



Too Sexy for My Hooves

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: During her unjust incarceration, Selene has become sure that the last job she will ever want is being a full-time innkeeper. If she hadn't been convinced before her latest guests arrived, cleaning out the centaur stall would have sealed the deal. Sure, she feels sorry because Prince Robyn is cursed, but that's no excuse for him not leaving the stable and doing his princely business outside. At least his devoted sunglass-wearing bunny butler is cute. It's no joke that Lord Alfred needs some lessons in modern humility, but Selene would never consider self-importance a crime. Magickals are all like that. Lord Alfred clearly loves Prince Robin like a son. She's also starting to think that Princess Peace and Harmony loves Prince Robyn, despite claiming otherwise. That's why she would never allow the fairy queen's spy to cause problems for the couple. Temporary or not, she is still the innkeeper for now

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I used a full-length antique mirror in my too-vintage bedroom to check out the short black dress I'd summoned from the closet of my actual house. It was tempting to summon another dress I liked much better, but that would mean even more of my clothes would end up in my prison's closet. Doing that felt too much like giving in to The Baba Yaga of My Nightmare's—aka Carol's—plotting to keep me here. Luckily, the dress I summoned looked good enough for my purposes, especially given the short time I intended to be wearing the dress versus the time I planned to be out of it.

It pleased me to see that the physical work of cleaning up this old house had carved a few pounds from my middle and transformed it into sleek muscle that looked much nicer beneath the silky, snug fabric. I twirled a bit to swing the skirt around my thighs. Given the amplitude of my glutes, a loose skirt was necessary to cover my hips. It was a physical fact for me that I'd come to terms with long ago. I knew the skirt's slight swing with my every moment would inspire all the right urges in Farley. I just hoped my appearance was good enough to keep him from being distracted by my dinner preparations—or any random world-domination plan that might decide to run through his brilliant mind.

He'd never seen me like this, and I was counting on his surprise to work in my favor. My daily attire consisted of paint-stained or potion-stained clothes, stiff with dried pigments, a testament to my messy craft. Why dress better in this place when all I did was sand furniture and dig in the dirt outside? Jezel and this Goddess-forsaken inn that Carol tricked me into renovating magically dressed me in the ugliest clothes in the world whenever a guest arrived, anyway. Thank the Goddess, no guests were coming tonight. That innkeeper outfit was a romance killer.

The horrific uniform Jezel insisted I wear around guests was only one of many reasons I couldn't see myself doing this for a living. Being forced to be an ugly innkeeper was as bad as having to be incarcerated in this place. Sure, the magic of the inn was amazing, and the guests were interesting. Even the fairy princess who'd slept with my ex turned out to be a fascinating person and not nearly as trappy as she seemed at first.

I shook my head to clear it of thoughts of Peace and the friends of hers that I'd promised to take as guests. I had better things to think about—like the look on Farley's face when he saw me in this dress.

For our third date, I'd summoned a leg-flattering black dress that now smelled of a scent I designed for myself. Wearing anything feminine with buttons or fasteners was out of the question for our evening. This dress would swoosh off when Farley pulled it over my head. No way would I slow the bear down with clothing obstacles once his genius brain realized he'd fulfilled the parameters of his father's three-date rule.

The bear shifter of my dreams was also the best man I had ever met, and I couldn't wait to take our relationship to the next level. If I'd been looking for something permanent, Farley would be an excellent choice.

But I wasn't searching—nor did I want a husband—well, not anymore. I'd come to that conclusion after Ethan's betrayal. Saying yes to his proposal had been a stalling tactic to buy myself time to plan a way to end things between us. I really hadn't been joking when I told Peace that her sleeping with Ethan had done me a huge favor, even though I could never sleep in my grandmother's bed again. It had taken me long to realize that it would have been worse to have been physically betrayed by a husband rather than just a boyfriend.

After Ethan, I decided that marriage and mating were vastly overrated. Even Carol's love life was disappointing, and she could spell men into desiring her. Not that I

thought she did that, but she used to date more than I did. Powerful women rarely find men willing to take them, magical warts and all.

