



Eight Embers

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: I've freed my gargoyle mate, just intime for a nasty witch to show up and ruin our party.

It's all good though, because my demon mate is good with his hands (and his magic).

Everything should be smooth sailing now, but as it turns out there's a goddess from a realm of unicorns that's got other plans for me.

We've got this though...right? Would be helpful if something ominous didn't happen to all the mates I've worked so hard to collect so far.

For the love of potatoes, 18+

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Chapter One

Rush

“Motherfucker!”

“Hello, darling.”

“No. No, no, no. You don't get to smile at me like that. You fucking knew, didn't you? That whole thing was a big, fat, fake ruse to get me in bed so that I'd have to marry you.”

“Well, I mean, if you insist. You're being a bit pushy about it but alright, I accept.” Her grin is delicious, and I'm drinking in her anger. Naturally, I take a step towards her, intent on claiming my prize.

“Get that smarmy look off your face. No! Don't— get out! I rescind my invitation inside!”

I cock my head to the side and take yet another step forward. Then I laugh. “I might have lied about that working. I guess you're stuck with me.”

“Oh fuckyeah, let's go!” Adam cheers, but we can't have anyone interrupting this moment.

Delaney whips her head to chastise him, only to witness him freezing midway through his sentence. “What the hell, Adam? Why are you—wait, what did you do to

them?”

I froze them and maybe influenced them to like me a bit, but what's a little persuasion between brother mates? “Don't worry about them, darling, they're fine. I thought we could use a little one-on-one time.”

Her face turns an alarming shade of red as she stalks towards me, actually making me fear for my life a little bit by the look on her face.

“You will undo whatever you just did. Right. This. Instant!”

“Aww, our first lovers quarrel! Look, I had a commemorative coin made just for this event.”

I summon it out of my pocket and pass it over, but she just stares at it, open mouthed. Guess romance really is dead up here.

“What the fuck is this?”

“Is this not working for me? Should I go the kidnapping route? I was sure you'd be excited to see me.”

“No. You do not get to pout, because that's just absurd. Yes or no; did you know about the marriage contract that weekend we met?”

“Well yes, obviously, but—”

“Then get out.”

I shrug. “Okay, if that's what you want.”

I walk out to the hall and sit, pulling out my harmonica so I can entertain myself.

It's not too long before she comes stomping after me, hands on hips, looking completely fuckable.

“Can I help you, darling? Are you ready for me to profess my literally undying love? We do have an eternity together, after all.”

“I don't know why the fuck I keep getting all the crazy ones? I need you to come inside and unfreeze everybody, please.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“I wouldn't have asked if I wasn't sure. What was your goal? Freeze all of them so that they're out of the way? Newsflash: already claimed all of them. They're not going anywhere.”

“Surely, they have to go somewhere at some point. They have classes and jobs and other things to go to on occasion, yes?”

“Oh my gods, that is not what I meant. You know what? Can you please just fix them?”

“Alright, you said please.” I stand and get into the doorway, waving my hand to unfreeze everybody. Immediately, the annoying witch I stopped starts shrieking, hands up and on the defensive.

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“Seriously? I didn’t mean her! Freeze her. Please.”

“You’re awfully bossy.” But I do freeze the witch, this time right before she could hurl a ball of energy at my lovely bride to be.

Now that that’s all taken care of, I stroll up to a very irate Delaney, peck her on the cheek, and look around at all the men that want to tear my head off with their bare hands.

“So, I’m Rush,” I explain with a smile on my face. “As you can probably surmise, me and our lady have a history. You could say she was mine first, but who’s keeping track?”

"Him?" The Adam fellow asks. "Seriously, Delaney?"

“Hey, if you would have shown up to that party forever ago, maybe we wouldn’t be in this position.”

“Um, I know you’re not trying to hold me accountable for something that happened so fucking long ago I can’t even remember it. What do you want with her?” this guy asks, turning to me.

I extend my hand, as is customary for humans. A handshake for starters and a name. “I’m Rush. I know she called you Adam a few minutes ago, but it would make me feel incredibly good about myself if you said it with your own voice.”

“Adam.” He throws an arm around Delaney’s shoulder and pulls her into him, giving

me a strange look I can't decipher. "What do you want with Delaney?"

"The right to marry her, of course. Darling, we're going to design the most lavish of gowns, just you wait and see. The designers we have in Hell are top notch. You should see this new technique they've devised to sew spikes into gowns. Have you ever seen a gown covered in titanium stiletto spikes? They're just simply precious."

"We will not be doing any of that," Delaney says like a total buzzkill.

"Fine with me. If you want to get married in the nude, we could arrange that, too. In fact, I know of a wedding venue where that's the schtick; no clothes allowed. Let's go around the room and get to know each other, shall we? You should all get in a circle," I suggest, infusing my words with a little bit of charisma to get them to do what I want.

Soon enough, they're all standing in a circle around the frozen witch. I manifest a ball and throw it across the circle to somebody. I'm trying to pay attention to everything happening, but really all I want to do is gather Leo in my arms and make sure he's okay. And then maybe have some fun with Delaney. Maybe I'll branch out and try something freaky with maple syrup?

"Name?" I ask the gentleman.

He gives me a few slow blinks before answering. "I'm very confused right now. I'm Jackson, I like puppies. Never had one, but maybe someday."

He passes the ball back to me and I smile in encouragement. "Very good Jackson, thank you for sharing." I throw the ball to somebody else.

"Okay, I'm Ash, and I teach shifter history. Sometimes when I'm in the shower alone I like to pretend my wiener is a puppet and I give him funny voices." He passes the

ball back to me and I can't help a little bit of a giggle.

"Why are they saying weird things?" Delaney questions, narrowing her eyes at me. "You did something to them. What did you do? Why haven't I punched you in the face yet for lying to me and getting in my pants?"

"Don't you know the rules of truth circles?"

"Obviously not," she says.

I throw the ball to her because I'm so curious right now.

She pinches her lips together to try and prevent words from flowing out of them, but it's no use. The magic is in full effect. It won't be satisfied until we've all told some sort of truth. Eventually she blurts out, "I'm Delaney and I like to eat ice cream cones from the bottom up."

The ball's back in my hands and I nod at her. "Thank you, Delaney. That was delightful. Odd, but delightful. Who's next?"

"Ooh, do me, do me!"

I toss the ball to the curly haired cutie who's bouncing up and down. "I'm Cory, and when I was a little kid, I wanted to grow up to be a jellybean. It took entirely too long for the adults in my life to break that specific dream."

I get the ball back and thank Cory, the magic propelling me to keep the game going.

"I'm August, and I think about my brother's ass far too much."

Delaney giggles and goes for a high five, but I find this entirely unsettling and almost

wish to end the game there, but August passes the ball on, bypassing me completely.

“I want to make it clear I’m only participating because it seems I am magically compelled to do so. My name is Adam; Delaney, I definitely saw your boobs a whole bunch of times in high school. No further comments, thanks.”

“Um, I’m Leo,” the next one says, testing the elasticity of the ball. “To be honest, I don’t really know much about myself other than that woman right there is the whole reason I am existing right now and I’m pretty sure we’re going to have a pretty epic love story.”

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I get the ball back and the magic binding the game dissipates on a whisper, but now I feel awkward. They have actual feelings for Delaney and here I am just being my normal stupid self. What chance do I really have?

“I am in no way required to say this, but I’ll offer up a truth of my own. I might have known about this contract way back when, Delaney, and I might have been more or less forced to forge a relationship with you by Lucifer, but the way you made me feel in that short time we had together is something I’ve only felt one other time in my life,” I admit as I can’t help but stare at Leo briefly. “And we didn’t even have to break out the potatoes!” I laugh awkwardly and rub the back of my neck, wondering what the heck to do now.

“I’ll just...take this off your hands for you. Have a good night, now.”

I do my thing and get the witch to trail along behind me in her frozen state, but I don’t get too far before there are footsteps trailing behind me. I want to hope it’s Delaney telling me not to go, but in fact it’s only one of her mates.

“That’s my sister, and I’m also headmaster here so I feel like I need to oversee what’s about to happen. What do you plan on doing to her? And can I interfere? I have a reinforced room I can take her to that will nullify her magic. Standard equipment at a magical school.”

“Oh, that would be great. Thank you!”

He takes the lead, and it’s probably for the best there aren’t many students out at this late hour.

“You said you’ve been outside Delaney’s balcony? I knew about Leo’s curse, but what...that is, where? I feel like I should know what’s been going on here.”

“You’re allowed to hate me, too. I won’t seek revenge if you don’t want to be nice to me. I think I did a pretty shitty thing all those years ago. I didn’t do it on purpose though, not really. Being raised in Hell means I have a whole different set of morals I’ve always been expected to adhere to. I don’t always understand humans, even if I’ve been around them for years now. And I was a pine tree. A devilishly good looking one, if you’ll excuse the pun.”

“Are you really one of her mates?”

I nod, avoiding eye contact. I’ve never felt like a fraud before, but that’s exactly how I feel now.

“I fought it too, the bond with Delaney. For far too long. I actually made myself pretty ill; the goddess doesn’t like it when we ignore her. It’s one thing to not act because you’re unaware, but to do the opposite?” He shakes his head.

“I’ve been topside for a long time now. Since Leo was human, actually.”

“Wait, holdup. He used to be human?”

I smile. Can’t help it. “Yeah. He was pretty spectacular. He was supposed to be a job, but I got attached. My father allowed me to stay topside as a sort of ambassador, but Leo had gotten himself into some tricky situations, as evidenced by the fact that he’s spent the however last many years as a gargoyle. Time is pretty hard to keep track of when you’re cursed.”

“You were cursed together?”

“He made a deal with a witch, and it went sour. She walked in on us in the throes of making passionate, mashed potato love, and was so enraged that she cursed the both of us. He got the brunt of it because she claims he broke her heart. Wait— if this is your sister, that means you’re of her line. No wonder you were drawn here to this school.”

“What are you talking about?”

I spin around as he begins to unlock a nondescript entrance near the main building of the campus, flicking a light switch on a dusty cement wall.

“Sorry, hasn’t been used in a while, but it’ll hold her. I’ll have to get her blankets so she’s not cold, though.”

“The witch that cursed us made it so that Leo wouldn’t remember anything before he became a gargoyle; she also tasked the women in her line with watching over the curse. I would hazard to guess your sister has been making trouble for our Delaney?”

“I’m her brother; I’m supposed to love her, and I do, but as she’s gotten older, she’s become obsessed with our lineage and with making herself out to be some superior person when we come from very humble beginnings. She’s needed an attitude adjustment for a while, but I haven’t been able to do much about it.”

I freeze as he locks the cell door on his sister, watching the play of emotions over his face, trying to understand the dynamics. “This is... hard for you, isn’t it? You love her.”

He looks through the bars while his sister is still frozen, an almost longing etched into his eyes. “Something like that. I didn’t think I would ever find myself in a position where my mate and my sister were mortal enemies. Makes me feel like I might have messed up somewhere. I shouldn’t be choosing anybody over my family, yet here we

are.”

“Sometimes,” I start, “family makes that decision for themselves before we even get the choice to try and put them first. Parents aren’t the same in Hell as they are up here, but Lucifer wasn’t exactly the exemplary father. Though he did threaten to start a war for me, so maybe there’s something in him that feels something for me. You ready for me to let her go?”

“Yeah. These cells should block her magic.”

I let go of the hold I have on the witch, taking a step back just because it feels like the right thing to do. What I should have done is plug my ears with cotton first.

She starts screeching immediately, throwing her hands as if she’s about to throw all sorts of spell work, and if it wouldn’t embarrass me to do so, I’d totally be ducking to avoid the spells. Even though her fingers are doing absolutely nothing.

“Get me out of here, Zac! Donottell me that girl is more important to you than I am. How dare you bring me here? You know I would never hurt you; not my brother.”

He looks resigned. “But you almost did, Shelly. You were aiming at my mate and one of her other mates. Don’t you think that harming them would do something to me?”

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“Tell me you didn’t bond with that horrible person.”

“Can we just, drop the dramatics for a moment please? There’s nobody here to watch you put on a show.”

She nods her head towards me. “Who’s that, then?”

“Somebody I’d steer clear of, if I were you,” he responds.

“So she gets everything, and I get nothing? Is that how this is going to go down?”

“What was your goal here tonight?” I step in and ask. “I could find out what spell you were about to throw at my mate, but it might not be too comfortable for you. I think asking nicely might get me a little bit farther.”

She huffs like a damn toddler. “That’s not even possible. You have no idea what I’m capable of.”

“Shelly, you tried to attack somebody. I can’t be your brother and the law if you’re just going to keep doing things you’re not supposed to do. I’ve warned you so many times your temper was going to get the best of you.” He takes a step back from the cell, and then another, keeping his hands in his pockets and looking quite sad.

“Where are you going? Get back here now and let me out.”

“I can’t do that, Shells. I wish I could, but this is bigger than just you and me now.”

“Because of her,” she spits with so much venom in her tongue I’m surprised it doesn’t burn her mouth.

Zac is ready to jump in and defend our mate, though. “She’s really nice, you know. She doesn’t deserve what you’ve been doing to her. I don’t want to take sides in this Shelly, but when you’re so flagrantly harming other students, you’re making me.”

“I’ll do it, you know. I’ve always threatened it, but I really will this time. Unlock this door, or...” she looks at me nervously, letting her sentence taper off.

He takes his phone out of his pocket, presses some buttons, and then it’s ringing on speaker. “Zac? You guys okay? Where’d you go?”

“I have something I need to tell you, Delaney.”

The girl behind the bars starts shrieking again, enough so that she drowns out my mate. And things seem like they’re about to get interesting, so we can’t have that. With a thought, she’s silent. God, it’s so much fun to be powerful.

Now she’s just an animated clay figure silently yelling at us. Perfect. Such an improvement.

“A truth,” Zac starts, “that I’ve tried to keep covered up for years. Some of the guys have wondered why I let Shelly get away with so much. Aside from just being her guardian all these years, there’s more.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” Delaney promises, nearly pleading, but Zac cuts her off.

“I want to. I need to. This... it’s been a weight on my chest for too long, and it’s already held me back enough. I meant it when I said you were everything to me now. I won’t let secrets get in the way of what we could be.”

“Whatever it is, it’s not going to change anything,” Delaney promises. “But I’m listening.”

He exhales heavily, rubbing his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. “When Shelly and I were younger, our parents were pretty great. Sure, my father was a terrifying naga and my mom a witch, but they were good parents.”

I think I know where this is going, but I do think he needs to say this. Somebody needs to pop the bubble of blame he’s clearly been existing in.

“My father spent a lot of time helping me to keep control of my temper; he always said nagas had a bad enough rep as it was, so it was important for us to be more than our peers. I always had to study harder, be better, do more, so that people wouldn’t be scared of me. Didn’t matter in the long run, people are still scared of me, but I guess it got me this job and found me you. So, there’s that.

“Anyway, my father had been bragging to my mom about how well I was progressing in my control. One day she came out to watch. We had this huge backyard then with this incredible forest, a little meadow, and a pond back full of koi fish that my mom loved.

“I was practicing shifting different parts of me independently and learning to bite without the venom. At the time I didn’t understand why I would need to bite somebody, but my dad always assured me it was just another thing I needed to practice controlling. He made sure I knew that we needed to have ultimate control over our venom since it’s so potent. He wanted to get me to a point that I had to really try if I wanted to inject venom in somebody. I don’t know what kind of scuffles he thought I’d get into, but I never questioned his ways, not really.

“So anyway, Mom was there watching—”

Delaney gasps. “Oh my gods.... did you accidentally kill her?”

Both of the siblings stare at the phone in horror as Zac starts back peddling. “What? No!... no! I would never...no.”

“Sorry, I got caught up in the drama of it. Proceed.” Delaney says calmly.

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“He’s still a monster though,” Shelly spits from behind the bars. “He ruined my life.”

“Sorry, my bad,” I interject. “Forgot I was supposed to be keeping her mute. She can’t talk anymore, Zac. Go ahead, man.” I forgot I was showing off my skills, I got pretty into Zac’s story.

“You know how it’s somewhat rare to inherit magical skills from both parents? How it’s more normal for a child to more or less show attributes of one parent, and maybe they’ll have a quirk or two from the other? Yeah, well my quirk turned out to be pretty bad. With all my honing of the naga skills, I hadn’t spent any time on the witch side of me, because I hadn’t realized those abilities were there.

“I was trying to show off but ended up opening a portal and shoving my parents through. I don’t know where they went to, but they’ve been gone ever since. All I know is that it was full of rainbows and glitter? So that’s my big shame. I spent years trying to figure out how to do it again, obsessing over any sort of tidbit I could gather to help me with the portal, but I’ve never been able to reverse the action. So that’s why I ended up mostly raising Shelly, because I took her parents away from her. I am a monster.”

Delaney is silent for a minute, likely processing. But I’m not entirely sure why he felt so nervous about telling this particular story.

“Thank you for telling me. First of all,” Delaney says slowly into the phone, “I don’t know how long you’ve been keeping that to yourself, but I hope you feel a little bit lighter with it off your chest. Second of all, I don’t think you’re a monster. Magic is... unpredictable sometimes. The goddess likes to play games and tricks, and it’s

not always intuitive to figure out how talents work. Look at me, how long did it take me to realize how to keep my magic under control? Do you have any idea how many orgies I've caused in my life? I feel like that's more alarming than you accidentally sending your parents somewhere. Wait a minute; in theory, they could still be out there somewhere, right? Like, alive? And could potentially be pulled back?"

"I guess so, but time always works differently in other realms, and I don't know anything about the realm I sent them to. It could be the most dangerous place in existence for all I know, and they could have been killed within minutes of landing. They could have been biologically incompatible with the atmosphere, they could have—"

"Deep breath there, Zacky. In this moment there's clearly nothing we can do, you've been... fighting this for a while on your own now. You have help now."

"Still don't think a group of college students is a flex but thank you."

"I mean, if you don't want our help..." she taunts.

"No, no, I would appreciate that. I've been so scared for so long about this getting out. It's...freeingto let it go." He turns to his sister. "Shelly, I've done a disservice to you. I've let you get away with too much instead of disciplining you and trying to shape you into somebody respectable. I just got mated and I really can't deal with you right now. Maybe that makes me a shit brother, but you're a pretty shit sister for trying to attack mymate like that. Not to mention it seems like you were trying to reenact a curse that she worked so hard to break? Yeah, I think you're going to spend the night here and we can talk tomorrow. I'll get you a mattress and some blankets and stuff, but I need to do a better job of teaching you the consequences of your actions."

He starts walking away and I follow, because ain't no way I want to be stuck down

here without him. It's creepy and gross, and I grew up in literal Hell.

When we get outside, I rock back on my heels, wondering what to do now. There's an expectation that Zac will go back to Delaney since she actually chose him, and I guess I could blip myself back down to dear old dad, but it's kind of depressing to spend my first actual night of freedom alone.

"You coming?"

"Nah, you go ahead."

He stops and looks at me, then walks back to me. "You should try to date her. Maybe this started out as an arrangement between your parents, but if you're fated like you say, you guys could be something special. She just needs a chance to get to know you. Maybe without pretending to be somebody else this time."

"I've just been waiting so long, I had this sort of dramatic idea in my head about how things would go down when I finally got to talk to her, you know? That was dumb. And Leo..."

"You love him, too?"

I rub my chest. "Is that what this is? It feels weird. Being a tree was easier, no messy emotions."

"I've got an extra room at my place if you need somewhere to crash. I could even hang out with you if you want?"

"I'm pretty sure Delaney needs you, but I appreciate that."

"I need to get my sister squared away, then I can bring you over there and get you

comfortable. Honestly, I don't know where I'll be sleeping tonight, but I'll sleep easier if I know you have somewhere comfortable to be. I get the feeling you just went through a huge transformation, and it doesn't sit right with me you being by yourself right now. You're going to need help. You know what? Just come with me. If nothing else, you and I can sleep on the couch in Delaney's living room or something. There's been too much of us all being scattered."

"You don't think she'll mind?"

"Only one way to find out," he says.

Chapter Two

Delaney

"Did I mention how hot you looked out there earlier, taking all your mates like that?"

Even after all this, August still finds a way to make me blush. Though I'm sure if he were to pull me up against his chest in this way and whisper just about anything with his warm breath raking against my skin, I'd react the same way. Ooh, idea. "Do me a favor. Whisper something completely ridiculous but do it in the same tone and manner you just did."

August pauses for a beat, no doubt used to my weirdness by now. "Um, okay, how about, zebras zigzag a zillion times while eating zucchini."

I feel my face scrunch up. Maybe it was the delivery. "Er, never mind. I just dried way up."

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Adam shoves his way between us, kissing me on the forehead. “So...the demon, huh? You think he’ll be your last?”

I look at my arm, at all the mate marks I've already got. “It seems silly at this point that I have to say this shit out loud. I believe Rush is my mate.”

As expected, another circle appears above the others. “Lovely. If only I could cheat and find out how many more dicks I'm expected to entertain by saying, ‘I think I have three more mates.’”

I go back to brushing my teeth when my arm is rudely grabbed and throats are cleared. “Uh, Delaney? Maybe you just affected that. You couldn't have said, ‘I think Rush is my last mate?’”

I pause, my mouth full of toothpaste foam, then spit it everywhere when I now see three empty circles I apparently just asked for indelibly marked on my arm as a sense of completion washes over me.

Adam grabs a washcloth from the shelf and wets it, peering through one eye as he does so he doesn't get toothpaste in it. Once he cleans his face, I grin at him sheepishly. “Oops.”

August barks out a loud, booming laugh. “Only you, Delaney. Gods, I love you. You know that? Okay, three more. You sure you don't want to try again, just to make sure?”

I throw my hands in the air and decide to throw out a crazy number. “I think I have

ten more mates.”

Everybody holds their breath, but nothing happens. My arm stays exactly the same. “See? Chill.”

Nobody says anything else as I floss and rinse and leave the bathroom.

I get about five steps into the living room, my toes sinking happily into the shag carpeting before Adam asks, “Who's gonna tell her?”

I spin around ready to say something sassy, but then Leo is there, spinning me towards him and grasping my other hand. “What's all this? Are you ill? What sort of symptoms are these? Shall we phone a healer?”

I look down in horror at my right arm, which now bears seven marks as well, unable to say anything. My tongue flaps around in my mouth as I forget how to breathe, and then I'm fairly sure I black out.

???

Colors swirl around me and something smells like...cotton candy. I know I'm dreaming, but at the moment I have no idea why.

Maniacal laughter starts to echo throughout the cloud-like atmosphere I'm floating in, but I don't see the source of it.

The cloud puff carries me further around, like a non-sentient escort, until I'm overlooking an entire city built on clouds. They're clearly very different from the clouds in my world, and absolutely everything seems to be either pastel or covered in glitter. Or rainbows. There are a lot of fucking rainbows.

I can't even begin to figure out what my brain is trying to tell me by creating this weird dream space, but the bustling city in front of me feels and looks too real to be a figment of my imagination.

Plus, there's a giant ass billboard in front of the closest city block cloud that reads, 'THIS ISN'T A DREAM, DELANEY'.

It's creepy, is what it is.

Why does that billboard know my name? Or is it the biggest coincidence ever conceived?

Of course, the billboard magically changes at that thought.

"IT IS I. YOUR FAIRYGODDESS UNICORN. WELCOME."

So much nope.

The cloud I'm on decides that's a great time to race towards the billboard, which apparently is more of a portal? I don't hit a solid surface as I careen towards it, but instead I yelp when the surface of the board feels like I'm being tickled everywhere at once, lasting about three solid seconds while I pass through a fully permeable surface.

"Fucking hell," I gasp, trying to catch my breath.

"I'm offended to be mistaken for such a place. Is this not the most magical place you've ever seen?"

I honestly can't look past her absolute dump truck of an ass, because she's a massive fucking unicorn. Like, horn and everything with a white coat encrusted with what might be actual diamonds, neon rainbow mane, and tits just out and proud.

“Wow.” Why can’t I look away?

She looks down at her chest proudly. “I know, right? Being a goddess seriously has its perks.”

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“Uh, should I...bow?” I drop into a really weird half curtsy/bow monstrosity, and then I straighten out immediately when a very clear memory hits me. “Wait. Are these your fault?” I gesture to the ridiculous marks trailing up and down each arm.

“Did you even look at them properly? Notice anything strange about them?”

“What’s different about them,” I continue to rant, “is that they’re there. Do you see how many circles are on my two arms, and how many holes are currently in my body? And no, don’t you dare suggest we can make some new ones. I’m not that kinky.”

Booming laughter sounds from beyond the room, and I spin quickly to see if I can find it, but there’s nothing. The goddess gestures to the windows that look out over the city. “Sweet child. We are being broadcast throughout the realm. I believe you are charming quite a few of my children.”

“Wow, so they definitely heard me insinuate you have a great rack, then?”

More laughter.

I face the window, which apparently is actually a camera, and wave very awkwardly.

“Uh, hi.”

“So, Delaney, we were just talking about your quest to come here and save the race, how exciting! You must be simply thrilled to see all the fine specimens accumulating for you.”

I spin towards her, mouth unattractively agape. “Nooo, we were not talking about

that, thank you very much. I'll have you know I already have a bevy of excellent men waiting for me back home. So, if that's all you needed, I'll just..." I hitch my thumb over my shoulder to indicate that I'm ready to go home.

"Fine, fine, fine," she says. "You're lucky I'm not one of those goddesses with fragile egos. You didn't even ask me my name," she says with a pout.

"Uh, you're the goddess."

"That's my sister. As you saw, I am the Fairygoddess Unicorn. It's very different."

"Right. Umm, I actually need to call you Fairygoddess Unicorn? Okay. Fairygoddess Unicorn, it's nice to meet you. Why am I here?"

"As I understand, your mother had some sort of 'chosen one' deal with my sister in your world, correct? Some dramatic thing she had to go through to collect her mates and save the world, yadda, yadda, yadda. Something not a lot of people know, is that there are realms all over the place, with different gods and goddesses in charge of each one. Do tell your mother thank you for me when you get home, will you? It wasn't easy I know, but the fact that she was able to get my sister safely away from your poisonous realm and into a safer one means the world to me. I mean, I only have about 587.2 sisters, and each one is so very precious to me."

"Point two? How do you have one-fifth of a sister?"

"That's a very rude question."

I throw my hands up. "My bad. Ignore me. Continue, please."

Her rainbow eyelashes flutter before she decides that maybe I'm actually earnest. "Being immortal and living forever gets a bit boring. To keep things somewhat

interesting, my siblings and I all take turns choosing a champion to solve all of our problems. There aren't a lot of rules, but the steadfast one is that the champion chosen must be in some way connected to the previous one chosen by her siblings. As a show of gratitude for your mother saving my sister, I decided to give you the fantastical honor of being my chosen one." She turns over her shoulder and yells, "Hit it, boys!"

A tiny marching band full of...crabs? comes barreling through the room, playing actual instruments that are twisted into all sorts of wild shapes. They march across the oddly patterned stone flooring while confetti rains from the ceiling.

"The confetti's edible," she whispers. "Just don't eat too much; it'll fuck you up."

I close my mouth very quickly.

She raises her hands like she's about to direct a musical ensemble, and then a magical choir of chubby, winged creatures drop from the ceiling, singing in perfect harmony about how incredible it is that I've been given this chance.

It's very overwhelming, to say the least.

Eventually, the little marching band of crustaceans does exit the room, and then a sentient vacuum zooms by, making lewd gestures while collecting all the psychedelic confetti and then it's quiet again.

The winged creatures are still there, but they're silent at least as they watch our interaction.

"These marks on your arm," Fairy goddess explains, "are my claim on you."

"That's...fine. Yep, totally fine." Shit shit shit shit shit. Maybe I should have listened

to my mom better when she warned me of the dangers of tempting goddesses to assign more mates.

“Aren’t you going to ask why they’re on your arm?”

“Yep, totally my next question. Also...is it too late to ask for some of that confetti you swept up? The stuff you said would fuck me up?”

She laughs in an over-the-top obnoxious way, but it totally works for her somehow.

“You are delightful. I need you to take some of my people as mates.”

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“You said I was here to save the race?”

“Did I? Perhaps I was a little overly dramatic.”

“So, the unicorns...don’t need saving?”

“Oh no, they definitely do,” she says with a manic smile. “Does that clear things up?”

I stare at her blankly, wondering how the hell to get home. I edge my way around her covered-in-fur human body that looks like an upright unicorn and approach the window overlooking the city.

Down below, many clouds float around and house neighborhoods as far as the eye can see. To get between the different clouds there are slides or ladders, making traipsing through this world similar to a real-life version of chutes and ladders.

The window in front of me goes opaque suddenly and I spin around, feeling the goddess standing far too close. She’s breathing heavily and her eyes are beginning to glow red, putting me on instant alert. “Maybe I wasn’t clear. You will come here and help my people. I only get this one chance to help the people I created. They have real lives, real hopes, dreams even, and quite enjoy a good Sunday roast. Veggie based, of course.

“I am forced to play by the rules that are pushed upon me, and I might be a cheerful, loving goddess to my people, but make no mistake, I will protect them at all costs. I am going to assume that your lack of enthusiasm for this opportunity is due to a lack of information.

“If this is such a burden for you, I can just as easily kill you and make it look like an accident so that I may retrieve someone else who would be more...willing.”

I hold up my hands to slow down her incredibly rapid spiral, brain too foggy to comprehend anything that’s happening. “Please. I do not want to disrespect you at all. I find myself...very confused about a lot of things, and it would help if you laid out in plain terms what you need me to do. If people need help, and I am able to offer that help somehow, then of course I will. I just am unsure what overloading me with mates will do.”

Her smile relaxes a fraction, and she takes a small step back. Progress. “I like your backbone. I’ve heard you have...abilities. My people, they don’t suffer from infertility or lack of females or anything like that. Yet we decline. Do you see how gray most of the clouds out there are? This is a result of the disease spreading through my kingdom. Unhappiness.”

I nearly choke but manage to catch myself. “Unhappiness. That’s what’s killing off your people?”

“Yes,” she spits, definitely judging me. “Unicorns are supposed to be happy. Happy people fall in love and fuck and reproduce. Unhappy people...unhappy people keep to themselves and remain in their own little bubbles and grow anxious. This world depends on happiness to continue to operate. If I can’t lift their spirits soon, then the magic that keeps these clouds afloat will fail and we’ll ...well. Let’s just say it isn’t a giant pit of foam waiting for us if we fall.”

“You want me to start some orgies.”

Fairygoddess cocks her head to the side. “I want you to remind my people why war is started in the name of love; why countless songs and art pieces are dedicated to it. They need to get their sparks relit in them, need a reason to pull themselves out of the

muck and come together to heal our kingdom.”

I nod, but it still doesn’t make very much sense. “What do you need me to do? What are you hoping I can affect? I am one human. They are...many. Did someone tell you I was a trained motivational speaker? If so, they straight up lied.”

She reaches for my arm, fingers tracing over the new marks on my arm. “This is too many.” She looks over my other arm that’s mostly filled up and begins to reach for that as well, but I snatch it back.

“No.”

She looks caught with her hand in the cookie jar, then deflates. “Forgive me. I will not take any of your mates away from you. I can... reduce the number you mate from here if I fix some stuff.” She closes her eyes and immediately someone starts screaming from the distance.

“What the hell was that?”

“I must erase part of their souls to unbind you from them.”

“THEN FUCKING STOP!”

The smile she gives me then is calculating, and with a wave of her fingers, a man with pastel blue hair appears on the floor next to us, on his knees, clutching his chest and looking around wide-eyed. He takes in his surroundings and falls to a deep bow with his head on the floor when he sees The Fairygoddess. “Your Majesty.”

“I’m sorry for the pain I caused you.”

His eyes meet mine briefly before landing back on the ground in front of the goddess.

In that brief moment, I note a hint of steely defense there. He definitely doesn't like me.

"I serve your needs, Goddess."

"It seems your soul is meant to be joined with my guest of honor." She closes her eyes and instantly, one of the marks she 'gifted' me fills in with a pale blue unicorn horn on a rainbow pastel background. "Saladriel, meet your soul mate, Delaney."

I give a really stupid wave. "'Sup?"

"You will accompany her home and help her prepare for the upcoming games. Get to know each other. When I summon you again, we will discuss the next part of my plan to fix the kingdom."

"Of course, your majesty. Whatever you think is best."

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I can't figure him out. He seems completely subservient, but not in a way that feels honest. He moves to my side and reaches for my arm, pausing and then dropping his hoof/hand hybrids before he actually touches me. He won't make eye contact with me.

Fairygoddess taps a finger to her chin as she looks us both over, then nods her head as she comes to some sort of internal agreement. "Good. Just in case you need a little bit of, shall we call it, motivation? I should inform you that I have a couple of transplants here who might be very interesting to one of your mates. If he wants to visit them anytime in the future, you know what you need to do. Saladriel, happy frolicking."

