



Small as a Mushroom

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Paranormal

Description: It takes more than mushrooms to break Nora's will.

Spending years working in the fields to fill the kitchens of the Order Academy has kept Nora alive, giving her a space to keep her head down amongst the towering rows of gargantuan mushrooms. She was strong before she arrived and is stronger now after years of hard labor, and she knows she has to escape or die a slave in the sunbaked fields. She has a plan, ready to act on one of the two rumors she learned over the years.

She just needs the right Aetheriani to bargain with.

Crystallo looks like an angel, with glimmering white wings and devilish eyes that look at her like she is a feast for his very soul. One year of service to him is something she is more than willing to promise for freedom, especially when his wingtip ghosts over her body, causing her blood to seer beneath her skin.

But there is a problem.

The other rumor going around about his kind? It's about the oversized weapon that swings from his hips, a weapon she is now expected to handle. But Nora is strong, and she has spent years twisting and breaking the stems of mushrooms she can't get both hands around.

He's about to find out just how strong she is.

This standalone novella with a HFN ending, like the others in this series, is cheeky. Monstrous kisses, chosen proximity, and a happy-for-now ending await in this fast, fun novella set in the Chaos God universe. Perfect for readers who crave unexpected surprises in monster romance where the sizes are more than compatible. The cake is a lie, and so is the mushroom.

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Chapter

One

NORA

Dusky white spotted caps brushed past my biceps, fleshy fungi tall enough to hide even my bulky frame if I ducked behind them. The ripe crop of mushrooms was large enough now to split a person in half...if they were made out of metal instead of soft fungi flesh. The mental image of me hefting one of the mushrooms by the base and using it to bash the farm overseer over the head with it flashed through my mind, graphic and detailed, his head caving in as the mushroom turned weapon caved in his skull, cutting through him to split his body in half like those action horror movies I used to watch in what now seemed like another life.

I grinned at the mental image.

A jolt of electricity zapped me, causing me to gasp with the sudden shock of pain.

I lurched forward, wrenched out of my violent daydream. I didn't glance in the overseer's direction. He was relaxing in the gazebo in the center of the field, where he could see all of our progress and send out little shocks when we slowed, or if he was bored.

I wasn't splitting anyone in half with a giant mushroom.

I sighed as I waded between the rows of gargantuan fungi, eggshell grit crunching

under my boots while the caldera's rim cast a jagged shadow across the field. The mushrooms reached my waist, thick, ruby-brown caps anchored to dense stalks shot with silver veins that pulsed with the eerie glow of magic. I flexed my hands, sore and aching from the work. The harvest shift was the worst. At least the new overseer was better than the one in my first year here. That one had pain magic instead of electricity. She didn't give out little shocks. Any time she decided to 'encourage' me, it would take me to the ground, my muscles seizing as every thought fled my body but the focus of pain.

I brushed the memory from my mind.

There was no point in focusing on the past. It was gone forever.

The only thing I could do was work and wait for the moment I knew was coming.

Soon, he would be here. It had been a year.

"Pulse," I said.

I felt a tug on my magic as a ribbon of pale air uncoiled from my familiar's wings. Zeph was no bigger than a kestrel, all translucent feathers and whirling runes that pulsed cobalt when he moved. His downdraft lifted in a tight vortex over the nearest cap. Spores shimmered up like powdered bronze. I traced a small symbol in the air, letting the golden light of my magic fill it as I cast the spell. A small wind swirled around the copper cloud, and with a twist of my wrist, I guided it into the tin shaker at my belt, spores pinging off the rim before settling.

They didn't teach many spells to mundanes like me, just the ones we needed to do our work.

I knelt down, grabbing the mushroom at the base. I tensed, ready to put the force into

my muscles that had gotten strong over the years here. I was already strong when I applied to the Order Academy. That strength and Zeph were the reasons I was assigned to the fields.

I gripped the base a little tighter. One strong twist and the whole thing surrendered with a wet pop. Flesh like firm dough pressed against my palm. This batch would dry into flour; the kitchens would grind the protein-rich caps and fold the powder into their creations. I reached up to grab the head of it, folding it down with another crack, then the whole thing went into the other sack that was on my back.

I'd gotten used to its weight, and my body had changed over the years I worked in these fields. Squatting, kneeling, twisting, lifting - they were everyday motions as I worked through the cyclical harvest, fields of mushrooms that were planted without worry of the season changing. The only focus was to have enough fresh product to make the dishes served to the students and the army.

My daily quota had increased recently.

It meant more weight, more strength, longer hours.

Forward. Three paces. Gather. Kneel. Twist. Lift. Forward.

Sweat rolled down my forehead, and I wiped it away with the back of my hand. I could feel the dust smear into mud across my skin and grit, knowing that a hot shower was hours away. With the sudden increase in my quota, I knew I would be out here until after the sun long set in the night air, my sweat cooling to chill me to the bone.

I heard the clanking of armor, but I didn't pause to watch. This morning, more soldiers for the Order army had arrived, marching through the fort, which was the only way in or out of this caldera. It blocked the singular opening in the steep rock

walls that surrounded the school grounds. Their gleaming armor clicked in time with Zeph's wingbeats as they strode from the entrance down the main path parallel to the mushroom fields.

Something big had to be coming to have that many soldiers come to the school.

I'd heard the whispers in the commons.

He was back, the Chaos God had returned.

Not that it meant anything to me. Mundanes like me grew up in what the fae and their ilk called the 'mundane realm.' We didn't grow up with stories of the great battles between Chaos and Order, between deities that walked among us. Supposedly, there was a Goddess trapped under the commons itself.

I shook my head at that thought.

The only thing that mattered was getting out of here.

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Wind shifted. Far above, clouds wheeled over the edge of the caldera. I wiped sweat, smearing tawny residue across my forearm, and moved to the next cluster. The shower in my dorm room was stained brown by the stuff.

Rhythm mattered, cut, scoop, swirl, seal, each motion precise to keep the spores from being wasted. I was halfway to my quota. If I pushed hard enough, I might finish before the dinner service was over. If not, I'd eat the provisions I had squirreled away in my room, saved for the days I just couldn't do it.

There! Zeph said into my mind. He's back!

I looked up, my familiar's urgent tug in my mind pulling my gaze across the field.

My heartbeat picked up, skipping a beat before cascading into the rhythm that both panic and excitement shared.

There was a figure silhouetted by the sun, a picturesque picture of a man who was not a man, a masculine form framed by the two huge feathering wings that curved around his body, like the wings of a non-biblically accurate angel. He wore a white robe with gold trim and had a simple gold band around his forehead. Gilded gauntlets adorned his forearms, and there was a sword strapped to his waist.

My hands clenched at my red skirt, stained brown by the dusted layers of dirt, sweat, and mushroom dust. I still didn't understand why they didn't give us different outfits to work in the fields. It made no sense to kneel in the dirt in a school skirt, but a lot about this school still didn't make sense, no matter how long I'd worked here. I'd left my red school jacket in my dorm room. My white shirt had wet circles under my

armpits and had the same streaks of brown as my skirt. I was filthy and disheveled compared to him, but what did I expect?

He was King of the Aetheriani, Rí Túath Crystallo, here for his yearly inspection of the spell that kept the field nourished, despite the systematic monocropping.

I was nothing but a mundane, a person transplanted from the normal world to this magical realm, a person brought here on the pretense of a magical education, and instead was put to work in the fields.

I had asked around to find out who he was and why he was there the last time I saw him. I had to piece together the information from other mundanes and the few times I was able to go to the library. His hair was a soft gold, curling around his face, which was familiar. I'd gotten used to seeing his younger brother's face on the banners that were hung from the domed walls of the commons the week before a game day, but I had seen Rí Túath Crystallo only once before, a year ago. He was doing the same thing he did the last time, stroking a finger along the underside of one of the large mushroom caps, then holding it up to inspect the quality of its spores.

He was alone, just as he was last time.

GO!Zeph swooped down to send a woosh of air past my ear, startling me into motion. I shrugged off my heavy bag, dropping it to the ground, along with my tin.

If I succeeded, I wouldn't need them anymore. I took one step, then another, and then I ran, dashing towards the promise of an escape. Electricity zapped me, but I ignored it. The shocks were easy to bear, easy to ignore when the only promise of freedom was standing there, waiting for me to ask for it.

All I had to do was convince him to take me.

The Aetheriani turned towards me, his wings spreading slightly before settling back down by his sides as he watched my rapid approach. There was no alarm in his posture. I was nothing that someone like him would be afraid of.

I slowed as I got closer to him, pushing through a row of mushrooms, their caps letting off puffs of dust as I stepped through them to the row that he stood in.

I threw myself on the ground.

My palms pressed into the dirt, and I bent forward, resting my forehead on the back of my hands. I waited, silent. I didn't know what kind of man he was. If he were anything like his younger brother, he wouldn't kill me for breaching some protocol I had no way of learning, but I couldn't know for sure. All I had to go on were the rumors.

"Speak," Rí Túath Crystallo commanded.

I lifted my head and upper body off the ground, looking up to meet his blue eyes.

A shiver ran through me, a heat that scalded my soul. For a moment, I forgot everything. I forgot why I was there, kneeling in the dirt. I forgot why my heart was racing and my lungs pulling deep breaths in. The only thing that existed was his eyes.

Request the boon! Zeph landed on my shoulder, shocking me out of my trance.

"Boon," I gasped out.

"So forward. Not what I expected from a mundane at all," Rí Túath Crystallo arched a golden eyebrow as he stared down at me. He lowered his voice as he looked up, glancing around. "You request a boon? Really?"

Relief flooded me, and I squashed it down. If he didn't want to honor the boon, he could have just walked away or struck me down. No one would bat an eye if a field worker were hurt. The only reason I'd lasted several years here was because the 'Proper Students' rarely came out in the direction of the mushroom fields. There was nothing here that was of interest to them, and so the mundanes who worked out here avoided their attention. It helped that the smell of the mushrooms covered our scents, making it less likely that we would trigger the wrong instincts just from existing. I'd learned not to shower before going to the commons for meals.

"I request a boon!" I said.

"Do you understand what you are asking for?" he said, his voice gentle.

I wasn't sure. My knowledge was based on rumors and whispered words shared between mundanes.

I sat up straighter, leaning my weight back on my heels. "By Aetheriani law, a boon is granted in exchange for a year and a day of service."

I hoped I was right.

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Even so, I still could plead my case.

I held up my dirty hands, palms up towards him, showing him the evidence of what I could offer.

"I am used to hard work," I said, knowing he could see the thick layers of calluses from years of working in the fields. I was filthy, but I was strong, I was sturdy. I was a woman who had borne the weight of hard labor and come out the other end thicker than I was before. "I have strong hands and a solid body. I will serve you well."

"Fuuuuu," came the gasp behind me. I glanced back to see the overseer standing there, his hands on his knees as he gasped for breath. He spent most of his time lounging about. It didn't surprise me that it took him that long to run across the field. Hewas wearing the silver jacket of a second-year 'Proper Student', one of the students who were born into this world rather than tricked from the mundane. He had the black hair and the pointed ears of an Aos sí, a fae who had the right bloodline to be considered better than the shifters and other 'Proper Students'.