Love between Farley and me wasn't likely because I didn't feel that level of personal commitment was necessary at this point in my life. That said, I had no issue with enjoying a casual relationship with him while I was stuck here. The bear shifter was handsome, attracted to me, and sexy. He wanted to be with me. Why wouldn't I want to be with him?

Sighing, I looked down at my bare feet. I was tall, but Farley was a walking skyscraper. Should I wear heels to boost my confidence at least a bit? No, heels wouldn't work. I dismissed that thought nearly as fast as it entered my brain. Farley loved going for walks after dinner. Short-heeled booties would be a much better option. It would make my outfit look trendier and make me appear younger.

I stared at my feet and snapped my fingers. When the booties appeared on them, I looked in the mirror once again. The booties were both cute and comfortable. They gave me a couple more inches, boosting my ego more than my height. Even nine-inch stripper shoes couldn't make me as tall as Farley. Two-inch bootie heels were the best I could do.

A wave of potent magic, like a physical force, washed over me, triggering a surge of panic. The sudden, jarring chime of the doorbell sent a jolt through me, and I swore, clutching my short black dress. The silky black fabric slipped through my fingers like sand, replaced by the scratchy feel of the pilgrim-witch clothes.

"No, no, no... damn it, Jezel! I have plans tonight!"

I raised my fist to shake it at the ceiling and saw a new wand clenched in it. Colors flowed through the wand, and each change in hue brought a different zing of power. I held it out for a closer inspection until the doorbell rang again. Sadly, the visitor was

not Farley arriving early.

Grumbling under my breath, I made my way through the kitchen and to the front door with my stupid, heavy skirts brushing against the floor. The pointy black hat perched on my head as if someone had glued it into place.

Thoroughly irritated by the interruption to my date prep ritual, I yanked open the inn door and gawked at the stack of hay bales that almost touched the porch roof. A large, polished leather saddle rested on top of the pile, and a hayfork leaned against the side.

But no person was in sight.

I stared at the hay in shock. “Good Goddess, what fresh hell is this?”

A plump, fluffy rabbit wearing mirrored sunglasses jumped onto each bale until he was eye level and cleared his throat.

“Good day, my lady. Are you the innkeeper of this fine establishment?”

My mouth fell open as I stared. The rabbit whipped off his sunglasses, stared hard at my clothes, and then muttered something about rabbit turds before returning his sunglasses to his face.

I tilted my head to look at him because I’d never seen an irritated bunny before. My hat tilted too, and I found myself grabbing at it, despite its gravity-defying abilities. I must have looked like a drunk, but more witchy Mary Poppins, because he made strange rabbit noises. I knew I was being rude by staring, but it was impossible to pay proper attention to a talking rabbit that resembled a child’s toy.

How was I supposed to take him seriously? Watching his whiskers twitch as he spoke, like a human, was fascinating. His adorable little bunny paws on his glasses

displayed more dexterity than I ever imagined a rabbit could possess, even a magical one.

“We were told you would be expecting us,” the rabbit said formally.

Never in a million years would I have expected a sunglasses-wearing rabbit and a pile of hay bales to be at the inn’s front door. He was alone, and there was no we. All I saw was him sitting on the hay. Was he talking about him and the rabbit mother of his twenty-five rabbit children?

Still gawking at the talking rabbit and the bales of hay, I closed my mouth and shook my head. “I wasn’t expecting anyone, especially not tonight. I made personal plans... a date... and it’s been a while since I had one. Being a virile male bunny, I’m sure you understand how necessary meeting one’s physical needs can be and how they can take precedence over everything else now and again.”

Dropping the nice bunny approach, the rabbit morphed into Sir Pompous Bunny as I watched. He sniffed haughtily as he studied my clothes. “Dressed as you are, I find the idea of you getting any romantic action tonight very difficult to believe.”

Usually, I would be insulted at such a statement, but the rabbit was right about these horrible clothes being a bone killer. Instead of glaring at him, I glared at the wand in my hand. “See? Are you hearing this, Jezel? I told you these clothes were hideous. Even a rabbit thinks so.”