This man I'm apparently mated to nods and shoots me the meanest side eye I've ever seen, and then I'm waking up back in my dorm room.

Chapter three

Zac

"Should have taken the psychedelic confetti when I had the chance," my mate utters before sitting up slowly. She digs the heels of her hands into her eyes, then frantically looks around the room. "Where is he?"

"Depends on who you're looking for," Adam tells her as he squats near her. He pulls her into the V of his legs, wrapping an arm around her shoulders until her back is resting against his chest.

"The... you know. Unicorn guy. Salad something or other." She raises her arm like

that explains everything.

“You must have been dreaming, my lady,” Leo tells her as he crawls toward her. It escapes nobody's notice that the demon's eyes are locked in on Leo's backside as he does so.

Delaney frowns and looks down at her arm, then holds it up for us all to see. “Then why do I have a new mark? It might have been a dream, but it was also real. She said...I think I'm losing my mind.”

Jackson reaches a hand down to help her up, letting Delaney stand slowly as he braces her hips with his hands. “Let's not do that particular trust exercise again, hmm? The one where we throw out crazy numbers about potential mates?”

“I mean, it was worth a shot. Can't blame a girl for being curious about how many men she'll have to make fall irrevocably in love with her.”

“You going to tell us what happened in this dream of yours?”

Delaney stops mid-step and turns to me, surprised I'm there. “Oh. That's right. We're a thing now, aren't we? Good news, I know where your parents are. Bad news, I'm gonna have to deal with a megalomaniac goddess for us to have access to them. You know, kind of par for the course for my family, I think. Really this could have been so much worse. I don't think anybody's going to expect me to eat her at the very least, so things are looking way up versus my mom's quest.”

“Quest?” I ask, trying not to be too shocked that she's so casually mentioned she knows where my parents are. I pull up my collar, my hands start getting clammy, and I can feel my snake trying to get out. That's probably a terrible idea in this dorm room.

“Hey, hey, hey, let's just take it easy, okay? Take a breath for me there, Zacky. Here, you want to put your face in my tits while you do it? That always helps August when he's upset.”

“It's true, it does,” he calls from across the room. He's sitting on one of the armchairs in the living room, ankle crossed over his knee as he taps on it with a finger. Apparently, he's past the phase where all the crazy things that happen to this woman surprise him.

It's magical though because my face gets shoved into that glorious cleavage and I do calm down. “Umph cjjkoekkk sdu?”

She pulls my face away from her so that I can speak clearly. “Try that again for me?”

“What do you mean you got a quest? And why does it seem like you expected this to happen?”

“Expectis probably not the right word. I guess I'm just not surprised, that's all. Maybe it's because I grew up hearing my mother's tales of defeating monsters, or about the trials my uncle and his cute poly group had to go through before they could settle down, or maybe my family is just really unlucky.” She shrugs. “Either way, apparently the fact that I have this many mates from this realm isn't more than I can handle, because Fairyunicorn Goddess—”

“Okay, back up,” Cory interrupts, putting a hand in the air. “Did you say...unicorn?”

Delaney nods. “Pretty standard quest stuff. The realm is dying, I'm their only hope, yadda, yadda, yadda. Oh, I'm supposed to make him happy... that would probably be easier to do if I knew where he went. Maybe he didn't get sent over here with me? No, she said that she was sending him. Why wouldn't she send him to my living room?”

“My love? I think I found this unicorn of yours.” We all walk toward where Leo is peeking out of the blinds, afraid to actually go outside though, it seems. He takes a few steps back when we're all close so he's not pressed against the glass. Sure enough, from what we can see anyway, there's a big, magnificent unicorn grazing on the grass right in front of Delaney's dorm.

He's got a light blue sheen to his coat, horn, and mane, which matches the color on Delaney's new mate mark perfectly.

I already feel lost in this mate group, and now we're adding more. Perfect.

There's a flock of female students surrounding the unicorn, pouring out of the dorm room as we continue to stare, and if this is the shifter unicorn that she's supposed to be mated to, he seems to have zero qualms about getting female attention.

In fact, he's throwing his mane back like he's in a shampoo commercial as he makes eye contact with her window, no doubt knowing Delaney can see, and then he's putting his head into the sea of bodies around him, completely loving everything about the situation.

“How dare he!” Leo exclaims, clutching nonexistent pearls.

“Do you want me to smite him, Delaney? We don't have unicorns in Hell, would be a big hit in the never-ending carnival section. We've got this great fun house full of all you can eat stale chips and mostly-melted ice cream he'd be perfect next to.”

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Delaney sighs in exasperation, counts backward from 10, and then raids the fridge and comes out with a bag of carrots. “I suppose it would be too much to ask to get a mate that actually likes me from the start? One that isn’t stuck on the side of a building?” she says as she throws a kiss over her shoulder to Leo.

“If you're going to confront him, know that we're all coming with you.” I stay close to her just in case she tries to fight me on that.

Jackson puts an arm around my shoulders, patting me. “That's the spirit. It's mate bonding weekend anyway. We'll get this guy under control Delaney, don't you worry.”

“Honestly, that's what I'm afraid of.”

And with that cryptic comment, we're marching down the endless stairs to get outside, making me wonder why we've never upgraded this dorm. My joints hate the fact I'm going to be using these stairs so much from here on out. Could I convince her to move into the headmaster's house with me?

Maybe it's best that I wait longer and get in her good graces first.

The troop of women all surrounding this unicorn is almost deafening when we walk out of the front doors of the dorm hall; squealing, taking selfies, some even attempting to climb on his back for a ride.

Delaney nips that in the bud, though. “Thanks ladies, you can go now. That's very kind of you to keep my mate occupied while I got him a snack.”

“Gross, we're mating animals now?”

I bite my tongue; it wouldn't be good to go around insulting my students. Probably.

Thankfully, Adam has no issue doing that. “It's a shifter, you dumbass. You guys are sitting here rubbing your bodies all over him, and you attend a magical university. Not one of you thought for a second ‘hmm, we have other shifters, and a magical unicorn that just came out of nowhere. Maybe they have the ability to turn into a human, too?’”

Delaney backhands Adam on the chest lightly. “Be nice,” she tells him while definitely not laughing at the abundant lack of common sense around us.

“Where did he come from, though?” one of the girls asks, still riveted by the light blue beast in front of her.

In their defense, I didn't know unicorn shifters were real. I'm half tempted myself to run my chest all over him and inhale to see if he smells like swirly lollipops.

That's likely another thing that would be frowned upon to do in front of my students.

I get closer to Delaney, resting a hand on her hip. I'm trying not to feel the heat of the students' eyes around me at the gesture. “Did you say his name was Salad?”

The pony snorts, making blue glitter fall out of his nostrils, but I'm thinking it's a display of anger. Still beautiful. Then he transforms back into a human, hands on his hips and wearing something that looks very toga-like. “It's Saladriel. Not Salad. Why would I be named after a leafy vegetable? That's just offensive. Even more offensive than being sent here, to your stupid, non-cloud world where I have to play nice with her. Figures. Just when I was about to get called up for my spot in line to sort out the recycling we import for fun. You ruined everything!”

Saladriel tries to stomp off, but quickly realizes he doesn't know where anything is, has no belongings, no money, no shelter, no nothing. So, he ends up just sitting on the grass and then plopping backwards to tantrum some more. He even kicks his legs for a bit of dramatic flair. “This issothe opposite of fun!”

“I should probably mention,” Delaney says as we sit there and watch him act like a defiant toddler, “that apparently where he's from, this cloud city—”

“It'scalledGlittertopia!”

Delaney points at him and laughs, accepting the interjection and yelling a thank you to the manchild. “The goddess said they are all very... unhappy there. The race is failing because unicorns need to be happy to thrive. I'm supposed to... make him happy? I don't really know, she didn't give me any details. She said something about games, too. But like, I have no idea what kind? Also, I think there're more unicorns there she's going to mate to me, so we should be prepared for that. Really, let's just be prepared for anything and everything, and we won't get throwoff. Okay? Okay. Who has questions? Put your hands down, I can't answer them.”

A lot of people are still staring, but the crowd is dispersing now that they realize that their magnificently magical unicorn is actually just a man who can't handle the situation he's been thrust into. Which, fair. I'm sure it's very confusing to go from the great time he was apparently having where he came from, to sitting on our lawn.

I walk towards him and sit down cautiously, trying not to spook him. “Hello, I'm Zac Aspis. I'm the headmaster here. Can't say I know anything about your species, but I'm sure we can get things sorted out for you. I imagine you're feeling very... disoriented. I want to make sure you get taken care of, alright Saladriel?”

He grunts, but his posture softens a bit. “You can call me Salad. What's the deal with the woman?” I can feel the glare and the suppressed laughter from everyone behind

me, because after the big fuss he actually does go by Salad, but whatever. I digress.

“Delaney? She's a student here. Also, my mate. All of us are mated to her, actually.”

“Awesome possum, so we can all be confused together,” he says grumpily. He leans close, like he's going to whisper a secret to me. “I have no idea what to do with a woman. Dating isn't fun, so we don't really do it.”

“What do you like to do for fun, then?”

Delaney and everybody else continue to give us some room, which seems to be helping Salad— nope can't call him that. How about Drew? Yes, I will call him Drew. At least in my head. Drew seems to relax so I give him a little bit of space.

“My favorite activity lately has been painting my wall two square feet at a time and watching it dry. It's fascinating the way that the color shifts as it goes through its various stages of curing. Sometimes we'll get really wild and do it at sunset, so that the colors change even more as the light glows a whole rainbow of colors outside my window.”

I look to my new group of found family for help. But what do I do with that? If this is what the unicorns are doing for fun, it's no wonder they need some outside help. The problem is, I fear that their goddess may have gone too far in recruiting Delaney, because she's so wild that they're going to be terrified every time she so much as speaks. It's pure system overwhelm.

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“That sounds like... fun. We could do that here, too.”

His eyes light up as he spins to me. “We could? Truly, you mean it?”

I look to my people again, and they’re very pointedly not looking at me; Delaney is doing her best not to pull out her hair, but I can tell she's in over her head as well.

Hey, if the guy wants to watch paint dry, who am I to stop him? “Yes. As a matter of fact, we were talking about wanting to paint Delaney’s room. Would you like to see it? If you're one of her mates, you’ll be staying there, too. Maybe you could help us... pick a paint color?”

He springs up immediately, clapping his hands in glee. “Iknewthat goddess wouldn't do me dirty. This is wonderful! Oh, I hope you have beige 2.1. If I have to, I'll go with khaki, but that's always been a bit dark for my tastes. We're not here to do anything crazy you, know.”

“Right. I guess we’re... painting the room, then. Great.”

Chapter four

Cory

“You’re not getting tired at all, are you? You’re like a little battery; you just keep on going.” I carefully drop my paint brush onto the paint tray and wipe my fingers off on my jeans. I gave up on trying to keep my clothing paint-free hours ago. Which is almost precisely the time I got sick of painting one tiny little section just to watch it

dry.

“It's kind of you to continue to paint with me. Perhaps I should call it a night.”

I study the newest member of our group with my peripheral vision, wondering how it's possible for him to sit cross legged so long without moving at all. He doesn't look like he's ready to quit painting yet. His hand is resting on his knee, paintbrush still covered in thick, goopy beige paint as he stares at the wall in front of him. I do notice though, his hand is shaking just the tiniest bit.

“Hey,” I say quietly. “Are you feeling okay? Nervous?”

A single tear escapes from his eye and tracks slowly down his face. He makes no move to wipe it off, nor do I mention it, but my heart is breaking because he's clearly uncomfortable and I don't know how to help him.

“I was with somebody. Back home? In Glittertopia. I have a girlfriend.”

“Ah. You need to talk to Delaney. Neither one of you asked for this situation, and I know for a fact that she'll help you in any way possible. Even if that means you're not together.”

Saladriel finally places his paintbrush carefully in front of him on the precise square of plastic tarping he cut out earlier, and then he turns sideways and lays his head in my lap. “Wouldn't that be a conflict of interest? She's not going want to help me get home so that I can be with somebody else.”

“I think that woman would surprise you if you gave her a chance. I know you're dealing with this soulmate bond, one you didn't plan for, but soulmates come in lots of forms. Just because she wears your mark, doesn't mean your relationship has to look a certain way. Some people are soulmates with their best friends and it's

completely platonic. She's not going to force anything that doesn't come naturally.”

“This whole day has just been very overwhelming. I knew our realm was doing poorly, but I didn't think things were so bad that we needed help from an outside source. I don't understand why Fairyunicorn Goddess would seek help from somebody that knows nothing of our realm. Or our people. And has no connection to it. I think I feel betrayed.”

“That's completely valid. I've never dealt with any sort of deity personally, but I imagine I'd feel betrayed, too, if I were in your position.”

“You don't think that makes me a bad unicorn? Shouldn't I be singing her virtues and convincing myself she has some master plan that I know nothing of? Will I be better off in the long run if I just stick this out and do what I'm asked?”

“Maybe, maybe not. I think that's for you to decide.”

A polite knock on the door has us both looking that way, and then there's the woman of the hour with a tray full of drinks. “This is probably really dumb,” Delaney says as she walks in the room a few feet, “and this might completely offend you as well, but one of my dads used to make me unicorn lemonade when I was little, and I figured it wouldn't hurt to whip up a batch. I have no idea if you even like lemonade, but I figured you might at the very least be thirsty enough to give it a try. You've been working in here all day.”

Saladriel looks up at me and I nod, encouraging him. He sits up and then stands, arching his back and stretching a bit after sitting so long. “Thank you,” he tells her as he reaches for one. “That was thoughtful.”

Delaney hands me one as well after grabbing her own and dropping the tray by the door. “Wow, it actually looks really good in here. The new paint really sets off those

green undertones in this carpeting.”

We've been painting one of the spare bedrooms today, which actually did need a fresh coat of paint. Even though I thought beige was going to be so boring, it feels brighter in here now.

Saladriel is rubbing the back of his neck, uncomfortable, and I take that as my chance to excuse myself, giving them room to talk. I grab Delaney's face and kiss her before I walk out of the room, unable to stop smiling as I leave them to it. I make sure to close the door behind me before finding a spot on the couch, stretching out next to Adam.

“There you are,” he says with a goofy grin. “I was about to come drag you out here if you weren't out in the next five minutes. I missed you.”

I roll my eyes. “I was literally like 30 feet away from you this whole time.”

“Doesn't matter. I couldn't reach you, so therefore I missed you.” Butterflies erupt in my stomach like they always do when he says things like that, and I find myself thinking of ways we can try and help Saladriel, because I don't think he really belongs here.

“You look like you're thinking hard about something,” August says as he grabs a blanket from the back of the couch and drapes it over my legs like it's nothing.

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“I guess I just feel bad for him. He just got yanked out of his life and inserted into ours, no warning. Seems a bit harsh.”

August nods. “Yeah, I guess so. Plus, we all know each other already. If I were him, I'd probably be really uncomfortable here. Even if we're trying our best to be nice, it's just a weird situation.”

“We should feed him mashed potatoes. Then he'll be happy. Guaranteed.” Leo looks ready to go ransack the kitchen to find some. I have the suspicion he really just wants to eat more himself and is looking for an excuse to make them. Not that he needs one.

Rush is in the corner alone, twitching, and I've noticed that every time Leo talks, he's completely tuned into him. I'm fascinated about what's going on there as he mothers Leo some more. More blatantly than he has. “No, you must be overwhelmed too. You only just got out of your curse. How are you adjusting?”

Leo's sort of like a little kid, but it seems like every hour he's able to talk amongst us and walk amongst us and participate in things, he becomes a little bit more human-like. “I feel... moody. I don't like not knowing anything about who I was before. I mean, what sort of fellow was I? Honorable? Scumbag? Rich? I could have been anybody. Trying to figure out everything is frustrating because everything is so hazy. I don't even know how long I was out there,” he says as he motions to the window, shuddering as he does. “It feels like I've been frozen, and when Delaney moved in, time started moving forward again. I just wish I knew how much time I lost.”

Rush begins crawling across the living room, keeping his body posture rigid.

Leo cocks his head to the side and watches but doesn't ask any questions.

“I could help you,” Rush magnanimously offers.

Leo's eyes light up a little bit. “You have a spell to help me remember?”

My suspicions about the two of them are getting stronger, so I continue to watch this all play out.

“Not a spell. I was there with you. In the before.” It seems as if it takes Rush a lot to admit this, but I think he's putting himself out there.

“You were? Why do I not remember?”

Rush reaches out to touch the top of Leo's foot and is emboldened when Leo doesn't flinch or pull away. Rush allows himself a small smile before continuing. “Making you forget was part of her curse. Perhaps the worst of it, because now you don't know who I am, you don't know what we were. She made you forget, and she made me remember. That is my curse. Well, that and being a conifer for the same length of time you were a stone building edifice; we're both free of that now.”

The room goes energetically still. There's still noise happening from the other room and the conversation happening in there, and I don't hear shouting, so that's a good sign. The TV is still playing and there's a low hum from the ancient refrigerator in the kitchen, but nobody in the room is breathing louder than they absolutely must.

We're all perking our ears and sitting forward, ready to hear a story.

“Would you tell me?”

Rush nods and gets settled, scooting just a little bit closer to Leo.

Delaney and Saladriel join us at that point, and my mate looks a bit tense but fine mostly as she drops into the open spot next to Ash. “Whoa, I just walked in on something, didn't I? Should I go back to the other room?”

I'm not surprised that Delaney would offer this, because she's the sort of person that considers other people all the time. I mean, technically everybody in this room is her business, but she likes respecting boundaries.

Saladriel has his eyes opened wide at this though, and he's looking at Delaney differently.

“No, my mate. Never. You must always be by me. Rush knows of my before. He was just about to tell us,” Leo earnestly explains.

Rush waits for Delaney's approval before he jumps into his story. The way he starts though, it's clear he's been practicing this in his head for a while. That he's just been waiting for his chance.

“You were a bit of a naughty human,” Rush says with a wry grin. “You loved living, so much so that you wanted to do it forever. You were spinning deals left and right with anybody who would listen, and my father tasked me with monitoring you.”

“Your father, The Devil?”

Rush nods his head in agreement. “I followed you for a while, trying to figure out weaknesses and strengths and anything that might be necessary in case you became a threat in some way. But the more I watched you, the more I was drawn to you. One day I approached you, and it didn't take very long for me to convince you to give me a chance.”

Leo's skin, mottled and gray as it is, is flushing with confusion. “I don't understand.

What did you want a chance to do?"

Rush extends a hand to Delaney, asking her to get closer. She does so reluctantly, sitting on the ground at the base of Leo's chair just a few inches away from Rush. He carefully lifts a hand to tuck some of Delaney's hair behind her ear, letting his thumb brush along her cheekbone briefly. He stares down at her hands, grabbing one with his. "I know you're angry with me. I know you don't understand me at all, or why I did what I did, and obviously you have every right to hate me for it. All I'm asking is that you don't hate me for Leo."

"Why would I hate you for Leo?"

Rush sighs deeply, then punches right ahead. "Because I've been with him, too. That was kind of the reason he got cursed; well not really, but I had a hand in it. He's a big part of my past. I know he's your mate, and I will respect that. But if I can help him not be so confused, I want to offer him that."

Delaney looks around the room, maybe counting us, maybe just trying to clear her thoughts, who knows. "I can't be angry about who was in your past any more than you can be angry about who was in mine. In fact, it's hard to truly be angry at each other. Maybe my anger is better directed at the people that caused it; the gods and goddesses forcing us to play these ridiculous games for their entertainment.

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“I get that being a conduit is special, that it shows the goddess’ blessing, that many people would give just about anything to have what I have; but sometimes... sometimes, I think I might give up just about anything to have whattheyhave. Choice. A choice to fall in love with people for the hell of it, to meet people and decide if I want them in my life or not.”

It's hard not to take this personally seeing as I'm bound to her for life, but I can sense that there's more coming, that I need to hear her out before I pass judgment on what she's saying.

“Being angry doesn't solve anything or change anything. All of us had some sort of idea about how our lives would go before a deity got involved. We can't change what they decide to give us, but maybe we can do it on our own terms.” She aims that last bit towards Saladriel, making sure he hears what she's actually saying.

“We can talk more about us later,” Rush says to Delaney, “I would like to help Leo now.”

Delaney smiles and nods, giving him the go ahead.

“Where I come from, companionship is not something I'm supposed to crave. People in Hell, they don't fall in love. They don't couple up or seek people out. Sex still happens plenty, but there's nothing deeper to it.

“I'm not sure what it is about me and you, Leo,” Rush says introspectively, “maybe there was a defect in my demon brain or maybe the clean air on Earth addled it, but I couldn't stop thinking about you.”

Leo leans forward, studying Rush's face. "Did you... stalk me?" He asks this like it's some sexy thing, his voice getting husky.

Rush glances to Delaney again, no doubt feeling awkward talking about his past lover in front of her. But she's just grinning like a fool at the both of them.

"I might have. Just a bit. The point is, we were together. I was obsessed with you. I rearranged my whole life to stay with you, took a job on earth indefinitely. Just for it all to get ruined."

"What happened?" Leo asks, hand getting closer and closer to Rush's shoulder.

"What happened, was one of the deals you made went sideways. There is a witch you were dealing with —"

"That witch we just locked up?" Leo asks.

Rush shakes his head. "No. She's the descendant of the original witch though, so that's why she had such a vested interest in preventing you from breaking your curse. She felt it was her duty to keep the curse intact, because that is what her ancestors have taught her. She probably doesn't even know why she's so angry," he says to Zac, who looks very uncomfortable.

I'd probably feel uncomfortable too if my family was responsible for the downfall of someone I was now tied to.

"For whatever reason, you gave this witch exclusive access to one of your nipples and failed to tell me that. So I was, well while we were, that is to say—"

The gray skin on Leo's cheek deepens, indicating a blush. His voice drops to a whisper. "Were we making love?"

“Yes, that.” Leo snaps and points at Leo, relieved that he didn't have to say the words himself. “I reached around to try and pleasure you more, and she showed up and started instantly screaming at us. She thought you and her were in a closed relationship, completely monogamous. I have no idea how long she sustained that belief, because it was hardly ever true, but she claims you broke her heart and broke the contract and so punished you accordingly.”

“Wait. Back up. Are you telling me you and Leo have been cursed for years because of some woman's inability to have a conversation? Wow, and I thought I had my crazy moments.” Delaney looks to the rest of us like we're just here for the ride and the occasional comment.

“She didn't want you to remember me, and I could never forget, as I said. I've been outside that balcony all this time, stuck as a tree. Forced to watch you without getting any closer.” Rush shifts his attention back to Delaney. “I'm sorry for not telling you who I was when we first met. I knew you would hate me if I did.”

“I wouldn't have hated you for who you are,” she insists.

Rush shakes his head, resting it in his hands. “I want you to know, the whole experience is wild to me too. The only way for me to unfreeze myself from that tree was to travel back home to Hell. I only did this occasionally, because it's not a pleasant place to be after I've lived on earth. The screams just never hit the same way once you've lived with birds in your branches.”

“I have questions. Is it not super gross that you were some super old demon and then you went and hooked up with a teenager? And how the hell did you even do that if you were stuck as a tree still? You can't be in two places at once. It's not adding up.”

Rush glances at me briefly, then gives me my answer. “There was this itch on the back of my leg in tree form, and it was driving me absolutely crazy for weeks. One

day I had enough and decided to give in. So, I transported myself down to Hell for the sake of getting my body back, just so I could scratch it. My dad was waiting, way too pleased with himself. He told me about his plan, how he made an alliance with Delaney's mom, using me as leverage. He thought he was doing something wonderful for me, offering me something. He knows nothing about you Leo, other than me being with you led to me being stuck as a tree. Which dad found hilarious, by the way. It's actually one of his favorite punishments now. He calls it 'The Rush Experience' and has populated parts of northern Alaska with annoying souls.

"Anyway. He had to sort of split my soul in order to make everything work. I would return to earth and go back to my pine tree, but a younger version of myself was removed forcibly so that I could meet you at that party that we knew you'd be alone at."

"Wait, is there a reason I wasn't at that party?" Adam asks.

Rush looks like he's about to say something, then thinks better of it. "We don't need to focus on the past. The point is, wait what was the point again?"

Delaney gets up on her knees, more into the conversation now. "What do you mean by he split your soul in half? That sounds incredibly uncomfortable."

"Yeah, it's... he basically pulled out the part of me that was real when I was the same age as you were. So when I met you, I actually was the same age. My older self was far away stuck as a tree. It wasn't until dad forced me to cut contact with you that I learned what was really going on. I don't like time traveling, but the me you see before you wasn't actually there at that party to make any decisions.

"When dad pushed the two parts of me back together, I recovered the memories. It was sort of like having a dream, but the guy you met at the party really was a teenager. And just so you know, once I found out what happened I really tried to yell

at my dad. The problem is, yelling at him is as effective as tickling one of his toes.”

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“Never thought about the devil having toes. Always figured he had claws or something,” Jackson says as he scratches the side of his head. “Is he quite ticklish, then?”

Rush snorts. “He's incinerated people for less. So, there is our grand history. We were together, and then we were not. We were forced apart and cursed, now I guess we're both with the lady somehow. Strange how that worked out.”

Delaney stands up and walks around the room, pacing and chewing on one of her fingernails. “It is weird how we all sort of come together, isn't it? Does anybody ever wonder how much say we actually have in our lives? Are we just living some predetermined path?”

This is starting to head into deeper territory than I think any of us are prepared to handle right now. I do what I do best and redirect everybody. “It's been quite a day. Maybe we should all head to bed and let this all sink in. Everything always seems more desperate and vivid when you're tired. I'm sure when we wake up, things will make more sense.”

I approach our collective mate with a hug, reading her reaction. “Even if I was tricked into being a part of your life, I wouldn't want anything else. I hope you know that.” I kiss her on the cheek before getting ready for bed, opting to sleep in a new room with a new guy instead of elbowing my way into a pile of bodies.

Chapter five

Delaney

“Who the fuck is banging on the door right now? Don't they know only psychopaths wake up before seven on the weekend?”

I pat the person I think just spoke on the face, going by direction of sound. If I accidentally grab a crotch instead, that's not my fault. Things are very confusing right when you wake up and have gotten very little sleep.

I spent the entire night with my thoughts stuck on crazy questions I'll never be able to answer, and now I have to get up and apparently be functional. That sucks.

I'm scared our visitors are going to pound again, so I tiptoe fast as I can to the front door, hoping it's somebody here trying to kill me because I'm definitely not awake enough to be social. 20 bucks says they don't even want to talk to me and just have the wrong room.

With my sleeping mask as a headband, and my hair well, we won't talk about that— I open the door and glare at a very angry couple that are definitely poised to pound on my damn door again.

“Can I help you?” I croak.

The woman looks me up and down, making a face of disgust before covering her husband's eyes. Just assuming here, seeing as they're both dressed in the same bland garb and are wearing wedding rings.

“Cover yourself up,” the woman hisses.

“Lady, you're at my place, rudely banging on my door at an ungodly hour and —”

“Don't you dare invoke the gods with us. You have no right. I will ask you again. Cover yourself up.”

I mean, I'm wearing pajamas. Just because my cheeks are hanging out and the spaghetti straps are doing very little to hold up the boobies, doesn't mean I'm going to rush in and change for them. "No. How about you tell me why you're waking me up and being judgy as hell in the process. And then maybe go on about who you are."

The woman grabs the sleeping mask off of my head, ripping some hairs off in the process so she can place it on her husband's head very carefully to cover his eyes better. I straighten my spine, mind made up about how much respect I feel like giving these people.

"We've come here to secure an engagement for our son. It is our understanding that you humiliated and compromised him. You ruined his value, and no one else will want him now. If you don't take him, he's completely untouchable. All so you could have a moment of fun, I suppose. I hope you're happy with yourself."

I try to open my mouth and say something, I really do, but the problem is laughter comes out instead. "My brother put you up to this, didn't he?" I wheeze, stomach cramping from the sudden burst of hysteria. "Very good. Veryverygood. Thank you. Enjoy your day."

I spin around to grab the doorknob, seeing as I closed it behind us to keep anybody else from waking, but she grabs my arm.

Maybe later I'll feel bad about karate chopping her in the neck for that action, but probably not. When you're raised by a bunch of assassins, you tend to be a little bit in the, 'throat-punch-now-ask-questions-later' camp.

The lady starts wheezing and making obnoxious sounds like I actually hurt her or something, and her doting husband rips off the eye mask that they stole from me after really creepily inhaling the smell on it, checking on his wife. "What did you do to her?"

I shrug. “Nothing she didn’t ask for. She shouldn’t have touched me.”

I take my sleeping mask back and tie it around my wrist like a bracelet, unwilling to let them have it because I love this one. I’ll definitely wash it before I put it back on my face, but there’s no way in hell they’re waking me up and stealing from me before I’m even caffeinated.

“I can see what kind of conduits they’re raising here,” the woman spits out between breaths. “No respect, no intention. Just running around ruining sweet, innocent children.”

“Woah, I have not had any interactions with any children, I would like that to be clear and on the record. Also, the only people I have compromised are people I’m currently very attached to,” I state, indicating my marked-up arms. “I don’t know who you’re getting your sources from—”

The woman gasps, and the guy now semi-crouched behind her shakes horrendously. “Are you calling me a liar?”

“Perhaps you can tell me who your son is, and we can start there. You’re flinging accusations and I really don’t appreciate it. I have never harmed somebody willingly or intentionally. You are impugning my character right now and I’m about to have a bunch of very pissed off men in the hall to deal with you if you don’t hurry this up. You don’t like dealing with me? I promise you won’t like dealing with my mates even more.”

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“And now you're threatening me? He'll have his work cut out for him; that's for dill pickle sure. The goddess would never stand for this. She'd remove her claim on you if she saw your behavior right now.”

Okay, I'm bored. “I left my phone inside, but if you'd like, I can get the queen on the phone right now and she can tell you exactly how the goddess would respond to this conversation; But be warned, it's eat glazed donuts off dicks day, and the queen will absolutely hold the conversation while she participates. Ask me how I know.”

“Why, you disrespectful little tart!”

It's at precisely that point that Wil shows up, wheezing, pausing to use an asthma inhaler before he can talk. He stands between me and his parents, though. Yeah, these are definitely his parents. Huh.

“...Sorry, Delaney. I told them not to... but they... wouldn't... listen.”

I can't help but smile at how adorable Wil is with everything he does, even when he's hunched over and barely breathing.

I'd offer to help him with a healing kiss, but somehow, I don't think that would go over well.

“Good morning, Wil.” His mother scowls at me but she can't ruin my smiling attitude around this adorable pink-cheeked man.

He directs his attention to them, putting his back to me. “I told you both it wasn't

what you thought. You've just made everything infinitely worse by coming here at this time of day doing who knows what.”

He falls to his knees as he turns back to me, bowing his head while placing his hands flat on the floor. “Your Majesty, on behalf of my family, I offer my deepest apologies for their discreditable behavior. They have disrespected you greatly, and I'll do whatever you deem necessary to make up for the insult. We are ever in your service and pray that the goddess continues to look over our family in favor.”

“Oh my gods Wil, get up right now. Do not be ridiculous. Their actions do not reflect on you.” I bend down and grab his hands, making him stand.

He's shaking almost as hard as his dad was a minute ago and won't look me in the face. I can tell he's incredibly embarrassed, and if anything, it just strengthens my resolve to adopt him even more.

Did I say adopt? Freudian slip.

“I'm sorry, what is it you think I did to your son? Wil's been wonderful to me, we're partners in class and he's actually one of my favorite people on campus. Not sure how the fuck you two produced somebody as great as him, but it worked. I might like him more than I don't like you.”

“The other day, in the hall,” Wil says to me quietly, “you were telling me that story in the bathroom, and locked the door? That crowd of people that were out there?”

“Oh. That's right, you did say you were worried about something like this happening. You know I would never make you uncomfortable on purpose, Wil. I think very highly of you.”

He nods furiously, wrapping his arms around himself. A tear escapes his eye, and I

can tell he's more than just embarrassed. He's completely humiliated, and by the sounds I'm starting to hear down the corridor, it's probably about to get a lot worse.

If people start walking out of the nearby dorms and see this whole display, he's going to be inconsolable. So, for his sake, I open my door and invite everybody in.

I direct them to the table and throw on a pot of coffee, telling them to ignore the half-naked demon sleeping on the couch, the lion that seems to have shifted in his sleep that is sprawled on the awful shag carpeting with his wrinkly balls out, and the guy in the corner, who's partially shifted with an incredible blue mane and horn on his forehead, kicking his feet up like he's having a fantastic dream.

Wil's eyes widen as he looks around, and I share a smile with him as I bring him a hot chocolate. I do not offer his parents anything, because I really don't think they deserve it.