"...cking mundanes!" the overseer finished. "This one got away from me."

"I will deal with this one," Rí Túath Crystallo said.

My heart sank. He wasn't going to accept my request. I'd learned enough by now to know that when someone was going to deal with me, that meant punishment.

"That's my job," the overseer said. He reached out with one hand towards me, electricity crackling around his fist. He could only send small zaps of electricity at a

distance, but if he put his hands on me, it would really hurt. "Someone has to keep these weaklings in their place."

I'd show him weakness.

Anger flashed through me, hot and heavy with the weight of the years of forced labor behind them. I shifted my weight, lifting one leg and planting my foot, giving myself that anchor to the ground. In one movement, I dodged to the inside of his reaching, crackling hand, lunging upwards from the ground as I took my clenched fist and slammed it into the underside of the overseer's jaw. A crack of pain radiated down through my hand. It was overshadowed by the joy and terror that flooded me as the overseer's head snapped back and he fell backward like a sack full of mushrooms, thudding down into the ground.

I turned slowly, flexing my hand.

It didn't hurt at all. I thought it would hurt.

My eyes met Crystallo's, but instead of indignation or anger, I saw... delight?

Rí Túath Crystallo arched an eyebrow at me, a smile slipping across his face as his eyes met mine again, and the spark that flew between us had nothing to do with magic.

"Name your price," he said.

Hope rose up with wings of relief, and I pushed it back down again, not letting it consume me. He hadn't agreed yet. He could walk away from this. Even worse, he could tell the school, and I would be punished for daring to speak to him.

"Take me with you," I said.

He closed his eyes, a shudder running through his whole body, his wings vibrating with the motion. He opened his eyes to pin me with his gaze.

“Being in my service would already do that,” he said, his voice soft and heated at the same time.

“Aetheriani law does not require the service to be done in your presence,” I said. “You could order me to serve you by remaining here. My boon request is that you take me with you, back to your homeland, so I may serve my year and a day there, with you.”

I had heard that mundanes had rights in the Aetheriani homeland. I wouldn't belong there, not while I was a simple human in a country filled with winged people, but at least I wouldn't have to spend time worrying about someone offing me on a whim, or worse, trying to put me in the fish hatchery.

“I will grant your boon,” he said, and the words floated through me, a liferaft that could drift out of my reach at any moment. This time, as the hope floated up, I didn't push it down. I let it fill me. He would grant my boon. He would take me with him. I would finally be able to escape this place.

He looked out across the fields. I followed his gaze, and my heart sank.

Standing in the middle of the road, soldiers curving around behind him to trample the far side of the grass rather than walk too close to him, was the man whose face had been put on posters in the dorm to inform us lowly mundanes of his importance. It was one thing to put up banners to celebrate a sports celebrity like Rí Túath Crystallo's younger brother. It was an entirely different level of narcissism for a leader to make sure pictures of their face were plastered everywhere.

“I am going to touch you,” he said, his words coming out quickly, as if he were

running out of time.

“Okay,” I said, not sure why he was informing me in advance. None of the other fae bothered.

Rí Túath Crystallo reached out and threaded his fingers through my hair, sending a tingle down my spine as my skin shivered at the gentle touch. It had been years since anyone had touched me like that.

“Hold onto my wrist to support yourself,” he said, his fingers curling as he took a thick handful of my hair. I reached up to grip his wrist with one hand, wincing as the copper brown dusting on my fingers smeared across his skin.

“Both hands,” he instructed. “Pull against my wrist to partially support your weight.”

I lifted my other hand and wrapped it around his wrist, my knuckles whitening.

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“If you can cry or pretend to be in pain, that would be helpful,” he said.

He dragged me forward, and I stumbled before I lost my balance, falling down as he stepped back out of the way.

He lifted my head to his hip with a single fist buried at the roots of my hair, forcing me up to the back of my toes. The pressure pinched my scalp; heat prickled behind my eyes. Then he began to move, dragging me along beside him. My toes skimmed the dirt between the rows of mushrooms as he marched.

My arms burned, but my scalp didn't hurt.

Even so, the fact that he could lift me like that and drag me, one-handed, was impressive. I hadn't ever been a small woman, even before my day-to-day existence turned into endless physical labor. Muscle weighed more than fat, and I was dense.

He was strong despite his fancy pants appearance.

His white robes billowed, gold-edged seams catching the harsh light. The gilt feathers of his wings almost glimmered in the sun as he moved, soft feathers brushing against me as he dragged me down the row as if I were as light as one of his feathers. My weight hung from his grip, shoulder sockets stretching. He kept the pace unbroken, wings half-flared for balance. Copper spores dotted his immaculate robe where disrupted stalks had puffed into the air at our passing.

That would ruin my quota.

Good thing I wasn't ever coming back here.

Loam and eggshell gave way to hardpack. The road's gray grit rasped my bare knees as they touched down. He halted at the edge, wings folding like silent doors behind his shoulders. My shoulder muscles still burned from supporting myself, but he didn't let go, and so neither did I.

Then he let me go, and I fell forward to my hands and knees again.

"Was there a problem with the inspection?" a cold, cruel voice asked.

Danger. Zeph hissed. Remain small.

I didn't look up.

Zeph was my ally. He had just as much of an incentive to want me to be free. The only way they were able to force him to work at this school was to use me. So when he gave me advice, I listened.

I kept my eyes down and tried to make myself invisible.

I stared at the embroidered boots that belonged to Seelie Ard Ri Lacnevioda Terithni'i Unlar Stormchaser. I had missed the most recent assembly where he spoke to the school, as my quota came before anything else, classes and assemblies included, but there had been an announcement posted in the dorms with his image all over it, his name and titles plastered across in gaudy, gilded gold.

"The crops are robust," Rí Túath Crystallo said. "The spell is holding."

I stayed where I was, still and motionless on the ground by his feet.

“I’m sure you’re aware that the Goddess has awakened,” the Seelie Ard Ri said. “Your people’s unique spell will not be needed once she sees fit to create a proper Order spell to serve the purpose.”

There was a threat hanging in the words, heavy and overt. In my investigations to find out who Crystallo was, I found out more about the outside world. There was an uneasy truce between the forces of Order and the Aetheriani, one brokered over the many years the Order Goddess had slumbered.

Everyone knew war was coming.

I didn’t want to be here to be caught in it.

Whatever the truth of the situation at the school, it was a problem for gods, imaginary or real, to work out. My problem was how I was gonna get away.

“I look forward to her creation,” Rí Túath Crystallo said, even though the mushrooms that fed the school with an abundance were due to the spell that only his family could cast. “It will be a great day when she steps free from her prison.”

“Watch what you say,” Seelie Ard Rí snapped.

“Whatever do you mean?” Rí Túath Crystallo said, an edge of a smile in his voice. I risked a glance up at him to see his eyes glinting like daggers in the sunlight as he stared down his enemy. “Surely you are not implying you wish your Goddess to remain imprisoned?”

“She protects us all with her sacrifice,” Seelie Ard Rí said. “Your people included.”

“Indeed, she is a gracious and proper Goddess,” Rí Túath Crystallo said. “Now, it is high time you show me the fruits of the fields. I have heard that having mundanes

working in the kitchens has resulted in some unusual dishes?”

He took a few steps forward as the two of them began to head up the road, towards the fort that blocked the single entrance to the Caldera. I looked up again to see two fairy hive workers floating nearby, one with green feathery hair and the other with brown, their insect wings catching the sunlight as they hovered, ready to run any errand. I'd learned over the years here that part of the fort that blocked the entrance to the caldera was a fairy hive. The 'proper students' referred to it as a captive hive.

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“Workers,” Rí Túath Crystallo paused as he reached them. “Clean this mundane up and bring her to serve my meal. Put her in something more revealing.”

“A farm mundane?” Seelie Ard Rí sneered.

I looked back at the ground as his hard eyes fell on me, the haughty edges of his face not softened in the slightest by his long black hair, an outward sign of his Seelie heritage.

“She was foolish enough to ask for a boon,” Rí Túath Crystallo said, a cruel edge to his voice. “I intend to reward that presumption with an introduction to Aetheriani anatomy.”

Seelie Ard Rí laughed, bright and sudden.

“I’ve always wondered how long it would take a mundane to die on an Aetheriani dick,” Seelie Ard Rí said.

My heart plummeted as they walked away from me, leaving me kneeling in the dirt.

I just made a horrible mistake.

Chapter

Two

CRYSTALLO

The chair was an insult.

I sat with wings tucked tight, my feathers pinched against the carved back that was shaped perfectly for a wingless individual. A fairy worker wouldn't have made the mistake of providing me something that would be irritating with my wings; they had wings themselves. The Seelie Ard Rí must have ordered the seat to see if I would react. This was always the case every time I came for my yearly spell inspection, as mandated by our tenuous treaty. Once a year, I put myself in danger, but it was the only chance I got to check on my younger brother.

What my brother told me this morning had changed everything.

I had to finish this farce and get back to our people to prepare.

Across the span of an obsidian-slick table, the Seelie Ard Rí, one of the two High Kings, lounged in an ivory tabard short enough to reveal knee-high leggings latticed in gold thread that glittered with small sewn-in diamonds. His black hair spilled like water over porcelain shoulders, every strand reflecting the light cast from light globes, spelled to the walls.

Between us sprawled a ridiculous feast.

A mountain of powdered donuts flanked bowls of steaming soup; beside them, a platter of blueberry pancakes dripped maple syrup, and then a tray of fried pickles. In front of me was a wine glass with a milky liquid, and small balls of gelatin at the bottom of it. A plate of funnel cake was off to the right, while sticks of candied apples leaned against a tureen of neon-green curry. Someone had stacked what looked like pizza slices, pineapple, and jalapeño into a conical tower, crowned by a single chocolate éclair. The mingled scents, lemongrass, frosting, brine, and melted cheese, fought in the vaulted air with nauseating tenacity.

The Ard Rí lifted a sugar-dusted cronut between manicured fingers, inspecting it. "I've been told that the diversity of mundane cuisine is entertaining." A sneer curled in the corner of his lip. "I'm sure a... creature... such as yourself must enjoy such a thing. Your people do have a taste for mundanes, do you not?"

My wings ached from where they were trapped by the chair.

"You are one to speak on the use of mundanes," I said as I took a slice of pizza with pineapple on it from the odd tower. The crust was hard and brittle, which was how they managed to get it to stand upright. I put it on my plate without taking a bite. "Unless you plan to change the way this school is run? Has your Goddess changed her mind about the best use for mundanes?"

"The Goddess does not change," the Ard Rí spat out the word like it was a curse, setting the donut down on his plate.

"She changed enough to allow the treaty," I pointed out.

"The Goddess decided to wait," the Ard Rí leaned back in his chair as he dipped his sugar-powdered fingers into the bowl of water to his left, wiping his fingers off on the small towel next to the bowl.