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No doubt wondering if I was mentally unhinged, my visitor looked around him in alarm. “Who are you speaking to?” the rabbit asked.

“The inn,” I said flatly, unwilling to rat out Jezel, even though she thoroughly deserved it for forcing me to wear this outfit. I moved my attention away from the wand and back to him. “Okay. Now that the pleasantries are over, let’s get back to business. Who are you, and why are you here?”

The rabbit straightened. I felt certain he was trying to add a millimeter or two to his upright size in an attempt to intimidate me. He was so small that I doubted even another male rabbit would have been impressed by the action.

“Princess Peace-and-Harmony made a reservation for us. She said you agreed to let us stay.”

I crossed my arms. “The princess merely asked if I would take in a friend of hers for a short stay. I said yes to the request, but she did not stipulate a date nor confirm that your arrival would be today.”

The rabbit sighed heavily and nodded. “Yes, well, unfortunately, our plans changed. I apologize for the inconvenience.”

I nodded once to accept his apology. “Could you leave and return tomorrow? I have plans for this evening that I’m unwilling to change.”

He raised his front paws. “But you’re the innkeeper. Your job is to serve those who stay here. Can’t your love life wait?”

“Look, Lord Rabbit, this innkeeper gig is temporary. I’m a criminal, and being here is my punishment. I am not a real innkeeper. I’m just standing in for one. The inn’s owner is extorting me.”

“What?!” the rabbit exclaimed, placing one tiny bunny paw to put it on his chest. “I had no idea you were a criminal. This is so unexpected. What kind of crime did you commit?”

“I shrank my ex-boyfriend’s man stick after he cheated on me.”

The rabbit huffed, and the movement sent his whiskers twitching. “Perhaps that explains why your dating life isn’t going well. A witch wanting to date should keep such spells to herself.”

Politeness gone now, I openly glared at him. “For your snooty information, Lord Long Ears, I caught the bastard doing the wild thing with another woman in my grandmother’s antique bed. He deserved what I did to him, and I needed to make sure he knew we were over. It was a temporary spell, and it eventually wore off. I’m just here because... oh, never mind. None of that changes anything.”

I liked Peace too much to blame her for this insulting conversation, but I really didn’t appreciate this snooty critter passing judgment on me and my love life. I wanted to tell him to get lost, but I couldn’t. Jeziel would probably kill me if I sent him away.

I was going to do that anyway, but then he nodded and patted his furry chest with his tiny bunny paw. It was bunny cuteness times ten—damn it. I found I simply couldn’t say no to a cute bunny, even if he did have a pompous, know-it-all attitude.

The wand vibrated in my hand, but didn’t shock me this time. I knew Jeziel was trying to tell me something, but I had no idea what. The shock of talking to a rabbit sitting on hay bales hadn’t worn off yet.

A full minute passed before I let out a breath to signal my defeat. “What’s your name?” I demanded.

The talking rabbit blew out a frustrated breath and then politely bowed his head. “Lord Alfred of Hutchley, at your service, Innkeeper.”

I raised an eyebrow at his title. “My name is Selene. You’re welcome to stay at the inn, Lord Alfred, but I have a third date scheduled for tonight. If I get lucky—and I fully intend to—I cannot guarantee you a quiet evening. Do you need further clarification about the situation?”

“No, and please do not provide it. Can you accommodate large four-legged creatures inside the inn?”

“No, the bedrooms are up a flight of stairs, and the inn has no elevator. You’re pretty big for a rabbit, but I could probably carry you up the stairs if you like. Would you require a litter box for your room?”

Alfred made a choked noise. “No, My Good Lady. His Highness and I require only the best your stable has to offer. One stall with fresh hay is all that is necessary. I will sleep outside Prince Robin’s stall door. If His Highness needs something in the middle of the night, I prefer to be close.”

“Prince Robin?”

“Yes, my companion is Prince Robin of Locksley,” Alfred explained.

“Locksley? Like in Robin Hood?” I asked, fighting not to laugh. Wasn’t Robin Hood a fox in the cartoon movie? He for sure wasn’t the rabbit. Was Little John going to turn out to be a bear? Farley wouldn’t appreciate me letting a strange bear stick around.