“Now,” I whisper, “you think I compromised your son? What story did you hear?”

His mother is still glaring daggers at me, and if Wil and I continue to be friends or get closer, I highly doubt we'll ever get on, but I'm not worried about that right now. I'm worried about taking care of Wil and making sure he feels safe with me again.

“We heard you sequestered yourself in a public bathroom. The women's, no less. You were unsupervised, and when you escaped, we heard that—”

“I'm going to stop you right there. First of all, Wil is an adult.” I look to Wil and raise my eyebrows, suddenly feeling like I need confirmation of that.

He nods, so I continue to question his parents. Somebody needs to stand up for this guy. “Second of all, Wil was only in there with me, because we were having a conversation and I needed to avoid someone that was walking down the hall. That is

all the information you get.

“You do not get to dictate my life, or try and ruin your son’s, simply because you heard he did something you don't approve of. I want to be very clear. I apologized to Wil the second I found out that I might have crossed some lines. I am unfamiliar with the fundamentalists that require their followers to keep themselves pure before mating. Wil and I are friends and had therefore not discussed boundaries. I didn't think I needed to discuss that with a friend of mine.”

The dad finally speaks up now, ears and cheeks bright red, embarrassed. But I don't know if he's embarrassed because of his wife's behavior, or because he thinks his son did something inappropriate. I'm betting on the latter, though. “Just so, our son decided to put himself in a situation where his integrity was questioned. The entire church knows about it by this point. In their eyes, the two of you are as good as mated. If you deny him, you will ruin him.

“He would be excommunicated from the church, and from our house. Only respectably mated young men can be unsupervised with a female they are bound to, and double especially with conduits. Furthermore, no child of mine would dare be caught alone with a filthy, sexually deviant bodysmith unless a mating contract was signed. I suggest you produce it.”

I place my face in my hands and just breathe for a minute, rubbing my temples. Nothing about this situation makes sense, and I hate everything about it. “I don’t sign fucking contracts with people I want to be with; we simply bone and grope each other at all hours of the day. And who are you to demand this of me, a conduit? You do know I don't actually get to choose my mates, right? The goddess has predetermined all of them for me. It is merely my job to collect them.”

The woman leans forward tapping on the table angrily. “You want to see my son ruined? Is that it? You care so little for others around you that you would throw them

away for a brief moment of fun?”

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Wil stands up suddenly, scraping his chair along the floor. I wince, knowing somebody's going to wake up for sure now. Or come over now that Wil's practically yelling at his parents. "That is enough, Mother! If you would have spoken to me like I begged of you on several occasions, we would not be in this situation. As it stands, you've probably alienated me from the only genuine friends I have on campus. Delaney has been nothing but wonderful to me, and her mates as well. This is the princess. Daughter of the queen. She's not just any conduit, and you have crossed one line too many. You are the embarrassment here, not me."

His father matches Wil's temper, standing up to lean over the table. Others in the dorm are starting to stir, and I know I need to get these people out of here before it gets really ugly.

"You will not speak to your mother this way, Wilford. We raised you to be a virtuous member of The Fundamental Church, and now we hear you're galivanting around with conduits behind closed doors, and defying your mother when she's only trying to look out for you? To protect you?"

I try to make eye contact with Wil, to get his take on this, but he's working very hard to avoid that. So instead, I make my own call. I step to his side and lace my hand with his, if nothing else than for a show of solidarity. "I will not do Wil the dishonor of forming an engagement with him merely to get you off of our backs, he's deserving of so much better than that and so much more from a partner. Judging you off of this behavior, I can't imagine you actually care for him as a person. But if I'm wrong and you do, I sincerely hope you'll reach out incredibly soon with a ready apology.

"I must ask you to leave my home. Your son will be staying here, behind my closed

door, so we can have a discussion of our own.” White lipped and stiff as hell, the two of them start walking towards my door, eyeing the array of men now at my back and around them in distaste. Leo is nude, bless his soul, because he just does not like the feel of clothing on his newly sensitive skin.

“The headmaster will be hearing from us soon,” his mother promises, clearly not actually taking stock of who’s in the room with her.

Her stride out the door would be a hell of a lot more impressive if the man in question wasn't naked but for one of my red Lacy thongs and standing behind my couch. I honestly have no idea how that situation happened, but I'm not mad.

Wil tries to tell her that she'll get nowhere with Headmaster Aspis, but I stop him with a hand to his chest. “Good luck with that,” I smirk at them as they finally cross the threshold.

Zac snorts and then immediately starts coughing, waiting till the door is shut behind them before anybody says anything.

I appreciate that nobody speaks for a few minutes, because it gives me time to pull Wil in for a hug and hold him. He's stiff atfirst, but soon enough he collapses into me and starts breathing erratically.

Adam clears a spot on the couch for us, so I lead Wil over there and sink down, wrapping a blanket around myself before pulling Wil into me again. He feels surprisingly good in my arms like this, but I hate the reason that he's there.

“I'm so sorry Delaney. You have no idea how much so. Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined that they would confront you in such a way. Anything I can do in restitution is yours. Do you need a servant? I'm your guy. Needs somebody to do your laundry, cook your meals? Whatever you need. Please, give me something so

I can make it up to you.”

I keep patting him on the back, waiting for his breathing to even out a bit before I try and talk. “You owe me nothing, Wil. I wouldn’t mind an apology from your parents, but this was nothing, I promise. I do think you need to explain some things to me, so that we don’t get in this position again. Was me taking you into that bathroom grounds for mating? How are the fundamentalists so rigid in their beliefs?”

Wil starts to play with the threads on the blanket, not meeting anybody else’s eyes in the room. “That church is all I’ve ever known. We’re sent on missions after high school to spread the word about the goddess, and it’s this whole big deal. I always thought being a part of that church made me very good, better than others even, I guess, which is sinful, and not at all how I should be feeling. Sometimes... sometimes I’d look at the conduits that the goddess blessed and wonder at their behavior, question why they were allowed to do as they liked without repercussion, when I couldn’t so much as speak to a woman alone without serious tongues wagging. But I know it’s just my lot in life.”

“Your parents would seriously kick you out, cut you off, for being alone with Delaney in a public place?” Ash asks.

“And they’d be right to. A lot of our value is held up in our ability to remain pure for our mates. We’re taught how important it is to keep our bodies clean, to not give anybody any grounds to suspect us of anything. Kissing is for your mating day, and you’re definitely not allowed to be alone until you’re at a minimum engaged with a mating ceremony planned. Even then, chaperones are highly suggested.”

“Well then, I owe you the biggest apology of all, Wil. If I’d known what I was risking pulling you into that bathroom with me, you have to know I never would have. I was raised with incredibly different values, so different in fact it’s actually comical.”

Wil takes my hand in his, slowly lacing them together and watching our fingers get mixed up. “Which is what I would have explained to my mother if she'd given me the courtesy of a conversation before barging in here the way she did. If she knew the whole story, knew what your magic entailed and all the goddess has blessed you with, she'd understand exactly why you see things differently than she does.

“I know they mean well, but sometimes it's difficult to get them to see me through the haze of our religion.” He pauses before taking a few deep breaths and trying to stand. “I should leave you to your day. I'm sorry for the interruptions of your morning. I'll try and talk to her later after she's calmed down, and hopefully this won't happen again. Until then, it's probably best if we only talk for assignment purposes. I don't want to give the other members of our church that are attending Hemlock any more reason to report back to the elders.”

I feel sad, a bit dejected at the thought of him leaving me like this. Adam actually kicks my ankle, August and Jackson are waggling their eyebrows at me like I'm the daftest person on earth, and I'm sure if I looked over at the others, they'd be having similar reactions. I think they all suspect I'm a little sweet on Wil and seeing him so sad like this is heart shattering. I'm pretty sure if I don't do something, one of the others will.

I have to force myself with a good glare at the ceiling before I make an attempt, silently cursing out the goddess for the ridiculous ways she's making me collect my mates. “Wait, Wil. You should stay and have breakfast. No need to rush out of here.” Okay, so I chicken out.

Oh, I made Cory mad. They're tapping their foot on the ground in a cute little shimmery pink nightgown, and I think I'm more afraid of them than anybody else if I hurt Wil. Maybe I can just whisper it in case I'm wrong, save myself some humiliation.

I make a quick dive under the pile of pillows and blankets on the end of the couch, completely burying my face so my voice will be muffled. “I think Wil is one of my mates,” I whisper to the cushions.

They're all stalling Wil, preventing him from leaving until I suddenly throw my arm in the air, feeling the burn as his mark etches onto it.

There's gasping and hooting and hollering and I'm sure Wil is very much confused, but now that I know for sure, I need to be the one to tell him.

His back is to me as I approach, but Jackson spins him around to me right as I'm before him. Of course, his first impulse is to reassure that I'm okay. “Are you well, my lady?”

I get confused and I'm grabbing him for a giant kiss instead of saying words, and then I pull back horrified, immediately remembering what he said about kissing. How it's only for mating day. “I'm so sorry Wil. I did not mean... I mean I did, but I mean...fuck.” I cover my face, embarrassed and generally feeling horrible, but there's no movement in front of me.

“Why did you do that?” Wil asks. “I need to know now, Delaney. If I have any hope of winning your heart over—”

I pull my arm out of the blanket I've still got wrapped around me and show it to him, placing his hand on the new mark that's his. It's empty still, but I know it'll be filled up soon. “You're one of mine, Wil.”

Wil faints.

Chapter six

A dark and mysterious source you don't get to know about until much later, maybe.

“Cease your whining, child. You’re giving me gray hairs.”

“You don't even have hair,” the silly human tells me. “But nice try. You really thought you had something there, didn’t you?”

I heave out a breath of exhaustion. This is not the experience I hoped for when I gave up my soul for obsessive love. Maybe I can just snack on the human a little bit. Yes. I’ll start with her vocal cords so that she cannot bother me anymore.

With a thought, it is done. And don't ask me to explain the mechanics of this to you, it would fry your tiny little human brain.

And then, blessed silence.

The human has only been down here for a few days and already I'm past the point of being able to handle her. Honestly, I think she got locked up in these cells simply because she was too irritating to be around other humans. I've heard that humans don't kill each other the way they used to in the past for such small infractions.

The problem now, of course, is that she can no longer do my bidding if she can't speak. Hmm. That’s quite a conundrum.

Ugh, fine. I will regurgitate her vocal cords.

The magic rolls up and out of my throat, splashing on the floor and creeping along the nasty concrete to reinhabit the human once again. The second everything reconnects, she's screaming in horror, trying to get away, not understanding that she is locked in a cell.

Remember what I said about the tiny human brains? Yes. Well.

“What did you do to me just now?” she screams. Her hands are cupping her throat as if in pain, but it's not like I pulled her precious pieces out unnecessarily rough for sport. They'll be mostly intact now. “You ungrateful, meddling, monster!”

I prowl out of the dark toward her, showing my face for the first time. Up until now I've saved her from this, lest I fry her brain. There's not much about me that humans can handle, sadly.

Ask me how I know this. If you're squeamish though, it's best you don't.

“Don't go throwing compliments at me without thinking first,” I caution her. “Flattery does not work on me. You failed to do your job. Why?”

The tears and the snot start again, and I cannot help but roll my beautiful eyes.

“I tried to do what you told me to! They overwhelmed me. You did not tell me she had a demon for a mate that was so powerful. I never would have agreed to help you if I knew I was risking myself. I was merely in it for a bit of light backstabbing and sabotage!”

“Well now it looks as if we'll have to find somebody else to do the job.”

“Why can't you just get your lazy ass out there and do it yourself? If you're so powerful.”

I bend forward, inhaling her terror when she finally sees my face up close. The walls and bars that hold her captive are no obstacle for me. I can become incorporeal at will, pass through any substance. And I do.

I get even closer, so she sees my gleaming teeth and smells my wonderfully rancid breath. “If the moon and sun weren't toxic to me, I would. I cannot risk being touched by either of them.”

“I just need to talk my stupid brother into getting me out of here. I'll make a show of telling him how I'm sorry, and he'll let me out. Then I can try again.”

I cock my head to the side, studying her. She's confident, I'll give her that. But no, I'm not stupid enough to risk her again. As all the villains say, she knows too much. “How about no. I have a lovely little evil grotto for you to spend some time in in my home realm. I'll put you there so I can keep an eye on you. I have some manipulating to do, and humans to trick into serving me. I think you'll find the conditions in this grotto much more uncomfortable than this place, so you should enjoy your time there. Do spend some time thinking about how miserably you failed.”

I close my eyes, wrapping one of my legs around her to transport us back. I make sure she's nice and tucked away in a gleaming patch of poison ivy before I resume my hunt, brainstorming ways to ruin the princess. It just won't do for her to succeed; there's too much riding on her failure.

Chapter seven

Adam

Every time I think I'm prepared for that moment when Delaney and Cory come waltzing out of class together, and I never am. They're usually giggling, linking arms and tripping over each other's feet because they're so excited to be close, and

constantly interrupting and talking over each other because they keep sparking things they want to tell their partner.

Class schedules tend to get in the way of the things we all actually want to be doing, so we try to carve out time where we can, but it's hardly ever enough. It's only been a few weeks since the long weekend where we spent as much time as possible as a chaotic family, but it feels like it's been months.

I can give them a few minutes, though.

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I hide behind the pillar and give a nod to the bulky security guards trailing amusedly behind them, staying out of sight so I can just watch them interact.

I fucking love the way Delaney gets aggressive with Cory, like now, when she's pushing them up against the wall with a hand to their chest so she can kiss them silly.

Cory, in turn, is smiling through the kiss and burying their hands in Delaney's hair, fisting it, and holding her close to them.

They act like high schoolers, and it's so fucking endearing that I hate to interrupt them, but if I don't soon, I won't get any time with either of them until late tonight.

They're both stuck in the world they've created for themselves, so they don't notice when I sidle up to them and lean against the wall, close enough for them to feel my breath on their cheeks.

They pull apart and give each other a devious look that very rarely leads anywhere good; then they tag team me, and I really wish I could say it was in a sexy way, but alas, they've discovered how obnoxious I get when my side is tickled, and they revel in my high sensitivity there.

Basically, they assault me right in the middle of the hallway.

Halfway through the attack, they end up kissing again, tripping until we're all sprawled on the ground, and I'm basically a glorified rug the way Delaney is pinning Cory down on top of me. Until she disappears, yinked up by an irate unicorn.

“This is preposterous. Have you no decorum?” Oh my, he’s fuming. Holy shit, does his breath smell like...bubblegum? Yummmmm.

Cory takes too long to climb off of me, too eager to be lying there, wiggling their ass right over my crotch. Things are about to get a whole lot more preposterous if they don’t stop.

Delaney’s tone softens as she runs her hand over Saladriel’s upper arm. “Hey, how’s your day been going?”

She looks genuinely happy to see him, and I wish he could reciprocate for Delaney’s sake. “Fine. What is meant by this pornographic display in the hall?”

Delaney stumbles, holding her head. She lifts her head in confusion, then smiles and mutters an apology to Saladriel before continuing down the hall like she’s there alone.

“What the hell was that?” I jump up quickly, making sure Cory is steady before sprinting after her. “Delaney, wait!”

She spins and waves at me, giving me a side hug. “Hey, Adam. I forgot you went here. You on your way to class?”

I grab her arms and check out her pupils, but they look fine. “You feeling okay? You’re acting strange.”

Her lips tilt down in a pout, then she pokes me in the chest. “I’m fine. You should go take care of your partner over there; they look lonely. You want to catch a movie this weekend? Let me know when you guys are free!”

She pats me on the arm and strolls off, the correct direction to her next class, but I’m

so thrown off by her behavior that August and Jackson catch up to her before I do, instantly on high alert. August blocks the flow of students from Delaney as Jackson herds her to the edge of the corridor, speaking in low tones that she doesn't seem to like.

“Just stop! I told you; I don't need your help!”

“Woah, woah, woah, let's all take it down a notch, shall we?” I suggest with the aim of not drawing more attention to Delaney. Something's going on with her right now and we don't need nosy people staring at her right now.

Delaney rolls her eyes and tries to distance herself from Jackson. “Can you get him away from me, Adam? I'm so sick of him pretending like he has any say in us being broken up. Jackson, this is on you! You didn't want me, so now you don't get me!”

Her voice is attracting attention anyway as it escalates in volume, so I push myself between Jackson and her so that I'm all she can see. “Delaney, I need you to do me a favor, okay sweetheart? Can you please take a few breaths for me, try to get your head clear so we can talk about what's happening? You're freaking us out.”

She darts her eyes side to side, and I know she's going to run before she makes any attempt to do so, and I've got her in my arms and pinned before she can get the drop on us. I make sure she's not uncomfortable, and I really hope one of her other mates is busy calling for medical or some other sort of backup because really, what the fuck?

“Baby, don't fight me.”

“Get off of me, Adam! Don't call me baby, I can't handle it!”

I do the only thing I can do to quickly to steal her attention; I play dirty. I go in for a

searing kiss, stealing her mouth like it's always been mine. And really, hasn't it? I don't give her any room for doubt, I just give everything I have to make sure that she feels exactly what's coursing through my veins for her: desperate need, always.

She responds, but she seems confused. When I finally pull back, she's rubbing her mouth like she's been betrayed by it, looking up at me with her fucking gorgeous lavender eyes so wide that I could fall into them.

“What's going on, Adam? Why did you just kiss me?”

I take a few deep, calming breaths myself before I deign to answer. “I need you to tell me exactly what's going through your head right now.”

We've definitely got a crowd around us at this point, and it's not long before staff start showing up, trying to get the gawking students gone. My heart is breaking because with every word she says, it's further proof that she's experiencing something right now that I'm not sure I can help her with. She's acting like everything between any of us hasn't happened.

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“I’m...really confused. I was just trying to get to class...and then Jackson,” she spits his name, but I can tell it’s coming from a place of hurt, of betrayal, “kept trying to...and then you...why is everyone looking at me like that?”

Cory gets on their knees and crawls to where we’ve ended up, on the floor with Delaney straddling my lap as I sit against the wall. “Prettiest of girls? Do you know who I am?”

She looks quickly between me and Cory and then gasps. “I’m so sorry! Fuck, I ruined everything! I’m so sorry, I never meant to come between you!”

Her eyes begin to tear up, and the pit in my stomach gets deeper.

“Hey, hey, hey, I think we should go to the infirmary and get you checked out. We’re concerned about you right now; do you think you could do that for us?”

“I won’t kiss him again, Cory, I swear! I know you two are happy, I don’t want to ruin it!”

I’m not even surprised when they lean forward and kiss Delaney for themselves, leaning into her until she’s gasping underneath them and grasping onto their collar.

“Everything okay here? I know this university caters to the conduits, but I must insist on not performing in the hallways. I don’t think our donors would like it if word got to them.”

Delaney scrambles away from both of us, cheeks a bright red. “I’m so sorry, sir, I

don't know what came over me...I..."she holds her head, but that's not what's concerning. What's concerning is that she just called one of her mates 'sir' like she doesn't know his first name and doesn't know what his face looks like when he comes.

"Woah, Delaney, I was just...hey, are you okay?"

I've only seen Delaney cry a few times, and it's gutted me every time. She falls into me, presumably because I'm the only known variable in this scenario she finds herself in, and I hold onto her as tight as I can without bruising her or restricting her breath. "We're going to get this figured out, okay? I don't know what just happened, but you have to know we're all going to take care of you."

"I can't bear to have August and Jackson look at me like that Adam, it hurts too much. It's so hard to stay strong," she whispers against my skin.

I get the feeling that we need to live in her delusions for a bit, if only to help her calm down. We need to get her seen by someone that knows something about, well, anything. "I've got you, Delaney. Can I take you to the infirmary to see if we can figure out why you're feeling so confused right now? I just want to make sure you're okay."

"I'm...I'm fine, Adam. I just get overwhelmed sometimes when they..."

I don't have to look over my shoulder to see that she's made eye contact with one of her twins.

Actually, scratch that, I do. She's not even looking at them, because they're definitely in front of me.

"Holy fuck, Adam. There's a unicorn in the hall. Did...those are real?"

Bless that sad man. “Uh, yeah, I heard about that. I think he’s an exchange student.”

She pushes away from me and approaches Saladriel, who has shifted and is standing in all his blue unicorn glory in the middle of the hallway. Don’t know how he’s going to fit out the doors, but I guess that’s a later-us problem.

“Oh my gods, you’re beautiful. Sorry, is that offensive? I really want to touch you right now, but you probably would be so creeped out by that, wouldn’t you? Okay, okay, I’ll give you space.”

Zac, Cory, and the twins are all still loosely ringing Delaney, covering our bases in case she makes a run for it again. She holds her hand up to her head again and sways where she stands, and Saladriel shifts in time to catch her in his arms.

She smiles up at him, dopily, before wrapping her arms around his neck and batting her eyes. “My hero.”

I can’t help but snort at how cheesy she’s being, but there’s something seriously fucked up happening.

I send out a text in the group chat alerting them that we’re bringing Delaney to the infirmary but to stay calm when they get there, then shove my phone in my pocket and forget about it.

I make eye contact with Saladriel and motion for him to walk towards where the healers are, and he gives me a nod and begins to talk to Delaney in low tones, keeping her from getting upset again.

She giggles a few times while he’s carrying her, and I can almost see that he wants to fall for her, but the whole situation just kind of sucks, because I know he doesn’t feel like he can actually be with her until he talks to the woman he was dating back in his

realm first.

I could kiss him myself though for being the one that is able to get her to the infirmary.

By the time we make it there, a couple of the others are there already, a few more trickle in, and there are so damn many of us that we make the small reception area look even smaller. Everyone is understandably anxious and wanting to rush Delaney, but I quell that with a look and approach the reception desk instead of giving into hysterics like I really want to do.

“Hello, how can we help you, dears?”

I grab Delaney’s ID from her pocket and check her in since I know all her information anyway. “Our mate...we’re not sure what’s happening, but she was fine one moment, and then the next, it was like she forgot everything that’s happened since the semester started. She...she doesn’t even know who some of us are. I...”

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The panic starts to hit hard, and I can't help but look back at Delaney to make sure she's really physically okay and not fading into nothing.

"Oh, my. That sounds...okay. Has this ever happened before? Does she have a history of head trauma or anything like that? Has she fallen recently or ingested anything that could interfere with her magic?"

I shake my head no, and it seems that I'm done talking. I sink into the nearest chair before my knees give out, so worried about my girl that I can't actually function now that the adrenaline is wearing off.

I have the clarity of mind to at least text her parents first, making sure her mom knows something is wrong with Delaney and her memories, because that feels like something she ought to know. Also, I'm maybe hoping for some brownie points so I can be the favorite son-in-law.

Chapter eight

Saladriel

I've felt out of place since my goddess sent me here, but for once, I actually feel like I'm helpful.

Whatever has happened to this woman that is supposedly my mate, has me thinking that things might be more serious than I thought they were. And the way she's looking at me...

I might have lied when I told her mates I had a girlfriend. We weren't committed, because neither of us cared enough about making it official to actually do so. At the time though, I think I just felt that the excuse was helpful, a simple way to keep myself removed from the group of men that are over their heads obsessed with the woman that keeps looking over at me like she thinks I'm safe.

I have no idea what to do about that.

Most of her mates are losing their minds right now with her obvious distress, so maybe it's good for me to be unattached thusfar, because I can remain levelheaded where they are struggling to do so.

The nurse is helping Delaney back to a more private room, but the nurse won't let any of us take a single step back with them because she says the room is too small to fit us all. That's when she looks to Delaney to pick someone she feels comfortable with being by for a little bit, and her eyes meet mine and I don't even think to refuse.

Huh, maybe I'm not as unattached as I thought I was.

The nice thing I've discovered about her very large and very strange collection of men is that they all try very hard not to act jealous with one another. So even though the gargoyle looks like he might want to rip me apart so he can accompany Delaney himself, and the teacher looks like he's ready to pounce on the nurse and demand she let us all go back with her, I know they won't.

They don't even begrudge me somehow needing this, somehow enjoying being needed like this, and they give me a nod, and it makes me nearly gasp out loud to recognize that they trust me with her, trust me to take care of her and to advocate for her.

The nurse is making small talk with Delaney as she leads us to a room, but I stay

close to her in case she needs me to catch her in a swoon again. Tough job, I tell ya’.

Once the door closes and everything is quiet, the nurse looks to me for a heavier explanation.

“I...well, I had just come from somewhere else and went to talk to her. She was...spending time with a couple of her mates after class released—”

“Mates? You are mistaken. I don’t...no, I don’t...” Delaney stutters confusedly, putting her hands on her forehead like that will put her memories back.

I nod my head to the nurse, showing her exactly what we’ve been experiencing. “One minute she was fine, then she brushed my arm and clutched her head suddenly, apologized for bumping into me, and wandered down the hall like she’d never seen me before.”

“And you are one of her mates, yes? You didn’t interfere with her in any way? It is a little suspicious that this happened right after she touched you,” the nurse points out as she takes some notes on her laptop.

“I would have no reason to harm her, and besides, I lack the ability to do so. Technically yes, we’re mated, but—”

Delaney bursts into tears and throws herself at me, sitting in my lap and all but forcing me to wrap my arms around her. “I forgot you? How did I forget about someone so important to me?”

She’s a blubbering mess, grabbing my face and pressing herself into me. I don’t have the heart to tell her we’re not actually together as of now.

“And all those gentlemen out there...” the nurse trails off, asking without trying to set

Delaney off.

I nod back while Delaney wipes tears from her eyes, and she misses the action, thank the goddess.

“I need to inspect your mate marks, Ms. Duncan. Is that alright with you?”

“Well, yeah, fine, but...I don't...do I have mate marks?”

She turns her head to me, her mouth so close to mine I stop breathing. Dingleberries. I'm not supposed to be able to feel thisway. What is happening to me? Something is stirring within me, and I find it unpleasant.

I nod in confirmation, too nervous to speak in case I kiss her instead.

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Delaney whips her sweatshirt off quickly, baring both of her arms as she makes herself comfortable sitting on my lap sideways.

We all draw in a gasp at the same time because there's something disgustingly wrong with some of her marks.

The ones she had before she came to my realm are all normal looking, but the ones my goddess gave her look like they're full of toxins. They're dark and the veins under them are sickly and evil looking, branching over her arms like sharp worms.

"I guess we found our problem," the nurse mumbles, and then she excuses herself to collect a doctor.

Delaney looks to me, absolutely panicked, and I don't blame her. "What do we do? What's happening to me?"

I only know that I have to get her better, so that's what I tell her. "We're going to figure it out. There are things I've been afraid to tell you about...my home. I was hoping the blessings our goddess gave you would be genuine, but...it's kind of looking like they're not."

"A goddess did this? Why?"

I gently hold her face, brushing her tears away. The tears burn my skin, because unicorns are only supposed to feel happiness, but it keeps me alert. "I want to hope her intentions weren't to poison you, but...gods and goddesses are known to be dramatic."

She buries her face into my neck, terrified, so I hold her. Because...she's my mate.

A knock sounds on the door before the same nurse returns with someone in a white lab coat, introducing themselves as the resident doctor on campus. Can't say I commit their name to memory, because I just can't look away from the poison that seems to be seeping through Delaney's arm.

"I don't want to alarm you both, but I think we need to take every precaution we can in order to help you get well, Ms. Duncan. These marks on your arm, can you tell me about them? I haven't seen conduit marks on that arm, and I have never seen them in this style. Are they tattoos that you got from an irreputable source, perhaps?"

How bad is it that I'm wishing Delaney had gotten tattooed by a dirty needle? I trust in the power of medicine to cure that.

I have no idea how to cure dirty magic.

Delaney looks to me because she doesn't remember. Of course, she doesn't.

"Um, well, I'm not actually from here. I come from a different realm, which likely sounds a little crazy, but, well, a few weeks ago I was at home when a searing agony began to pulse through my chest, and then I was teleported to the home of our goddess. You don't know her name here, but she is The Fairyunicorn Goddess.

"She brought Delaney into our realm, Glittertopia, to ask for her help in saving it. Then she gifted Delaney marks from there, and I believe her intention was to gift her mates from our realm, so she'd have a vested interest in saving it. I just..."

The doctor's face turns into a subtle look of horror as she looks at me. "Tell me I'm jumping to the wrong conclusion here."

“I could be wrong, but I think the goddess tied the fate of the realm to Delaney’s magic. So the realm fails, Delaney fails. That’s...the only thing that makes sense.”

“If that’s true, then I don’t know how to help you, Delaney. We could put you into a medically induced coma to try and put the spread of this decay in stasis, but if this is truly an act from somebody divine, then anything I do won’t change a thing. I don’t want to just send you home, but I need to do a bit of research and see if anyone else in the medical field has experience in this.”

“I would probably be better off with my parents. One of my fathers is a poison master and another is a potion master, and my mom is, well. My mom is. If anyone can figure this out, it’s probably them.”

Delaney’s phone starts ringing and when she pulls it from her pocket, I see that it’s one of her dads calling, and from the tone I hear, they’re panicking.

Delaney doesn’t have good news to tell them, but I think she also doesn’t want to do it over the phone.

She grabs my hand, lacing our fingers together as she squeezes. I squeeze right back, feeling some kind of way about being her support right now. I don’t have a phone with which to text her mates with an update, but I have a feeling we’re probably just going to leave the infirmary anyway.

The doctor leaves as Delaney explains to her that her parents are on their way, but the nurse makes sure we know to stay put until someone comes to discharge her.

Delaney’s phone conversation isn’t very long, and it’s far too quiet in the room when she hangs up, but it’s the perfect amount of noise for her head to rest on my shoulder.

“I’m scared.” She laughs in a sad, deranged sort of way. “I’m broken and I don’t even

know who I'm sitting on. I know you said we were mates, but...I honestly don't know your name." She squeezes her eyes shut and covers her face in embarrassment, but we can't have that.

I peel her hands away and wipe her tears once more, continuing to ignore the way they burn my skin. "Saladriel. Don't feel embarrassed about something you can't control. About you and me, you should know—"

The nurse waltzes back in, interrupting me, and I lose the nerve to tell Delaney we're only semi-friends.

"You can drink this as a tea every couple hours to try and stall the poison, and it should help with the lightheadedness you experienced as well. If somebody from your group could just update us when you have something to update us with, we'd be very appreciative. It'd be nice to have some sort of idea what to do on the off chance...another student gets poisoned by a deity."

It sounds absurd, but the reality is far from amusing, so none of us laugh or even smile. Also, one of my worst fears is about to come to pass; I have to share one of the deepest held secrets of my people if I want any hope of saving this woman I didn't ask for but might actually want.

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Delaney clings to me as we walk back out of the office, and I carry the bag of remedies we were given, hanging my head as we meet the others back in the waiting area that they've completely overtaken.

They jump up when they catch sight of Delaney. Their immediate impulses are to rush to her and grab her, but she flinches because...she doesn't remember mating any of them.

I turn to her and grab her hands, knowing I have no right to ask what I'm about to. "Do you trust me?"

She opens her mouth a few times and closes it before swallowing thickly and nodding her head.

I turn to her mates, most of whom I still can't quite remember the names for. It's not like I've been trying though; actually, I've been actively messing up my memory when it comes to this group because I've been convinced that I wasn't going to be here much longer. I was sure a miracle would happen, and I'd get to go home. "I think I know how to help her, but it might seem weird to C.U.N.T.S. like yourselves."

Adam, always so hot-headed, grabs me by the arm and gets in my face, somehow missing the way Delaney shrinks back from him. "What the fuck did you just call us?"

I pry his hand from my arm, one finger at a time. "C.U.N.T.S. Creatures unicorns never talk to or sauce."

There, that will show him, acting all offended for nothing.

“Sauce?”

I mimic jacking myself off to completion, aiming right for his stupid face with my imaginary jizz. “Sauce. Unicorns don’t typically pair up outside of our race, but that could definitely have something to do with the fact we only have cupids in our realm.”

Adam chokes. “Please don’t tell me there are unicorns that fuck cupids.”

“They are completely consensual relationships, you judgy cloud bitch. Cupids aren’t actually children, I thought that was obvious.”

Then I walk past everyone else, feeling protective over Delaney. I definitely don’t make eye contact with anyone as I tow her out of the infirmary and towards her residence, playing with her fingers where she’s got them laced with mine.

“What do we need to do?”

I meet her eyes briefly before looking down again. “I’ll need to gather some supplies. Maybe...I could get one of your mates to drive me to a place where I could purchase them? And...I will need to borrow currency as I have nothing in this world that belongs to me.”

She stops in front of me, making me halt as she frames my face with her hands. “Why do you call them my mates like you’re not one of them?”

I gently pull her hands away from me. “Because I’m not, not really. We’re not together, Delaney. I’ve been pretty miserable to be around since I was brought here, but—”

“Were we friends, at least?”

