

When I slid into the corner booth at Manny's, there was already a hot cup of coffee waiting for me. The man sitting across from me wasn't someone I had ever intended on talking to again, but his voicemail had sounded so... So sad, and so regretful, that my curiosity had gotten the better of me. It'd been a few months since I'd returned from Faerie, and admittedly, I was starting to get just a little bit bored. So I'd agreed to the meeting.

"Thanks for meeting with me," Todd said. He looked about as bad as he usually did, with dark circles under his eyes and his hairline newly receding.

"How'd you know I was back?" I asked. I'd done a pretty good job of keeping under the radar as I got resettled. I was still staying with Corbin at his house, but my things had started to encroach upon his sparse, professionally designed interiors. Things like my beat-up old coffee table, because it was the perfect height for couch research, and the art I like getting tacked to the walls, and of course Oscar getting his shiny black fur all over Corbin's white couch.

"Carla let it slip that you'd done karaoke together recently," he said. "Not on purpose. You know how she gets at happy hour."

"That's what I get for buying that last round of shots, I guess," I muttered.

"I owe you an apology," Todd said.

I blinked. That wasn't exactly what I expected.

"And an explanation."

That was even less what I expected. "What? I mean, yes, you do, but seriously? That's why you called me?"

"You were right to cut me off," he said. "After what I did."

“What, selling me out?” I said with my eyebrows raised. I took a sip of my coffee. Todd working with the Fae Court to try to figure out what I was felt like a different lifetime. I’d been through so much worse since then—and hell, the guy the court sent to try to figure me out ended up being my mate. So it was pretty clear who came out on top. But at the same time, getting a bona fide apology from Todd was on my list of brand-new experiences. So I was going to ride this wave wherever it took me.

“I shouldn’t have done that,” Todd said. “I know that. But at the time I was desperate. I’d gotten... Well, I had a bit too much fun gambling.” Sheepishly, he rubbed the back of his neck. “It got really bad. To the point that I was taking out credit on the bonds.”

“Jesus,” I said. “You were in that bad of a hole?”

“My bookie was an UnSeelie,” Todd said. “So when a Fae agent showed up curious about you, they said if I agreed to work with them, they’d wipe out my debt. A fresh start.” He sighed. “I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Should’ve just asked me to lean on the bookie a little,” I said.

Todd pressed his lips together. “You’re the best bounty hunter I ever hired,” Todd said. “The other guys I’ve got on payroll take twice as long and are three times as messy. I want you back as a part of my team. What will it take?”

“Too late,” I said, without any heat. When I’d first been starting out, Todd had been like a father figure to me—but after the way he’d betrayed me, and over something as stupid as a gambling debt, I knew we’d never go back to the relationship we had. But more than that, I’d outgrown him. I didn’t need Get Out Of Jail Bail Bonds to get my bills paid—I had bigger contracts to pick up. “I’m going full freelance. Managing my own business now.”

I expected him to argue with me, but he only nodded. “I expected that’s what you were up to,” he said. “But I thought it was worth a shot. And you know, I wanted you to know why I did what I did.”

“Who was it?” I asked. “Who was curious about me on the court?”

“I didn’t meet him face to face,” Todd said. “He always sent a lackey to meet with me in the Den. The lackey said his name was R-something? Rodgeron?”

Of-fucking-course. “Rutherford?”

“Yeah,” Todd said. “You know the guy?”

“It’s dealt with,” I said. “Thanks, Todd.”

We shook hands, then Todd stood up, leaving me alone in the corner booth.

At the counter near us, Corbin spun around on the stool he was seated on. He pulled off the beanie he'd been wearing, and adjusted his oversized jacket, then joined me in the booth. "That seemed like it went well," he said.

"Did you hear it all?" I asked.

"Of course," Corbin said. "Should've known it was Daniel's influence that led me here in the first place."

"Worked out better for us than it did for him," I said with a shrug.

"Good point." He leaned over the table and gave me a brief kiss. "So what's next?"

I grinned. "Breakfast combo," I said. "Then I was thinking we could call Maxwell. Maybe Ignacia. See what they think about starting to do a little legwork in Faerie. Seeing how strong the queen's hold really is. Seeing if we can't start a little trouble."

Corbin smiled just as big. "Sounds like a good time to me."

Bigger things indeed.

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I arrive at the ball and instantly wish I hadn't come. But the Fae rule over humans and the Light Fae King and Queen have decreed all eligible women of age attend tonight so their son, Prince Xavier, can decide on a wife. It's not like he will choose a simple seamstress like me, anyway.

Except everyone seems to be staring at me because of the pendant I'm wearing, which I found years ago by accident as a child on the castle grounds. The Queen demands to know where I got it from.

They tell me it's stolen and that I have to return it. With my hands shaking, I unclasp it from my neck. But, for reasons I can't explain, I'm unable to give it back. What they say next makes my blood run cold.

Witch.

I swear I'm not a witch. But they banish me from the Kingdom anyway, so I'm no longer under the protection of the Light Fae. I've no idea what I will do. Where I will go.

Until Thane, the prince and soon-to-be King of the Dark Fae, enters the room. He claims me, announcing that I am his, but his sinister golden eyes aren't looking at me—all they see is my pendant.

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So I go hunting for a way to free myself. When I discover I'm the hunted, and there are those who want my blood, Nic claims he can protect me. But can I trust one of his kind?

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Bounty Captured

Solstice Huntress: Book 3

Lindsey Devin

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