I looked around the mountain of hay for the mysterious prince but saw no other animals.

Alfred's sigh was large. "That myth involved the Prince's ancestor from many centuries ago. His Highness was named after that ancestor in the hope that he would be inspired to be as honorable. Alas, Prince Robin has grown up in a different time. Life has shaped the prince differently."

I grunted softly, "So I guess he doesn't rob rich people and give the money to poor people, then?"

Alfred grunted. "No, he's a software designer—what most would call a geek. To his queen mother's horror, he prefers playing video games to participating in real life."

I wrinkled my nose in disgust. Games were fun, but they were still just games. I visualized a chubby fox in a castle basement with a game controller desperately clutched in his paws. What kind of games would he play?

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The clip-clop of hooves on the sidewalk drew my gaze away from the rabbit and the hay bales. A majestic centaur approached us at a leisurely pace. I watched, mesmerized, unable to take my eyes off him. He might very well be the most handsome creature I had ever seen in my life. He literally glowed with male beauty. There were no other words to explain the light emanating from his skin. My fingers itched to touch him. I wanted to run my hand up his arm. I wanted to see what the rest of him looked like and whether he glowed everywhere else.

The wand buzzed and sent a stinging shock through my fingers. I lifted it and yelled in pain. When I looked at the centaur again, my raging hormones were once more under control.

Oh. Right. Something strange was happening here.

It was Farley's skin I wanted to explore, not this beautiful stranger's. I didn't even like shifters. Farley was my exception—my only exception. And Goddess help me, I intended to keep it that way.

The centaur stopped behind the hay bales and shyly smiled in my direction. "Greetings, Innkeeper," he said in a voice that melted my insides. He bowed his head respectfully.

Wow. The centaur's voice was as lethal as the rest of him.

It took a lot of concerted effort to ignore the lustful thoughts his voice caused. A conversation with this creature would weaken any woman's legs, regardless of how many she possessed. For a couple of seconds, I was actually grateful mine were

hidden beneath the layers of my ugly skirts.

I blinked and tried not to stare at him. “Welcome to the inn, Prince Robin of Locksley.” It took me a few moments, but I finally dragged my gaze back to Alfred. “Peace said her friend was dealing with some sort of curse.”

“Indeed, he is,” Alfred said, bobbing his rabbit head. “Are you not affected by it?”

I cautiously glanced at Prince Robin again, who ducked his head to study his hooves. “No, I’m not really seeing anything out of the ordinary.”

“Because he refused to date, the Fairy Queen turned him into a lothario. Everywhere we go, His Highness is now bombarded with unwelcome advances from strange females.”

I shrugged. “Why is that a curse? Most men would love to have that problem.”

“He is betrothed,” Alfred said stiffly, puffing up his furry chest. “Drawing so much unwanted attention is unseemly. He desires only one female in his bed, and I support his choice to abstain from others. Hiding from the efforts of the curse is what has brought us to your door.”

I lifted the wand in my hand and glared at it. “Maybe you should pop out and take this one, Jezel. The prudish rabbit speaks your archaic language. You know that I have no idea how to talk to someone about abstaining.”

“I beg your pardon,” Alfred exclaimed in his snootiest tone. “Are you suffering another mental breakdown? Do you have some strange fetish about your wand?”

Loud laughter erupted from me. The wand sparked painfully against my fingers, causing me to drop it to the porch floor. Still chuckling, I bent to pick it up.

Unfortunately, the corset-tight layers of heavy cloth wouldn't let me reach down enough. I laughed again, feeling utterly ridiculous. Carol would pay for all this nutty stuff—all of it.

“Don't bend over too far, Selene. I'll get that for you,” Farley said, walking outside.

Picking up the wand, he smiled and handed it back to me. He must have come from the back of the house. Because they were here so often, Paul and his mates had carved a path through the woods that led to the inn's backyard. To shorten their walk from the infamous Assjacket, Farley said he bent time with his new physics. Now it only took them all of five minutes to reach the inn.