I frown. “I think I’ve been avoiding everyone as much as possible. This world scares me. It’s too different from home, and I feel...lost.” I make myself meet her eyes finally, so she knows I mean what I’m about to say. “I want to do better. Will you permit me to court you in the ways of my people? I think it will also help with your current situation.”

One of her mates grabs my shoulder, separating me from Delaney so they can spin me to them for a confrontation. His anger makes me shut down, and I miss everything that is said until I feel a softer touch on my shoulder, breaking me out of it. Adam’s anger was more than my quota for the day.

“You need to speak gently. You won’t get answers from Saladriel with that harsh tone, he’s a unicorn. He needs rainbows and sparkles.”

I’m shooketh. I spin to her, immediately, in wonderment. “How did you know that?”

She gives me a soft smile and shrugs one of her shoulders. “Is it important?”

I shake my head no, and she reaches into her pocket for something, pulling out a tube of some sort of cosmetic. “I only have this right now, but maybe...this will set you on the right track? It’s for your lips, but you won’t be able to see it if I put it there. I can...spread it on your hand?”

I see the glitter within the tube, and I thrust my hand forward before I even have time to think about it.

She paints a swatch of sticky silver gloss on the back of my hand, and I immediately start turning it in the sunlight, bringing it up to my face to get a whiff of cherries while I do so. The sun hits the sparkles and tickles something deep within my soul,

giving me my actual first smile since I arrived.

“He’s...smiling. Because of a little bit of lip gloss?” Somebody asks, clearly not understanding how wonderful it is.

Another one of them shrieks and jumps back, very disturbed by it. Somebody mutters ‘ridiculous demon’ under their breath, but I tune that all out, because I feel a little bit balanced.

“Thank you,” I tell the woman that just gave me the greatest gift I’ve had in weeks. She opens my hand and tucks the entire tube into it, making me gasp. “I couldn’t!”

She could be making fun of me, but I don’t think she is when she smiles and tucks her hands under her arms, hugging herself. “Consider it a courting present. I can court you right back, you know.”

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Bolstered, I turn to her mates. “I need someone with currency and a vehicle to drive me for supplies.” Then I remember to look at Delaney’s arm again, and sure enough, a few of the dark spidery veins have lightened considerably just from this smallact of kindness. I know I’m on the right path; we just need to figure out a way to get back to my realm so we can carry the plan out.

The one she’s most familiar with, Adam I believe, volunteers to stay home with Delaney since she’s not confused by him as much, as well as the two security guards whom she seems to have a past with, and then some of the older, more adult mates and the demon and the smaller one that is scared of breasts are stepping forward to drive us all. The rest opt to stay back with Delaney, since the vehicle we’re taking will only fit so many bottoms.

Chapter nine

Ash

This might be the strangest trip to a store I've ever taken. It's odd enough looking over and seeing my boss in the passenger seat, but then to have my TA in the back, next to a demon, next to a fucking Unicorn, and I feel like we're just a few vowels away from a very bad joke.

“So, what's this idea of yours?” I finally ask as we're about to pull into a parking lot.

Saladriel’s silent for a minute, fiddling with the lid on the tube of lip gloss Delaney gave him. “I think... that when the goddess gave her those marks, she tied them to the fate of my realm. She told Delaney she had to help us, that she was the chosen one,

and that she should be thrilled about it.”

“She did not seem thrilled about it,” Zac surmises.

Saladriel shakes his head. “And I don't think my goddess liked that very much. She is... vainer than other deities I've heard about. She likely took affront when Delaney wasn't jumping up in joy to be given such a task.”

I pull into a spot and turn off the car, turning to see everybody. “I just want to know how she physically expects Delaney to be mated to that many more people. We are not exactly struggling, but there are so many of us already. Delaney's having a hard time I think, though she won't admit it. I think she feels as if we don't get enough of her. And to some extent we all feel that as well, though we'd never hold that against her. She didn't choose this, none of us did. But your goddess on the other hand...”

“There may be a way to undo the marks she was gifted.”

Rush gasps and leans forward to grab onto Saladriel's hand. “You mean... I might not have to be terrorized by a whole herd of you?”

I snort. Saladriel looks at him kind of sideways, and then he pats the demon on the head like he's a puppy. Apt. “Mating bonds in my realm are different. They are given by the goddess, and they are planned by the goddess. We do not form them on our own. If we want to be mated to somebody, we must find them on our own and just make whatever commitment we want to make. There are no marks or soul mates.

“And that's the problem of our realm—mating is unappealing to us as of now. The goddess has been trying to foist these bonds on us for years, and they seem to be getting harder and harder to make stick. She's playing with everybody's souls like they're taffy, pulling and braiding them together, and then she's surprised when things fizzle out and people are left even more depressed in the aftermath of it all.”

“It wouldn't harm the people she's supposedly mated to if the bonds disappeared? Because in our realm, an unfulfilled fatedmate bond is incredibly painful.” I definitely wasn't in my right mind when I thought I could just postpone ours indefinitely.

Saladriel shakes his head. “Unicorns have to want the bond in order for them to stick. They might feel a rush of false happiness at the beginning of a bond starting, but over time, if that bond isn't fortified over and over again, it'll dissolve on its own. It goes to reason then, that if we can somehow figure out who she's supposed to be bonded to, and make them happy without her, then the bonds wouldn't work out anyway. Yes, it will hurt initially, but that's only because you're ripping something out of their soul. Something that should never have been there. For all I know, they might feel better, more themselves once it's gone.”

Even aside from the tearing-their-soul thing, I don't like how the rest of that sounds as far as Saladriel's concerned; Delaney looked like she was getting a little used to him today. I think she'd ultimately understand if he chose not to be with her, but...as her mate, I don't want her to experience that pain.

Wil scratches his forehead, clearly thinking through everything critically like he does. “That seems... a bit underhanded. Don't they deserve happiness, too? Do you not think that others from your realm could find happiness with our Delaney? We all know she has enough heart to give out to as many people as she needs to. I'm weary of playing with things that deities give us. I don't see that ending well.”

“Unicorns are just created differently,” Saladriel replies with a shrug, and then he climbs out of the car.

We all get out and follow, not really sure how that answers everything, but somehow it does in his mind.

I grab a cart as we walk into the big box store, and I'm thinking it's good that Leo stayed home. He surely would have been overwhelmed with everything that this place is. Also, he'd probably be highly mistrustful of a place that sells milk a few aisles over from paint for your house or clothing that would fit anybody. "What are we looking for?"

Saladriel looks so stressed out, his eyes wide as he takes in everything. Yeah, maybe bringing him was a bad idea as well. "What is this place?"

Zac grabs him by the shoulders, forcing him to look at him. "Look at me, buddy. We've kept you pretty sheltered so far, I can see how this would be a shock to you. Can you describe to me what it is you think would help Delaney to get better? We need to focus on that. Tell me what you think is going to help her, and we'll figure out what options we have here."

Saladriel blinks a few times and then finds a way to compose himself. "The realm is the bigger issue. Short term though, glitter. Colors and glitter. Colorful paper. Something to make happy things with."

"Things that make people happy? Say no more. Somebody point me in the direction of the mashed potatoes."

I shake my head at Rush's enthusiasm, thinking it's pretty damn lucky we live in a place where there are so many different species everywhere, because otherwise, wow. We'd be getting some looks for appearing in public together.

Rush immediately takes off in search of potatoes, but...yeah, I'm not following him.

"Someone want to keep an eye on that demon?" Zac asks, but in a way that implies he can't be bothered to do it himself, just that he thinks it might be a helpful idea.

We think about it, really, we do, but I guess none of us are that tempted.

“Alright then. To the craft aisle?”

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They're not an overly helpful bunch, but we do manage to get what equates to a preschool's worth of glitter, construction paper, markers, and the like. I really don't know what exactly Saladriel thinks this is going to do to cure Delaney, but I guess I'm at least willing to give it a shot.

When we're ready to check out, Rush has yet to find us again, so we go on a literal demon hunt through the store, only getting slightly sidetracked when we see all the lacy things that would look fantastic on our girl, ultimately deciding to wait until she knows who we all are again. Seems like it'd be less creepy that way.

"Ooh! Demon spotted! Aisle 15!"

We all chase after Wil as he starts to speedwalk through the store, catching sight of Rush semi-hiding behind an aisle and talking to somebody that looks suspiciously like a student I've seen on campus before. Can't place his name, but they're both looking around all shifty-like.

The student, who's got a hoodie on, catches sight of us and blanches, hissing something at Rush, who spins and gives us a goofy wave. The other student says one last thing under his breath before running off, leaving Rush to make his way over to us with a basket full of potatoes in various forms.

If he's paying for them, I have no business criticizing him.

"What the fuck is all that for?"

Okay, apparently Zac does have business criticizing him.

Rush turns his nose up and starts heading towards the front of the store where the registers are, calling over his shoulder, “I have a gargoyle to charm and a conduit to make sweet for me. These potatoes are going to get me very far, I think. The only one that’ll be laughing when we’re through all of this is me when all of you realize how smart I am.”

???

“How do you know Spencer?” Wil asks Rush as we start loading everything into the car.

Rush freezes for a moment, holding one, single potato, petting it like it’s a kitten. “He’s a business associate.”

“Business associate?” Wil asks, clearly confused. “You’ve been a tree, though. How do you have business associates? And why him specifically? You know he’s hangs out with —”

“My sister,” Zac snaps. “That’s how I know him. He dated my sister for a long time.”

“Is he looking for a support group for that experience?” Wil asks and then immediately slaps a hand over his mouth as his eyes go wide. “Oh my goddess, I cannot believe I just said that.” He goes to open the car door, setting his hand purposely where the door will slam and I yank him out of space at the last moment.

“What the hell was that about? You lose your damn mind?”

“I must punish myself for speaking ill of a conduit.”

Zac snorts as he throws a random juice box for Wil to catch. He doesn’t seem mad about it though as he unwraps the straw.

“I highly doubt she’s worth putting yourself through pain for. I love her, but oh my gods is it a relief to have some distance right now. I thought it was going to kill me getting my secret out there, that I’d be under her thumb forever. I don’t love that she’s locked up in what’s essentially a dungeon cell, but she’s got to learn her lesson one way or another.”

“Wil’s got a point though,” I concede. “How do you have business associates if you’ve been cursed as long as Leo was?”

Zac returns the cart, and we all get buckled in, heading back towards campus. Just knowing I’m about to see Delaney again has my palms itching, my heart racing.

Pathetically adorable, I know.

Rush is only silent for a minute, holding his emotional support potato. “Remember I told you I could transport myself to hell if I needed a break? That had a few perks. I had access to a phone occasionally if I needed one, as well as other people that could work for me. Hell’s influence on earth doesn’t stop just because I’m a tree. I still had shit to do. Souls to damn. Glitter to incinerate,” he says with a stink eye to Saladriel.

Saladriel puts his hands in the air. “Hey, you asked what would help, and this is it. Not my fault glitter makes you squeal like a pig. Not such a tough demon, are you?”

“Children,” I chastise. And they stop.

We park without further incident, but before any of us get out of the car, Wil blurts a nervous, “Wait!”

He’s usually quiet unless he’s defending Delaney, so I’m curious about what he has to ask.

“I need advice. It would be less... embarrassing, I suppose, if Delaney were not around for me to seek it. I considered just taking you all one or two at a time into a separate room, but then I thought to myself no, maybe that would be suspicious, or she might get to thinking I’m—”

“Wil, what do you need?” I very much doubt his request has anything to do with his studies; he’s an excellent student.

“A few weeks ago, when Delaney informed me that...” his face has gone bright flaming red, and I feel like he’s about to shout, ‘never mind!’ and dart from the car. I help him out.

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“When she kissed you and told you you were one of her mates? Is that what we’re referencing?”

He nods, his voice very quiet so we all have to lean close to hear him. “I guess what I wanted to know, that is to say, do you very much think it would be wrong of me to kiss her again? I’ve been tormenting myself over it. I know she understands my hesitations, but I find that I, well, want to. And I figured the goddess would take exception if I were to, seeing as how we’ve already done it once. Or is it a sin each time? I’m not sure. My head’s all fuzzy.”

I tap on the steering wheel wondering how best to go about this. I haven’t spent much time around Delaney’s parents, but if her mother truly is the voice of the goddess, then the goddess is freaky as hell. “I know you’ve been raised in a very strict religious home,” I begin cautiously, “but I’ve got to tell you, the way the fundamentalists view courting and kissing is not the way most others do.

“And I know that can feel like a point of pride when you’re in the thick of it. I had friends when I was younger that were fundamentalists. But you have to think about this logically, Wil. What do you, Wil, believe in? I want you to forget about rules that somebody told you were important. We know what the goddess wants of us because she’s mated us to Delaney.

“You do you know that Delaney feeds off of sexual energy, correct? That that’s how she fuels her magic? If the goddess wanted her to refrain from kissing before she got mated, how would she even be here? She’s been holed up for years because she couldn’t control her magic.”

I turn around so I can see him better instead of looking at him through the rearview mirror. “And furthermore, I had to learn the hard way that she needs physical touch. She’s hardwired to seek that out because it’s important to her. That’s how she connects to us. Of course she’ll understand if we’re not ready for any of that, and I’m not saying this to pressure you into something you’re not ready for, but it’s physically impossible for Delaney to develop a deep relationship with somebody without having that physical aspect.

“She needs to feel that energy to understand how we feel about her, it’s how her magic works. I messed up in the beginning thinking I had to go about things a certain way because of what I had been told and grew up with. My advice to you is if you feel compelled and comfortable to kiss her or touch her or do whatever, then just do it.

“There are not going to be any negative repercussions for that, from anybody. You need to let go of the guilt you’ve been taught to feel over desires you can’t control. She is your mate. Maybe not officially yet, but you’re fated. That doesn’t begin with some arbitrary start line. You need to spend time together, learn each other.

“Once you guys are committed, you’re stuck for life. Now is the time to have fun and play and make each other laugh. Kissing is important. Intimacy is important. Whatever that looks like for you two, that’s what you need to do.”

Chapter ten

Delaney

“Are we sure this is going to work?”

“No,” Adam says, “but it will be fun. I still think your memories are gonna come back, so I don’t think we need to start from square one. These are your mates,

Delaney. I can already tell you're ready to strip them all down and have your wicked way with them, so this is nothing.

"I know you don't remember it but trust me when I say they've been in and out of every part of you. Well, I guess that's not true. You and Cory haven't... Rush either. But as your best friend, I feel like I owe it to you to tell you you might want to hold off on that one unless you feel super compelled. You guys have some shit to work through."

Whatever, I already know I'm a ho. "Alright, turn off those lights. Blindfold me. Do whatever."

"That's our girl," Adam says as he ties something around my eyes.

The light around the blindfold dims as somebody turns the lights out, and I'm giddy. I don't think I would ever be interested in a second chance at much, I tend to enjoy life as it comes at me.

But right now, I'm basically in a room full of men that I'm insanely attracted to, and I've been told they belong to me. I can kiss them, and it will be like kissing strangers and I'm going to get fucking high off of it. It's gonna be incredible. Can't wait.

I walk around the room with my arms outstretched, trying to bump into somebody. I thought they might make this easy on me, but maybe not. I walk carefully so I don't stub my toe or walk into anything too hard, and someone sneaks behind me and taps me on the ass.

I spin to grab them, but I'm too late or they're too fast. Even when I squat and reach out in all directions, all I feel is a couch cushion.

I walk around a bit more, and someone yanks a tank top strap off my shoulder,

pulling it down so one of my tits falls out. There's definitely grazing involved, as there should be. That's the whole point of this game; to make things flirty and fun and sexy between me and these men.

I feel like I should cheat a little bit.

I push some lust out into the room, just a burst, strong enough to affect anybody close to me while being invisible. I immediately hear a deep groan, and I jump. I'd like to think they won't let me hurt myself, but maybe that'll make it kinkier.

I have no idea who I'm holding, but that's not about to stop me. I cling to him and kiss him like I'm desperate, and I'm rewarded with strong hands gripping me, pushing a delicious hardness into me through our clothes.

“Cheater!” one of the twins yells. “Guess we just need to block everybody in this room.”

Damn. I forgot they could do that. No matter, I'll use a different tool in my toolkit. Maybe if they see whoever I'm clinging to get preferential treatment, I'll be able to spur them into action.

The more I kiss him, the harder it is to stop. Eventually, he's moving us and falling onto a couch, giving me more leverage to do more of the things I want to do.

Until I'm yanked off of the warm body and deposited several feet away on my feet. Whoever I was with groans with frustration while the hands that are holding me smack me on the ass in what I'm assuming is supposed to be a reprimand. “Naughty girl. Think you can just kiss one of us and then end the game? You've got more to find.”

One of the twins again. I really do think they're out to ruin all my fun.

I hear the door opening and closing, voices entering the room, which means the guys that went on a mission are back. They're immediately shushed, and footsteps run to them, likely explaining what's happening.

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“Alright Delaney,” somebody else calls. “You've got fresh meat. Everybody is now wandering, with the exception of Wil. He's going to stand in the kitchen and observe for now.”

I hear a squeak and then somebody starts laughing, and then whoever was talking just a second ago corrects themselves. “I stand corrected. Wil is... participating. Interesting. Enjoy your hunt!”

Somebody puts music on, and I try to listen for any footsteps near me walking around, snatching at the air until I grab somebody's T-shirt. I clamp onto that thing tight and tug the person into me, and I'm met with a rich and spicy scent I can't place.

I cling to them, using the sides of their shirt to press my body into theirs as I go in for the kill. They're eager to kiss me back, palming the back of my head to get our mouths fused together even better.

I try to let go of everything that's happened today, all the confusion and the discomfort. I focus all of my attention on this person I'm holding, this person I'm kissing.

There's a version of me out there that knows exactly who this is, that wouldn't need any other identifiers other than the way they feel in my arms to know who they are. But that person is not me right now.

I start mapping them out, running my hands under their shirt to feel all the warm skin. It's got a texture to it, a little bit bumpy everywhere but in a smooth way. It's firm, and they've got very little stubble on their face.

Before long they're pulled away, and I'm spun around a few times so I lose any sort of orientation in the room. My victim is placed near my other one with a plop on the couch and a groan.

You know what they say, it's all fun and games until somebody gets hurt.

Or disappears. I feel like that should be part of the disclaimer, too.

The whole building rocks as an earthquake goes off, the room shaking with a deep rumble that sounds far too menacing.

I immediately rip the blindfold off, which for some reason takes way longer than it needs to, only to find myself in a dim room containing exactly one unicorn and one mate that I currently only vaguely remember from class.

I run room to room as if that's somehow going to magically reveal where everyone went, checking the hallway in case they all decided to play a prank on me, but I can tell by the expressions on both the remaining men's faces that that's not at all the case.

I stare around me, bereft without even knowing most of my mates' names, not even knowing who to call for other than the twins, Adam, and Cory.

We're all frozen in case whatever just happened isn't done happening.

I feel mildly good about getting to Saladriel's side because he was so kind to me earlier when we were in the infirmary, and Wil is sweet even if I don't exactly know anything about the two of us as a couple.

"What just happened?" I look to Wil, tears about to fall down my face, no answer ready.

Saladriel grabs my hand, linking our pinkies. With a little tug I'm stumbling more into him as he wraps an arm around my shoulders, doing a very awkward job of trying to console me.

"I don't...what?" I fall silent again, then a toilet flushes down the hall and we're all creeping that way and sticking our heads into the short hallway to see if it's somebody that's supposed to be here or somebody that none of us know.

Because I was raised to defend myself, I decide to protect the guys behind me and creep down further, keeping my back to the wall right as a blue-skinned demon walks into the hallway holding...a bowl of potatoes.

"Was that an earthquake?"

My head goes all fuzzy and I sway a bit, clarity returning to me.

I blink, look around the room, and then sigh. Very dramatically, lots of flair. "For fuck's sake. Did you just miss out on getting raptured because you were using the bathroom?"

Rush looks down at his potatoes, french fries this time for variety, then at the bathroom, and he clears his throat. "Uh, yep. That's— that's exactly what I was doing in there. Totally was using the bathroom." He nods emphatically to back this up.

I narrow my eyes and stalk towards him. Dig a nail into his chest for showmanship. "You were doing something freaky with potatoes, weren't you?"

"Let me explain."

"Can I get an 'aye' from everyone that doesn't want the demon to explain?" Saladriel immediately interjects with a hand in the air.

Wil follows suit, practically shouting, “Aye!” and maybe I’m curious, but I don’t think I ought to be.

Rush very surreptitiously stuffs a few more fries into his mouth, licks his lips, and looks me up and down, lasciviously. Then remembers that I’m not supposed to be this clear headed. “Did you get your memories back? Sweet.” Goes right back to eating potato products.

“Woah, really?” Wil asks, throwing himself in front of me and checking my eyes.

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I smile at him and pat him gently on the cheek. “Don’t know if it will stick, but...yes. Just in time for me to lose every single one of my mates except the three of you. That seems like reckless behavior.”

A knock on my door is immediately followed by it opening with a key, and in walks my brother, then my mother, then every single one of my fathers.

Wil immediately cowers behind me and legitimately whimpers, but he’s so freaking cute. I sway again, once more falling right into Saladriel’s arms, and luckily this time I retain all the bits of information in my head.

“Delaney! They said— woah, where is everyone?”

“She said they were raptured...” Rush explains, looking back and forth between all of my parents, his precious bowl of potatoes, and me. Then he stuffs the remaining couple handfuls into his mouth and turns around so he can finish consuming them without anyone seeing how gross he’s being, holding up a single finger over his shoulder to tell us he’ll just be a moment.

“Raptured? The goddess wouldn’t do that and leave you behind. Unless...” my mom trails off, contemplating something very hard. “No. I’m nearly 90% certain. You definitely would have been raptured, too. Come to think of it, I definitely wouldn’t be here. I’m a shoo-in to whatever afterlife the goddess has in store for us poor wayward souls.”

Rush chokes and then thumps himself on the chest to clear his throat before wiping off his face with his forearm. He also has the decency to brush his hands off on his

pants when he finally relinquishes his precious bowl and then puts his hands on his hips while pasting a used car salesman grin on his face. “Hi.”

“Rush, Saladriel, Wil,” I say to my parents as I point to everyone. I go down the line of my fathers I really don’t expect them to remember the names of when I hear a whimper.

I crank my head behind me to the clingy Wil, and he’s got a face of absolute awe as he looks at my parents. I pull him in front of me and wrap my arms around his waist as I prop my chin on his shoulder, kissing him on the neck where I can reach. “It’s okay, Wil. You can talk to them. I don’t think they’ll traumatize you or anything.”

He falls to his knees but trips, righting himself as he puts his forehead to the ground. I’m taken right back to that night on my balcony when he rushed into my dorm to find me out there in the rain, rendered speechless when Ash informed him who I really was. He’s so cute I could eat him.

“Your Majesty! And Royal Consorts of The Goddess’ Voice! Wilford Murdock, at your service.”

I think he’s actually going to faint.

I sit on the ground right next to him and then tilt him when he begins to tip over. He lands with his head on my lap, giving me an excellent opportunity to study his features and comb through his hair.

“Oh, he is adorable,” my mother exclaims.

“That he is. Anyway. My memories. They just kind of came back to me suddenly...”

No one is even looking at me.

They're all looking over my shoulder at a very miniature and very adorable unicorn that's shaking as he hides behind a coffee table leg.

"Did you know he could do that?" Rush asks, head tilted as he crawls towards the frightened palm-sized shifter.

"...No?"

Rush scoops mini shifted Saladriel up and carries him over to me, and he immediately burrows under my hair, peeking through the strands at my parents.

"Delaney...this is...so much more confusing than I thought it would be when we decided to come down here," my father Foster says.

"Oh yes, it's constant chaos around here," Rush says happily, completely unphased by everything.

"Hmm." My mother shifts her attention back to me, leaning into some of my fathers that crowd her and make her lean on them. They're all so dependent and needy, it makes me sick.

Fine, you caught me. I kind of want that.

"So...yeah. I was basically mid-make out with Cory when this fuzzy little unicorn—human sized and shaped, that is—bumped into me and everything sort of went fuzzy. I don't really remember what happened next, it's like looking through a dream I already had. Something about the infirmary and playing a game and...I don't know. Then there was this earthquake and everyone disappeared, and here we are."

"Delaney!" My brother calls from the kitchen. "Why the fuck do you have so much potato shit in your kitchen? Scratch that. I just decided I definitely do not want to

know.”

“Ask this one,” I yell back, pointing at Rush.

Rush is eyeing my brother nervously like he’s going to decimate his stockpile or something.

“Wait, they really were raptured?” My father Dax asks.

“They weresomethinged,” I mutter, trying to comfort a Wil that’s starting to breathe a bit more normal and flutter his eyes.

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He sits up, looks up at me and immediately smiles, then darts his eyes in panic to my parents and scrambles up off the floor. He's not too gone though to remember to extend a hand down to help me stand.

He puts an uncertain arm around my shoulder, patting me very awkwardly but becomingly and grimaces at me. "This feels unnatural, doesn't it?"

I grab his hand and lace our fingers together. "It's sweet. I like it."

"Hold still, my princess. There's a critter in your hair!"

Wil reels back his hand like he's going to squash it, but I stop him. "No, it's Saladriel! He can adjust his size, apparently."

"It's— really?"

"Okay, so we need to figure out what happened to everyone then, right?" My mother asks, trying to keep us on track.

The unicorn starts shaking, so I set him on the ground carefully and watch him swell and shift until he's a regular sized human again. His ears are pink, and his face looks mortified. "Sorry about that, your energies kind of wrecked my nervous system. It's possible I expected something traumatic to happen, like it does back home when I'm anywhere in the vicinity of Fairygoddess Unicorn."

"I feel like I should be offended by that. Are you saying I was that something traumatic that happened?"

He shakes his head at me and snorts. “No. Well, kind of, but no. She’s...look. She’s probably the one responsible for... all of this. I mean, think about it. It makes sense, right? I bet you she’s starting her games.”

“Games?” one of my dads asks, unimpressed.

I sigh dramatically and pin my mother with a stare. “This might be your fault. She told me the gods take turns choosing saviors; by the way, she’s grateful to you for saving our goddess. Rules state that the savior has to be somehow connected to the previous one chosen. She was so impressed by you she chose me to save her realm.”

“Why does her realm need saving?” Papa Gray asks, definitely suspicious.

Saladriel puts a finger in the air, seeking permission to talk. “I can answer that. We’re...miserable there. We need to be happy to thrive because hello, unicorns, but it’s...not a happy place.”

“And what is your goddess doing about this?” My mother asks, getting a bit heated now.

Saladriel looks to me, and I sigh, dramatically again, and show my mother my arm from Fairygoddess Unicorn. “She told me she was giving me mates from her realm, that I had to compete in some games, yadda, yadda, yadda. I don’t know. There were singing crustaceans the size of thimbles and psychedelic confetti. There wasn’t exactly a lot of time for questions.”

“Well, you know what you need to do then,” my mother says as she walks to the door.

“Um, research?” Wil asks timidly.

“We’re going to the portal that Uncle Bennett uses to travel here. With the unicorn’s magic signature, it should take you to his realm. You need to go get your mates back.”

“And if it’s a trap?” Saladriel asks quietly.

“Oh, I’m sure it is,” my mother says as she collects my brother, who is for some reason playing with the basket of tri-colored mini potatoes on the counter, stacking them into a pyramid. “But if you’re her savior, I can’t help you. I’m only the voice of the goddess in this realm. You’ll be fine, kid.”

My fathers offer similar sentiments as they kiss me on the head and walk out.

“Aren’t you worried about her safety?” Wil shouts after them.

One of my fathers, the really scary assassin one that trained me the most, starts laughing. “She’s good. They should be worried about their own safety once our daughter unleashes herself over there.”

Wil, Saladriel, and Rush look at me. I shrug and follow my family. “Looks like we’re going to the portal.”

Rush eyes the kitchen. “Will there be potatoes there, or should I pack some?”

“We only have sweet potatoes,” Saladriel informs him.

Rush shudders and then starts shoving his ‘emergency instant potatoes’ into his pants in his ‘super-secret hidden compartment,’ before following us out to the hallway. I lock the door and there’s not much else to do but be the savior, I guess.

Chapter eleven

Wil

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Oh my gods. I just touched her breast. Do you think she noticed? Of course she noticed that. It's attached to her. She didn't say anything, though. Is she waiting for me to address it?

Sweet goddess, she's repulsed right now, isn't she? She thinks I've lost all respect for her and have decided to start groping her all willy nilly.

My hand is still tingling. They were so soft.

No! Snap out of it. You cannot.

But she is my mate, technically, so...

Fart nugget. I just walked into a light post. Dag nabbit, that hurt.

“Oh my gods, Wil! Are you okay?” Delaney gasps, fleeing to my side.

Great, now I've waylaid our mission because I don't know how to handle myself in any sort of situation involving her. “I'm sorry I touched your breast. I didn't mean to.”

I can breathe easier now knowing she's at least heard me apologize. Maybe I'll breathe again fully when she accepts my apology.

“You touched my breast? When?”

I throw myself back onto the ground and stare at the clouds, wishing the ground could just swallow me whole. I feel like that would be far less painful than this current

situation. “When we were trying to get out the door of your dorm room,” I explain quietly. “It was an accident. I’m disgusted with myself.”

She stares down at me, the tips of her toes in her black sneakers brushing against my hip. “Don't be. Unless you don't like my breasts? Do you even want me? We haven't really talked about us courting or anything.”

Oddly enough, the hint of panic is what calms me down more. I like that she gets awkward with me as well, it makes me feel like I can be more myself.

Feeling cheeky, I wrap a hand around her ankle and yank on her leg a little bit until she stumbles, not accounting for the fact that she would completely trip over me. I thought maybe she would just stumble a little bit and end up hovering above me in a really cute way like couples in movies do.

As it plays out though, I have to roll over quickly to catch her. I'm able to cushion her fall just enough that the wind gets knocked out of me, but she's spared any sort of pain.

At least I got what I want. She's now right above me, our bodies more or less aligned. So the outcome is good, but the execution needs some work.

I gape like a fish, trying to draw breath that won't come.

“Oh no, I broke you!”

“He likely just got the wind knocked out of him, Delaney,” the unicorn tells her.

I nod seriously and point at him, so she knows that he's correct.

When the air finally comes back, my first instinct is to grab onto her, and it feels so

naughty.

Her wide hips are so, so... wonderful. "I'm touching you," I say stupidly.

While we're here and being stupid though, I might as well go for broke. "I like touching you. I didn't mean to insinuate that I didn't enjoy my... earlier, you know, touches. Only that it was without your consent. I already told you I was romantically interested in you. I just never thought I actually had a chance."

"I really, really want to kiss you right now," she says as she stares down at me.

I see this playing out in my mind, going two different ways.

The first way is that I launch her off of me or turn my head shyly, avoiding her at all costs to keep myself pure.

The other way this plays out is I let my body have what it wants, and I give myself permission to kiss the woman I'm supposed to be mated to. Somebody that the goddess has blessed me with.

I feel hopelessly reckless, and I don't let myself second guess anything else.

I remove one of my hands from her glorious hips so I can pull her head down to me. Her soft hair is up in a bun, but it tickles my fingertips as I weave them into it. Her eyes widen slightly as she realizes what's happening, but I can tell that she is ready to enjoy it. A look of almost relief crosses through her eyes the second before our mouths touch.

I know it's not actually our first kiss, that she got excited and kissed me before; but this is the first intentional time I've kissed her, so it feels pretty major.

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I'd like to say the birds started singing, then the sun came out, and the world flipped on its axis, but in reality, it was far worse than that.

I develop an intense, an instant erection, and she feels every bit of it. I don't even have the brainpower to be mortified, because her lips are on mine and she's licking my skin.

I feel my magic stirring within my chest at the strong emotion I always try so hard to suppress, and I'm scared, no, terrified that it's going to break free. My control is so hard won, and I've gone so long without any sort of magical freak out.

But some things just cannot be helped.

I'm shifted and stock still before I can discern which way the sky is. My limbs are locked up, my beady black eyes staring straight ahead, and any second now, I know the laughing will start. It always does.

Fainting goats always get so many views online, but nobody ever stops to think, hey, I wonder how mortified that goat is about this? What can I do to ease that goat's burden for them?

Unfortunately, my erection does not go away simply because I've switched forms. So not only am I locked up in a dead faint, my freaky, ugly, goat penis is sticking out into the air for everyone and their mother to see.

Maybe I can convince my heart to make the faint permanent. It can just stop beating right here, then I won't have to face anything else that comes later.

“Holy shit. Did anybody else know he was a goat shifter?”

Delaney immediately covers my body with hers, likely to give me a bit of modesty. She's quick to do it so I'm not sure how many people actually saw, or how many people were already looking at my penis when I transformed, but that's a totally different issue that I really don't need to think about.