"She has awoken," I said. Then I used one of the tidbits of information my brother fed me. "She believes the Chaos God has returned. She announced it to the school. You are moving some of the army onto the campus. Tell me, Adoivencal, do you think the final battle will be fought here? If so, I should bring in my army to provide winged support for the troops. My people are all unbound by the grace of the Goddess, with the exception of one, of course."

It wasn't by her grace, it was by her failure. She hadn't managed to bind all of the creatures of chaos before being imprisoned.

The Ard Rí's eyes narrowed with my use of his first name. Or it could be the fact that I was pretending like we would fight on the same side of the battle. I had been pretending that from the very first moment I came to power.

"I will consider that," he said, his tone neutral.

"With what happened to the headmistress, I would think you would be eager. What would happen if all the dragons came unbound at once?" I asked, pressing my point. If I could get my army in position before the Chaos God called us to fight, even better. "You need soldiers in the air to defend."

"The dragons are loyal to Order," he said.

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"Even the one who ate the headmistress?" I asked.

"You will not speak of my family's loyalty," the Ard Rí snapped. "Only the Goddess can release the bonds. She is the one who decided on the headmistress's end."

I kept the smile from my face at his lie. It was a good story to sell the Order army in the wake of the chaos that had happened on campus. My brother had filled me in on the results of the Blood Moon, the destruction that had brought the Ard Rí to the campus in the first place.

The small servant's entrance to my right opened, and my gaze shifted.

I watched the farm worker cross the threshold.

Fresh lavender soap drifted ahead of her, a clean counterpoint to the grease-sweet air of funnel cake and curry. The crimson dress they'd poured her into barely deserved the word; two narrow silk panels, laced together at the spine, left her broad, muscular shoulders and most of her flanks exposed. The fabric stretched when she breathed, fighting the breadth of bone beneath olive skin. Her belly was exposed by the dress, and though the rest of her had thick strength to it, her belly had a soft layer on top of the muscle, pudging out a little through the space.

Light-brown hair, brushed those shoulders in gentle waves. Every strand caught sparks from the rune-set lights, so the locks seemed to smolder. They shifted as an invisible wind brushed against them. There was no airflow in the room to clear the complicated smells of the table, so she must have a familiar that had wind powers that was not allowing itself to be seen. All mundanes that came to this school had

familiars; it was a requirement for them to get into the school at all. It was the one thing mundanes had that made them valuable to the people of my world, the ability to bind those lesser sprites to their bidding.

Her hazel eyes, green near the iris, brown at the rim, swept the long table, stopping on the absurd towers of pineapple-pepper pizza and powdered donuts, a small smile twitching at the corner of her lips at the sight. Her weather-worn skin was scrubbed free of every last fleck of mushroom dust, but it couldn't erase the damage done by the sun. Her skin had spots and leathery lines unable to be erased by scrubbing and lotion.

She paused just inside the door, shutting it quietly behind her, squared her heavy-set shoulders, and waited, clean, stocky, unmistakably strong. The heat that burned in me while I gazed at her startled me, a searing need that had kindled the moment she had charged me in the field, her feet thudding into the soil with every step.

Her eyes caught mine and widened, and for a moment, I couldn't breathe.

I tore my eyes away to realize the Ard Rí was also staring at her.

"Farm girl," I said. "Come here."

She rounded her shoulders, hunching as if to make herself look smaller as she walked over to me. There was no way she could ever look small. It wasn't just her frame and musculature; it was the very essence of her being that seemed to fill up the room. I reached out when she neared, grabbing her by the waist. A small shock ran through me as my hand landed on her bare flesh.

Another rush of heat flooded me, narrowing my thoughts to the soft gleam of light on her skin, the feeling of her strong, thick body under my hand.

I hadn't been with a woman in years.

There was a risk of marrying and producing an heir. As soon as I had a child, my younger brother would no longer be my heir, and no longer be considered a valuable hostage. I knew how these people thought, how they operated. The moment he was no longer considered valuable in that way, his life would be in more danger than it already was.

So I had avoided any thought of love, romance, or even the simple obligation of royal duty.

I dragged the farm girl down into my leg, avoiding the center of my lap as I settled her down on my thigh.

I regretted that I hadn't asked her name. It was incredibly brave of a mundane to speak to me. The ones that lived here had the singular experience of pain and suffering. They were traumatized on their first day arriving here, their idea of a beautiful opportunity of an elite college shattered against the reality of what this place really was - a prison and a trainingground, a place for the forces of Order to grow and train, to prepare for the coming war.

A war my people would be on the other side of.

The farm girl shifted, her large, thick bum brushing against the hardening log between my legs. It took everything in my power not to groan. Instead, I grabbed her firmly around the waist and shifted her again, so that she was no longer touching me there.

This was not about taking pleasure in her body.

This was about saving someone brave enough to ask for help.

I ran my hand through her hair, pulling her head back to expose her neck.

The Ard Rí was still staring at her. I needed to divert his mind away from her loveliness.

“I’ve never put myself in a mundane’s mouth before,” I said, as if the rumor-fueled horror I was describing was as casual a thing to me as tending my plumage. The lies my people fed the Aos sí were a twisted version of the truth, twisted enough to be able to feed into the cruel mind of the man across the table from me. I ran one finger down her jugular. “What do you suppose it would do to her if I spent myself deep in her throat? Do you think she would suffocate first or perhaps her neck would break?”

Her entire body tensed, and her eyes widened. I could feel a tremor go through her body, but she didn’t react other than her breath coming quicker. I could feel her heart race through my palm on her belly.

She must not know of the rumors to react so calmly to my statement.

“That’s disgusting,” the Ard Rí laughed, his delighted tone a counterpoint to his words. “I didn’t know your tastes were so foul.”

“I heard what happened to your consort,” I said as I pushed the farm girl off my lap to the floor next to my feet. She kneeled there, out of sight of the Ard Rí. I put my hand on the top of her head and stroked it gently. I couldn’t reassure her more than that. “Surely you are not condemning my amusement? It is in Proper Order to use the mundanes as we see fit, is it not? My kind are exceptional healers. I can just heal her and use her over and over again.”

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“There is a line,” the Ard Rí grinned.

“What is this line to you?” I asked. “You laughed when I said I was going to fuck her to death. You smile even now.”

I plucked one of the chocolate donuts off the table and lowered it down out of sight. I quickly cast a small poison detection spell, drawing the simple form in the air. It settled on the donut, not reacting. Once I was sure it was safe, I held it in front of her face. Instead of taking it from me, she leaned forward and took a bite out of it, her lips brushing against the edges of my fingers. Another shiver of desire rippled through me.

I had planned to toy with her further at the table, enhancing my image of a cruel sadist who wouldn't think twice about fighting on the side of Order, but I couldn't do that. She was impacting me too strongly. If I continued like this, the Ard Rí might see through my game. If he thought I genuinely desired her, he would try to stop me from taking her with me.

“They are made to be used as chattel,” the Ard Rí scoffed. “Wasting them is a nuisance. I won't allow you to waste her. If you are going to take that one, you will take her as a breeder.”

There it was. Technically, I didn't need his permission to do what I wanted with a mundane, but if he decided to stop me, it would make honoring the boon much more difficult.

“I doubt she would catch my seed,” I said, and then held back a grimace as my cock

twitched at the thought of bending the farm girl over and plowing her fields. "It would be amusing to see if she survived the attempts."

"You can heal her afterwards if you're fast enough. Mundanes are exceptionally fertile," the Ard Rí smiled as he reached for a slice of pizza, inspecting it and giving it a sniff. "There have been several that have survived lycans on the Blood Moons."

"You let the lycans near mundane women during the Blood Moons?" I hissed, forgetting the character I was trying to portray for a moment. I quickly smoothed my expression as the Ard Rí glanced over at me, giving him a tight smile. "What an interesting choice. I imagine your retention rates are low."

"Like I said, chattel," the Ard Rí said. "There are plenty more in the mundane, and they are useful in their own ways. Now, enough pleasantries. Let us return to the idea of winged support. It intrigues me."

I reached down and ran my fingers through the farm girl's hair. I couldn't give her a warning this time, but I made the motion brief, dragging her up to her feet as the wince on her face echoed in my heart.

"Go wait in my room," I told the farm girl. "Prepare yourself as best you can to be mounted. Stretch yourself out if you can. Your survival will depend upon it."

She got out and fled the room.

"We can station my units on the top of the wall," I said, my thoughts following after the farm girl. Soon, I'd be able to leave with her and abandon this pretense. As long as the Ard Rí thought I might beget an heir on her, he wouldn't interfere with me taking her. A young heir would mean he could try to kill me and leave my people with nothing but a babe to follow. "That way, they can be ready the moment the Chaos God shows his face."

She would be safe.

The relief that trickled through me was a strange counterpoint to the hard throbbing in the stiff member between my legs. I shouldn't be so concerned about some mundane woman, yet, here I was, worried about her, on the eve where my years of lying were about to put my army into an ideal position for the final battle.

Yet even as I focused on my adversary, my thoughts followed after her.

Chapter

Three

NORA

“Shit,” I cussed as the door shut behind me. “Mother loving donkey balls. I've avoided death by dick so far I didn't think I would ever get there by asking for it!”

He was lying,Zeph insisted, swirling in the air next to me.He won't do that to you.

“How do you know that?” I hissed at my familiar. “You grew up in the mundane just as I did! You don't know any more about the Aetheriani than I do! They could be like all the rest of the fae freaks!”

Everyone knows that his brother is a good man,Zeph said.He is a talented healer.

“That birdbrain let his brother attend this school for years,” I argued. “No one would do that to someone they actually cared about.”

Zeph fell silent as I leaned my head back against the door, taking in the room.

Warm air puffed at my face, beeswax, lavender, a hint of old iron, soft enough to make me wonder what they were masking. Torch-runes spat behind crystal shields; false flame hissed and popped.

The bed owned the chamber, occupying the center of it like a gilded wart in the middle of a face. I walked towards it, inspecting it. Four ash pillars, wrist-thick, rose into a canopy webbed with runes carved into them, but no magic to charge them. I only recognized a few of the runes. Despite being here for years, the few mundane classes I was able to take only covered the very basics of spell casting and rune writing. I knew spells for cleaning, watering, and a few basic healing spells, not much more. Mundanes at this school were expected to learn how to be batteries, to power their familiars' abilities or charge the spells that other people create, or to feed the needs of the monsters that roamed the campus.

Here I thought throwing myself at the feet of a visiting dignitary was my chance to get away from the monsters.

I wasn't about to charge an unknown spell on some bedposts, so instead I circled left. The wardrobe loomed, black walnut, iron banding. A basalt hearth crouched opposite the bed, runes glowing ember-red as heat rolled off in waves. I could see the glowing rune carved into the hearth.

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A washstand waited in the far corner: green marble veined like bruised meat, silver basin holding water so still it mirrored the ceiling beams. I took a deep sniff, immediately identifying the smells of citrus and clove, a mixture I hated.