If it were anyone but Farley, I would have considered such a wild claim about bending physics to be a strange pickup line meant only to impress.

Hey baby, I bent physics for you. Are you impressed?

I understood magic, and I could tell Farley possessed some. What I didn't quite believe was that bending physics on a path was truly possible, but... whatever.

Since I talked to a ghost witch inhabiting a wand and was stuck in a magical house that dressed me in ugly clothes whenever it wanted, I had no right to challenge other people's magical claims.

“I have unexpected guests, Farley. These are the friends Princess Peace-and-Harmony mentioned.” Looking back at Alfred, I inclined my head toward Farley. “This is my hot date. He sees beyond my ghastly innkeeper clothes.”

Farley grinned at me and turned to be polite to my guest. He nodded and said hello to the rabbit without asking a single prying question. As if he saw strange things every day, he cast a cursory, indifferent glance at the hay bales, saddle, and hay fork.

Then his gaze shifted beyond the hay to the centaur looming behind it. His eyes turned feral in an instant, and a deep growl emanated from the area covered by his eight-pack abs. It rose in his throat, and when it emerged from his mouth, it was everything except a roar.

I reached out a hand and patted his abs. It took all my willpower not to explore them. Who knew roaring would turn me on so much? “Shush, honey. You’re scaring my guests.”

“He can’t be a guest because he can’t stay here,” Farley said in a growly voice. The fangs I loved were on full display, but he was not smiling. “I forbid you to look at him.”

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My hand froze against Farley’s intriguing eight-pack. I must have misheard him because I know he would never openly order me around. Well, maybe he would do it in bed, but definitely not in front of strangers.

I eased my hand away from him just in case. “I’m sorry. What did you say to me?”

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Farley opened his mouth. He looked like he wanted to take it back, but instead of doing that, he turned to the centaur and roared as loudly as he could.

Convinced by Farley's roar of an imminent bear attack, the centaur screamed and then raced away, galloping at top speed back down the path that led to the main road.

A groaning Lord Alfred took off his sunglasses, rubbed his cute bunny eyes, and sighed. "This always happens in the presence of other males. The curse on the prince would be so much easier to handle if I were still a human. A rabbit couldn't catch a centaur even on its fastest day. Usually, I have to wait for him to miss me and come back."

Touch the wand to the rabbit's head, Jezel's bossy voice whispered inside my mind. It will temporarily lift the curse. The effects won't last, but it will make his task of retrieving the prince more manageable. The same magic will not work on the prince, though. The blocks on him are too strong. The curse involves ancient fairy magic.

I briefly nodded to let Jezel know I understood. The ghostly witch had terrible taste in clothes, but she sure knew her magic.

"Stay here, Farley. Don't make me spell you," I ordered. He growled softly at my command but stayed where he was.

I stepped down to Alfred and touched my wand to the space between his bunny ears. The rabbit immediately transformed into a man dressed in an expensive, custom-tailored gray suit. The resized sunglasses now hung from his fingers.

“I’m free. You freed me from the curse. How is that possible?” Alfred asked as he patted his human body. Once reassured he was truly human again, he slid off the hay bales and dusted off the back of his clothes with a hand.

“It’s a temporary reprieve, Alfred. The inn wanted to help you. Go after Prince Robin of Locksley and bring him back. While you’re doing that, I’ll get my jealous bear under control and fix your stable stall.”

“I apologize for his display of cowardice. His Highness is not a brave man because he’s never had enemies before. Please trust me when I say he is still quite an intelligent one,” Alfred said sadly.

I turned and narrowed my eyes at Farley. “I’ve met a lot of genius males lately. I’m sorry that Farley scared him so badly.”

“I will not harm him, but the centaur can’t stay here,” Farley said again.

I waved a hand at my stupid outfit. “Did you not see my stupid clothes? They are officially guests now, Farley. I’ve already said yes. What is your problem with them?”

“The centaur... he’s...” Farley chuffed and waved a hand. “He’s dangerous for you to be around.”

I huffed. “Not any more dangerous than you.”