The point is, her warmth covers me, regulates my nervous system, and I'm able to unfreeze myself.

Unfortunately, my movement makes her hand land right on my very exposed-to-the-air goat penis.

Maybe I have a superpower; because all it takes is that one stupid brush that shocks her due to the moisture content on my very stupid goat penis, for me to shoot off like a rocket.

Thank the high heavens there's so much grass underneath me; it should cover up the mess at least a little bit.

The pupils in Delaney's eyes widen, turning her eyes almost fully black as she soaks in the amount of lust that's surely pouring off of me being so close to her.

I have enough clarity now to be able to shift back to my human form, which again just puts me right under her, and we're just about back to square one.

“Guys, we have a problem,” Delaney practically whimpers.

I don't want to look away from her face, but when the demon and the unicorn both start quietly moaning, I'm absolutely forced to.

“Is the problem this rock-hard dick in my pants?” Rush replies to her with no grace. “Because I'm pretty sure my balls are so heavy they could be used to knock down buildings. Holy smokes, woman. I know you don't like me very well, but mounting you is just about the only thing I can think about right now.”

“Yes, that's the problem. Not sure if any of you are aware of it, but August and Jackson performed an essential function for me. They're shields. They blocked my magic from hitting people. And apparently whatever business Fairyunicorn Goddess got up to making me forget all of you, drained my stores. So, now I have no control over my magic again. It's lashing out and it wants an orgy. It wants an orgybad.”

“Don't see... how that's a problem,” Rush gasps. He falls to his knees and starts crawling towards us.

“The only way to get it to stop is to feed off of one of you. But I kinda learned my lesson the hard way, and what if I try and feed off of one of you and it doesn't work? Not sure if I really want to feel what I actually mean to any of you. Also, two out of the three of you don't even want to have sex with me at this moment in time, so there's that as well.”

“Children! What are you—oh. I see. Well...yikes, that's potent. Good job, darling. You make mummy so proud. Would you like us to clear the area so you can enjoy some naked frolicking? Oh dear, it might be a bit late for that. I just saw no less than three pairs of naked breasts and two sets of male buttocks. This is...maybe we should just rush you all out of here, instead.”

Did I say I was mortified before? Because being found in this state by your future mate's mother and fathers is...why the fates aren't I dead yet?

Delaney yanks me up and hands me my clothing while breathing heavily, wrapping her arms tightly around herself.

I get my pants buttoned as we walk to the parking lot, and we're ushered into one of the cars her parents drove. Our poor girl is practically shaking.

I don't know if I should touch her to try and offer comfort, or if that would simply increase the bad way she's clearly feeling.

"You good back there, Del?" one of her fathers asks.

She nods. "Just been a bit since I've felt like this, going to take me a minute to get used to it again. I forgot how much this sucks."

I'm sat in the row behind her, next to Saladriel, and he's holding himself nearly as tightly as Delaney is. His hands are in two meaty fists, but Rush is really the one I'm scared of.

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He's shaking, no,vibrating,next to Delaney, and I'm so focused on how uncomfortable they both are that I nearly miss the student that is currently standing in the middle of the road, waving us down.

I manage to warn Delaney's fathers in time, because clearly, they're distracted by seeing their kid so distraught, and they slam on the breaks, seatbelts straining to hold all of us back.

Rush opens the door without any explanation, ushering in the student who...oh. It's that kid he was with in the grocery store.

"Sorry I'm late," he says as he climbs in and takes a seat next to me.

"You know this one?" The dad that's driving asks. He's actually pretty terrifying. I have no idea what his magic entails, but it's very formidable.

"I...yes, ish? Hi, Spencer. Can we help you with something? Kind of in the middle of a big ordeal right now."

"Rush told me," he says, waving Delaney off as he gets buckled in.

Rush nods perfunctorily, and then the driver shrugs and continues driving.

"So, did you ever read that note I gave you a while back? I know you're busy, it's just that, well, it would explain some things."

Delaney, turned sideways to better see Spencer, furrows her eyebrows. "Note? You

never gave me a note. You handed me something, sure, but when I remembered to open it, it was just a shopping list for toilet paper, dandruff shampoo, and tater tots...oh. You know Rush, you said?"

Spencer frowns at Delaney. "Damnit. I gave you the wrong paper. No wonder I couldn't remember what to get when I was at the store." He leans back and massages his forehead briefly, clearly annoyed with himself.

"What was it meant to have said?" Delaney asks, apparently just accepting that this guy is coming with us.

"It was a warning for you that there was shit going down on campus."

"Is there a reason you couldn't have just said, 'Hey Delaney, can I warn you about something I heard that might affect you?' Was the note necessary?"

Keeping his head against the back of the seat, Spencer rotates his head to the side to face her. "I'm sorry, have you met you? You're so fucking hot I can't even give you the proper piece of paper when I need to. Also, I thought it would be cute to give you a note. The back of the note had a questionnaire for you, for funsies. Sort of a get-to-know-you-bit."

She opens her mouth to ask a question, but I stop her with a gentle pat to her shoulder. "I got this one, darling. Spencer, what did the questionnaire say?"

Rush tags himself in. He digs a hand into his pocket, the outside one, not the one with his secret potato stash, and moves several things around before withdrawing his hand with a baggie of rainbow stickers and a neatly folded square of paper. "Exposure therapy," he says about the stickers before handing the note over to Delaney.

Then he squishes his eyes closed, puts the bag up to his eyes and opens them while

holding the stickers inches from his eyeballs. It's literally just rainbows. He squeals like it's an actual ghost, holds eye contact for about 10 seconds, and then shoves them back in his pocket very fast. A deep shudder rocks his body then he goes back to staring out the window like nothing happened.

Delaney clears her throat as she reads aloud, "Delaney, I just wanted to tell you to be careful, or else. P.S., you're really pretty. P.P.S., see back for questionnaire." She flips the paper over and sure enough, there're three questions in his handwriting, all multiple choice.

Delaney continues to read out loud for the listening pleasure of everyone in the car. "One. If I hadn't almost thrown a football at your boyfriend's face, do you think it would have been appropriate to ask you out for frozen yogurt? Yes, hell no, or what is frozen yogurt? Two. If we were to be in love, what would your ideal morning routine be on the weekend? Bagels and shmear in bed while we read the comics together under a snuggie blanket, go to a hip brunch place we have to put on real pants to attend, or a protein shake and jog around campus in matching exercise gear. Number three." Delaney rolls her eyes and then turns her head to Spencer, and I honestly do not know what the name is for the look on her face.

The poor little himbo seems so earnest because she just forges ahead with the last question, which I think all of us in the car are dying to hear. "Question three. What is your stance on bacne? Love it, hate it, or ambiguous."

Delaney rolls her lips in, then takes a second to compose herself. We all need that second.

"Well don't leave us in suspense here," one of her dads calls from the front passenger seat.

Delaney takes a very measured lean away from Spencer before responding. "Is there

a reason why you wrote, 'beware, or else'? That seems a bit threatening to me. Show of hands? Does anybody else in here think that that seems threatening?"

Everybody raises their hand, leaving Spencer very bewildered. "Huh. I didn't even think about it being taken that way. Oh my goddess. Do you think—" and he gasps with a hand to his chest. He leans forward in a harsh whisper. "Does it seem like I was threatening you? Because I definitely was not. I just didn't want you to get in trouble or get hurt."

Saladriel chimes in, clearly uncomfortable with this entire situation and having no idea who Spencer even is. "Yeah, I think the problem here buddy, is how vague the note was. You didn't tell her what you were warning her against or what to look out for, so all that note would have done is put her on alert and stress her out without any idea about what to look out for. What threats were you trying to steer her away from, exactly?"

Everybody immediately looks at Rush, and his eyes go wide with innocence. "Don't look at me. I'm not a threat to her. I was a fucking tree, for gods' sake. Also, I'm obsessed with her."

"I suppose I can see how that would have been confusing to her. My apologies, Delaney. It was not my intention to confuse you further. As for threats, I was definitely referring to Shelly. I don't think she was working alone."

"We took care of her," Delaney says easily. "She's in a magic dampening cell until Zac figures out what to do with her." She pauses, thinking about that statement and then nods. "I suppose that would be easier to do if he was actually on campus. How long do you think it will take the university to realize their headmaster has been kidnapped? Is that going to make me look bad? Be honest."

"Oh yeah," Rush says. "That witch is definitely not there anymore. I dropped by there

earlier this morning to see if the ambience in the dungeons had improved after housing someone; Dad is looking for somewhere special to hold a sacrifice ritual. I thought I told you her cell was ominously empty.” He frowns at himself while sifting through his thoughts. No luck.

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“Hey Delaney,” Spencer says, being completely pedantic, “I think that Shelly might be more dangerous than we originally thought. Don't underestimate her.”

“She seemed friendly enough when I caught you sneaking out of her dorm room that one time,” Delaney sasses back.

I bite my lip to hold in a laugh, because that sounded an awful lot like jealousy.

Apparently Spencer thinks so too because he gives her a wide smile. “I'll have you know, I only pretended to date her to help Rush. Yeah, I've been playing the long game. Undercover. Wait. Do people think I actually liked her? Oh gods. No. No, no, no, no, no. That's...horrifying. I just had to pretend to be nice to her and report back to Rush. He's been watching her for years since she was the one responsible for watching over Leo's curse.”

“So you've never...”

“Considering my you-know-what,” he says out the side of his mouth with a subtle nod to her dads in the front, “has not shriveled off from disease, no. Vehemently no.”

“One more question,” Delaney asks.

“I'm an open book ma'am,” he says with another smile.

“Do you seriously require a shopping list for three items?”

“Yes,” one of her dads says from the front seat. “Leave the poor guy alone, Delaney.

He wrote a list to make sure he got everything he needed in one trip. I'd say that's responsible, not a red flag. Besides, he made you a questionnaire. That takes effort."

She's trembling slightly, worrying all of us, I'm sure. It shifts the levity pretty fast.

"What can we do to help you right now? What will make you feel better?"

She grimaces and pats me on the hand, speaking mostly under her breath. "Nothing you can help with, I'm afraid. I'm worried about everybody we're missing. What if they're not okay? What if they're hurt or something? You don't need to worry about what I need right now; we need to find them."

"But we need you at your best if we have any hope of thinking clearly," Rush explains. We all angle our bodies more towards her, conscious or not. "We can tell you're hurting right now. Would you let me take care of you?"

The demon always tries to come off somewhat aloof, like nothing really bothers him, so this might be the most serious I've ever heard him. It makes sense that it's because it concerns Delaney.

"You should all know how my magic works. If you're not... you know, basically in love with me, I can't feed off of you. That means none of you are a viable option right now; we just aren't there. I appreciate the offer, but it wouldn't work. I'm going to have to just deal with this until we find the other guys."

Rush opens his mouth to say something, but one of her dads reaches forward to grab something out of the glove box, tossing it back at Delaney. "Here. We brought one of these for you just in case. Mom thought it would be better used coming with us than sitting at home."

It just looks like a bracelet to me, but it seems to bring some sort of peace of mind to

Delaney. It doesn't make me feel any less like I'm about to bust through my pants, but the longer I sit here in this level of arousal, the more I can tune it out. Maybe Rush is on to something with that exposure therapy thing.

Rush stares out the window for a minute, and we all watch the landscape go by, unable to do much else right now. We're stuck in this car, unable to do anything to help Delaney's other mates, wow it feels strange to count myself among that number, until we get where we're going. Which could take a while I think.

"If you can, you should all try and take a little nap. Whatever energy you can store up now will only help you. And Delaney, I know I seem pretty blasé about this, that we all do, but you know it's only because we know what you're capable of, right? We adore you kid, and we're so damn proud of you. Whatever that goddess has in store for you when you get there, I know you're gonna kick ass. You're strong like your mom."

We all feel the stare her dad gives us through the rearview mirror. "None of you forget that. Protect her, yes, but don't underestimate her strength. Make sure you don't limit what she's capable of. And if I may offer a word of advice, you guys are in this together. The bond you guys have with each other is just as important as the bond you have with her. You need to know each other well and have each other's backs no matter what. You need to become the best of friends, inseparable, if you really want to flourish. The tighter knit you are, the harder it is for outside sources to fuck with you. So, if you have any shit to get out of your system, I suggest you do it now."

And with that, both of her dads stop talking. One of them puts on the radio and presses a button that raises a divider between the front and back seats, kind of like you see in really fancy cars or limousines. I'm not sure I want to know the ramifications of why that exists in their car.

"Your family is royalty, Delaney. Why don't you guys have bodyguards?"

She scoffs at me. “Are you kidding me? I have 11 dads. They are their own bodyguards.” Her head falls back onto the headrest while Rush gets twitchy.

I get the feeling he's amping himself up to try something. I don't want to close my eyes because I don't want to miss it. Whatever it is.

I've never been up close to other people kissing, other than the few times I've been around Delaney and her mates. Since she told me I'm hers, I've been pretty withdrawn, spending time in my own dorm, trying to get my head wrapped around everything.

I've seen them with her a time or two of course, but even then, I never felt like I could really watch because I never felt like I belonged there. I was so embarrassed about what was happening that I closed my eyes and tried to block out the sounds. Then promptly fled as fast as possible without being rude or drawing attention to myself. But I can just tell by the intensity in Rush's eyes when he turns to Delaney that I'm about to get an up-close demonstration.

“I'm only going to say this once, Delaney, because contrary to popular belief, I'm not a masochist. I don't particularly enjoy being rejected, and you may not believe it, but I do respect you. You and Leo are my whole world. Even if neither of you know it.” He picks up her hand carefully, places it on top of his, and starts to stroke the back of it.

From the sound of it, her dad is doing some steering wheel drumming from the front seat, singing his heart out while the one in the passenger seat grumbles about his lack of musical talent. I don't think it escaped anybody's notice that they've given us privacy.

“Of course I know how your magic works. I know you're still angry with me for my role in the deception, and I know you feel like I tricked you into sleeping with me

before so that I could secure this engagement my dad set up, but the truth is, I was obsessed with you the second I laid eyes on you.” With that he gathers his thoughts, all the while keeping his voice low and even, soothing. “I actually had this big dramatic plan to woo you once we started hanging out. I figured you weren't ready for anything heavy and serious because you were still in school, and the version of me you met then wasn't capable of sustaining myself for very long.

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“But if my father would have allowed it, if he wouldn't have forced me back home, I never would have left you. I never would have played out that whole farce of me moving away, because being apart from you has been misery. Every day I've been miserable. Replaying those days with you in my head, every touch, every laugh, every smile. And the way it felt when you gave in to me...” and he shudders before another deep breath. “It meant something to me. That was the first time for that version of me as well. And maybe it makes me possessive or selfish or whatever, but I'm smug as hell knowing I got to be your first. Nobody can take that from me.”

Delaney just sits there speechless, but I can't tell if it's because she's moved or she's gassy.

She's staring at Rush now, waiting for him to look up at her. When he finally does, I think all of us are done pretending that we're not completely eavesdropping our way into this conversation.

When he's too nervous to meet her eyes again, she breaks the silence. “What are you getting at?”

He finally looks up, his face resolute. “I'm saying I can feed you.” And he grabs her by the throat and kisses her.

Delaney doesn't react right away, doesn't respond to him. She doesn't stop it though, either. She kisses him back, but I can tell the second she decides to open up to him; the second she realizes he does have strong feelings for her and that she can in fact feed off of him, because her eyes fly open, she lets out a loud gasp, and then she's kissing him like she's every bit as starving as she is. Like she's trying to drain his soul

through his mouth.

For a second, I'm almost worried that she's going to start stripping right here in the back of the car even with her fathers' presence so close to us all. But that would be crazy. Nobody would do that.

Until, that is, I'm reminded that her mother is also a sex goddess, and sex is just regular to them. It's just another need, a normal part of life. They're not awkward or embarrassed about what Delaney needs to survive, and that's why they raised the divider. They don't like to see their daughter in any sort of discomfort, and I'm willing to bet they knew exactly what would happen when they closed that.

And what's more, they don't care. I'm sure they're not wonderfully comfortable with it, but I can tell Delaney has a good relationship with all of her parents and the two taking us to the portal see this as a basic need of life, because it is. To her, anyway.

I get now what Ash was trying to tell me. Me holding back is only hurting her. I may have been raised differently, where you stay pure until mating, but that doesn't work if you're fated to a bodysmith.

They're rare, and they don't usually mate for life; unless they're the even rarer combination that Delaney and her mother are, being conduits as well. I decide right then and there to start taking care of Delaney the way she needs. First chance I'm given, I'm kissing the snot out of her.

As it stands, she's unbuckling herself and her hand is disappearing into Rush's lap as he lifts his hips from the seat to pull down his pants. Spencer is whistling to himself and looking out the window, Saladriel is trying very hard to cover up his lap, but Delaney only has eyes for Rush. Whatever she senses from him has quelled her fears. She's gaining some trust for him. And he's going to take care of her. As it should be.

There's really no room in this car with this many people to be doing what they're doing, but they do it anyway.

She turns around so she's sitting on his lap, her back to his chest and she's, well, riding him.

The sounds. Oh god the sounds, muffled as they are.

She's got her head thrown back and I tentatively reach forward to clear her hair from her face. She smiles at the gesture but doesn't falter in her movements.

I can no longer see Rush's expressions, but he's whispering endearments into her ear, praising her, encouraging her, promising strange things that must mean something different in Hell.

I thought mating was supposed to take longer, but then again, she was starving. When they both stiffen and start whimpering, it's pretty obvious what's going on. They stop moving, both a little sweaty as he tries to kiss her neck more, and it smells like straight up sex in here, the smell I'm starting to associate with Delaney.

Could I do that? Could I allow myself to be free enough to make love to Delaney? In a place such as this? As of now, I don't think I could.

At least one of us is capable of caring for her this way, but I need to learn how to be what she needs.

By the time Delaney is safely buckled again and everybody's clothes are back on properly, she's snoring quietly with her head tipped onto Rush's shoulder, and he's looking down at her with so much tenderness I almost forget he's a demon. It's a little bit heartwarming. And the lust that was pumping through all of us has dissipated, so for now, she's satisfied. It's anybody's guess though how long it will last. Especially

once we get to a new land that features a goddess that seems to have it out for her.

Oh gods, what even am I getting myself into?

Chapter Twelve

Delaney

“Ugh, gross! What the hell?” My hand immediately reaches out to slap whoever is shoving a nasty, wet tongue into my ear, but Rush doesn't even look mildly sorry.

In fact, he shrugs. “Works every time. Out you go, sunshine. We are at our destination.” And he jumps out of the car, extending his hand like he's about to guide me down a red carpet.

I rub the sleep out of my eyes, belatedly realizing I probably just made my mascara smear like crazy, and then I have to do damage control by licking my fingers to wipe it off as best as I can, which let's be honest, probably only makes everything worse. Collar of my T-shirt it is. I definitely can't get out of the car without fixing my sloppy-ass ponytail, and then I'm out of excuses.

I will be the first to admit how much of a badass I am, but I think it's okay to be reluctant about jumping into a portal willingly. I've gone through it before to visit Uncle Bennett, but that's because there were cute babies involved, and I knew exactly what I was getting into. Plus, my parents were with me.

Of course I want to get over there and make sure my mates are okay, they are kind of my responsibility and everything, but standing in front of the portal just feels so ominous.

“We're sure this is the right move? Like, 100% sure this is our best option?”

Our only option? You guys don't think everyone will just magically reappear where they disappeared from? Maybe we should go home and check, just to be safe."

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I catch something weird on Saladriel's face, and I'm fast enough with my spin that I actually see it before it disappears. "Holy fuck! You smirked. The grumpy unicorn smirked, everybody!"

He rolls his eyes at me. "Whatever. I can be happy, okay? Now, we going through this thing or not?"

I suck in a breath through my teeth. "Right. You probably want to get back to your girlfriend, huh? Should be excited to see you. Yes. I guess we're doing this."

My mom turns to smirk at me. She hip checks me as she walks up to me, holding out a hand for fist bump. "Back of the car? Nice."

"Mrs. Delaney's mom, it's a pleasure. Things were a bit hectic back at the dorm, but I wanted to say hello," Rush says with another flourish. He bows to her, holding out his arm like he's in some sort of medieval court or something. "I just want you to know I'm going to treat your daughter very well."

She scoffs. "If by treat her well you mean keep her fed, then yes, you are. And if you talk to him, tell your father I didn't appreciate his New Year's gift very much."

"I'm so sorry about that. I told him it was a bad idea. He really doesn't listen to me, though."

"Hmm," is all she says. "Alright, here's your pep talk. Gods and goddesses are difficult. The trick is, you need to manage them in a way that they don't realize. They almost always have very big egos. Use that."

Saladriel nods in agreement. “Pretty sure that's their default setting.”

“Alright, bye then! We'll see you when you get back.”

My parents hug me and then start heading towards the car while Wil stands there open-mouthed. “Wait, that's it? No, ‘keep each other alive? Don't get hurt? You've got this?’”

They all pause. And then my mother turns around. I know immediately this isn't something that anybody else needs to hear, but unfortunately, I can't make it stop. I've learned from numerous experiences that when my mom has wisdom to impart, she will impart it no matter what I do to try and prevent her from doing so. It's usually better to let it roll off your back and move on.

“When in doubt, remember the lessons you learned at the infamous strip club,” my mother tells me with a big wink. “Also, ask the locals on recommendations for lube before you try and improvise. Not everything is created equal in other realms.”

My mom stops at the guard house, presumably to give them instructions about when we return, blows kisses and then starts to pull away.

“Look, I know they aren't traditional, but I swear to you they love me.”

“Yeah, no. I totally get that,” Spencer says with a face that tells me he's trying so hard not to laugh.

“Still unclear why you're here,” I tell him, “but you know you don't actually have to accompany us to this other realm to go on some silly quest this goddess has decided I need to go on, right?”

Rush waves his fingers at my arm. “You should do the thing, Delaney.”

My jaw drops. I look at Spencer, I look at Rush, I look at my arm. And I do it all again. Maybe I get teary eyed, but there's no proof. "Why would you say such a hateful thing?"

"She doesn't mean it like that," Rush assures Spencer. "She's just resisting the knowledge that she will have another mate to take on right now. She's feeling unprepared and overwhelmed with everything going on."

Spencer looks embarrassed, but I probably feel more so. Best thing I can think to do at that moment is lie on the ground. Face first. And hey, if my face ends up in an ant hill, that's certainly nobody's business. I can take it. I'm tough.

"For fox's sake, Delaney. They're literally eating your face off. Get off the ground," Wil says with a level of exasperation heretofore unseen from him.

"I get it now. Why my mother is known to yell out, 'there are too many dicks in this damn family!' when she's napping on the couch. Can I not just fucking date somebody and control how everything progresses?"

"Is this a bad time to tell you I don't actually have a girlfriend?"

Okay, the venom is starting to really bother me. So, I roll over. Let them eat my scalp for a bit. "Really, Saladriel? You could have just said you didn't want to be with me. That would have been acceptable, you know."

Right, well. Sort of feels like I'm spinning out of control; I don't really know what's happening anywhere, I need to get everyone back. I need Cory's sunshine. I need an Adam hug. I need the twins there to tease me and make me happy. And that's not going to happen if I don't suck it up and just go through the damn portal.

I grab Wil's hand because he looks as nervous as I am. I'm not sure what Rush is even

thinking about. I don't have the mental capacity to process getting together with Spencer right now. Sometimes you just need to enforce boundaries and take care of yourself.

“Okay, here's your pep talk from me,” I tell the guys standing behind me. “I have no idea what to expect when we walk through here, but let's just do our best to work together and stay together. Spencer, if you're intent on coming with us, I'm going to need to put a pause on anything between us. I'm just not ready.”

“That's cool. Totally respect that. If you really don't want me, I can stay here, but I'm pretty good at managing Rush by this point. I might come in handy.”

“Up to you. Let's just get this over with, shall we?” And just in case something happens, and I don't get another chance, I kiss Wil on the cheek, and I squeeze Rush's hand. It's thanks to him I feel as steady as I do right now, but I think it's just going to take time to build something reliable together.

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I take a deep breath and take a step forward. And take another step forward. And I keep doing that until I'm through the portal.

We end up on a cloud, a different one than I entered on last time. Still not quite sure how Fairygoddess got ahold of me in my dreams to transport me here, but at least I know there're other ways in and out. I won't feel quite so trapped now.

If I didn't know any better, I'd think we were walking into some sort of paradise. It's comfortably warm, a little bit sunny, and blue skies as far as the eye can see.

Big, fluffy clouds dot every available plane, with walkways and ornate bridges connecting them. I can see cottage-like homes in the distance, some clouds with nothing but gardens, and the one immediately in front of us is spread with a big, soft picnic blanket.

A blanket that is meowing at me.

Let me tell you, if you ever want to trap a girl, give her a basket full of kittens that magically change into burdens. It's actually perfect.

Before Saladriel can warn me not to, I'm diving towards the giant wicker basket full of writhing, fluffy kittens. They're all calicos, my absolute favorite coloration. I've never gotten to have a cat because they get nervous around people that can turn into giant lions, but these ones don't seem to mind me so much as I make obscene grabby hands at them all.

I flop in front of the basket and I'm elbow deep in purring felines before I realize

they're not like regular kittens. At first, it's nice. Their fur is soft and warm, their little claws prickling me gently. But when I try and scoop them all up, because I don't stop to think it's weird there's a basket full of kittens here for me, they all turn into blue glowing orbs and sink into my arm. Right over my marks where the guys' mate marks are.

“Oh good, it worked. Excellent!”

Motherfucker.

I'd know that dump truck of an ass anywhere.

“You didn't bond with Saladriel. Why not? Was he not good enough for you?”

A good way to handle somebody with a big ego is to pretend like you don't notice it. Pretend yours is bigger. “Forced bonds don't work out too well, as it turns out. He's been pretty homesick and there's not really any chemistry there.”

Fairygoddess Unicorn pouts. And yes, it looks as dumb as you're thinking. “You sure it's not just because you didn't want to put any effort in? I know you're capable of it.”

She's giving off serious villain vibes at this point. “What do you want from me? Why am I here? And where the hell are my mates? If you took them from me, you can be sure I won't do a damn thing for you. If I find out they're harmed in any way, we're going to have some serious issues to settle between us.”

“It's cute you think you're a match for me. But lucky for you, I still want your help. Saladriel, darling, I'm sorry things didn't work out for you. I can see you're unhappy. I will revoke your bond.”

He stiffens behind me, and surprisingly, it's him that stops her. “We didn't work out

because I wouldn't let her get close to me. It's my fault goddess, not hers. Please don't punish her."

"Well, I really thought I was onto something. But if a woman like that can't even save you, I guess I need to adjust my plans."

I just know she's going to do something bad. And whether or not Saladriel actually likes me, I'm fond of him and I feel protective of him. I won't let him get hurt because of something he had nothing to do with. "Goddess, we simply need more time together. I can make him happy, I know I can. It's just been difficult trying to focus on school and all the other distractions around me. It was thoughtful of you to bring us here so we can focus on being together."

I've guessed her game, and I made a risk, but it's going to pay off. I know it will. Ithasto.

In the last few weeks that Saladriel's been with us, I've been giving him space. I didn't want to push him, didn't want to pressure him into anything. Especially because I knew he was with somebody else. Or at least I thought he was.

I'm not even mad that he lied, because I'm sure he did it for a reason. He did not ask to be entangled up in this anymore than I did, and I'm not going to fault him for trying to stay safe the easiest way he could think of.

But now, I feel like it's imperative that we play along with the goddess' game or things are going to end very badly. Probably for both of us.

He seems taken aback when I spin suddenly and throw my arms around him, embracing him for probably the first time. I hold him and I let him feel the tremors in my arms, let him know that I'm scared too, but to also reassure him that I'm not going to give up on him.

Whether he admits it or not, he reacts to me. I know we can't always help the way our bodies react to things, but the faint taste of his lust tells me he's at least somewhat fond of me as well. I can work with that. And sometimes, a surprise kiss works miracles.

Now that I know he doesn't have somebody waiting for him, I can kiss him the way I've been thinking about since I got his mark.

He's breathless when I finally pull away, but he's definitely smiling a bit. And I can feel the black lines in my arm burn just a little bit less.

“There. That wasn't so hard, was it? This is all televised, by the way. Say hello to your fans, darling.”

I have no idea where the screen is, no idea where the recorder is, or what angle people can see us from, but I want them to know I genuinely want to help them. If it's within my power. Whatever's causing Glittertopia to not be sparkly and happy, and I think we all know the root cause, it feels like it would be a lifelong dream for anybody to rescue a planet full of unicorns. Almost as nice as a basket full of kittens.

Damn it. The kittens.

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I hold out my arm with the blue orbs glowing under my skin, taking stock of the actual lumps now situated there. They're firm and a little bit warmer than the surface around them. "What am I meant to do with these, then?"

"I'm so glad you asked. These are your embers. All eight of them. One for each of your mates that are currently visiting my home. If you want to free them, you've got to play the game. Easy as that."

"And how do I play?"

"Unfortunately, you can't do anything until the marks from my sister on your other arm are satisfied. If you want to rescue your mates, you've got to make the ones with you right now yours first."

"You do know we all have lives in our own world, right? You took the headmaster of an entire school. That's going to cause absolute chaos if we don't return immediately."

She waves me off. "The second you stepped through that portal, time stopped over there. Not a second will pass while you're over here. I did that so you can give all of your focus to what I need. Everything there will still be waiting when you get done."

That's surprisingly... helpful, actually. "So we're here. We were sure that we had to travel all the way to the portal in order to rescue my mates. Now you're telling me it was all for nothing because you're what, not ready for me to compete in your games? Am I the savior you chose for your realm, or am I not?"

She sighs, and for a moment I see past the façade that she's wrought upon herself, the

true face she hides. She looks defeated. “It’s simply not that easy. The magic in my realm won’t be able to take root until the magic from the other realm is satisfied. And if you’re thinking you’ll simply waltz out of here, back to your home, and rally up a force you think capable of defeating me, think again; the portal behind you is currently locked and will remain so until I am satisfied.”

There’s an oomph behind me and I turn to see Rush face down in a cloud, ass in the air, while he munches on the cloud he’s sitting on like it’s actual cotton candy. He’s got a dopey look on his face, and I just know this is the result of him taking me in the back of my dad’s car. Bit of a delayed reaction, but if this is all he’s going to do, I’ll consider myself lucky that at least one of my mates doesn’t go absolutely batshit when we have sex.

“You going to handle that?” The goddess asks, pointing to the demon.

I wave her off. “He’s fine. Of course we’re trapped here. What do you want me to do then? Have me and my mates stare into each other’s eyes until we feel something move within our chests? You can’t just force a bond to manifest. It takes time. It takes experiences. It takes...fuck. Rush, no!”

And there it is.

He’s shifted to his standard demon form with blue skin and slightly different features, has stripped, and is now bouncing from cloud to cloud, streaking and yelling, “Wheee!”

“Good luck with that. Come find me when you’re ready.”

The goddess poofs into thin air, leaving me with a group of people that I apparently need to find a way to fall for. Or at least get close enough to them to claim them with my magic.

“He’s headed for the village of elders,” Saladriel says with a hint of amusement. This quickly turns to concern though as he thinks about it. “It’s basically a retirement community. I’m a little concerned him running through their clouds so...naked, will cause some heart complications.”

Perfect. Exactly what I need right now. “Alright. Lead the way, unicorn expert. I have no idea how to navigate these clouds.”

Chapter Thirteen

Spencer

I must admit, it's a bit tricky to have a conversation with somebody you're really into while you're busy leaping across clouds. Maybe it makes me gross to think of it, but at least I get to watch Delaney bouncing around. The jiggle that woman has is unmatched.

We keep getting glimpses of Rush in the distance before he'll disappear somewhere, usually reemerging with a loud cacophony of shrieks. We get a flash of his blue ass as he cackles like the demon he is and then he's switching directions and disappearing again. It's a bit like chasing after a toddler, really.

“Think we could trap him with a bowl of mashed potatoes or something? This is way more work than I wanted to put into this endeavor,” Delaney wheezes.

I'm right there with her though. As much work as it is to play football, it's got nothing on the muscles it takes to cloud jump. My thighs are burning, and I don't know how much longer I'll be able to go. Saladriel has shifted to his unicorn-self which seems perfect for this sort of environment, which makes sense, but poor Wil is basically having one long asthma attack.

“Only sweet potatoes here,” Saladriel reminds us. Let me tell you, it's a bit jarring to hear a human voice come out of a Unicorn. But damn he's pretty.

Eventually, it becomes too much for Wilford to handle. He collapses onto his knees then flops onto his back and waves us on. “You... continue... without me. Cull the weakling. I'm not worthy.”

“I'm guessing you didn't bring your inhaler?” I ask Wil, just to be sure.

We actually went to the same elementary school, so I've known him for a while. We've never really been friends, but I guess that's about to change.