It was the same soap we had in the dorm.

This room appeared fancy, but the comforts were minimal compared to what could be provided. This was not a room one gave to a visiting equal you wished to impress. This was luxurious at first glance, the way an evergreen forest is in the winter, green and gorgeous, but lacking in the abundant resources that came with sun and tender loving care.

I turned to the window and brushed a fingertip along the sable-lined drapes. There were small signs of wear and decay on the fabric, as well as worn patches. Outside, wind knocked the shutters; inside, the cloth drowned it. I yanked a panel just wide enough to see that the room faced inwards in the caldera, and there was no glass on the window, just wooden shutters I could see across the campus, and see the glimmering dome of the commons as it caught the moonlight.

I let the drape fall.

"I could go back," I murmured. "I don't have to go with him."

I could run back to my dorm and try to hide until the visiting Rí Túath left. I could stay out of sight, be unnoticeable, just like I always tried. I could remain small and unimportant, and continue to live out my life working in the fields and avoiding the dangers that lurked around the campus. At least I could try. If I went to the commons

at the wrong time and caught the wrong eye, I could end up with a lycan following me back to my dorm.

You punched the overseer in the jaw, Zeph reminded me. You took him down with one blow.

I let out a sigh, and Zeph swooped over to my shoulder, landing on it. Zeph nuzzled my cheek, and I stroked my hand down over their soft feathers.

I didn't have any way to know if Crystallo was telling the truth at dinner about forcing himself on me. I had heard rumors about angeldick. The Aetheriani were rumored to be one of the higher-risk bed partners, and that was saying a lot at a school filled with men who shapeshifted into mini kaijus whenever there was a blood moon. Not that I could be certain. There was only one Aetheriani on campus that I knew of, and no one had ever claimed to have bedded him. There was a serious risk that Crystallo was going to come in here after dinner and prove to me just how big the mistake that I'd made in asking for his help was.

I wrinkled my nose.

I wasn't a small woman in any sense of the word, maybe I could take it.

My stomach quivered, in a mixture of disgust and excitement, the wet heat between my legs a byproduct of my thoughts.

It was possible to feel two different emotions at once. Being turned on by a threat and also being appalled by it was a natural physical response that maximized survival. It had been a hard lesson to learn, but it was one of the few lessons that this school offered in spades.

I turned back to the bed, frowning as I sniffed the air again.

There was something wrong in this room, more than the fact that it was far too shabby for someone of Crystallo's rank. The silk coverlet looked innocent, white, perfect, so I pinched a fold. Pearl beads clicked under my nail, like teeth against bone. I let go of the fabric and crouched down, my knees and palms pressing against the floor as I leaned down to peek under the bed.

There was the source of that strange smell of old iron.

Thick, heavy chains lay coiled under the bed, and runes were painted on them with dark red paint. I could see that the runes were fully charged with magic, shimmering with unspent magical energy. They were waiting for something, some sort of trigger. I could see the trigger rune written on the chain, one that I recognized. It was similar to the spell I learned to trap rodents in the fields that were damaging the crops.

The door creaked open behind me.

I sat up, looking back over my shoulder to see Rí Túath Crystallo crouching through the doorway, bending at the waist to fit his wings through the too-small frame of the door, another product of the slights against him in this room. There was no reason to give him a room with a door that was too small for him, not unless there was more at stake here than the microaggressions of the room.

"Wait!" I threw up a palm towards him. "It's a trap!"

He stopped, still on the outside of the doorway, his eyes slipping briefly to my backside before jerking abruptly to my face.

"Is it?" he asked.

"There is a spelled chain under the bed," I said, standing back up to my feet and turning to face him.

“What is it spelled for?” he asked.

I looked down at the ground, my arms hanging down by my sides as a slight burn came to my cheeks. Of course, he wouldn't believe me. I was a filthy, uneducated, mundane. I was nothing to the monsters of this world. It was foolish of me to think that someone of his rank would even tolerate me speaking in his presence.

“Forgive me,” he said, sending a shiver of surprise through me. I looked up to see him staring back at me with his soft blue eyes, the golden curls around his chiseled features making his next words seem all the more angelic. “I forgot for a moment that they limit mundane's education.”

"I'm not limited," I growled, clenching my fists as I glared at him.

He looked at me for a long moment.

My heart pounded in my chest. I realized I should look down. I should drop to my knees. I should ask him to forgive me. I should ask all these things to get what I wanted, which was an escape route out of here. I had done everything I could to get out of this place. I had taken the time to learn on my own. I had learned from other students. I had spent late nights at the library trying to find any knowledge that would help me grow into the kind of person who could escape here. I had climbed the walls and seen the unforgiving landscape on the other side. I was determined, strong, and intelligent, but it wasn't enough to escape.

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The only real option for escape I had found was to take advantage of a visitor's culture.

So I glared at him before gritting my teeth and dragging my eyes back down to the floor, hating and loving the wild, powerful woman inside of me, I had to suppress to save myself.

"If you aren't limited, then tell me what it is spelled for," he said, his voice soft.

"If you climb onto that bed, it will chain you to it," I said, glancing back up to see his brilliant eyes still gazing at me.

"Something has changed," he said. "To try and trap me now... What has changed?"

All of the mundanes talked to each other. Information was how we survived. At least it was after we got to our second year. No one who had survived their first year trusted the incoming class. It was hard to trust people who couldn't comprehend the true level of shit that they were in.

Maybe he would see me as valuable if he knew I had information he needed.

"They are saying that the seals are being broken, and the dungeon is escaping," I said.

A smile broke across his face, sudden and startling, like the first heat of the sun's rise when it first breaks through the ice-cold air of the night, soft, gentle, and brilliant all at the same time. "That is what my brother said."

He held out one hand to me, not stepping any further into the room. "You have saved me. Let me save you."

"What about your brother?" I asked.

His face grew dark. "If they are trying to trap me while I sleep, then that will only put him in more danger. He is safe as long as they need him to control me. I am sorry, but you will have to leave any of your belongings behind. We must leave at once."

"I don't have any belongings," I said, walking towards him. I didn't have anything that mattered as much as getting out of here, at least. I had earned different small trinkets for good behavior while I was here, but there was nothing I wanted to hold onto.

I didn't take his hand. I wanted to take it so badly to feel my skin slide against his, but I didn't. Instead, I clasped my hands in front of me, and he let his own fall back down to his side. He gave me a nod, then turned into the stone hallway. It was one of the narrow ones, leading to the living quarters. He led the way to the larger connecting hallway that could fit at least six people shoulder to shoulder, with an arching ceiling that a shifted lycan could stand up in comfortably.

"There is enough space here," Rí Túath Crystallo murmured. He lifted a hand and focused, runes appearing in midair on the far side of the hallway, rimming a small alcove on the far wall. I gasped as I recognized what he was doing. There had been a brief segment on portals in one of my classes.

"I thought we couldn't portal within school grounds!" I said. "I thought they would be blocked!"

"This fort is on the edge of the area they have shielded against portals," he said. "Didn't you wonder why students weren't allowed to roam these halls?"

I hadn't wondered.

I just assumed they wouldn't let us in the fort because we might sneak through it and out to the other side of the caldera. None of the mundanes knew how to cast a portal, nor were any of us strong enough, as far as I was aware.

We were used as batteries.

I braced myself, waiting for Rí Túath Crystallo to reach out and start to drain me. Different monsters did it in different ways. The Seelie Aos sí, the higher fae that were born 'right', with the 'right' hair color and the 'right' abilities that didn't include shapeshifting, would demand that I channel energy to them as I had been trained, making me focus on sending it out so that they could grab hold and use it. Refusal would be met with torture or death.

The other monsters... it depended on whether they were unbound or not. The late headmistress had been unbound, and I'd learned her preferred method for feeding on magical energy during Orientation.

I shuddered at the thought.

I waited, but Rí Túath Crystallo said nothing, just continued focusing on the runes as they glowed into place, activating one by one from his own power.

The steady thud of boots on stone caught my attention, and I turned to look down the hallway towards the sound.

The next sound that came out of my own mouth was garbled, a product of shock and fear, of not understanding how or what or why. What I was seeing was not possible, at least, it was another thing that shouldn't be possible.

“Orcs,” I forced the word out.

Tusks gleamed in the light of the hallway, leather and metal armor creaking and clinking, their breaths harsh in the absence of any words. They were as quiet as they could be for a destructive force in a place where they shouldn’t be... where they couldn’t be.

There was no way for them to get here.

There was only one entrance or exit from the Dungeon where they lived onto the campus, and it was on the exact far side of the Caldera as this fort. This squadron of Orcs would have had to fight through the Order Army blockade and then through the ‘Proper Students’ who had been using them as training fodder for centuries.

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There was no way they could be here, and yet, here they were.

My heart caught in my chest as it fluttered and struggled, my breath coming sharp and sudden with dread built from Blood Moon after Blood Moon. The first one was the worst. I could still hear the screams from the front lines down below as I stood up on the risers, my bow clenched in my trembling hands as I watched the young men who had been in that first year class go down, cut down by axes and swords, their blood spraying across green skin and leather armor.

The worst part about it wasn't watching them die, it was clenching the bow in my hands and feeling a sick rage twisting around in my chest, wishing I was down there with them. Every time I was up on those risers, holding a bow, there was a part of my heart singing a song of violence.

Now those monsters were here, rushing down a narrow hallway towards me.

I didn't have a bow. I didn't have a weapon.

The fort around me was silent, unaware of the danger slinking through its halls. This was my chance to escape, but there was no escaping the monsters that slaughtered so many of my fellow students. The soldiers who would stop me from getting away were the same ones who would protect me from the Orcs.

I opened my mouth to scream.

Pristine white feathers blocked my view of the Orcs as Rí Túath Crystallo stepped in between me and the approaching squadron.

“I will protect you,” he murmured.

The panic in my heart stilled, flashbacks of bloodshed brushed away as I stared at his back, where the wings connected with his shoulders, muscles thick and knotted. He couldn't even fly in this indoor space. He didn't have a weapon.

And yet he stepped in between me and the approaching danger.

I stepped around him so that I stood beside him. I clenched my fists, my fear shifting into determination. I felt the brush of his feathers against my back as he spread his wings wider.

“I'm with you,” I told him.

Then the Orcs were there, their front line two yards away from us. The one in front, an orc with black hair pulled back in a braid, the sides of his head shaved, lifted his sword as he strode forward.

“May Chaos lead you towards the blood that must be spilled,” Crystallo said, his voice holding the timbre of ceremony.

The orc stopped.

“Do you fight for the next world to come?” the Orc asked, his sword still lifted.

“Chaos sings me to the air,” Crystallo replied. “With wings of fury, my people will ride to the call of his song.”

“Where is the blood to be spilled?” the Orc asked.

Crystallo pointed down the hall. “Seelie Ard Rí Adoivencal Terithni'i Unlar

Starflower can be found in the fort's throne room, or in the main suites that connect to a small door behind the throne."