Farley frowned. “I’m not dangerous—but even if I were—it’s still not the same. The centaur is dangerous in other ways. He is dangerous to your female side.”

I blew out a breath. “The centaur is not going to do anything to me. You can either help me prepare the stables for them or go home. I don’t have time to deal with your

strange reaction to two cursed people. They came here for a reprieve. It is my job to give them one.”

“Be honest, Selene. Were you attracted to the centaur when he showed up?”

I grunted. “No, I was not.” Well, not technically. A few stray thoughts didn’t count. “I noticed he was handsome and had a sexy voice. Lord Alfred said the prince’s strong allure was part of his curse. What caused your growling fit?”

Farley blinked at the question like it surprised him. “I was issuing a warning. If he touches you, I will rip off his hand and slap him around with it. And I didn’t like the way he was looking at you.” Farley crossed his arms. “It’s a bear thing.”

I rolled my eyes and sighed heavily. I stared at the ceiling of the porch. “Get me out of these stupid clothes, Jezel. I have to change so I can muck out a stall. The Baba Yaga is going to pay for doing this to me.”

The innkeeper’s costume instantly disappeared, leaving me standing there in my short black dress and cute booties. The skirt flounced slightly as I jogged back up the porch stairs to enter the house.

Behind me, Farley swore, and he never swore. I didn’t know whether to laugh at his reaction to me in a proper dress or weep because the stupid guests had ruined our date. Tonight could have been my lucky night. Scratch that—it would have been our lucky night.

Farley rubbed a hand over his face. “Is that your idea of date clothes?”

“Yes. Do you like them?”

“Yes. You look amazing,” he said roughly.

“Well, too bad. I have to go put on my worst jeans now because my guest is a centaur who requires a freaking stall. Plus, I have to decide which shoes to sacrifice because I refuse to get animal poo on my best black booties.”

Farley scratched his jaw. “You look sexy in jeans too, Selene. Don’t you have something ugly to wear until he leaves? What about that ugly robe Auntie Carol borrowed? Did she ever return it?”

That robe was cozy and warm. A woman couldn’t keep the winter shivers away with a thin, silky robe, regardless of its sex appeal. I narrowed my gaze at the bear. “Keep that jealousy shit up and I will turn you into a lizard.”

I went into the kitchen and then to my bedroom to change. I felt oddly grateful to Jezeel for interrupting my uncontrollable reaction to the cursed prince. Farley had been right about the prince being dangerous to my libido, but I still didn’t want another relationship where the guy I was dating felt like he owned me—body and soul.

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“Selene...”

I turned around and held up a hand to stop Farley from protesting his innocence. “Don’t follow me in here. You embarrassed me in front of strangers. I’m upset and busy with unexpected guests. In case you aren’t clear on the matter, this is me not being happy. It’s not metaphorical. My irritation is real.”

I closed the door in Farley’s startled face and began stripping off my sexy clothes.

He cleared his throat on the other side of the door. “I’m sorry, Selene. I don’t know what came over me. He was all glowy and oozing pheromones. As crazy as it sounds, I truly wanted to kill him. It took all my willpower to tone down my reaction to a mere warning.”

I froze, with one leg in my jeans and the other out. “I saw that too. Maybe that glowy stuff is part of the curse.”

Farley’s sigh was loud. “The centaur reeks of sex pheromones. The idea of him seducing you makes me insane. My urge to make sure you’re mine, and only mine, is very strong. I really wish I hadn’t made that stupid three-date promise to Dad Charlie.”

I sighed as I pulled on my jeans. “Yeah, well, that makes two of us, and not just because of the glowy centaur. I’ve been ready since the day I met you.”

“Does that mean what I think it means?” he asked.

“I have no idea. It’s called sarcasm. Being sarcastic is an advanced form of using metaphors. We can discuss it over dinner. Friendly food and talk are all you’re getting tonight. We’ll have to reschedule our real third date for another time.”

“Will we be talking about Metaphors 202 or Sarcasm 101?” Farley asked.

I laughed even though I didn’t want to. It was one of the reasons I wanted to sleep with him so badly. Farley always made me laugh.