He's really struggling. “Delaney, you might have to...you know. Are his lips turning blue, or is that just me?”

Delaney doesn't hesitate to throw herself down beside the suffocating goat shifter, leaning over him. There's real concern on her face and I'm happy that Wil's found somebody that appreciates his uniqueness.

“Fuck. You don't look so good there, Willy-boy. You're freaking me out.”

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It's like a death scene from a movie in slow-mo. I can tell Delaney's weighing her options, thinking about Wil's hang ups with kissing, but I think he'll forgive her for crossing that boundary if it's literally to save his life.

“I'm going to have to kiss you, okay Wil? I'm going to heal you. I don't know what else to do for you right now; you can hate me for it later.”

She kisses like it's an art form. As she lays beside him and pulls his face toward her, I can't help but think about the kiss I got from her under similar circumstances. Maybe it wasn't life or death, but it would have been a big deal if I wouldn't have been able to play in that game. I'm not ashamed to admit I have wet dreams about her several times a week at this point.

I think Saladriel is trying his hardest not to watch, still trying to be grumpy for whatever reason, Rush told me all about that; but he keeps sneaking side glances at the couple. And that's exactly what they look like. Wil has rolled into her now, wrapped his arms around her, and he's kissing her with even more confidence than he did earlier.

After it goes on for a few minutes, I think they've forgotten the reason they started kissing in the first place. They're just doing it now because it's fun. I can see Wil's hands fluttering around, trying to figure out where he's allowed to touch her, and her trying very hard to go against her bodysmith nature and respect his boundaries. I know she's wanting him something fierce because I can feel exactly how strong her lust is.

There's nothing to hide behind here, so I just let the hard-on happen.

It's nice, actually.

“My turn!” Rush yells as he suddenly appears from nowhere and tries to wedge himself between Wil and Delaney. Wil is in shock for an entirely different reason now, and Delaney is so thrown off by the sudden change of person in front of her that it takes her a beat too long to grab Rush’s arm and lock him down. But this is why I’m here.

I grab the demon rope I’ve taken to carrying with me everywhere out of my back pocket, and I throw it like a lasso around Rush’s head. It instantly immobilizes him, leaving him unable to do little else but wag his eyebrows at Delaney. And maybe gesture to his enormously hard cock, but I think he’d find a way to do that no matter what we did to him.

“Where did you even come from? And Wil, you breathing easier now?”

Wil looks like he's just seen light for the first time. He vaults over Rush and throws himself back at Delaney, who has no choice but to be pushed back into the clouds with him on top of her.

In a feat of strength I didn't think Wilford had, he pries her knees apart so he can kneel there, and once again kisses the ever living shit out of her. Delaney’s lust fires up again, and I lose focus on the demon. Luckily at this point all the aerobic activity has cleared his head a bit, and he's more or less back to himself.

“Whew, that was a rush!” And then he starts laughing hysterically at his stupid joke.

“We're not making very good progress,” Saladriel comments.

Wil scrambles backwards and helps Delaney up, then stands there trying to cover up his crotch like we don't know exactly what's happening there.

“Can I have that?” Delaney asks, gesturing towards the demon leash I've grabbed once more.

I hand it over gladly and she wraps it around her fist several times until there're only a few inches separating her and Rush. “On your knees, Demon.”

Her growl sends shivers down all of our spines at the same time, and weirdly, all of us end up on our knees.

“You think you can run from me? What if something happened to you? What if you got lost? What if we couldn't get to you?”

Rush rolls out his bottom lip in a pout and bats his eyes. It only makes Delaney narrow her eyes further at him.

“I'm... sorry?”

“You should be. Let me tell you how things are going to go, okay? You don't so much as breathe without my permission. You are mine. That means you stay the fuck next to me, or I will make sure that godsdamned perfect dick you have never works properly again, you feel me?”

“Yes, mis—”

“And another thing. If I have to choose between chasing your blue ass around or making sure that my absolute sweetheart of a mate Wil doesn't overtax himself, I will let you walk yourself right off these clouds and let you deal with the repercussions yourself.”

Fuck me why is this so hot?

“You disobeyed me, Rush. You took off and made us chase you all over this fucking realm and then you just pop back in when it suits you? I don’t think so. You’ll stay the fuck next to me— what are you doing?”

He’s done playing, is what he’s doing.

My whole body is buzzing from the leggings he’s peeling off of her, my eyes fixated on the skin he’s working to reveal.

Despite her protestations that she’s sweaty and there’s no way he wants his face anywhere near her right now unless a shower miraculously appears, he forges on, full steam ahead.

Also, a shower miraculously appears.

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Saladriel moseys with intention to a slightly darker cloud just to the right of Delaney's head and reaches down into it until an entire fucking handheld shower head emerges. Then he reaches in again and produces a bottle labeled, 'Adult Fun Time Wash'. I shit you not.

Rush doesn't question the weirdness of this exchange, he simply moves faster, getting Delaney completely naked from the hips down and reaching for the water and soap, staring her down while he does a thorough job of cleaning her.

The second those suds are gone from her body, he throws the showerhead and the soap bottle back to Saladriel and fuckingdivesbetween Delaney's legs.

"Be mean to me again," he pleads before he shoves his tongue inside of her.

"You fucking worried me sick, and I ought to castrate you for that. For worming your way under my skin and making me fucking want to keep you safe, and—oh my gods.Fuuuuck..."

I don't know exactly what move he's using, but she's writhing and yanking his hair and enjoying the hell out of it. Literally? He's got her flesh peeled far apart to fit his face there and looks like a demon possessed (oh my gods, these euphemisms come way too easy with him) as hedeavoursher.

He wrenches an orgasm out of her, his whole body shaking from the effort he's imbuing into this process and doesn't let up until she's screaming bloody murder and the lust is so thick that it sends me to my knees. I feel like I'm getting secondhand high from this.

She twitches a long time while Rush finishes her off, motorboating between her legs like it's completely normal and not at all weird or off-putting. It's so fucking hard to not shove my hands in my pants and jack my self off, but when Delaney catches my eye, I decide that maybe it's okay that I do exactly that.

She watches my movement, but I keep it classy by not pulling my monster-sized cock out of my pants completely, working myself within the confines of my stretchy joggers. It's too good with her watching.

Being on my knees for this makes it a bit more of a challenge for some reason, but the eye contact she forces on me has my hand moving impossibly fast as I mentally replay everything Rush just did, wishing for not the first time I could touch her like that. Wishing I had some ownership of some part of her, however small, so I could enjoy her and worship the fuck out of her.

Maybe it's the little bit of bodysmith genes in me making it happen, but I swear to you my arm starts to burn as if it's sitting on a hot stove. Nothing visibly happens to it, but it's pulsing in time with my ring finger, and I think it's at that moment I decide to believe Rush. I decide to accept that I'm meant for her, because somehow that's the only thing clear in my head.

“Oh, fuck I want to choke on that thing. Damn, Spencer, that's not even remotely proportional to your body size. Please, fucking choke me, let me feel your pelvis smashing into my cheek bones.”

Her voice is desperate, and I fear that we are in fact starting an orgy of our own, but it's impossible to stop. The very air feels as if it's holding us hostage, soaking into my lungs and using my every breath to further its agenda, which seems to be fucking, in any form.

It's impossible not to crawl over to her and drape myself across her body, so I don't

fight it. It's like her voice is controlling my actions, wiping away all of the protests I'd possibly have to make about using her this way.

But I think she fucking needs it. I don't know why I seem to have been blessed in such a way that I'm even here at all in this circumstance, but I can feel her hunger for me, and my desperation to get her wet, hot mouth wrapped around me while I slide into the silk of her throat and choke her is too overwhelming to fight against.

Not that she'd let me fight it anyway. Every time I protest even the smallest amount by halting my movement towards her or by opening my stupid fucking mouth to tell her I can take care of myself, I can't seem to stop my actions.

So, I stop trying to.

When I pull my waistband down below my balls, I'm so close to her that my dick sort of spills out of my pants and smacks her in the face. But she loves it. She starts nuzzling me, driving me up a fucking wall, teasing us both until she can't anymore.

The first time her perfect pink tongue leaves her mouth to lick me, I know I'm done for. I've never ever in my life be in a situation like this where I'm with a woman that's so damn feral for me that it pulls us together exactly like fate forcing us together.

And maybe that's what this is. Maybe it has nothing to do with an irritable unicorn goddess that wants to teach Delaney some sort of fucked up, unnecessary lesson by using the very clouds we must stand on to carry out her own plans, and everything to do with Delaney feeling how strong my urges are and making them her own. I mean, it's probably also the first buttholy fuck she just swallowed me whole.

I'm blessed in the penis department thanks to my bodysmith heritage, and I know it's scared off women in the past who previously swore they wanted to know what it was

like to be with someone with such a cock, but Delaney is taking it as a personal challenge and damn if she isn't setting a personal best.

Someone pulls my shirt over my head while I hang my head over her, my knees a little above her head as I slip down her throat upside down.

Her throat widens slightly to accommodate me, and those damn muscles she's got hidden there make me the happiest hostage there ever was.

I didn't think there was ever going to be a way for me to experience head this way, because it would take someone practically dislocating their jaw to do it. I guess I wrote off getting with a bodysmith. It's not something that somebody like me ever thought would be a dream that could come true.

They're rare and they're so fucking sought after, and I have nothing to offer her; they're usually so pampered and fawned over that only the wealthy typically seek them out. I'm just a broke college kid that wants to play football.

Yet here I am with my cock down her throat and a pounding in my chest telling me that this girl is a part of my future. I know she just told me a little bit ago that she wasn't ready, but I'm already mentally calculating what plans I had for after graduation and wondering how I can alter them to stay close to Delaney because I'm pretty sure this is going to become an addiction. Even if she's not ready for anything more than what we're currently doing.

I make the mistake of looking up, catching Wil's eye, who is looking at Delaney's mouth working me in horrified fascination, so lost to his baser instincts trying to fight their way to the surface that he lets out a very goatly bleat.

Rush still has his face buried between her legs, but she's squirming like she needs more. Her lust is choking me almost as hard as I'm choking her, and since she can

hardly voice her needs right now, I guess I get to be her advocate. “She needs to be fucked; I can feel it.”

Rush looks up, panicked, then glances down at his very flaccid dick. “This place doesn’t like demons,” he whispers. “It’s too happy. It’s freaking me out and I can’t get it up. Even with this perfection in front of me, my body won’t work. I don’t think I can perform in this realm!”

Wil’s not going to take her for the first time under these circumstances, and when I try to meet Saladriel’s eye he pointedly looks away, even though I know his unicorn dick wants to rut into something.

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She's starting to hurt. This realm seems to be messing with her magic, too, because I can tell she's already hungry again.

I force myself all the way inside her throat again, wrapping a hand around her throat where I see myself bulging from within, massaging it, and she doesn't once protest. She locks onto me and squeezes, very nearly undoing me, but I have to be better than that for her.

I know she doesn't think I can feed her, but with all the shady shit that Rush has told me about her over the years, I probably know her pretty damn well. I'm likely half in love with her already, even if I didn't ever consider I was an option for her until very recently.

I've got to be better than nothing, right?

Before she starts struggling for air, I pull out and flip myself around, lodging Rush out of position.

I make sure she knows I'm going to kiss her long before I make a move to do so, because I need to know she wants it like I do, even a fraction. Her eyes are watering, mascara a little smudged, and it's so fucking hot that I groan and I shove my tongue in her mouth where my dick just was. She's greedy again, clawing at me as she wraps her legs around my hips.

“Wait, wait, sweetness. You need to know I haven't been with anyone in a long time, okay? I'm clean. I might be able to use my little bit of bodysmith genes to fuel you up better. And I want you to know I'm not just doing this because you need it. I'm here

because I fucking want you. Have since I saw you in my stadium.”

Delaney wraps her arms around my neck and pulls me into her, and I can tell she’s emotionally overwhelmed from everything happening, holding onto a fragile amount of stability from having all her mates ripped away from her temporarily, terrified that she won’t be able to feed off any of us, and just overall tired.

I’m surprised as hell when she whispers the magic words, confirming that I’m definitely meant for her, and the second that empty circle shows up on her arm for me, I push inside of her and claim the fuck out of her.

She bows her back and lets out a scream, her beautiful breasts begging me to play with them. They’re too big to fit in my hands, but I rub my thumbs over her nipples anyway as I hold them best I can, kissing her again so I can meet as many of her needs at once as possible.

“We’re going to get them back for you, Delaney, promise. Just let us take care of you.”

It doesn’t take long for her to show signs of an impending release since Rush warmed her up so well with his tongue, and there’s no way I’m holding out either after having her suck me down so damn well.

I need to be deeper, though. I want to shove myself so deep inside of her that I feel like I’m falling in.

I grab her ankles and cross them, propping them up on my shoulder as I lean over her and kiss her again, taking her mouth as I slam into her over and over again until she has no choice but to scream once more. It’s fucking perfection hearing my name on her lips like that, fucking thrilling knowing that it’s me making these sounds come out of her, and it’s fucking perfection when she clamps down on me and pulls an

entire year's supply of cum from my balls, leaving me lightheaded and very husk-like when it's over.

ChapterFourteen

Saladriel

“Sometimes I think all they do is rut into each other,” I say to literally no one as I wander to a spot one cloud over. It doesn't do anything to reduce the number of absurd noises they're making, but it makes me feel better about myself for not perving right next to them.

I don't like how often she makes my dick hard. It's not natural. I also don't know how much longer I can hold out on her, she's starting to mess with my head, I think. I'm starting to look at her different and I think the weird fuzzy feeling in my chest is... happiness.

No matter how many times I'm an asshole to her, she still smiles and pats me on the arm and is so damn nice to me thatsometimes I just want to gag on it. Sort of like the way she was just gagging on Spencer.

That man has to be setting some records.

For some reason, I get very growly when I think about her meeting other male unicorns. I know my goddess apparently has matched her with some, but what happens when they take to her immediately? I'm going to get edged out, and I don't even know if that's something I want or not.

I'm kind of guessing not since the idea of it makes me sick to my stomach. I just don't know how she expects to find the missing mates she's here to find if she can't stop getting bent in half. Is this one of those ‘trust the process’ moments?

“Sorry about that, Saladriel. It wasn't my intention to make you uncomfortable.”

I shrug and pull up a puff of cloud to mess around with. Odd, it feels a little spongier than normal. “That's just your nature, right? I don't ever think you're doing it intentionally to make me uncomfortable. It just is what it is.”

“It's kind of weird though, the black lines in my arm are even lighter now. I wonder why that is?” And she looks at me like I'm about to confess something.

Ha. Yeah right. I'm not...enjoying any of the sex she keeps having without me. Gross. “I just live here, Delaney. I don't know how the rules work.” Totally believable, right?

She unfolds her legs and drapes them off the side of the cloud with me, seemingly unbothered by the fact that I'm still in my unicorn form. I guess that's kinda cool that she doesn't care.

“Has anybody explained to you how my bodysmith powers work? Why I behave the way I do? Why I'm so sex-crazed?”

I shrug again, getting more and more uncomfortable as our topics progress into more personal topics. Next thing I know, we'll be discussing toilet paper preferences and exchanging DIY recipes for face cream. Gag. That sounds...awful.

“My body absorbs lust from people and that's how I fuel my magic. Every bodysmith works a little differently, and me in particular? I can only feed off of people that have real feelings for me. Otherwise, I could be in the lustiest place on earth, and I wouldn't be able to absorb a drop of it. And I know this because I've literally been to the lustiest place on earth. Mom took me for my 19th birthday.”

“Your mother seems strange.”

Instead of getting offended, she laughs. “You have no idea. Anyway, I know we probably all seem like sex fiends to you, and I don't think the goddess thought about that or put any consideration into the fact that you're not into me. Is it because I'm a woman? And whatever the answer, I'm not offended. I just want to understand. I can't protect you with her if I don't know what I'm working with. I have this feeling that nothing good will happen if our mission fails. If we don't find a way to form some sort of bond together, I don't know what she'll do to you. So, give me something I can work with. How can I help you adjust to this? Do I have any hope of making you even a tiny bit happy?”

I might as well just tell her. “It's pretty common, and I would venture so far as to say normal even, that most unicorn shifters are somewhere on the asexual spectrum. I personally hover somewhere around demisexual. That's why the goddess is having such a hard time getting us to mate and bond together, because she's not respecting our needs.

“Even though she supposedly created us, she hasn't really taken the time to understand how our minds work. So no, it's not that you're a woman. If I was going to be attracted to anybody, it would be a woman. I like how soft they are. It's just not a quick thing for me; I need a connection first.” My ears burn and flick back and forth a bit at that admission that I didn't mean to make, but she accepts it like she accepts everything else. It's infuriating how even keeled and kind she is.

“Thank you for telling me that. We are pretty opposite then, I guess. I feel like I haven't actually asked you this question point blank, so maybe it's time to. Do you

have any interest in a relationship with me? A relationship that looks like whatever you want it to look like. If you want to just be friends, I need to know that, too. I just... I feel like I'm flying blind here.”

She holds out her arm and rubs her fingers over the mark the goddess gave her for me. “I guess I feel a responsibility to you since she matched us. I don't know if she knows something we don't, if we could be a good pair or not given enough time, but what do you want out of this?”

“That's not an easy question for me to answer. I guess...” I give her the respect of looking at her eyes, hit square in the chest by their light lavender color. I also decide to stop trying to protect myself or hide myself and shift back to my human form.

She smiles, and I know I made the right move.

“As you've probably figured out by now, I don't do well with change. I feel like I'm getting lost in this group of men you're with, and I don't know how to worm my way in there. I don't like having attention on me, and it's difficult to talk to you alone. I feel selfish even asking to talk to you alone. There're so many people with things to tell you, ideas to share, mouths that want to kiss you...why would you give time to me when I don't really know how to talk to people and kissing kind of freaks me out?”

She shyly twines our fingers together, rubbing her thumb along the side of my hand. It's oddly nice.

“To be honest, I get kind of lost in all the noise as well. I'm more or less making this up as I go? I've pretty much known my whole life that this is what kind of lifestyle I'd be living eventually, but I guess I hoped that my mates would be fewer in number and come to me slower.

“I love the idea of a less-harried courtship, of getting to know each other while you

decide if they're somebody you could see yourself spending your life with. But sometimes... sometimes decisions are made for us, and we can only adapt to them the best we can."

She pauses for a moment, weighing her words. "I know I come with a lot of baggage, Saladriel. If you've ever spent time dreaming about a partner you'd end up with, I can pretty much guarantee those dreams included somebody far simpler. And I mean that in a good way," she quickly corrects. "That doesn't mean though, that we can't work together and to find a way through this. If you want out of this, then I'll figure that out, too. I don't know how yet, and it might take a bit of time before I can get to that point; but I would never want to keep you tied to me if you truly didn't want to be here. Based on your behavior since we met, I kind of get the feeling that's the case—"

Why do I want to kiss her so badly right now? Kissing just seems weird. And not at all enjoyable. So why are my lips tingling? I suppose the fact that my body's been getting aroused around her is answer enough. That pretty much never happens. "I haven't exactly given you a fair shot. I've been determined to be unhappy with you and your group. I'm sorry for that."

"Please don't apologize. This is your home. Not where I am. I tried to get your goddess to undo the bond before we met, have I told you that? That's why you were in pain initially. I heard you screaming and I couldn't handle the thought of someone hurting because of me, so I made your goddess stop."

This surprises me, and I reel back. I kind of figured she'd be delighted to have another toy to add to her collection. Which is very unfair of me to think, but I've been so determined to not like her. "You didn't want me as a mate?"

She flips my palm over, sparing a quick side glance and smile for the outfit I'm wearing. For some reason, we get to choose our clothing when we shift back to our human forms. I imagined myself in a cotton candy pink T-shirt and some worn grey

corduroy pants, even though I've never worn corduroy in my life. Okay, maybe there's a cute lioness embroidered on my chest as well, but that could be for a lot of reasons. This ability is a gift from our goddess, no doubt something she can dangle over our heads to show she's benevolent.

"More like I'm struggling with the number of people I'm meant to be taking care of and forming bonds with. I started out with August and Jackson, and then that blew up, and then I thought I'd— you know what? You don't need to hear all this."

"Tell me anyway?"

She flops back, and I immediately miss the warmth of her. She props her hands behind her head as she stares into the endless blue above us. "My mom always made it look so easy, being a partner to so many people. I've never stopped to think that maybe that's because my parents have had so long to figure it out. In my world, us conduits are like mini celebrities, adored by the masses and envied by more, for the gifts our goddess gave us. But sometimes, I wonder what it would be like to simply be with somebody because I want to, not because I have some deadline hanging over my head reminding me I have to find my mates before my magic dries up."

"Does that actually happen?" It appears I have more to learn about her world than I thought.

She nods, and my neck is starting to ache from looking behind me, so I carefully recline next to her on my side, propping my head up with a hand.

"Most conduits know exactly how many mates they'll have. When they present as a conduit, they get dots on their arm indicating how many soul mates they have."

"But not you?" I guess.

“But not me,” she agrees. “I have some resentment for my goddess as well. But sometimes, I think if I'm having such a hard time balancing the people she's put in my life, I can't imagine how much harder it must be for her. I mean, she has an entire realm to look after and anytime anybody's unhappy, who do they blame?”

The next time I swallow, it sits too heavy in my stomach. “The goddess,” I whisper.

“Who knows; maybe she wanted to surprise me with how many mates I'd have so I could fully enjoy just being with them without worrying about how many more to find. In actuality, I'd probably find a way to be unhappy or frustrated no matter what the circumstances were. If I'd known from the start that I'd have this many mates, I probably would have fought even harder than I already am.”

The rest of her group that has come with us are suspiciously quiet, but she seems unconcerned with that. I have her full attention right now, and it's nice. They're adults, I figure they can look after themselves for a little bit. “Why are you fighting it?”

“It's just all moving so fast, you know?”

I get the sudden urge to run my fingers through her hair, and I realize this is the peace I've been looking to find with her. So I try it, and if possible, she gets even stiller. Maybe she's been taking notes from that gargoyle mate of hers.

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Even messy from running after the demon for quite a while, and after several rounds already today with her mates, her hair is so, so,so soft. It's such a light color that it's basically white, with an almost metallic hue to it. As the sun's light hits it, it has opalescent rainbows if you look close enough. "I'm obsessed with your hair." And then I realize what I said, and I draw my hand back quickly.

She lets out a soft laugh and blinks her eyes open to look at me. "You can touch my hair, Saladriel. I'm hardly going to take it as a come on."

I indulge myself again, working out some of her tangles and smoothing it out for her. "You're not what I expected. I had this idea in my head that you'd be bossy or pushy or... I don't know. Not this."

"That's a good thing, I suppose?"

I shrug again because I don't know what else to do. "You're just so different than anybody I've ever met." I stare at her, inundated with other urges. Am I brave enough to voice them aloud though? Not like I have anything to lose. "Do you think... I could maybe hold you?"

"Technically I'm yours. You can ask for whatever you need. That's kind of the point."

The simplicity of that statement is shocking somehow. "Is it really that easy? Have I been overthinking this?"

Her eyes crinkle a little bit at the corners which is adorable, and she scoots over, carefully peeling my arm away from my head so she can lay on my bicep. Then she

grabs my other arm that's on my hip and pulls it over her lower back, and she finds a spot to rest her head right near my collarbone, that just feels... nice.

“We all process things in different ways.”

It's really quiet as we lay there together for a few moments, but I'm more at peace than I have been in a long time. With my past situationship, we could hang out and not talk for a bit, but it never felt like this. I've never given much thought into having a partner, but maybe I'm starting to see the merits of it.

A few things she's been saying suddenly work their way together in my mind like a puzzle and I feel embarrassment tingeing my skin scarlet. “You know I find you attractive, don't you? That's what you were getting at? That bodysmiths can sense lust, but you're different and you can sense when it's more than just lust, right?”

She does me the service of keeping her head where it is, so I don't have to look in her eyes while I feel so embarrassed. “That's nobody's business but your own, Saladriel. Whatever you identify as, it's nobody's business who or what you're attracted to. And I'm not so vain as to think the fact you seem to be able to feel lust around me means you have feelings for me. For all I know it's just some weird anomaly because of what I am. Every single pore of me is meant to be alluring. My species are like sex toys for the rich, usually. I never take it personally.”

“Would you hate it very much if I asked you not to write off our bond quite yet?” My voice is soft, timid even, but I know she hears me. I know she knows exactly what I'm saying.

Now she does sit up a bit to meet my eyes, pushing me more on my back so she can lean on my chest as she looks at me. Once again, I like it. It shocks me, but I'm gonna go with it. “In case you misunderstood what I was trying to tell you,” she starts, “I wish I had more control over how overwhelming it can feel to have this many mates

that I have to bond with and make happy. One thing I have no problem telling you, is that I don't resent my mates at all. Each one of them brings something different into my life, and I trust that the goddess led me to people that she knows will balance me out.

“Maybe your goddess builds bonds a different way, and I know you said all this stuff about how easy it would be to dissolve the ones I still have on my arm from your goddess, but I'm just going to take this one step at a time. If you want more time to explore this, then that makes my heart really happy.”

“It does?”

“Of course it does. None of my resentment has anything to do with you guys. It's merely that I feel like I don't have enough time in my day to make these connections as deep as I want them to be. But I guess we have the rest of our lives to work on that. Maybe... maybe the ‘no rush’ part comes after I have an official bond with everybody. Sort of like, I don't know, an arranged marriage or something? Get the commitment up front, and then you take your time deciding what that commitment looks like. You take your time integrating your lives together and finding out how to make each other happy. Maybe I've been thinking about this all wrong.”

“That makes sense. I can see how that could be a good way to look at it.” This is the most honest we've ever been with each other, the most open I've ever allowed myself to be with her.

Maybe I just needed to do it on my own turf. Being home helps me feel more grounded, which is ironic since we don't even have ground here. But it soothes something in my soul having this conversation with her here, where I know everything about the realm there is to know. Now she's on uneven footing as she figures out how things work here, surrounded by strangers.

“I suppose we should start looking for your guys then, huh?”

Her eyes flick down to my mouth, and I instinctually know she wants to kiss me. She's never given me such blatant signals before, and I thought that it would freak me out, but I'm realizing that somewhere along the way I started to develop a little crush for her.

Even if I've been in the back of the crowd, I've started to get to know her. I've watched her interact with everybody, watched how her eyes light up when one of her mates says something sweet to her or kisses her unexpectedly. More than all that though, I've seen how hard she fucking tries to be a good partner to each and every one of them; tries to find the unique things they need from her and provide them, and my heart is starting to get involved with her. Because how could it not?

Therein lies the real reason my body's reacting to her. It's inconvenient maybe, I'm nowhere near ready to act on it, but I know who she is, and I can't deny that I'm curious about how things could be with her if I let them. That's new.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I lean down and press the barest of kisses to her mouth.

She doesn't maul me like I always imagined happening for some reason, she sits still and lets me experiment. This makes it even easier to respect her and only reinforces this crush.

Is it possible that the goddess knows what she's doing after all? Did she actually bring me somebody I could see myself being with? Maybe it's too early to know, it's only been a couple of weeks after all, but when I pull away and hug her a little bit tighter to my chest, I realize everything has changed.

Apparently, I like kissing if it means kissing her.

Chapter Fifteen

August

This is bullshit. Total, absolute bullshit.

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No, let's take that further. Because bulls really aren't the biggest animal out there, are they?

ELEPHANTSHIT.

Titanosaur patagotitan mayorumshit, even.

You know that feeling when you're having a lovely time with your mate, playing a naughty little game of find-the-dick in the dark, and then the next moment you're turned into a literal cloud for unicorns to trample on?

Do you know what else they do on clouds?

They pee on them. Fart on them. Generally, disregard them completely.

Sometimes, they even hold romantic tableaux for said mate where she proceeds to get railed on them, without ever knowing the fluff that she's all up in is actually one of the loves of her life.

Look. I get it. The goddess here is a bit pissed about with how things are working out in her realm, but I feel as if kidnapping and transforming us was a bit extreme.

You know how much it sucks to not be able to get a cloud boner when your mate is literally getting railed on top of you? Ugh, my life sucks.

The only consolation I have at all here is that the rest of my brother mates are likely also clouds, too. I can't sense them at all, but I have to assume.

Is this what Rush felt like when he was a pine tree? Will I even be sane if I'm rescued? How do you rescue a cloud, per se?

I can feel Delaney through our bond still, likely because this goddess can't write over the other goddess' magic, so I can feel how distraught she is, even if she's being fucked to within an inch of her life by what sounds like a monster cock. It's called compartmentalizing, alright? I know she loves me, that she's worried sick, even if she's gushing fluids all over me.

Man, this sucks.

I wasn't given any sort of instructions or anything, just whisked away and aerated and vaporized and stretched and expected to sit here all happy-like while I'm used so crudely.

Oh. Can I just clarify that the peeing and farting happened prior to my mate showing up? An errant unicorn happened to fly by, choosing me as their glorified latrine before going on their merry little fuckin' way. Thank the goddess clouds have self-regulating water purification, am I right?

Can't exactly stain a cloud.

You can, however, hurt their feelings.

Now Delaney's having a heart to heart next to me with what I just know is a unicorn. How does she not notice who I am? I thought she'd know me no matter what.

We'll have to work on that somehow.

And now they're walking away, on a mission to find me and her other mates. I can't even scream to tell her I'm here. Can't whisper sweet nothings or grab that very

spankable ass.

Fuck me.

I guess I'm stuck here for a bit.

You think she'd be into role playing later when we're out of this mess? I feel like a cloud could be kind of kinky.

Chapter Sixteen

A dark and mysterious source that might not be all that important at all

“You said this would ruin her! You swore linking her to your dying realm would change everything. You lied.”

I cannot see my reluctant co-conspirator behind the privacy screen, and I really wish I didn't have to keep it that way. If the sun and moon are toxic to me, then the goddess of Glittertopia would reduce me to convulsions and a puddle of goo much faster than I'm comfortable with sharing.

“I did not lie. I told you there was a chance it wouldn't work like we hoped it would. There's a difference between the two. She must have found a loophole.”

I can feel the smugness in her voice. I think I've been played. “This was your intention all along,” I accuse.

“What's it to you anyway? Why are you so intent on ruining my champion?”

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I try to keep my emotions at bay, but it's useless. I'm far too worked up right now because there's too much on the line. "Because I've spent my entire existence trying to prevent her from doing what she's doing! I've sought the wisdom of every seer on the planet, at the expense of my very soul, all so I could find a future that isn't this one. She doesn't get what was given to me!"

"Are you doing okay there? You're coming off a bit hysterical."

The scream that erupts from me very nearly shatters our partition. "How dare you sit there smugly, feeling sorry for me, feeling better than me. We had a deal. You would find a way to ruin her, and I would... do something. I never remember that part."

I feel her sigh stronger than I hear it. "Okay, and when would you say you started feeling like this? Can you point to any specific moment in your life that might have led to the creation of this trigger event? Because you're very triggered right now. It's quite alarming, actually."

I take a few steps back from the partition, not stopping until my back hits the cool dirt of the earth wall behind me. Not until there are bugs crawling over my shoulders, reassuring me that all is still well with the world for now. "You're trying to end me."

The voices in my head are trying to convince me that she's standing up and brushing herself off, about to flee. She'll go somewhere I can't follow, and I'll have to wait until she decides to give me another audience.

That won't do. I take a deep breath, and I do what I do best.

Well, second best. I'm actually hella good at recreating Bob Ross paintings.

There, see? I'm more stable already. "Please," I beg. "Haven't you ever been so unnecessarily obsessed with somebody, that it's all you can think about? That your entire existence revolves around them? That you structured your memories and your life around the one time they smiled at you like you were somebody important? When they... allowed you to gaze at their glorious brown, hairy nipples? Because I have. Put yourself in my shoes. Come on, when was the last time you gave up ownership of your soul to curse him and his stupid demon lover? All I did was make him more appealing in the end, blast it all to the nether world. I know you know how I'm feeling."

It's so quiet for a moment that I'm not even sure she's still there. But then, she lets out a disgustingly vibrant fart, and there's a splash and a flush, and the sound of water running. "Did you just... take a shit while I was pouring out my heart to you?"

The squeak of the paper towel dispenser runs, followed by the soft thunk of a damp towel hitting the plastic liner of the garbage can. "Look, you seem... well, I can't say great, not with a good conscience. But I have a responsibility to my realm. I only told you I would try.

"By all accounts, this shouldn't be working. I gave her no instructions. I've matched her with somebody completely wrong for her. I tied her to my realm, so that she'd forget most of her mates temporarily. I even," and I swear she shudders, "took her mates and turned them into glorious clouds." I get the feeling she's bracing herself, trying to get herself to calm down.