The Orc's gaze fell on me. The skin around his eyes tightened as he spread his lips, baring his teeth.

"Come with us and kill the King, halfling," he growled. He pulled out a long dagger from his belt and flipped it, holding out the hilt towards me. "Your place isn't in the sky."

I sucked in a breath. What did he call me?

Crystallo's hand fell on my shoulder. "She is mine."

The word mine slashed through me like lightning, igniting that smouldering fire between my legs even as a part of my heart rebelled, snarling in the darkness with its refusal to bend. I glanced at his hand, and he lifted it off my shoulder as if it had burned me.

"You cannot own an Orc," the Orc spat out.

"I'm not an Orc," I said. "I'm not a monster."

"Orcs aren't monsters anymore than I am one," Crystallo said, his voice soft. "Anyone who looks at you can tell you have Orc blood in your veins."

"Come with us," the Orc said. "Join the clan of Morgra Mossbinder, follow the lead of Killian Moonchaser, and bathe in the blood of your enemies. We will teach you what you need to find vengeance."

I couldn't deny it appealed to me. The thought of finally learning to swing a sword

and fight was something that rang in my very bones, but at the same time, there were other things that called to me. There was a part of me that wanted softness.

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“Come with me,” Crystallo said, his voice soft.

The Aetheriani will take care of you, Zeph said. Life will be good there. If you go with the Orcs, all you will find is death over and over again.

That was all I needed. Zeph had been by my side for so many years, and his advice had never failed me. Plus, my body was reacting to Crystallo. His lightest touches were fire to my skin, and I couldn’t deny that I wanted to see where that would go... even the rumors were true about his people.

“I’m going with him,” I said, nodding my head towards Crystallo.

The orc nodded once and shoved his dagger back in his belt.

“We will see you at the end,” he said.

“The end is the beginning,” Crystallo replied, his tone taking on that same air of ceremony.

The Orcs moved past us, and Crystallo turned back towards the portal.

Within moments, the portal flashed into light.

I didn’t hesitate, I didn’t wait for Rí Túath Crystallo to order me around or tell me what to do. There was one thing that had kept me alive at this school for years past most of the other mundanes in my first-year class, and that was my heightened sense of self-preservation.

I dove past the Rí Túath like a speed swimmer anticipating the starting bell, plunging through the portal and into my future.

Chapter

Four

CRYSTALLO

The farm girl threw herself through my newly created portal like a Thutar rolling for the kill. I would have laughed if I hadn't been so relieved I didn't have to waste any time myself as I launched in after her. The moment my feet touched down on the wooden surface of my home, I cut the portal, snapping it shut.

"The seals!" I laughed. I threw my hands up in the air, joy ricocheting through me like a fledgling with too much yavarin sap in their system. "THE SEALS ARE BREAKING!"

The farm girl was sprawled out on the floor of my throne room at my feet, the crimson dress she had worn to dinner riding up around her hips. The sight of her exposed like that nearly killed me.

Instead of dying, or staring despite my deep appreciation of the view, I leaned down and grabbed the bottom edge of it, pulling it down over her rump as people rushed into the throne room, summoned by my shout. I resisted the urge to grab her by the waist to lift her up. She had rejected my hand when I held it out to her earlier; she must not want to be touched. I didn't blame her with what I had threatened back at dinner.

Still, the sight of that dress of her thick, muscular curves, a body strong with the intimate knowledge of hard labor, sent a heat burning down into my loins with a

sudden flash of desire. She was strong, she was smart, and the moment there was action to take, she took it. If she hadn't been there, I would have been caught in the trap they set in the guest room. I had planned to sleep and visit with my brother the next morning, as was customary for my visits, but the seals were breaking.

Of course, they wanted to trap me.

Capturing me right before the final battle was the best move they could make.

"My people!" I called out, lifting both my arms as more of my subjects, courtiers, and officials alike flooded the throne room, filling the air with chirping cries of greeting. "We will have an official welcome soon, but there is urgent business. War council, with me! Heralds, call in those who are not here."

I leaned down next to the farm girl who had just risen to her feet.

"I must see to my people first," I told her. "Then I will ensure you are taken home."

"Wait," she said. "Home?"

I didn't have time to answer that as I was already in motion. I strode from the room, leaving the young heralds to fly off and search for the few of the war council who hadn't yet made it to the throne room. The few that were there included General Vetharim, my head of intelligence, Orisanti, and my lead steward, Solarion. They followed after me as I led the way into the side room I used for smaller meetings.

I moved to the head of the table, which was covered in a large map of the school. "The seals are breaking. I can confirm the seal located here has shattered." I placed my finger down on the map where the fort was. It was the only way those Orcs would have made it into the fort like that. The seal down in the cells had to have been broken.

“That makes two,” Orisanti, my head of intelligence, said, tapping the part of the map we had already marked off based on the reports from his spies.

“The Chaos God has returned and is shattering the seals,” General Vetharim agreed.

“Though why he is taking so much time between them is strange.”

“It is odd,” I agreed with her.

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There was the small sound of a scoffing snort behind me.

I glanced back to see that the farm girl had followed me into the war room and was standing behind me, just out of sight of my peripheral vision.

“Sire, who is this?” Solarion asked.

I felt a brief moment of shame that I hadn’t learned her name yet, but I let that pass through me, letting it go just as quickly as it came. I didn’t have time for shame. “Introduce yourself,” I commanded.

“Honored Aetheriani,” the farm girl said, bowing deeply from the waist. “I am Nora, an Agronomist trained in Sustainable Agriculture with practical work experience at the Order Academy in Operations and Implementation.”

My lips twitched at her sudden title. They didn't give mundanes titles like that. She was again displaying her intelligence, labeling herself as something more than what others would call her, trying to make an impression of importance when faced with a new social situation.

“A mundane,” Solarion said. He lifted an eyebrow as he inspected her. “Rather sturdy, aren’t you?”

He saw what I saw in her square jaw and broad shoulders, but had the good manners not to say it.

“Yes, honored Aetheriani,” Nora said, bowing again. “I am a humble mundane with

very useful skills; I look forward to utilizing them in the service of Rí Túath Crystallo.”

“She is to be portaled back to the mundane at a location of her choosing as soon as we are done with this meeting,” I told Solarion, not a little bit of regret flickering through me. The heat that rose in me every time I looked at her urged that I keep her by my side, but that wasn’t right. Nora deserved to be able to go back to her home.

She deserved her freedom.

“No!” Nora gasped.

Chapter

Five

NORA

Rí Túath Crystallo was sending me away!

The school would take note of my disappearance. I hadn’t just survived because I was cautious, I’d also survived because I was skilled. I wasn’t lying when I laid out all those titles for myself in an attempt to sound more impressive. Sure, I’d never actually been hired under any of those position names, but that didn’t stop me from assigning value to my own skills. I had the knowledge of an Agronomist, a person who knew a lot about soil and crop science. I wouldn’t consider the type of farming we did at the school to be fully sustainable, as there was a magical element that couldn’t be replaced, but I still knew how to design a sustainable garden. I had started a small one near my dorm to supplement myself when I couldn’t get to the commons in time.

If he sent me away, I would end up right back at the school.

I should have just gone with the Orcs.

The school had spells they could use to track people down in the Mundane realm; it was how they knew where to send the school pamphlets to recruit promising young victims. All it took was one person deciding to hunt me down, and I would be dragged back and interrogated so that they could find out how I escaped.

“No!” I gasped. “You granted me your boon! You said I could stay by your side!”

This was a Rí Túath. None of the people in this room supports me against their Rí Túath. If he cemented his decision to send me away, away I would go.

I slammed my fist down on the table, forgetting everything I'd been forced to learn over the last few years. The sound of my fist hitting wood startled me, as did the cracks in the surface under my fist.

I stared down at where my olive skin met the wooden surface.

Embarrassment at the damage rushed through me.

I didn't need to be strong; I needed to be gentle.

I dropped down to my knees.

“I will be of service to you!” I said, bowing my head..

“Don't do that,” Rí Túath Crystallo said, his voice gentle. “Stand up.”

He didn't want me to kneel.

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I sucked in a breath, a sudden and sharp strange feeling I didn't quite understand wrapping around my heart. He was a ruler who didn't want me to kneel. I was nothing more than a dirty farm girl. I had the blood of monsters running through my veins.

I rocked back to my heels, rising back to my feet quickly.

“Sire,” the Aetheriani with brown speckled wings said. “If the seals are breaking, then it would be best if you were to beget an heir. Mundanes are known to breed well and true, and with a boon granted that removes the need for ceremony and pomp.”

My mind staggered over those words, trying to piece together what he was saying. What did a boon have to do with all of that? I didn't know the details of the year-long service, had I run up to the Rí Túath in the field and basically begged him to bed me?

“We don't know when we will be called to fight,” Rí Túath Crystallo growled, closing his eyes for a moment as if he couldn't stand the sight of me.

“All the more reason to ensure your lineage, sire,” said the Aetheriani with tan wings dappled with streaks of white. “One so sturdy is an excellent choice.”

Should I tell them?

I pressed my lips together. If I told them, they might force me to leave.

“Leaving a fledgling behind without a father is not what I intend to do,” Rí Túath Crystallo said, snapping his eyes open to glare at the other Aetheriani. He looked from one to the other, studiously avoiding looking at me.

Relief filled me as the pressure I was under to tell the truth vanished. He didn't want a kid right now anyway. I didn't need to announce the whole thing to the room and risk his advisors changing their minds suddenly, cheerleading for me to be tossed through a portal into the mundane.

This way I could stay here for a year with just the risk of a danger bang.

If he were chivalrous, he would be down to even just pretend we were doing it if I told him the truth. I eyed him, noting the chiseled jaw and curls in his hair. The exposed muscles of his arms were strong and gorgeous. He was the kind of man who could drag me by my hair without breaking a sweat, and the twinge between my legs let me know that he was exactly the type my body wanted right now.

Strong and dangerous.

"Of course, sire, but your intentions must serve the people, not yourself," the tan winged one said.

Rí Túath Crystallo finally turned to look at me, his gaze hitting me like electricity, running up and down my spine as heat pooled, coiling in the root of my core. "Is this what you really chose? You can go home. You need not serve me and my people in this way."

Strong, dangerous, and a good person.

"But you took me with you," I said, my mind skipping back to our first conversation, realizing I had basically sold my body to him in exchange for an escape. I thought I would scrub floors, but in reality, I was offering to take danger angeldick.

I could feel dampness gather between my legs at the thought.

I wanted to stay.

I couldn't lie and pretend I didn't want to.

Plus, I was well-versed with basic healing spells.

“There is no debt that needs to be paid,” Rí Túath Crystallo said. “I would help any mundane escape that place if the opportunity arose. You may go home without any obligation.”

His words floated through me, stroking a soft part of my heart that had survived under layers of hardened shells, developed by the unrelenting needs of survival. It had been so long since someone gave me a choice, a real choice.

The choice was to go home and risk the school coming after me. It sounded like there was something brewing, and it was unlikely that anyone at the school would have the attention to spare to hunt me down, but it was always a risk. The other choice was to stay here and sleep with a creature whose nether parts carried a big, serious question mark in my mind. Rí Túath Crystallo's younger brother was one of the few Aetheriani at the school, and none of the mundanes I had spoken to knew of anyone who had slept with them. The knowledge I had of his malehood was based on rumor. Even so, it was a rumor I didn't want to gamble with.

“Will it injure me?” I asked, my voice soft.

“It will not,” Rí Túath Crystallo said.

“There are several mundanes living in this city with Aetheriani partners,” the brown speckled Aetheriani said. “They are all healthy, strong, and able to walk around fine a few hours after mating, I've been told.”

"None of that," Rí Túath Crystallo growled at the advisor. "She is here now, she doesn't need the stories."

I narrowed my eyes and pursed my lips.

I could leave and go back home to a place I hadn't seen in years and hated before I left. Or, I could stay here for a year, get to sleep with the hottest male I'd ever seen. The whole begetting thing I wasn't worried about.

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“I’m DTF,” I said, nodding my head.

Everyone looked at me in confusion.

“I wish to stay,” I amended myself.

“EXCELLENT!” the brown speckled winged Aetheriani snapped his wings open in excitement. “Please, come with me. I am called Solarion, and I will ensure you are well taken care of.”

I glanced at Crystallo, and he nodded, so I followed after the brown speckled winged Aetheriani back into the large room I had landed in after coming through the portal. The room looked like a giant hollow in a tree if the tree had started to grow branches inside itself, with a huge hole at one side leading out into what looked like open air. The walls had perches jutting out from the smooth wooden wall at all heights, and those perches had winged people lounging on them, filling up the space with more chirping chatter than before. In the center of the floor, just behind where I had gone sprawling, was a large ornate backless throne that looked like it had grown out of the floor of the tree trunk.

Solarion stopped in front of the throne, looking up at the people on perches around us.

“Rí Túath Crystallo has granted a boon to Nora, an Agronomist trained in Sustainable Agriculture with practical work experience at the Order Academy in Operations and Implementation! She is strong and skilled and ready to serve the Aetheriani in these turbulent times!” Solarion called out. “Rejoice!”

The room erupted into gasps and chitters.

A flush rushed across my skin like a backdraft in a fire. He had just announced to the whole room that I was going to bang the King.

“This way,” Solarion said, taking my elbow and drawing me across the room to an archway. The archway had two armed guards on either side of it. On the other side were a set of stairs that curved up to the left and down to the right, smooth, unbroken wooden walls on either side. I went with Solarion up the stairs, following the curve as if we were walking up along the inside of a giant tree. By the time we stopped at another archway, Solarion was breathing hard.

“I... normally... fly,” he gasped out as he paused, his hands on his knees.

I waited for him to recover.

“Where are we going?” I asked him as he chased after his own breath.

“To prepare... clean...” he said. “Then... chambers.”

“I have just been scrubbed clean,” I said, wrinkling my nose as I thought about the way the fairy workers had gone after me with those brushes. They had been quite determined to make sure every speck of dirt was gone from my body before they shoved me into the tight-fitting dress and sent me to be eye candy for the dinner discussions.

At the thought of that, my stomach rumbled.

He stood up straight, putting his hand on his chest as he finally caught up with himself.

“You must be pampered,” he said. “It is tradition.”

“Does this pampering involve food?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” he nodded. “And a massage.”

I grinned at him, and he smiled back.

“A massage?” I asked.

Chapter

Six

CRYSTALLO

“She is prepared,” Solarion said as I landed on the balcony that led into the royal aerie. All the rooms that had been crafted into the spaces that the Sunsong Arbor provided had pathways to the outside. My people preferred to fly, even if we had walkways and passages for the land-bound people who inhabited our cities.

I had done my preening and ceremonial preparations elsewhere, leaving the royal aerie to the woman who had agreed to be my mate for a year.

I stepped toward the archway carved directly into the ancient tree, each concentric ring of bark rising like ripples under my fingertips. Tangled runes, painted carefully onto the wood, remnants of the patterns the Chaos God had left behind, spiraled upward in a silent promise of protection. Above me, the trunk widened into a vast column, its pocked surface rough and cool, flecks of amber resin glinting where sap had oozed and dried.

The entrance itself was blocked by a curtain of polished beads, smoky quartz, sun-bleached bone, and jade, strung through tiny brass chimes. They clinked in a lazy rhythm, a hollow, wind-borne tinkle that mingled with the distant whisper of feathered wings.

I looked back over my shoulder.

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Sunlight streamed through a lattice of branches, painting the canopy of the city below in shifting patches of green and gold. Platforms of aged heartwood fanned out from smaller trunks, of the children of the Sunsong Arbor. Rope-thick bridges connected pathways for those who needed to use their legs to traverse the many levels of the tree-strung city.

I could see winged figures drifting in graceful arcs, their feathers catching the light like stained glass. I turned away from the swooping movement of the city below, back to the curtain, back to where a woman waited for me to do my duty to my people.

My heart was heavy with the thought.

I'd spent so many years avoiding it for the sake of my brother, but now that the final battle was imminent, the thought of creating a child filled me with dread and joy. There was always risk in battle, and I couldn't stand the thought of creating a new life to leave behind.

I desired her. I craved her. I yearned to sink myself inside of her.

I glanced back as movement caught my eye.

Solarian was right at my shoulder.

"You will not enter," I ordered.

"Sire, such an important occurrence bears witness," Solarian said. "It is tradition."

“It is not her tradition,” I said, pulling from my knowledge of what I'd seen in the Mundane realm. “You will not enter.”

“Understood,” Solarian nodded, acquiescing to my command.

I spilled my magic into one of the runes on the archway to release the warning mechanism, and then pushed apart the curtain and entered the royal aerie. I walked through the sitting room, my eyes skimming over the furniture grown from the inner walls of the tree from carefully placed grafts, padded with thick linen cushions. There were several perch seats in the high vaulted room next to huge stained glass windows that threw light across the room, with enough room for five people to lift up into flight at the same time without brushing feathers. The room smelled like sunshine and life, the scents of home. I strode across the thick hand-woven rug that dominated the room and to the back of the room.

I pushed past the high vaulted lintel that marked the end of the sitting room and the beginning of the broad hallway that connected the various rooms of the royal chambers.

I found her in the nesting chamber, a room that had been left empty until I chose to start a family. She was sitting up on top of a mounting table that had been set up in the center of the room, a towel wrapped around her. Her shoulders glistened with massage oil, and she gave me a tentative smile as I strode into the room.

The sight of her long, strong legs and those muscular arms stoked the burning heat inside me.

I couldn't do this.

I wanted to do this, and I didn't want to do this.

I was desperate for her, and I was desperate to not touch her.

“Have you preened to your satisfaction?” I asked her.

“Preened?” she asked. “I mean, the food was delicious and the masseuse was phenomenal. I feel all loose and relaxed. I also did extra... stretches.”

I took a deep breath, examining the knot of reluctance in my heart.

I needed to tell her I didn't want to mate with her. The problem was, those words weren't true, and she wasn't my enemy. Lies were a tool used to deceive the enemy, and in the short time I had spent with her, I already knew that she would never be that to me. The burning desire in my body was for her. The throb between my legs, thick with anticipation, was for her. I wanted her more than I'd wanted any woman in a long time.

She shifted back on the table, making a space between her legs, and patted it.

"Let me rub your shoulders," she said, her voice soft with the embers that burned in her hazel eyes.

My words failed me, and I found myself moving forward. I stopped at the edge of the table, facing her, my wings spreading out to either side, curving up to cup around us, my wing tips brushing up against the table as I stopped them. I was displaying for her.

She reached up and put her oiled hands on my shoulders, the heels of her palms resting against the upper part of my pectorals. She pressed forward, hooking her fingers into my trapezius muscles to use them as a brace to press the heels of her hands into my pecs.

"Oh," I gasped out as my wings shuddered from the sudden, delectable touch.

"There has to be a better way to do this," she murmured as she glanced over at my wings. I spread them out even wider, my body reacting to her interest.

I lowered myself to my knees.

I set my hands gently on her thighs, close to her knees, and I felt her legs tense under my touch, a slight tremor running through her skin.

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“I don’t wish to do this,” I told her as I looked up at her, hating the words as they came out of my mouth. Hating how little those words conveyed, and how much I needed to say to explain the tangled mess that lived in the conflict between my mind, body, and heart.

“Oh,” she said, her skin flushing as she looked down at her hands, which rested on my chest and shoulders, the soft strands of her hair brushing her shoulders. She hesitated a moment, biting her lower lip. “Is it because you don’t want to have children?”

She was so sharp, so intelligent.

I didn't even have to say why I was hesitating, and she had already put the pieces together based on what she overheard.

Her intelligence just made her even more attractive to me than the thick, muscular bulk of her body.

“The thought of having a child now is terrifying to me,” I told her. “This world is about to become even more dangerous before it is healed. Chaos must break and rebuild.”

“Will your people toss me out if I don’t, you know, conceive?” she asked.

“Not at all,” I said. “Please know that it isn’t because I don’t find you attractive. I am utterly devastated by you. The strength of your body, the sharpness of your mind - you are a phenomenal woman, and if I knew that it would not bring a child into a

devastating world, I would be blessed to bring you to the peak of your pleasure.”

The nervous smile on her face shifted into something warmer, something deeper.

“I also find you attractive,” she said in such a simple and direct manner. “I would also like that.”

“Do you now?” I smiled at her even as my heart twinged with the torture of it. We both desired one another, but we couldn’t be together, not in the way that my obligations demanded. Still, there were other options. I ran my thumbs along the inside of her thighs, slowly circling upwards.

“I could pleasure you without a full mating,” I said, licking my lips as I anticipated the taste of her there. I could slide my hands up so easily from this position, drag her hips forward to the edge of the table, and find the feast that waited for me. “If that is something you desire.”

She sucked in a sharp breath, and the flush on her skin deepened.

“I have something to tell you,” she said.

I waited, letting my hands fall still on her thighs.

“I got my tubes tied a while ago,” she said, the words coming out in a rush. “It was pretty hard to get a doctor to do as young as I was, but I was determined and every morning at that school, I woke up grateful that I did.”

“What does that mean?” I asked. “What is tube tying?”

“I can’t have children,” she said. “I had a part inside of me severed so I wouldn’t be able to conceive.”

“A healing spell would repair that,” I said, pointing out the obvious issue.

“I’ve only had localized healing, and not to that area,” she said. “I’ve been careful to keep my protection intact.”

I thought about that, taking in her words.

She took a deep breath.

“I mean, that’s the problem, though,” she said. “I appreciate your offer of pleasuring me, but I don’t know if we should do that to ourselves. Holding back would be torture.”

“Then let's not hold back,” I purred. “Let me pleasure you and mount you and bring you to the fullest satisfaction you have ever felt with a mate.”

She hesitated, and fear flashed across her face.