"Do you have any idea how wrong it is to grant such an honor to people not even from here? It is an insult to everything I stand for. But I did it. Because you told me you would give me your very special vintage collection of Sparkling Magical Pony Dolls. Mint condition, from 1993."

“I... yes. Yes, I very...yep. That's exactly what I'm going to give you. I remember now, thank you for reminding me.”

Her footsteps clomp louder, getting closer to me. I can see her breath on the screen now, each exhale getting heavier and heavier. “Do youhavethe dolls? Because if I went through all of this and you were lying... well. I don't think you'd like that very much.”

Double-barreled jumping jiminetty. Why did I have to promise such a very specific thing? My therapist would tell me that my desires blind me to what is happening around me, and she'd be right. Damn it, she usually is.

When I don't say anything, the tension grows thicker and thicker. Maybe I can just slink out the back and she'll never know.

Or, maybe she'll light her hooves on fire and tear through the partition like butter, no, likemashed potatoes, and she'll look at me in all her glory, with bedazzled tits, and make me forget all about that silly human-turned-gargoyle that's taken up the entirety of my existence.

Maybe, the very air will sing for us as she gazes upon me, and we'd come together like two halves of a whole that never should have been separated.

I feel a rictus grin split my face, the skin on my left side only slightly sagging from the insects that I've allowed to take up residence there. Her beauty tastes like a bald eagle soaring majestically over a mountain at sunset. Like the twinkle of sunlight on the bluest of ocean waves as it gently makes its way to a tropical oasis.

Likefate.

“Then again, who needs material possessions like dolls, when you can have this?

Snuggle bear, why didn't you tell me? You had the cure all along, didn't you?" I find myself actually laughing, a light, grating tinkle of a giggle that sounds so wrong but feels so right.

Belatedly, I remember why I wasn't supposed to look upon her visage.

But this time, it's okay. As I feel the very atoms of my being cease to exist, I'm at peace. I'm the rainbow shooting across the sky, the dew at dawn that makes everything magical.

And then, I'm a puddle on the floor that the second and best love of my life rinses away with a mere hose. And there I'll stay. I'll be the very foundation that supports her special hidden ground-dwelling toilet. And I'll thank her for it.

Chapter Seventeen

Delaney

"Nothing about this place makes any sense. You know that, right?"

Saladriel shrugs. "It doesn't have to make sense; it just has to be."

"Wow, that was deep," Wil says with a nod. "You know, there was this famous philosopher that said—"

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“Is that what I think it is? I haven't smelled that since...” Spencer closes his eyes and inhales deeply, tension leaving his body as he does. “It smells like the best cookies I've ever had in my life. The batch grandma made for my 7th birthday. Damn, they were perfect.”

“Cookies? No. It smells of rotting flesh. It's delightful.” How Rush says this with an actual smile on his face is actually not the most alarming thing we've encountered here.

Turns out they're both wrong. “Saladriel, why does this ominous tunnel of clouds with a river running through it smell exactly like Adam's cum?”

“Wait, does everybody's cum smell different to you?” Saladriel asks in earnest.

“I don't think anybody wants to know what I think,” Wil says dejectedly.

“Hey,” I say as I lift his chin. He looks at me, and happy silly butterflies erupt in my stomach. “What does it smell like to you?”

“The patch of grass where we went to convention when I turned 13. There were a lot of wildflowers that year, and lots of bees. Everything that grew there just tasted perfect.”

Saladriel walks to the side of the tunnel and opens what looks like a shed, the sound of scraping metal echoes and with a bit of resistance, he tugs a rowboat out into the stream.

He stands and he's about to talk, but then he thinks better of it and takes a few steps back to the side, hits a switch, and the entire tunnel lights up with neon pink and red lights. Music starts up, and then a big sign that reads, 'Tunnel of Love' descends from the ceiling right above us.

I stare up at it, dumbfounded. "Yikes. That's really... yeah, that's really there, alright."

"Fairygoddess likes to encourage us to be immersed with one another, remember? This is the most direct route to where we need to go. I know it seems a little odd to you, but I thought you might like it," he says with a shrug.

"Alright, love tunnel it is!" Spencer says as he rushes toward the boat. He turns to look at us, and one by one we shrug and reluctantly get in as well.

The second Saladriel kicks off from the bank of clouds, we begin to speedily float through the Tunnel of Love.

At first, it's mostly innocent things, like the lights and the music and the smells that seem to cater to each of us individually, or evoking something from our past that we enjoyed.

But as we turn the corner, a new section emerges. Sounds of flesh slapping together is faint enough where you have to strain your ears to hear it, present enough to give us all tingles and a little bit of a flush, but not substantial enough to truly enjoy.

Eventually, an animatronic flying cupid drops from a cable in the ceiling playing a violin, sprinkling down confetti that looks very much like the psychedelic stuff that fairy goddess told me would fuck me up.

I learned my lesson last time. I scoop some of that shit up and stuff it in my bra in case I need it later.

“The inn is just up here,” Saladriel says as his face flushes with embarrassment.

The boat does indeed move swiftly, and after listening to several awful ballads written specifically for unicorns, praising the silkiness of a mane, or the way a certain flank glistens in the sun, Saladriel is mooring us off to the side where there's a sign like you'd see on a highway back home. The exit simply says ‘Trope Inn’, and there's an arrow pointing off to the right. I’m giddy, looking forward to whatever is about to be delivered unto us.

“I should probably warn you—” Saladriel starts, but I cut him off.

“No, you shouldn't. We're on an adventure. I'll take whatever's about to happen at face value.”

He sighs resignedly, and I get my first glimpse of other unicorns.

It's not just an inn here, there're other buildings as well; what look like cafes with benches outside, roads made of cobblestones if cobblestones were made of clouds instead of stone, and plenty of grass patches where there are unicorns grazing helter-skelter.

Every single unicorn that sees us stops immediately and drops their jaw open, staring at us like we're some freaks from a different world or something.

Oh, wait.

I give them a wave and a smile, sidling a little closer to Saladriel as I do in case they think we weren't invited here.

Nobody seems to want to talk to us, but that's probably because Rush is currently in the fetal position, rocking back and forth against the nearest wall he could find.

“It's okay Rush,” I coax. “They're nice unicorns. I promise.”

Just because they want to prove me wrong, a passing unicorn spits on us, literally turns his nose in the air while saying loud enough for all of us to hear, “Damn tourists,” before sashaying away.

Saladriel looks like he's moments away from bounding after them and accosting them in some form, but I assure him it's fine.

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I try a different tactic with my easily spooked demon. “I won’t let anything bad happen to you, Rush. Would it help you if you wrapped your arms around me and just let me lead you? You can keep your eyes closed. You won't have to look at all the scary unicorns that way.”

He takes a deep breath and nods, briefly getting to his feet with his eyes squeezed as shut as he can make them.

It's definitely not my fault when I immediately forget he's there and turn sideways to see something and make him walk into a signpost, but after that things go a little smoother. I keep a hold on his arms as they cross over the front of my shoulders, reassuringly patting them occasionally.

When we finally make it to our destination, Saladriel opens the door for us and we enter what passes for an inn here, all of us nearly dead on our feet after the long day we've had. I didn't even think about needing to stop and sleep until Saladriel pointed out the sun doesn't set in the same time frame as it does back home, so we need to remember to sleep and pay attention to our bodies.

Before any of us can even ask for a room from the receptionist, he's reaching behind the counter and grabbing a key and slapping it on the counter. “Penthouse suite. Full package.”

Saladriel groans. “I was afraid of that. Thanks, man.”

“What does he mean by full package?” Wil asks as we follow our resident unicorn to a cloud elevator.

“Your girlfriend specifically said she didn't want to be spoiled. You'll see when we get there,” Saladriel tells him as he pushes some buttons that don't look anything like buttons inside the elevator.

The cloud rocks gently and Wil peeks at me sideways. “Is that what you are? My girlfriend?”

“If you're not ready for me to call you my mate yet, then sure. If that's what you want,” I say with what I hope is a smile. I'm actually just counting down until I can find the privacy of a bathroom, because I've been holding my bladder for hours now, feeling icked out by peeing on a random cloud. And I'd do some pretty questionable things for a shower. Gods, how I want to shower.

Before Saladriel lets us into our room, he turns to the group one more time. “I would like to warn you before we go in; does anybody want my warning? Because once we walk through this door, it might be a bit until the room decides to let us out.”

We're all scratching our heads at this, but it's Spencer that speaks up. “What, is the room like, sentient or something?”

Saladriel plays with the key that has a little room tag attached to it. “Yes and no. Look, it's kind of like the love tunnel. The goddess has done everything she can, everywhere she can, to encourage romance and bonding between us. This hotel... it's one of her more... shall we call it, aggressive methods? But there's nowhere else to stay. My apartment wouldn't fit more than two of us, and I have a feeling we should be sticking together right now.”

There's a strange energy running through me, aside from the fact that I'm already getting hungry again. “Staying together is good,” I say with a bit of rasp to my voice. All four of them whip towards me at my tone, and I can feel the lust rising in them.

“Again?” Rush asks with a bit of a laugh. Then he looks down at his dick. “Listen here buddy, we've been waiting for this for years. We're not gonna let this chance go by, you hear? First chance we've had to lie her out like this in what feels like forever, and you're not going to go all scaredy cat on me and shrivel up because of a couple innocent...”

Saladriel gets sick of waiting and opens up, revealing a room that might very well be trying to get me pregnant.

“Rainbows...” Rush says dryly.

It's so very different than the clouds outside, that it's hard to believe we're in the same place.

There are no clouds here, the goddess has put in actual furniture made of rainbows themselves. I squat down and give a big kiss to the front of Rush's crotch just so he doesn't feel left out.

The place is huge, with flat surfaces of varying heights and contours everywhere. Literally, every single one is begging me to bend over them and get taken.

I don't think I'm being clear enough. I can sense that they're not alive, but they're literally whispering, ‘Fall on your back and arch your chest to the ceiling’, or ‘I have an indent to cup your breasts while you flop forward on me’.

They have talking instructions on how to use them, and pretty much every piece of furniture in the room seems to be a sex bench of various types.

Saladriel sits in the entryway with a hand covering the lower half of his face, horrified and embarrassed at the same time, but I'm giddy as a fucking unicorn. “It's like a park!”

Ain't no need to still have clothes on. I throw them into the washing machine I spy next to the kitchen and wander 'til I find the bathroom, my jaw-dropping open at the huge, opal-tiled shower big enough to fit a couple of unicorns easily. There are even grooves in thoughtful places for hooves to fit so they can mount each other in there without slipping, which honestly is just so considerate. Nice touch.

“Oh I'm gonna get you so dirty,” I tell the shower. But first, toilet.

Not to get super gross here, but isn't it the absolute fucking worst when you really need to fart, but you're around somebody you're trying to impress or sleep with? Like, when do you let that out? You just have to keep letting it build, right? Until you can tear yourself away for a bit of privacy. That's when all hell breaks loose.

The relief of sitting on an actual toilet is unmatched, and it really honestly just puts me in such a better mood to pee in peace. Amongst other things.

I yank the hair tie out of my hair and give my scalp a good scrub before cranking the shower all the way to the hottest setting. “It's big enough for all of you if anybody wants to join me,” I call out to the rest of the hotel room.

Still not sure what to think about the whole ‘Trobe Inn’ thing on the sign that was out front, but I'm guessing it's just something kind of cheesy to help inspire people to get frisky and flirty.

That is, until I wash my hands and start to get my hair wet, and I make the mistake of touching the tile wall in the shower. My hands stick. Not like glue, but like a magnetic or magical current is locking them there.

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“Uh, guys? I said, there's room for all of you in here?”

It takes a few minutes, but I hear footsteps.

Surprisingly, it's Wil that enters the bathroom, sans his cute little checkered collared button up he was wearing. I'm not going to lie, he's not muscled up or anything like that, but I find his skinny body absolutely adorable. I just want to wrap myself around it like a stripper pole.

Wow, I must really need to be fed.

My back is to him, but he walked in here willingly, so he had to know I'd be naked in the shower. Right? Oh. “Wil, do fundamentalists usually wear suits in the shower? Were you expecting me to have something on when you walked in here?”

He still doesn't say anything, so I look over my shoulder at him and notice how hard he's breathing. His eyes are locked on my ass, which with the height at which my hands are stuck has it popping out just a little bit. I'm sure it looks phenomenal. A sexting wet dream.

Without breaking contact with my cheeks, he opens his pants and drops them, walking into the shower stall to join me as if he's in a daze.

He accidentally brushes across my arm when he shuts the door, making me bite back a whimper. Up until now, he hasn't touched me a whole lot because he hasn't been comfortable with it, but I'm getting the feeling that something has changed.

“Are you okay?”

Finally, he looks at my face. I watch his throat bob as he swallows, his hands clutching and unclutching like he's physically stopping himself from reaching for me. “I want to try and take care of you, Delaney. If that demon can feed you, I can feed you, too. If I'm going to be one of your men, I want to be yourman. Does that make sense?”

I mean, hot. But what if it's some weird magic in this room influencing him in some way? “Are you sure you're ready for that? Because you know I don't expect anything other than you know, hanging out or whatever. We can go at whatever speed you want to, Wil. I don't want to make you uncomfortable.”

He shakes his head and steps closer to me, leaning his chest over my back while keeping his hips away from mine. He's tall enough that it works. “I'm sick of being good, Delaney. Sick of following rules I don't want to follow. Sick of feeling guilty for wanting to kiss you whenever I want. Sick of watching other people take things from you that I want to be taking as well. Maybe it's because I'm so far from home right now that it feels like I don't have to listen to any of the voices inside my head, but if there's one thing on this damn earth —planet? I don't know where we are. But if there's one thing I'm sure of, it's that I want you. You're my soul mate. I'm yours, too. That means these things I feel for you aren't wrong, or bad, or inappropriate.”

I open my mouth to say something, not sure what, but it doesn't matter much anyways. Because he's reaching for my face and twisting it gently so that he can kiss me. He comes across as confident and desperate all at the same time, a wild cocktail that has me desperate for more.

“Are you comfortable? Do you want a different position?”

Wow, I guess we're really just getting into it, aren't we? “It appears I need help

washing up. I think the name on this hotel was literal. That's what Saladriel was trying to warn us about. Trope hotel? You know, like tropes in a romance novel? Have you heard of those? Sometimes in books, one of the main characters gets hurt or is really tired, and they need their partner to wash them and it's this sweet, romantic, sexy thing. Well, my hands are completely stuck to the wall. I got as far as getting my hair wet, but I can't do anything else. So, I'm gonna need you to wash my back for me. And possibly my hair? And anything else you want to..."

He flashes me a smile that would be more fitting on Rush before taking a few steps back to look me up and down. "Hey Spencer," he calls. "I'm gonna need a hand in here."

I swear to you, it's like a switch just flipped inside of him. The geeky, shy boy I knew is nowhere to be found as he gathers my hair gently and then tugs it down, so I'm forced to look up. My neck is exposed, and he leans forward to nibble on it. "Better be careful what you ask for, you know goats have a reputation for eating everything," he bleats in my ear.

Fuck I'm so turned on right now.

I haven't used a lot of restraints with any other mates, but I find myself almost nervous as Spencer walks in with his jaw dropped and takes in the scene.

"Our mate needs us to wash her it seems," Wil explains. "The hotel is keeping her captive and won't let her wash her own body. I'm thinking we've been walking a lot and are gonna need to be pretty darned thorough." He rubs his hands together like he just can't wait to get started.

Spencer does a double take at Wil and then looks at me with his eyebrows raised and I shut my mouth right up and don't say a damn thing. I don't want to ruin whatever mood Wil is in. No thank you. So I shrug and motion with my head to my stuck

hands and I'm not sure how much he understands, but when I give him a nod and he realizes he has permission to touch me, it's game on.

“Limits? Triggers? Do we need a code word?” Spencer asks calmly. He seems way too prepared for this exact situation.

“I don't enjoy pain with sex, don't enjoy orgasm denial. It makes me a really grumpy bitch. Don't even try it, I will castrate you.” I say sweetly.

“Noted,” Spencer says before ripping off his black shirt and baring his bronze chest. Holy shit is he ripped. I mean, I knew he was on the football team so it makes sense to have the kind of muscles he does, and when his track pants drop to reveal massive thighs, I'm pretty sure angelic sounds come out of me in a really embarrassing area.

“You're going to look at me right now,” Wil says. “I don't want to be your boyfriend, Delaney. I may not be the loudest of your mates, or the funniest, or the anythingist, and I don't even care if there's something weird about this realm making me feel bold. All I care about right now is that I'm here, and that you need me. And you're looking at me like you might actually want me to touch you.”

“I do want you to touch me,” I say on a whisper.

Spencer has started getting my hair saturated with water again and squirting shampoo into his palms, then proceeds to give me the most amazing scalp massage I've had in months. His fingers are strong from gripping that football, his arms perfect, and holy shit is he dedicated to his task.

Wil squats next to me and runs his hands up and down the sides of my calves. “It seems to me you're stuck. Won't be able to move at all, right? I'm going to need to get every inch of you clean, and I'm going to need to make real sure I do a good job. Probably going to have to look real close. Maybe even go over some specific areas

twice.”

Okay, now I'm getting desperate for somebody to touch me. But not just anybody. Wil is driving me absolutely crazy as Spencer keeps lightly brushing against me over and over again as he works my hair.

It's a bit torturous to be stuck in one place as Wil grabs a washcloth from outside the shower and slathers some body wash into it, looking me over while he figures out where to start.

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The thing is, I don't even care if this feeds me. All the little ways he's been nice and sweet to me since I met him are echoing in my mind right now, all the times everybody at school has been awful to him while he just tries to be good. He's easily one of the sweetest people I've ever met, and I want nothing more than to make him happy. To give him something that feels like it's just his. Maybe this is how we start that. "Wil, please."

I'm rubbing my thighs together, because he's breathing hot air on my shoulder and my neck, teasing me like a madman.

He smirks at me, and once again I'm thinking Rush has taught him way too many tricks. I don't even know if that's true, but clearly Wil has been taking notes. "You need something?" And then he fucking runs a hand down his stomach and full-on grabs himself.

I'm certainly going to expire. This is how I die. The nerdy quiet boy has suddenly gone rogue, giving me classes in seduction.

"Holy fuck man, did not know you had this in you," Spencer says in disbelief.

I giggle, because same. But then I moan, because Wil leans forward and bites down on one of my nipples. Their lust is putting my mind into crystal clear focus, but making it go hazy when Wil grabs my other breast with this other hand, pushing his face between them and touching them every way he's apparently been dreaming of touching them if his words have any stock to them. But I believe it. The way he's touching me is the product of many a dirty daydream, especially if he seriously doesn't have any experience whatsoever. He knew exactly what he was going to do the

second he gave himself the green light.

I love that for him. And me too, obviously.

They do in fact clean me very,verythoroughly. Then they do it again. Then, I'm exfoliated. Spencer even double washes my hair before coating it in conditioner, and opens the bar labeled 'facial soap' to carefully cleanse my face with.

At some point in there they manage to clean themselves as well, which is not as fun, but still necessary. And just when I think that maybe Wil has lost all of his bravado, he falls to his knees in front of me and looks up at me with the water sluicing through his curls. I'm unaccustomed to seeing him without his glasses, his eyes so intensely turquoise without the barrier of them.

He stares up at me before touching me at all, and it feels like an important moment between us. I've heard that they've done studies on how long it takes to hold eye contact with somebody before you can fall for them, and there's clearly something to it. Because after it stops being awkward, it starts feeling intimate. Starts feeling deep. It starts feeling like I want keep looking at him just like this for possibly many years to come.

And I will say the one thing that these bonds from the goddess do is assure me more or less that I can count on a future with the men I'm with now. Once made, the bonds are strong and true and it's so freakishly uncommon for anybody to dissolve them that that's not something I'm worried about. The goddess matches us up well, so I get flashes of us doing this years from now when we've had all kinds of experiences together, looking at him just like this and carving out time amidst a crazy day to just be together.

It's a very nice daydream.

I appreciate that Spencer doesn't try and rush Wil or anything, he just stands behind me with his chin on my shoulder, running his hands up and over my sides while kissing my neck. He's watching Wil as well, waiting for him to make a move, clearly not wanting to overstep.

And then Wil leans forward. He uses those long fingers the goddess blessed him with to part me open for him, studying me like he'll be tested on it later. After how thoroughly they just got done cleaning me, I'm sure I taste like soap, which can't be the most appealing thing in the world, but by his expression you'd think he just tried drugs.

After the initial swipe of his tongue, he groans in the back of his throat, chokes off a bleat that tries to escape, and then dives right in without overthinking it. It's special though because it's Wil.

I know how far out of his comfort zone he must be, which makes his enjoyment of this even better for me. It's torture having to stay still while the two of them touch me and explore me, because I want to touch and explore them, too. I want to run my fingers through Wil's hair and lean on him for support, want to reach behind me to make Spencer feel good.

But I'm stuck. I'll start panicking about that later maybe, but for now, I can't take my eyes away from Wil. He's so beautiful on his knees before me, his face serene as he works my body with his mouth. What he lacks in experience he makes up for in enthusiasm.

Making a quick study, he tries all kinds of things until he gets a reaction from me, and then he keeps doing those things. In this way, he learns pretty quickly the best way to make me lose my mind, and it's surprisingly not very long before my lower belly starts to clench. It's warming and tightening, and I'm starting to get that floaty, high feeling in my head that always proceeds an orgasm.

When Wil reaches between his own legs to grip himself tentatively, using some slick he's taken from my body to do so, I very nearly combust right there.

And then there's that damn eye contact again.

I can only see his eyes peeking out from between my legs, can see his arm as he works himself, his other fingers running slow circles around my clit. And I give myself over to the sensation. I fall, knowing he's going to catch me.

He stands to kiss me as his fist works fervently over himself to make himself come, and by the burning in my arm, I know my magic is sick of waiting. So with his tongue down my throat, his hand jacking himself off, and Spencer behind me, I make Wil mine for real.

I'm still on high alert, wanting to watch his face when he can't delay it any longer. I'm not disappointed at all. His forehead lands against mine as I feel him pour into my soul, breathing heavily together.

As far as orgasms go, it's pretty damn magical.

What I'm not expecting nor am I prepared for, is for him to shift immediately after he comes. His cute little goat hooves slip in his own mess, and he's bleating and crying out as he tries to get out of the shower.

“You think we can let the others take care of him for now?” Spencer whispers in my ear.

Now that Wil has been claimed, apparently the hotel is satisfied and lets me go. I'm able to take my hands off the wall and stretch my back in the opposite direction, relieving the ache that was starting to form there.

I'm quick to pull Spencer against me as my back hits the tile, wrapping my arms around his neck and hitching a leg up onto his hips.

Unsurprisingly, the fact that I was able to get a little bit of nourishment from Wil's orgasm tells me how he feels about me, and I already know that Spencer can offer me at least as much as he did earlier.

“I don't want this to be just about what I need; I want it to be about us. Earlier I said I wasn't ready for anything, but I should have known better. Now that I've had you once and I've kissed you, it doesn't matter. Knowing you're mine actually changes everything. And I want to be with you, just for the sake of being with you. Not because I need to refill my magic stores.”

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His smile could light up the whole city block. “It's a good thing I put that tracker on Rush then, wasn't it? Otherwise, I wouldn't have been in the road when you guys were leaving.”

Oh my gods. “You put a tracker on Rush?”

“I'm sure you see how that could be beneficial. And I get what you're saying, I wasn't offended. I remember when my sister was courting her mates, how she got stressed trying to balance them both. I can't do what you do, Delaney. I couldn't make every damn person attached to me feel like they're my one true love. I couldn't keep all their little details straight, and I sure as hell couldn't make all of them fall for me so completely. You're special. I hope you know that.”

It's nearly impossible to ignore the hardness pressed up against my lower belly, so with a bit of maneuvering and a little help from his strong back, I work him inside of me with my one leg still hitched up on his hips.

We both gasp at the connection, and though it's weird to be going through all this without my other mates and I miss them like crazy, knowing they're unharmed leaves me able to enjoy this.

“Thank you. I'm gonna make mistakes, I'm gonna say stupid stuff and probably hurt your feelings, but if you can remember that at the end of the day, we can always find our way back to this,” I say as I shove my tongue down his throat and squeeze him internally, “and remember how it feels to be connected like this, we'll be able to work it out.”

Chapter Eighteen

Rush

I try to smile when Delaney finally makes it out of her seduction shower, but even I know that this isn't what smiles should feel like. She's marked Wil and Spencer it seems, and I'm happy for them, really, but I also feel like I don't belong here.

I know she let me take care of her earlier, but for all I know that was only because of the circumstances. Riding my demon pole was pretty much her only option, and I have no idea where I stand now.

"This room is going to try and push you guys together, hope you're prepared for that," the unicorn tells me.

I shrug. I'm not inclined to be vulnerable when that usually gets me hurt, so I try and act like nothing affects me. "She's got them. What does she need me for? I know Wil's still a goat now," and I check on him to see he's still chewing away on a few cans of soda we found in the fridge, and perfectly fine, "but once her bodysmith pheromones wear off he'll be back to his normal, sweet self. Between him and Spencer, they'll give her everything she needs."

"Don't you want to be with her too, though?"

"I don't think it matters what I want," I tell him as I stand to answer a knock on the door.

I find a light green unicorn shifter shaking on the other side, holding a stack of pizza boxes. "Um, three veggie supremes?"

I pat my shirt. "I don't think we ordered those, man. I don't even have a way of paying

you. Sorry, I think you got the wrong room.”

He sniffs, presumably inhaling the incredibly potent scents that Delaney and her amorous mates have graced our room with, eyes widening. “You could... pay me a different way?”

What is this, the set of a porno? “That's my mate you're talking about,” I growl, taking the pizzas from him because now he's pissed me off and I am hungry.

“Did you order these, Saladriel?” I ask as I put the pizzas down on the kitchen counter.

He gets up and meets me in the little kitchen. “I'm sure it's Fairygoddess taking care of her chosen one.”

“Well I didn't pay him for them. Not even sure they're ours, but he made a stupid comment, so I took them and slammed the door in his face.”

He waves me off. “Oh, we don't have currency here. We barter in smiles and glitter. Your favorite things.”

When I don't say anything, he snorts and then starts cracking up. “Oh my gods, you should see your face right now. Perfection.”

He's still laughing at me while he wipes his eyes off and looks for some plates in the cabinets. “If Fairygoddess ordered them, which I'm assuming she did, you don't need to worry about the money. She'll want to feed us so she can take care of us while we're here.”

“This is all so fucking weird,” I mumble as I take a bite. I instantly want to spit it out. “What the fuck is that? That is not pizza.”

Saladriel chews and swallows, then looks at me like I'm lying. "Yes, it is."

I plop the pizza down and start poking at it, trying to figure out what's on it.

"Oh, unicorns are vegan."

Oh my gods, did my father trick me into a new section of Hell? That's so like him.

"Dad!" I yell, trying to tempt him out.

Delaney comes walking out in nothing but a towel. "You guys okay out here?" she asks with an eyebrow quirked in response to my shout. "Ooh, pizza!" And she bites into it and immediately spits it out. "What the fuck is that?"

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I point at Delaney but aim my voice at Saladriel. “See? It's not just me. That isn't pizza.”

“I mean it's weird, but I don't know if it's bad.” She tries another bite, grimaces, and swallows it down with far too much effort.

Now it's my turn to laugh. “Yeah, you're really selling it right now.”

“Shut up,” she says as she rolls her eyes and smacks me lightly in the chest.

That bit of playfulness makes it hard to feel distant from her. I'm tugging on her and pulling her into me before I even think about why that's a bad idea. “Have a good shower?” I ask right into her ear.

It kills me that this woman is capable of blushing. “Yes?” she basically asks.

Spencer is in the bedroom, jumping off the bed and pretending to be an airplane. Wow, he's really good at those sounds.

Delaney doesn't even flinch at his behavior, nor at Wil's as the sound of goat belching echoes from consuming the tin cans in the corner.

“I'm happy for you.” And then I make myself step away because I may be stupid, but I do have some sort of preservation instinct.

I grab some more pizza, determined to eat it out now that my expectations are well adjusted, grabbing some water for me and Delaney before walking out to the little

dining area.

I pull a chair for her and sit, trying to dig into the meal as she takes her time to meet me over there.

She's quiet for a few minutes, and I can tell she wants to say something, but that's fine. We don't need to talk about our feelings. I know she doesn't want mine.

“Look, Rush—”

I hold out my hands. “It's fine, Delaney. Really. You don't have to explain anything to me, alright? I'm just happy that you're happy.”

I begrudgingly finish my slice and get up to wash off the plate, thinking maybe a bit of air will help me feel better. I don't know if I can be locked in a room with her and everybody during their post-mating snuggle sesh.

“Saladriel, you want to go for a walk or something, man? Show me the area?”

When he doesn't answer I realize that he wants to be here too. “You know what? I'll manage. Go relax Delaney, I'm just going to scope out the area and then I'll be back.” I kiss her on the cheek and head out the door, taking note of how I get back down to the lobby, so I don't get lost.

A little bit of independence will be good for me. Maybe I'll be able to report back to dad later with some new ideas. He's always excited to try new torture methods and this whole realm is an embarrassment of riches in that department.

I don't really remember much about leaping through the clouds earlier, but I do remember how good it felt to be with her.

It's no surprise that thinking happy thoughts makes me think of other happy thoughts. I don't have too many of them, and I'm missing what Leo and I had more than ever.

I'm sick to my stomach not knowing where he is, not knowing if he's really okay. We only have this unknown goddess' word to go off of, and I know better than to offer her my blind trust.

Leo is... special. Fragile in a way. He needs attention, especially since he just got freed. I'm really worried about what getting cut off from Delaney will do to him.

I wander for a bit, trying not to let my ears burn when I hear shocked neighs at my appearance. I get the hang of traveling over the clouds pretty quickly, watching others use hidden trampolines within them or ladders.

Without paying much attention to where I'm going, I end up heading in basically the opposite direction we traveled to get from the Tunnel of Love to the hotel.

I'm so proud of myself for not panicking when their version of a sunset hits, that I seek out a perfectly formed cloud and sit on the edge of it as I watch the sky. I guess I can kind of see why people enjoy this. It's happy, if you're into that sort of thing.

Little cupids carry baskets across the sky and throw out dark blue glitter that seems to make everyone it hits sleepy, but luckily it has no effect on me. Another thing my demon blood is good for I suppose is that foreign magic has to work harder to affect me.

I lay back and let my fingers run through the cloud, coming away with little tufts that I get the oddest desire to sniff. I don't know if all of them smell differently or what, but I am a little ashamed when this one tries to give me a hefty boner. It's shocking because up until now I've basically been impotent in this realm. I don't think the goddess would appreciate me rolling over and showing this cloud who's boss.

Instead of molesting the cloud, I roll over on my stomach so I can inhale the smell of it better. I bury my arms in it, making it way more sexual than it needs to be, but hey, everyone else is sleeping so who's going to know? It just smells so good. It tickles something inside my brain.

Some parts of it have different textures, and that fascinates me, too. Soon I'm crawling around and feeling throughout it, inserting my arms all the way up to my shoulders and making a fool of myself. But I can't find it in me to regret that or stop myself.

Eventually, I come across a curious item and pull it out of the cloud to inspect it. "That's weird, does every cloud have a switchfloating around inside them somewhere? It's probably a terrible idea to flip it, right? Really bad things could happen."

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But really, when has that ever stopped me?

I check below me to make sure I won't fall too far and splatter in case the cloud I'm obsessing over disappears, but I'm kind of expecting the cloud to just turn on a different mode or something when I hit the switch, because I know I'm going to do it. Maybe the cloud will change colors, who knows?

While squatting in the middle of the cloud I flip the switch, and I do fall, but when I land, it's right on Leo's dick. He's solid and firm underneath me as we land on the cloud that I'd spied earlier, a pale purple one that's maybe 15 feet below where I just was.

I'm irritated that I'm wearing pants, but I'm not mad that he's not.

“Rush? Is it really you?”

There're not many times in my life I've been this stunned, but I'm so happy to see him again that I pull him in for a kiss just like old times. I fling myself at him, really. But he's so happy too, and he's gripping onto me and rolling around and laughing, and... trying to thrust his dick into me?

I finally come to my senses. “Were you...” and I look above me in case I really have lost it. But the only other cloud above me now is off to the side. “She made you acloud?”

It's such an obscure fucking thing to ask somebody, and I've asked plenty of odd questions in my day.

“Where's everybody else? Where's our lovely mate?”

I wave my hand. “She's over there somewhere. I can take you to her, she'll be so happy to see you.”

He grabs my face and pins me down, studying me. “Why are you sad? Why are you not with her?”

“Just needed a bit of air. She's fine, she's got her other mates. She doesn't need me up there right now.”

“You're wrong, she does need you. Maybe not in the way you want her at this moment in time, but she'd want to know you're okay. I can't believe you found me! How did you do that?”