"No," she said, the word coming out suddenly and abruptly. She lifted her hand up to her mouth, as if she hadn't meant to say it.

Disappointment flooded me, but I let it pass through me and let it go. It didn’t matter. I didn’t have the right to her body any more than she had the right to mine. She could say no or yes at any time, and I would abide by her choices while honoring my own. She could ask questions, tease me, offer the idea of mating, and yank it away, and it didn't change her right to her own body.

I lifted my hands away from her thighs and set them on the table on either side of her.

Every ounce of my desire screamed that she was mine, but I was not a beast ruled by my body.

I was the ruler of myself.

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"Of course," I said, doing my best to make sure my disappointment didn't convey in my voice or body language. I had no right to her body. Her asking for a boon and my rescuing her from that school didn't give me the right to her body, even if other people might see it that way.

"You're okay with that?" she asked, her voice tentative. I studied her, seeing the markers of vulnerability. That nervous smile, the way her upper body leaned ever so slightly away from me, her elbows held in tightly at her side. "I've been teasing you, and I know I owe you for rescuing me..."

"You don't owe me anything," I interrupted her. "You have no obligation."

"Are you sure?" she asked. "I promised you my body."

"Bodies aren't something that can be traded, not in any sense of goodness. You are thinking like a follower of Order. Order is the way of control, enslavement, and commodification. I am a follower of Chaos," I told her. I understood why she thought the way she did. She had entered this world into the cradle of Order and had been immediately inundated in the religious trappings of control. At that school, the only knowledge of Chaos was whispers brought in by those who held the way in their hearts. My brother was a source of those whispers. "Chaos is self-actualization, self-sovereignty," I continued. "My choice was to bring you with me and not cause you harm."

"I was prepared to have to heal myself afterwards," she said, relief washing over her face.

“Why would you need healing?” I said, moments later, realizing what she meant.

She had heard the rumors.

“Your dick is dangerous,” she said, her eyes cutting into mine.

"It is not," I laughed.

She narrowed her eyes at me. "Prove it."

I grinned and rose to my feet. I stepped back and shrugged out of my robe, letting it fall to the ground as I spread my wings as wide as they could go to frame my presentation.

She gasped, her eyes growing wide as she took in the part of me that she was afraid of.

“It’s so small!” she gasped out.

Chapter

Seven

NORA

“It’s so small!” I gasped out.

I slapped my hands over my own mouth too late to stop the words from coming out.

I couldn’t believe I said it like that! The piece of meat that jutted out from between his legs was by no means small. He was at least seven inches, and I was certain that if

I wrapped my fingers around him, I would find that his girth would be more than satisfying.

The thing is, I was expecting something more than the length of a baseball bat and the girth of one of my legs.

His kind were rumored to have the kind of anatomy that would literally tear someone apart.

"How big did you think it would be?" he asked, lifting an eyebrow. His wings stretched even wider, catching the sunlight that was coming through the window as the golden light glimmered off the edges of his beautiful white feathers. My eyes darted around, from his large but still doable maleness, to his chiseled and gorgeous body, which I was desperate to touch, to the soft shine of his impressive wingspan.

My cheeks burned. "As big as a mushroom."

"You have heard the rumors," he grinned, and my anxiety at the thought that I had just offended him fluttered away along with my fear of having to figure out how to take a monsterdick.

"Are they..." I cut myself off, realizing I was about to ask him if the rumors were true, and he was just the angel who fell short of expectation. I felt a flush rush over my skin that had nothing to do with his nudity or my glorious relaxation from my massage. There was so much I wanted to know, but at the same time, I was rapidly re-evaluating the situation. The man was hung, he was royalty, he was chill with not knocking me up, and if we clicked in the bedroom, I was likely going to be set for quite some time. I was definitely attracted to him. When I said no earlier, the word was a surprise to me, brought out by the sudden slash of fear that rushed through me at the thought of being bent over the table and destroyed by a piece of oversized bodily equipment.

I knew I was being mercenary about this, but I knew what I wanted.

He was an opportunity for a good time.

“Are the rumors true, and am I just on the small size?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I didn’t say that,” I said as my skin felt so hot I could fry an egg on it.

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“We spread those rumors on purpose,” he said. “They are not true.”

Relief that I wasn't just being an ass to him burst free from me in a sudden laugh.

“Why?” I asked.

“Disinformation is an important tactic of war,” he said. “Overt lying, subtle lying, misdirection, presenting truth as lies- those are all methods to confuse and disrupt the enemy. When someone lies repeatedly and publicly, it's because they believe you are their enemy. My people have carefully crafted a lie that has withstood the centuries.”

“But why?” I asked again. I couldn't for the life of me think why

“Those of Order value bodies like a commodity. What young you can breed, what labor they can squeeze out of you. Our lie makes us less valuable as women with channels so cavernous they won't hold the seed of others and men with members too large to be safe with anyone else - we decrease one part of our value to them.”

I opened my mouth to say how ridiculous that was, but then I shut it. I'd deliberately smeared dirt on myself to avoid attention when I went to the commons for food. I made myself filthier and disguised my scent to avoid attention. There was only one Aetheriani at the school, and his wings had been bound by the magic that bound everyone else. Here was a city, a country, a community of people who were unbound by the constraints that tied down everyone else. They had kept themselves separate, isolated, and removed from the system that trapped others.

If spreading rumors about themselves was one of the ways they sustained that, there

was no judgment to be had.

"Now, you have preened - would you like to rest?" he asked. "I can show you your chambers."

"You're really going to let me live here and not give anything back?" I asked, blurting it out.

There had to be a catch. He wasn't going to force himself on me, either physically or with coercion. He wasn't going to push past my hesitation, even when he had proved my fears were misguided.

There was no way he was going to just offer me safety and security for nothing in exchange at all.

"You will give something back," he smiled.

Ah, there it was, the catch.

"When you feel safe and settled, when you have gotten to know my people and found your way around the city, you will find the joy inside of yourself that you wish to offer to others," he said.

"You're joking," I said.

"You are an intelligent, strong, hard-working woman," he said. "You will find a place that brings you happiness, and you will make my city and my people better for it."

"Is that how you really feel?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. He stepped forward and reached out as if he was going to place a hand

on my shoulder, and then hesitated.

He was being respectful.

I reached out and caught his hand as it dropped, lifting it up to put it on my shoulder. His hand was warm and huge, and he gave my shoulder a gentle squeeze. He cleared his throat before he continued speaking. "You are safe. You are free. Anything you wish, it is yours."

"Your people think I'm here to give you an heir," I said, bringing us back to the one flaw in his generosity. "What happens when they find out that isn't going to happen?"

"What goes on between the two of us is none of their business," he said. His thumb traced a lazy circle over my collarbone, just like it had done when it was on my thigh, and that same heat clenched deep in my core. He had been about to eat me out, and I had stopped him.

I deeply regretted stopping him.

I opened my mouth to tell him I'd changed my mind, yet again.

"This has been a lot," he said. "Let me show you to your own space, where you can spend some time by yourself and process."

I closed my mouth.

He was right.

He let go of my shoulder and picked back up his robe, putting it back on. I followed him out of the room and down a hallway so large he could fly in it if he needed to, though no one else could pass him in midair. He stopped in front of an arched

doorway, the wooden door carved and painted with winged women throwing winged children up into the air.

"Where is your room?" I asked him.

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He pointed at the door across the hall from mine.

"Your inner sanctum is so close to mine," I murmured.

"You are welcome in my space at any time," he said, his eyes intent with the meaning behind his words.

"Any time at all?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. He hesitated as if he wanted to say more, desire flashing across his face like a fire that was burning him. He turned away from the heat and vanished through his door.

I followed suit, stepping into my own room.

I stopped, stunned by the sight in front of me.

The walls curved upwards, creating a vaulted dome of space with huge windows that let in the sunlight filtering through the green leaves of the tree branches outside. In the center of the room stood a bed that was an immense platform hewn from a single heartwood slab, its headboard flaring up like outstretched wing bones. The mattress lay high, piled with what looked like down-stuffed silks, colors of sunrise golds and rosy reds, a sunset of color that matched the cushions on the perch that jutted out from under the highest window. I wandered across the room, my bare feet padding on a thick woven carpet that covered most of the floor, protecting my feet from the soft wood of the tree. I pushed open a door on the opposite side of the room and entered a bathing chamber, with several pools filled with water that ran from one to another in

a staggered cascade. At the top of the stacked pools was one made out of gleaming copper, and the water in it had the soft scent of steam rising from it. This room was thick with plants in woven pots that seemed to grow from the walls, their broad leaves dripping down with the slight shimmer of water as they caught the condensation in the room.

I turned and left the room.

The doorway on the other side of the room led into a huge closet with hangers on the large pole that wrapped around the room, and built into the wall dressers with drawers that slid out smoothly at the slightest touch. On one wall were several white and gold robes that matched the 'proper' garment for royalty. Thankfully, there were other garments of a variety of colors and styles, off-the-shoulder or one-shoulder dresses. I gasped as I found a drawer filled with trousers. I held one up to my hips. It might fit?

It had been forever and a day since I'd last worn pants, as I wasn't allowed to wear them at school.

I'd missed them.

It was the pants that did me in, the feeling of them as I slid them on to discover they were perfectly my size, fitting around my larger rear end without digging into the softness of my belly. I let out a trembling gasp as tears pricked in the corners of my eyes. I stood in front of the huge mirror in the back of the walk-in closet, sliding my palms over my legs as I turned this way and that to examine myself. I blinked them back, refusing to let them go as I carefully took off the trousers, folded them, and carried them back over to the drawer.

I clenched the fabric so tight in my fists, my heart pounding in my chest as the intensity of my emotion overwhelmed me. If this place was a trick, if there was a

catch lying around the next corner waiting for me to discover things weren't as good as they seemed, I didn't know if I could handle it. I wanted so badly for this to be real.

I wanted so badly for him to be real.

I released my deathgrip on the trousers, setting them down in the drawer.

I smoothed them out gently, my palms running over the soft fabric.

I could wait.

I could wait to see what would happen, to see if he was a man of his word, to see if this was all real or just another horrible trick like I had discovered during Orientation, my first day of school. I could wait to see if my fragile hope would be shattered, never to be put back together again. Except, I had spent years like that - working and waiting for my chance to escape. I hadn't had fun. I hadn't gone to the school parties or done anything other than work and study.

I hadn't been living, I'd been waiting for my chance to live.

I bit my lip as I reached up and took a dress off the hanger that would have been borderline inappropriate for going clubbing in a big city. I slid it on, feeling the soft fabric molding to my body, showing off every curve. I looked at myself in the mirror, seeing the strong lines of my muscles, the soft bulge of my belly, and the rounded edge of my rear.

I was gorgeous, feminine, and strong.

He wanted me as I was.

I didn't want to wait to find out if this was all a lie.

I wanted to have my fun, take my pleasure, and if my heart was broken afterwards?

I could live with that.

Chapter

Eight

CRYSTALLO

Iglared at my crotch.