“Luck?” I ask with a shrug. “I don't know. I was just hanging out and I thought the cloud smelled good. Found the switch and... wait, is it as easy as that? Like, we can release everybody else if we find them and hit the switch? That seems like a really stupid way to kidnap people.”

“I'm so happy to be back with you,” he coos as he nuzzles me, and then his tone softens. “I thought I'd be stuck there forever again.”

“Leo, I'll always find you. You have to know that.”

It's at that time he understands and processes my reaction to him a moment ago. “Wait, what did that kiss mean?”

“Whatever you want it to mean, my Leo. You have no idea how happy I am to have you back in my arms.”

He's quiet, and I'm scared to look at him, but I do anyway.

“You truly care for me, don't you? Everything you told me back in Delaney's dorm, that was true? Our history together? We were lovers? Truly?”

It's so tempting to think about just giving in and telling him every sordid detail. It's tempting to just take him because I want him and deal with the consequences later. But it's more than just myself that will get hurt if I choose to be selfish like that. However, I could never downplay what he means to me. “Before I met Delaney, you were my everything.”

He's naive but not at the same time, with a childlike wonder because he's forgotten so much of his life. But I don't believe that he's naive in his affection. I've seen how he is with Delaney, heard about how she started sitting with him, how she loved all his creepy little movements. In his mind, there's no doubt that figuring all this out is as simple as a conversation. Maybe it's my fault for never considering that.

“You don't see me that way anymore? I know you were trying to build something with Delaney, but sometimes it feels as if you're trying to say something without saying anything at all. Sometimes it's as if I can feel your attention on me, and it makes my body excited.”

I take a deep breath and put some space between us, because if anything were to ever happen between me and Leo, Delaney needs to be at the heart of it. Leo seems a little upset by the distance, but it's necessary. “I've made lots of mistakes, Leo. Delaney has every right to feel about me the way she does.”

I can't help remembering for just a moment the way she felt earlier when I was inside of her. How her breathing hitched when we moved together, imploding while trying to make very little noise. Truly, it was better than I remembered it being.

“What's that face for? Please tell me you guys did something fun?”

I shake my head, reminding myself it's probably not going to happen again. Especially now that we have the key to getting her other mates back. “There was nobody else to feed her. After you guys were taken, she was struggling. Her stores were depleted and without the twins there to shield her, it was causing issues. At the time, Wil wasn't comfortable with her in that way yet, Spencer and her didn't even know what they were going to become. I was the only one available, and she knew that. So I was able to feed her, and it was... incredible. But I'm pretty sure it was a one-time thing. Speaking of which, we should get you back. Come on, the hotel's this way.”

I'm half expecting the goddess to drop out of the sky and stop us and vaporize Leo again, but it doesn't happen.

Once we're about halfway there he grabs my hand, lacing our fingers together. “What did you mean by saying at the time Wil wasn't comfortable? And who is Spencer? Have I really been gone that long?”

I don't bother taking my hand back, because it feels too nice, too domestic. “Things tend to change rapidly when situations get dire. You can get more details later, but Wil and Spencer took care of her in the shower. By the sound of it, it was enjoyable for everyone. And Spencer... he's somebody I've been working with. He's one of hers too, she's already claimed them both.”

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And I don't want to say anything else about it. He doesn't need to know how much it hurts to see other people get claimed when I've known her the longest, not when it feels like I'm never going to get that chance. Leo's also not somebody that needs to listen to me whine about things I want but can't have, so I continue leading him to the hotel in silence.

Have you ever seen a scene in a movie where the clouds suddenly part and the sun comes dazzling down? Maybe there's a heroine riding a unicorn out of a cloud, and there are literal rainbows surrounding them? Because I've got to tell you, it's much more impressive in person.

We're only a few clouds away from where the hotel is when Delaney comes bounding on Saladriel's back towards us. For a moment I even hallucinate that there's music playing in my head, like a cheesy soundtrack. But it's only a hallucination until I see a mini crustacean band dancing along the clouds behind them, plucking harps and striking itty bitty drums. "Talk about an entrance," I smirk. Smirking is so easy to do, and such a good way to hide what you actually feel inside.

"We've been looking everywhere for you!" she says as she jumps off of Saladriel's back and right into my arms. She wraps herself around me and it's nice. And yes, I would testify that in court.

She pulls back just a few inches and grabs my face. "I was so worried about you! You've been gone forever. Do you not remember our lesson earlier? I said you needed to stay the fuck by me. You left so fast, then you just up and disappeared. Seems to me like somebody's earned a spanking."

I'm confused, is what I am. "Delaney, I was giving you space with your new mates. Didn't want to cramp your style. You should be back with them even now. What are you doing here?"

She opens her mouth to speak but then catches sight of Leo behind me. He's nervous too, unsure of his reception, but she screams and pulls him into our hug without letting go of me. She still has her legs wrapped around me, and are those tears coming out of her face? Fuck. It's messed up, but tears are a surefire way to make me horny.

"How are you here? Oh my gods Leo, oh my gods!"

So we stand there like that together, having a nice touching moment. All the while, we're gathering a steady stream of onlookers. Gross. "Perhaps we should get inside?" I suggest. "I'm sure Leo's had enough of being out in the elements for now."

"I'm afraid that's not going to work until you two have an epic reunion scene."

I look at Saladriel. "What?"

He sighs and rubs his fuzzy unicorn forehead, running his fingers through his very pretty mane. "We were only able to get out of the room because we promised it with blood we were going to come hunt you down and that it would be very dramatic. You should expect rain fall in three...two...one... and they're right on time."

How many tiny flying cupids does this realm employ? They're fucking everywhere, kind of like cockroaches.

They fly onto the scene with actual magic wands. When they give them a wave, it starts to rain. But only where me and Delaney are standing.

She smiles at me through the water and brings her face close to mine. "I haven't been

communicating well with you, and I'm sorry you felt like I don't need you as much as I need the others. I've been angry about the past, but probably for the wrong reasons. Yes, I was surprised at first to see you, and I was pissed because I did feel played, but it's not fair to you to hold onto that anger when you had nearly as much to do with it as I did.

“So if it's okay with you, I think we should just pick up where we left off earlier; you know, when I pulled your cock out of your pants and sat on it? Seems like the best place to continue our story.”

“But I've got this whole moody thing going where I make everybody feel bad for me. I feel like that's worth some character points here, I'm not sure if I'm ready to give it all up yet.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “We'll find other ways to get you character points.”

Okay, okay, I let her kiss me. How could I not? And just to see what happens, I grab the front of Leo's shirt and yank him into the kiss as well.

I push him at Delaney first, watch them to try and inspire my dick to get hard, but then it catches sight of the rainbows and goes back to its cave to hide. “Delaney, I might need you to push some lust into me, I'm really not copacetic with this realm.”

She pulls back from making out with Leo to shove him at me. Her eyes are lit up in joy as the rain continues to fall down on us, soaking through our clothing. I feel like the hero at the end of a romantic movie. Not that I've ever in my life watched one of those, mind you, but I imagine this is exactly what it would feel like.

Being given permission to kiss Leo is a gift I don't think twice about. I'm not about to fight her on that, not when everything I've ever wanted is within my grasp.

“We should get back to the room before Spencer and Wil get bored and wander off,” Saladriel says, but I don't miss how ruffled he seems. Maybe one of these days he'll get sick of watching and want to join in as well. Who knows.

“No, they cannot ride me,” Saladriel says before Delaney even asks.

“How did you even know I was about to ask that?”

He smiles at Delaney and holds out his arm to link with hers. “I guess I'm starting to understand how your brain works,” he says with a light knock on her head. “Come, let's go take care of your gargoyles.”

Before we can head out though, Delaney remembers about the weird blue glowing things on her arm. She holds it up, pushing back a sleeve. “Well, I guess we found a loophole? Look, one of the embers is gone.” And she beams up at Leo, needing to look back at us every few steps she takes to make sure we're still there.

Maybe I can find it within my character traits to stop feeling so damn sorry for myself. And then, to end the scene, I do the most romantic thing I can think of doing in that moment. I lean over to Leo's ear and whisper into it, “I brought so many potatoes, Leo. You're not going to know what hit you.”

Chapter Nineteen

Leo

“Leo!”

I welcome the embrace from Wil, even though we haven’t had much occasion to spend time together. It’s a bit like putting on a new shirt you forgot you had and haven’t worn in a while. “Hello, Wilford.”

He beams up at me and pulls me further into the hotel room, patting the couch and fluffing the pillows next to it. “It’s wonderful to see you! How did this happen?”

I tilt my head to my mate, who has apparently decided to climb her demon.

Ourdemon.

I meet Saladriel’s eyes over Delaney’s shoulder, possible actual flames dancing in them as he tows her over to me. He plops her on my lap and stands behind me, leaning over me with his elbows resting on my shoulders.

“I found his cloud,” he says nonchalantly.

“Hey, I’m Spencer,” Delaney’s new fellow says as he shakes my hand. He seems wary of me, but then again, I’m sure he’s not been around too many gargoyles.

“Leo,” I offer, wrapping my arms around Delaney.

“What do you mean you found his cloud?”

Rush waves his hand towards the window we have which overlooks part of the

kingdom. I've spent far too much time in the sky, and I think after this we all could use a nice vacation somewhere where there is absolutely no sky involved. Do people vacation in Hell?

"I was wandering around and found a cloud that just sort of hit me in the olfactory senses. Definitely didn't roll around in it. I used manly detective skills to find a switch hidden within it and I hit it, and voila. Leo."

Saladriel looks like he's contemplating this as he sits down across from us. "I suppose it makes sense the goddess would use what she has to hide them. Was it super strange to be turned into a cloud? Kind of the opposite of stone, wouldn't you say?"

I start up a low purr for my mate as I continue to inhale her unique cherry scent. "No stranger than being turned into an immobile rock for dozens of years."

Saladriel walks over to the window, gazing out of it. "It's only a matter of time until she realizes we figured that out." He spins and walks back to Delaney, lifting up the arm that his goddess marked.

I think we're all a little surprised to see one of the extra marks is gone now. "Not sure why finding Leo cancelled out one of Fairygoddess' chosen mates, but it's interesting," Saladriel says as he runs his fingers over her arm.

She shivers when he brushes against his mark, and I don't miss the uptick of his mouth as he deliberately does it again before dropping her arm carefully back to her lap.

"She did say it was a game," Delaney points out. "Sometimes games have shortcuts, or tricks you find out as you play them. Leo, do you think everybody else is out there right now, floating around disguised as clouds? That's such a weird question."

“Definitely. I couldn't sense them at all, but when we got pulled into this realm, we were all in one group. It felt like we all were transformed at the same time and then dispersed throughout the kingdom.”

“But what about the mate you deleted from Fairygoddess? Aren't you worried that we just completely erased somebody's future?” Wil asks.

“It is not Delaney's responsibility to take care of every single person that needs to be loved. Up until very recently, nobody in this realm even knew Delaney existed, so there's no way that the goddess could have planned it very long ago. Maybe she had an idea at some point that this kind of situation would happen, but I'd be willing to bet a whole lot that she's sort of making this up as she goes.

“Think about it. How much notice did Fairygoddess actually get that Delaney was going to be her chosen one, or that it was her turn to even have a savior? If she would have chosen someone else, how would the mate bonds have worked then? Would she have chosen the same people from here to tie them to?

“Back at home, it makes sense to have us all be fated for each other, because our souls have been on the same plane of existence since we were born. Our goddess saw them as we emerged and knew exactly how well we could complement each other. This goddess knows nothing of Delaney's soul.”

The rest of them swing their eyes to Saladriel. I get that Wil was raised in a way that idolizes and worships anything to do with the goddess at a fervent level none of us will ever achieve, but I think he's worrying about the wrong thing here.

He's also not ready to let this subject go. “Then how do you explain Saladriel?”

Saladriel sighs and sits down on one of the empty chairs. He looks at Delaney and then back to Wil. “There's not much to explain. Do I think I might be able to fall for

her given enough time and opportunity? Probably. But then again, I imagine anybody in my shoes could do that. Delaney's pretty amazing. It would be pretty damn difficult to not fall for her when she looks at you the way she does."

Delaney's nose wrinkles up all cute-like. "Thank you, that means a lot to me."

There's no doubt in my mind that Delaney could make anybody fall for her. Even somebody completely and wholly incompatible with her, because she has a way of charming you in a way that's customized to how you operate. Maybe it's her bodysmith genes, but she's able to get reads on people and figure out exactly what they need to feel good. And I'm not just talking about sexual needs.

"Not to be inconsiderate, but I think there's a great difference in being a soulmate to Delaney and choosing to be with her because someone told you to. Delaney, I feel you in my soul. You wokeme from my state of rock and made the world start turning again.

"I know that each of your mates experiences their bond with you differently, but one thing we have in common is that you completely change something about our lives. Either you soothe a nature within us that needs soothing, or you bring out qualities in us that we have a hard time accessing, or you comfort us in a way nobody's ever been able to before. But I feel you in mysoul. I don't think that Fairyunicorn Goddess can replicate that. How could she? Soul mates are sacred, and you need to have intimate knowledge of somebody's soul to weave them together.

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“Not to diminish what you have with her, Saladriel, but it is a different bond. A mate bond and a soulmate bond are two different things. Given time and energy, I am fully of the belief that you two could build something incredible. But it's likely always just going to take a little more work than any of the relationships she has with us, because her soul was matched with ours from the second it was created. That's not something the goddess here can recreate.

“So I think, in conclusion, that the unicorns here that she wears a mark for would likely be just fine eventually if she severed those bonds. Yes, it might be painful because the goddess did some trickery to bind them somehow, but in our realm, ripping apart a bond like that would literally kill you. Considering Delaney is just fine right now, I'm going to assume that the unicorn she erased is as well.”

It's silent for a few minutes, and I worry that maybe I've said too much or made Saladriel feel like he's worth less than us, but I hope he understands what I'm actually saying. This isn't Delaney's home, and you can't mess with people's lives the way this goddess is trying to.

Eventually, Saladriel talks. “Leo's right. It would hurt to walk away from Delaney, but it would definitely not kill me. How would this even work? This is my home. I couldn't ask all of you to move here, and I'm not sure I'd be comfortable permanently moving to your realm. We'd be flip flopping back and forth to appease each other, and eventually that feels like it might get old.”

Delaney stands slowly from my lap and walks to Saladriel, kneeling on the ground before him. “What are you saying?”

He gives her a sad smile, but if neither of them feels that the relationship they're building is worth the sacrifice of moving to a new world, then it's going to be a hard relationship to sustain. "I think we've known from the beginning there was something off about our pairing. I'm just not sure if I'm capable of the emotional depth and the physical affection you need. I feel as if we could be very good friends if that's something you're interested in, but honestly, I think both of us would be just a little bit miserable in some form or another if we kept trying to force this to happen."

I think Delaney's crying a little bit, but I can already tell through her posture and through our bond that she accepts everything that he's saying as truth. "But I need to protect you. What if your goddess retaliates for our bond not working out? I don't want her to hurt you because of me."

Saladriel takes her hand with both of his and rubs his thumbs over the top of it. "As Leo said, it is not your responsibility to take care of everybody. I am a citizen of Glittertopia, which means I am responsible for my own happiness, and my goddess is responsible for my well-being. If she chooses to punish me for being completely incompatible with you, then that's on her. I'm not going to change my entire future to appease her. I'm not going to ask you to accommodate me permanently because you're living in fear of consequences for something you had no control over.

"You didn't ask for this, so it's not on you. I appreciate you wanting to do the right thing and take care of me, but you have so many men that love you. So many men that would give everything to be with you. I'm just not there. I do think you're amazing; but I need a quieter life. I need skies and rainbows and clouds. I need to be with somebody that understands that a physical relationship is never going to be at the top of my list of needs."

Wil starts sniffing. "I hate sad scenes. We want you to have a happy ending Saladriel!"

He presses a gentle kiss to Delaney's hand. "I'll get there. Maybe we can figure out a way to communicate. It would be kind of hard to stay friends if I can't send you a letter every now and then."

"I'm sure we could figure something out," Delaney says. "A long time ago, my uncle Bennett moved to different world and used the portal to communicate with my mom and grandpa. I'm sure my parents could figure out something for me if I asked. And I would love to stay friends."

"So, what now? We just go around sniffing clouds until we find ones that Delaney thinks smell good? I'm guessing Rush found Leo because they're a thing. It would follow that only Delaney could find the others...unless there's more poly happening here than I realized. In that case, tally ho!" Spencer looks a little uncomfortable with all this talk of mates and serious things, and I'm curious to see how he fits in with the rest of the group once we find everyone.

"Hold that thought," Saladriel says as he gets up and walks to the other room.

He returns with a tote bag and dumps a bunch of stuff out onto the coffee table. "The goddess gave Delaney the task of making her realm happy again. We still need to do that. As hard as this is going to be to part ways, I think having that heavy bar of expectation lifted off of me has already done me wonders. On top of that, your arm is healing, Delaney. Think about how much more we could do if we just spread a bit of cheer in the realm?"

Delaney starts rifling through the stuff that he dumped out. Seems to be craft supplies, and now I remember Saladriel asking somebody to take him to the store before we all got disappeared to Glittertopia. "Not to be a downer, but how is a bit of glitter going to fix everything?"

Saladriel looks me dead in the face and says, "Because it's glitter. Glitter does fix

everything here. Maybe this is our answer, Delaney. If we can figure out a way to make the other unicorns here happy, the goddess will have no reason to punish me for us choosing not to be together. Then you'll get to go back home and start your life with your mates, and I'll get to tell everybody about this awesome friend I have that shook everything up. We can't lose with that."

"I might have some ideas..." I'm reluctant to voice them, but if it gets us home faster, then I can frolic. Probably.

ChapterTwenty

Delaney

"Before we get too far down the ideas rabbit hole, perhaps we could possibly sleep first? I don't think I can make anybody in this room happy until that happens first."

"Sorry, got excited by the glitter. Of course, we should sleep. It's been a really long day." Leo looks bashful as he says this, and if I wasn't feeling like I was dead on my feet, I'd be jumping all in to go rescue the rest of my mates as soon as possible. But I'm not good to them if I'm delirious from needing sleep.

I squeeze Saladriel gently on the shoulder as I walk past him, going towards where I know the bedroom is. I hadn't paid much attention to it earlier, but of course there's only one bed.

"That's definitely not going to fit everybody," I sigh to myself as I start figuring out who the heck is going to get left out.

"Maybe if we lie on it sideways? Our feet would hang off, but surely that would be better than sleeping apart from you." I should have known that Leo wouldn't let me out of his sight for long. I'm sure he has every intention of being attached to me at the

hip.

Although, if we're going to be attached, I think there are plenty more interesting ways we can do it than via hip.

I'm clearly talking about his massive gargoyle cock.

“Or maybe there are extra blankets somewhere and we can just make a big bed on the floor? The carpeting wouldn't be too bad.”

“We'll figure it out, Delaney. Don't you worry about us,” Wil says as he starts opening up closets.

Leo scoops me up and peels back the blankets with one arm, tucking me right into the middle of the bed and wrapping himself around me.

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Rush sits on the other side of me tentatively, kicking off his shoes and pulling off his T-shirt. “I think I'll go take a quick shower before I try and sleep, if that's alright? Will that keep you up?”

I wave him off and let out a massive yawn. “Of course not. Go take care of yourself, just come kiss me before you go to sleep?”

I snuggle into Leo, tucking my knee between his legs, feeling at peace having him here even if we weren't separated all that long. We've been on again off again through no fault of our own since we met, so I'm going to inhale the clean water scent he emanates through his thick grey skin as long as I can.

“Oh, if you guys crawl in next to her, the bed should accommodate you,” Saladriel explains as he grabs a blanket and heads back out to the living room.

I sit up with a frown on my face, wanting to call him back, but then I remember the conversation we just had, and I plop back down on my back. Earlier we had a moment, and I liked kissing him, and now I'm all confused. I don't feel the pull to him like I do all the others, but it's difficult to just shut off the part of me that still thinks we need to claim him.

“You okay?” Leo asks for just me to hear.

“Yes and no. I need to sit with the Saladriel situation a bit, I think.”

“Can I lay next to you while you fall asleep? I'll move when Rush gets out of the shower, I just want you to be the last thing I hold before I go to sleep in the living

room with Saladriel.”

I yank Wil onto the bed with us. Like Saladriel promised, as soon as he's lying down, the bed magically expands enough to house the three of us.

Wil sits up with furrowed brows, looking at the bed. “Convenient. One bed trope?”

“Wil, are you telling me you read romance?”

I'm so, so sleepy, but I really need to know the answer to this.

“Likely not the stuff you're used to. Fundamentalists have their own form of romance novels, and it centers on newly married people being forced to share a bed for the first time, glorifying their purity. It's definitely propaganda and has less than zero juicy bits.”

“Kinky. Get under the covers. You're sleeping next to me.”

And then Spencer climbs in, and as I'm drifting off, the bed rustles one more time from Rush climbing in, and it's something to be tucked in tight between all these men that are already becoming such a big part of my life, and a lot of the worries from the day melt away.

A part of my mind is still worried about Saladriel out there by himself, but if we're going to split ways, then attempting to get any closer, physically or emotionally, will only make it harder.

I'm not even going to share the dreams I have with you, because they're disturbing even to me, but I'm sure Rush would be ecstatic to hear the role that potatoes played in them. In fact, I might need to question him later about if it's possible for him to influence dreams. It seems like too big of a coincidence to me, and definitely

something a demon would do.

???

“You need to get out, you're not supposed to be here. What made you think this was a good idea?”

“I had to see you. I'm sorry, I couldn't wait another day.”

“Well, your timing sucks. It's not going to work if she sees you right now. Get out of here before you wake her up.”

“But baby, you promised we'd finally end our dry spell. Now you want me to wait longer? When am I going to be enough for you?”

The conversation gets quieter after that, changing to whispers, and my whole body is pulled tight, nausea and acid fighting for dominance in my throat.

Part of me wants to sneak out there and see who's talking, and part of me wants to ignore it completely because if I do, then nothing will change. Nothing will be ruined.

I can't even work through the process of elimination to figure out who's involved, because I seem to be the only one that was sleeping. I must have been exhausted. Judging by the temperature of the sheets around me, it's been a while since anybody's been in here with me. So it's possible then that multiple people are in on whatever deception I apparently missed.

My legs shake as I tiptoe out of the room, trying so hard to be quiet. I shouldn't have to sneak around; these are my mates. I never thought I'd have to worry about anybody being dishonest with me. But I guess there really is a first time for everything.

Just as I make it to the threshold, I can see some bodies through the crack of the door, and I don't want to believe what I'm seeing, but it's pretty hard to ignore the evidence.

I take a deep breath and start out there, making sure I get a full measure of the scene before I cast any judgments that would make me look dumb. We will not be acting out the miscommunication trope today.

“You guys better start explaining yourselves right now.”

Leo and Rush freeze immediately, hands falling away from the female in front of them. They spin to me with horror on their faces, but they know they've been caught. There's no way to explain themselves out of this.

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Really, there's only way this scene can end. "How long has this been going on?"

"Delaney, please," Rush begs as actual tears fall from his eyes. I'm not mistaken that he's actually hard now either, when he's been claiming since we got here that it was impossible. "She's one of the main reasons Leo and I came together in the first place. She was desperate to see Leo. Not that he remembers her, but—" he looks to his partner in crime, who's opening and closing his mouth over and over again, unable to think of anything to defend himself.

"I promise you're the only one for us," Rush finally says as he looks between me and this other female, who like a total bitch is just sitting there quietly. Not so mouthy now that I'm in front of her, is she?

I get closer so I can inspect her, doing my best to ignore the fact that she's shamelessly wearing no pants and is already lying on her back with her legs spread for my men. "I can't have this anywhere near me. I know you two have history, but this is not the way to go about re-igniting your flame."

"Told you she'd be pissed," Spencer calls from the kitchen where he's making toast. "Told you not to bring that shit over here, Rush. This is on you. I'm not getting you out of this scrape."

"I expect this from you Rush, but Leo? You promised I was important to you."

"Are they done yet?" Saladriel yells from somewhere else in the room. I do a survey of the room until I find him in the corner with his hands over his ears, clearly trying to block out all the noises these men were about to make.

“What would have happened if I would have kept sleeping? Would you have just had your way with her? Completely ignoring the fact that we're supposed to be something to each other? That I'm the only vagina owner, starch or otherwise, you should want to pound?”

Rush eyes the woman, although maybe that's too generous of a term. Ho bag. Homewrecker. Mound of mashed potatoes perfectly sculpted on the dining table. Doesn't matter what you call it. She had her own voice that they've perfected. There's no way this is their first time together; you don't get hips like that without practice.

“Rush, I'm only going to say this one time, so let me be clear. If you're with me, you can't be doing this, unless I'm involved. What the hell were you thinking trying to leave me out?” And I stalk straight up to him, grabbing a handful of the potatoes as I do and reaching into his pants to put them where I know he wants it.

He somehow made the mashed potatoes the perfect consistency, so it's as moldable as playdough. I guess those instant potatoes are good for lots of things after all. Probably best my brother never got the answer about why we had so many in our kitchen.

I squish the potatoes around Rush's extremely hard and throbbing dick, and I will admit I get no small amount of satisfaction from doing it. This mashed potato fetish goes much deeper than I thought it did, but we're not going to kink shame.

Wil pops his head in. “Wait, you're not mad at them?”

Can't say I've ever craved a mouthful of potatoes right after waking up, but I do so anyways without using any utensils to get them in there, and then I go for Rush's mouth. He sucks my tongue into his, moaning as he cleans it. It's absolutely filthy and disgusting and I hate every bit of it, but he doesn't, so I guess this is part of my life now.

Leo whimpers, and I have to pull away from Rush to take care of him. “Is she going to give you what you need Leo? Or am I?”

“Only you, my mate. My perfect one. My everything. Please, let me show you my devotion. If it makes you feel better, we gave her your nipples.”

I tut at the both of them as I look over the mess on the table. “I have to know, how did you get her to sound so real? I was convinced I was coming out here to kneecap at least two people.”

Rush is staring down at his crotch with his pants still up, thrusting his hips against the air as if he's imagining thrusting into the mashed potato woman on the table. Goddess, I'm going to hate myself after this.

“Wil, I'm going to need another hair wash after this.”

I pull off my clothes and climb onto that table, making sure my pelvis lands right where the mashed potato woman's is. The squish of it against my skin is part fucking nasty and part cold mashed potatoes on my skin, but the look in Rush's eye says this is going to be well worth my time.

“Holy fuck, you have no idea how hot this is.” Rush's hands are fluttering above me trying to figure out where to start, until Leo offers him a hand in assistance.

With linked hands, they pat the potatoes around me until I am Mashed Potato Woman, and then Rush eagerly scrambles between my legs to lap at me. His demon tongue snakes all the way inside me, thrashing around inelegantly, aiming to accrue the most damage at once.

I guess it makes sense he could do the voice, that his tongue can change a bit. I wasn't sure how I'd feel getting fucked by him in his demon form, but actually it's quite nice.

He has some minor shape shifting abilities, so it feels like the first time with him.

He's muttering obscenities and crying real tears as he cleans off my inner thighs of potato, then turns around to Leo to share. By the time the necessary bits are free and clear, Spencer has the forethought off getting a damp washcloth to throw it to Rush, so that he can wipe off the potato mess from his dick before shoving it inside of me. That is not role play I will be participating in, thank you. No further questions.

Beneath me, underneath all the potato mess and the ruined potato woman, the table itself seems to be crying out in pleasure for being used so crudely. Cries of, 'yes!', and, 'more!' echo under us as Rush starts thrusting into my body. He's so worked up that it's actually kind of doing it for me, so I decide to ride this out for everything it's worth.

Maybe it's not my kink, but if it gets him this excited, and we're doing it in a safe space, then who am I to deny him? He's got his hands buried next to me in the pile of potatoes and he's kneading it under my ass as he moves his hips, his eyes once again ensconced in flames.

I can't look away from him, and maybe I should be surprised by how different it feels for him to take me in his full demon form, but there are definitely some things he did not prepare me for.

Like for example, when he gets himself so deep inside of me and his eyes are burning, literally, and his hips seem to be locked still as something within him probes into me. I shouldn't be able to feel my cervix being breached, but here we are.

A very narrow part of him sneaks past it and works its way into my uterus itself, and I've never been more grateful for the fact that I can control my own fertility. Because I know exactly what he's doing. He's locking us together while he comes deeper inside of me than anybody has any business being.

“Oh my fuck, is he trying to breed you? I don't think my balls can handle how hot that is,” Spencer pants as he gets closer to us, miraculously ignoring everything else happening. The typical male brain, everybody.

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I can't look away from Rush, though. A part of him is a little vulnerable letting me see him like this, being taken by him when he's in this state. He's not trying to hide his true nature in any way, shape, or form, and that in and of itself softens me more towards him.

I can actually feel each burst of cum as he puts it exactly where he wants it to be, and then he starts thrusting again in tiny but precise thrusts that have him grunting and groaning which I promise is way sexier than it sounds.

It. Does. Not. Stop.

The longer he stares at me and continues to come inside of me, the more my legs start to shake until he's setting off an orgasm within me that has my whole body clenching down on him, which in turn just makes him go off even more.

This continues until my stomach is slightly swollen from the amount of cum that he's shot off inside my body. I'm a curvy girl and my stomach is far from being flat, but when I reach down to it it's definitely doughier than normal.

Yep, new kink unlocked.

“Sorry Delaney, I can't make it stop. Shouldn't be much longer,” Rush says between gritted teeth. “Leo, get underneath her. Need to have you both. Need to mark you both. You're both mine.”

The more he demons out, the fewer words he's using to communicate, and the harsher his voice gets. Leo does not need to be told twice. He unplasters me quickly from the

table, using the sticky remnants on my backside to keep me in place on top of him, and then Rush is reaching between my legs to start stretching me out so he can notch Leo against me.

Poor Wil, he's going to be completely traumatized by this. What is this, the third time?

When they both finally get fully seated inside of me, Rush loses his ever-loving mind and yells out as the most intense orgasm I've ever felt locks up my entire body. I don't even notice the mashed potatoes caked on me anymore, because my stomach is squishy and I'm so stuffed full of lust that my magic practically leaps off of me and into Rush.

I feel the burn of the claim, linking us together for the rest of our lives. I'm pretty sure I'm getting the good end of the deal if I'm going to get this on the regular. I decide right then and there to stop resisting a wedding. This is low-key spectacular.

His lust is also delicious. It's flowing against my skin like silk, seeping into it, and making me full and completely woozy. I'm pretty sure cum drunk is a good look on me, but I'll check back in later.

Spencer is ready with the demon leash so that Rush won't be able to disappear this time, and look, I'm never the girl that passes out immediately after sex. I actually hate that trope. It's ridiculous to think that that's necessary to do in every scene in a book. But I'm thinking that demon cum must have some sort of element to it that makes me just want to pass the fuck out, because the room is spinning and I can't stop smiling, even as I'm carried to the shower.

The second time I wake up for the day, I've got a demon and a gargoyle wrapped around me, and I feel so damn content. I may have a table full of glitter and construction paper to contend with, a unicorn to (hopefully) amicably separate from, and likely a huge, starchy mess to clean up in the kitchen, but I'm done collecting my

mates.

I've lured them all to me, and even though some of them are currently vapor outside my window somewhere, I'm optimistic that today is the day I get them back. Tomorrow's the day we'll go home, and Fairygodness will be dealt with, unable to make us do anything else for her.

I'll still help make this realm happy, because I said I would; but the urgency is lost, because I found my mates. The strength of my goddess's magic has a greater claim on me than that of Fairygodness Unicorn, and I find that I feel...relief.

My right arm is clear. No more dark veins, one less false mark.

I'm going to be sad for a little bit that Saladriel and I aren't going to work out because I've spent so many days thinking of what our days together might look like, but not even that can dim how good it feels to have confidence in knowing that all of my soulmates are bonded to me.

I feel like I could probably take on anything right now and succeed, because I'll never be alone again, I'll never have to deal with my magic spinning out of control and kickstarting orgies unless it's a paid gig, and I will always have somebody to spend time with. That's pretty fucking cool.

"Uh Delaney? There's somebody at the door. Two somebodies, in fact. I wanted to keep letting you sleep, but they're being pretty insistent. They claim to be Zac's parents?"

Saladriel's voice disappears and then he immediately comes back and pops his head in the door, a grimace on his pretty face. "Also, they claim to know the real reason this realm is being poisoned. Hope you didn't have plans today because I think you're gonna be pretty busy. Oh, also—"

I scream into the pillow.

So much for today being the day all my new and temporary dreams come true.

???

One more to go...you know you can take it!

Also...I see honeybee shifters in your future. And...what's that? A MC whychoose with a trash panda??? Okay fine, your wish is granted.