"Calm down," I ordered.

The stiffness between my legs hadn't gone away.

Being around Nora had triggered my instincts in a way I hadn't expected. All the talking and thinking about mating had triggered my instincts just a little too much, and I was in for a long, painful night. There was no use in rubbing it, that wouldn't cause the problem to reduce in hardness or go away. The only thing that would help would be a mating flight.

This was why I had been so fastidious in avoiding any partner, even if I had taken precautions to avoid breeding.

Triggering my natural instincts like this was a brutal distraction if I wasn't going to have a permanent partner. One mating flight would lead to another, and my body would insist on returning to the mate of my choosing, or I would have sleepless nights and days full of the agony of holding that instinct back. I gritted my teeth as I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes, resisting the urge to stride back across the hall and act like an unmitigated fool.

The soft creak of my door opening caused me to drop my hands and look at the vision slinking into my room.

My wings snapped open wide, spreading out in full display.

"Is it all right if I come in?" Nora asked, the tight red dress she wore was an utter vision of delicious indecency. It was even more revealing than the one she had been

dressed in back at the dinner, and it was made all the more torturous by the fact that she had chosen to put it on. She had chosen to dress like that and come into my personal chambers.

"Yes," I said, tensing all of my muscles as I held myself in place by sheer force of will.

She shut the door behind her and looked at me, taking me in.

Then she licked her lower lip and bit it, oh so slowly, and the motion nearly took my breath away.

"I don't know how to say this," she said.

I waited, not interrupting her process for gathering her thoughts.

"I don't suppose you would still want to..." she trailed off.

"Want to feast between your legs until your legs shake and you scream my name?" I said, unable to hold back the words the way I held back my body. "Want to slide into you and watch your face as I drive you towards the utter madness of pleasure? Want to lift you up in the air and feel you come apart as you cling to me?"

"Oh," she sighed out, her lips parting as her eyes widened, lifting up to catch mine. "What's the catch?"

"The catch is you have to be yourself," I said. "Don't hold back. Let your inner Chaos reign."

I waited again, every part of me tense.

"Yes," she breathed out.

Chapter

Nine

NORA

Wings wrapped around me.

I was in a cocoon of feathers, the soft brush of sensation across my body as his wings surrounded me, tickling against my exposed skin. He had crossed the room so quickly that it took my breath away. I could feel the heat radiating from his body as his wings shivered, almost vibrating as they brushed against me.

He wanted me to be myself.

He wanted me not to hold back.

How had he seen how much of myself I pressed down, just to survive?

"You hesitated before," he said, his voice deep and demanding as he asked for an explanation and gave one in the same statement.

"I'm not hesitating now," I replied, reaching out to put my hand on his warm, bare chest, spreading my fingers out to brush against the edge of his one shoulder robe. There was a formidable tent down below, where his need for me was barely contained by the clothing. I slid my hand down, feeling every ridge of his chiseled abdominals until I found the edge of the fabric. I slipped my hand under and threaded my fingers down the happy trail of golden curls. I felt the base of his shaft and wrapped my hand around it.

He sucked in a sharp breath, his feathers quivering over my skin, sending small bolts of pleasure through me.

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"Such a good size," I murmured as I felt the thick, hot meat in my hands.

His fingers were on my jawline, tipping my chin up.

"You are a remarkable woman," he murmured. "So strong. So intelligent."

I was caught by the brilliance of eyes that saw me.

He had seen through the dirt and dust, through the circumstances of my forced profession, and he had seen me, the me who had hidden in the fields, lurked in the libraries, and stained herself with sweat and mud to get through each day one by one. He saw beyond the calluses on my heart. He saw how I made myself small to survive.

He saw my strength.

He wanted to experience my wildness.

I let him feel it a little, with a gentle squeeze.

He grinned and leaned down, his wings closing in around me to hug me close to him as his lips found mine with a tender touch. He kissed me softly, gently, and I was consumed with the sensation of his feathers brushing against my back, his lips parting mine as his tongue slipped into my mouth, his need throbbing hard and hot in my hand, twitching with his unabated desire for me. He started by just tasting me, teasing me. He moved his lips against mine in a strange way that caused heat to flare between my legs, and as his tongue circled around mine, I realized he wasn't just kissing me, he was giving a preview of what it would be like for his face to press between my

legs.

I slid my hand gently along his length, and his hips moved backwards, as if to pull himself out of my grasp.

I gripped hard.

He let out a little cry into my mouth that was a mixture of a gasp of pleasure and distress all at the same time.

"Strong hands," he gasped as he broke off the kiss.

I released my grip, just a little.

"You're not trying to escape me now, are you?" I asked, loving the feeling of power his reaction gave me.

He chuckled, deep and low, and his feathers brushed over the bare skin of my back again. He trailed his lips along my jaw, brushing them against the soft skin.

"The only place I want to escape to is between your legs," he murmured.

He then took my earlobe between his teeth, biting it gently as his tongue swirled around the bottom of it.

I let out a moan as one of his hands trailed up the inside of my thigh, finding the bottom edge of the very short dress I had on. I slid my hand up and down his length, and his sharp gasp made my thighs quiver.

"I can think of a better use for your mouth than talking," I said, releasing his maleness and dragging my hand up his body until I was threading my fingers through his hair.

Then his hands were around my hips, and he was lifting me up in the air. I let out a gasp as I clung to his shoulders. He effortlessly carried me across the room, back towards the huge bed. He didn't take me there, though. He walked past it and set me down on the edge of a table that was familiar. It was the same table I had gotten a massage on. It was padded, and at the perfect height for him to line up with my hips.

He set me down so my rump was on the edge of it, my legs dangling down off the edge, and he knelt down in front of me, between my legs.

I parted them, and his hands ran up the insides of my thighs, his fingers sending shivers of anticipation through my entire body, like an electric firestorm of raging, unadulterated urges. Then his mouth followed the path of his hands, and I leaned back, my hands going to the table behind me, and spread my legs just a little bit wider.

"No underwear," he chuckled.

"What did I say about your mouth?" I asked.

His breath was hot against the hair between my legs, and I could feel liquid trickling from me, just enough to tell how eager my body was to make this connection. Then his fingers were parting my hair, and his mouth was on me, and my back was arching, and the sound coming out of my mouth had nothing to do with control and everything to do with the wildness that lived within my heart, aching and determined to break free.

He was licking and circling, tracing the memory of his mouth in the corners of my flesh as he found his way through every fold, exploring the hidden depth of my pleasure as he stroked his tongue along it, teasing the small nub of a tip that extended beyond the protective flesh of my nether flower. He slid one finger in me, and I rocked my hips as he explored, finding the small spongy spot inside of me to stroke

in time with the movement of his tongue.

I didn't last long.

I found my peak in a sudden, crashing explosion, my thighs quaking as I squeezed hard with the rolling waves of it.

"Strong down here too," he murmured as he slid his fingers out of me.

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"Strong enough to make you lose your goddamn mind," I told him, reveling in my own cockiness.

He rose, suddenly, his body in between my legs, his hand moving his tunic out of the way as he dragged his hard, hot heat against the inside of my wet thighs, finding the drenched junction. He dragged the tip of himself through my folds, and we both stared at the mesmerizing motion of mushroom-headed flesh parting through my fields.

Then he stopped, the tip of him catching against my opening and we both sucked in a breath at the same time, joined together in our urgent need to bang.

"I..." he hesitated, his eyes lifting to catch mine.

"If you don't fuck me right now I am going to rip out all of your feathers, one by one, and braid them into my hair," I said.

He let out a guttural sound, and then we both were gasping as he pushed into me, the head of him popping through and sliding into my tight channel, strengthened by years of hard labor that required all of my core to get through the day.

"Too tight," he grunted as he pushed, barely inching in.

I relaxed my muscles, and he slid in all the way, bottoming out as the head of him bumped into my cervix with a pressure that was only pleasurable because of how aroused and desperately needy my body was. Then his arms were around me, and my legs were around his hips, and he was lifting me up as he stepped up onto the table

and launched us both into the air.

I let out a scream that was also a laugh as his wings beat into the air, lifting us into the vaulted dome of his massive bedroom. My surprise was quickly overwhelmed by pleasure. As we rose in the air, he pulled out of me, all the way to the tip, then slammed back. He moved with the beats of his wings, keeping us hovering in the air as he moved his body and mine together, apart, together, driving into me over and over again. I was being carried, lifted, and utterly fucked all at the same time and there was nothing to do but enjoy the ride, to be consumed by the experience, to be pounded as the sound of our wet flesh slappingtogether was a counterpoint to his wings beating in the air, keeping time with a sensory overload of delight.

Then I was quivering, coming, clenching as the waves of my own pleasure hit a new high.

He was moving faster, more erratic, and we were back down on the ground, and my back was down against the table, his hips slamming into me in one, two, forceful thrusts that kept lifting me up along the never-ending cascade of my peak. Heat filled me as I felt him drive deep into me, his length twitching and pulsing inside of me as I clenched hard around him and he filled me with his seed.

Then we were lying there, sweating, his wings lifted open above us, him leaning on his elbows over me as we both breathed hard in the aftershocks of our mutual, explosive, pleasure.

"Holy shit," I said.

Epilogue

CRYSTALLO

"Pulse," Nora said.

A burst of wind came out of nowhere, catching the flames and spiraling them up into a mini tornado of flame. I grinned with delight. I hadn't even thought to suggest that and she took her familiar's wind power and combined it with the flame spell without a second thought.

"You're a natural," I said, kissing the top of Nora's head.

She grinned at me as the flames danced in a mini whirlwind upwards out of the circle of stones, fed by her magic and the spell she had just learned to cast.

"Being a natural is about effort plus time," she said. "I could have learned this years ago if that damn school had been willing to teach me anything."

"They can't teach this," I said, smiling as I watched the fire dance. "Chaos magic requires being true to yourself, to your feelings."

"What if my feelings are dark and full of rage?" she asked.

I didn't have to think twice to find the right words. "Then I will teach you to burn the world."

"Crystallo," Nora said, and I looked down to see that unspilt tears glimmered on the edges of her eyes as she stared up at me.

"Nora," I replied, waiting to see what surprising thing she would say. Every day with her was a joy. I didn't know when the final battle would arrive, and even though my people rushed about with last-minute preparations, the wheels had been set in motion for long enough that my days had enough time in them to spend hours with Nora, teaching her and delighting in her company. I found myself coming back to her, over and over again, wanting to be near her, wanting to spend every moment of my free time with her.

"Thank you," she said, blinking as a single tear rolled down her cheek. "For saving me."

"Thank you," I repeated back to her, smiling with all the warmth that radiated from me.

"For what?" she asked, wiping the tear away just as quickly as it arrived.

"For existing," I told her. "For staying. For giving me a taste of pure happiness in a world where such things are bogged down in complication and fear for the future. Being around you is an utter and complete joy. Being inside of you is a heaven I had been denied for so long."

"You're welcome," she said, smiling back up at me. Then she looked back at the flames. "Now how do I make this bigger?"