“You have until dinner to decide,” I said.

I grinned at his low chuckle as I snatched up the still-filthy sneakers I had been wearing to garden. The washer and dryer were downstairs in the house, and I’d yet to go exploring.

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A still-human Alfred eventually coaxed the still-fearful Prince Robin back to the inn. Farley helped me fix up the stall. After we were done, I ordered him back inside. Dinner was less fun than it should have been, but Farley had settled down enough at that point to kiss me goodbye before he went home.

When I went out to check on my guests before retiring, the innkeeper’s clothes reappeared. While I was sweating in the outfit, at least I got to watch a cute, fluffy bunny dig a hole in a hay bale nearest the closed stall door. It relieved me physically and mentally that the prince’s allure didn’t pull at me.

Maybe my immunity was a case of out of sight, out of mind. Was the curse visually triggered rather than a matter of pheromones?

Farley’s nose wouldn’t mislead him. If he said the prince was oozing pheromones, I

believed him. But I'd be lying if I said the prince's curse didn't fascinate me. Collecting unusual spells was a hobby of mine. The best ones—like the spell I'd used to punish Ethan—were often curses.

I smiled down at my rabbit guest. "I'm getting ready to call it a night, Lord Alfred. Can I get you anything before I retire? It sounds like Prince Robin is already asleep."

There was silence as Alfred and I listened to the prince snoring.

Sighing heavily, Alfred pushed some of the loose hay back into the hollow he'd made in the hay bale. "Could I trouble you for a carrot or some lettuce? Prince Robin refused to eat, but I'm starving."

I hurried away as quickly as my corset and skirts would allow and soon returned with a plate of assorted vegetables. I also carried a baggie with a duplicate set for Prince Robin, in case he woke up hungry in the middle of the night. Alfred thanked me for the food and my patience. His pomposity was nowhere to be found. He must have lost it while chasing after his royal charge.

A need to ease him gnawed at my gut. "I'm sorry you changed back to a rabbit so soon. When the curse is gone, come back as a human for a visit. I'll make a special room for you and serve you tea by the fireplace. We can have a real chat. You deserve a break."

"You're awfully kind for a criminal. Perhaps you will be granted an early release for your good behavior," Alfred said with a strange snuffle that I credited as rabbit laughter.

I watched with a smile as he used one paw to scratch a twitching ear before using both paws to dust off the excess hay from his furry chest and belly. Lord Alfred Hutchley was growing on me, and there was nothing I could do about it. However,

I'd lost interest in the prince when he ran after Farley merely growling at him. He could have stayed and explained things. No matter how alluring he seemed, I would never be genuinely attracted to someone like him.

“Well, I'll do what I said for as long as I'm stuck here. Currently, I have about fifty days left on my sentence. Since the inn's owner finds a way to add to my prison sentence every time she visits, your chances of catching me are good if you return before the end of summer.”

Alfred tittered at my declaration, and I smiled.

“Okay. I'll let you get some sleep now. Goodnight, Alfred. Summon me if you need anything. Call my name and the inn will let me know.”

Alfred dipped his rabbit head in acknowledgement. “I am truly sorry we ruined your date.”

“Farley and I being together is inevitable. I should've kept my disappointment to myself. You didn't ruin anything, nor did you do anything wrong. Also, Farley is not as bad as his growl made him sound. Please give him another chance to make a better impression when he shows up tomorrow.”

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Alfred waved a tired paw at me. “It was not the bear’s fault. Open derision from other males is one of the many costs of the curse. Even Prince Robin’s gaming friends react poorly to his presence now. He’s not coping well with being ostracized.”

Morals be damned. What male ever waited to indulge himself? All the other males I knew would have been having the time of their lives with every female they came across. They would be enjoying the curse. “I would be interested in hearing the whole story. Perhaps I might be able to lessen the costs of the curse for both of you.”

“You are very kind.”

Was I being kind? I doubted my motives were altruistic, but I definitely felt guilty for trying to get him to leave earlier. The guilt at least reassured me that I hadn’t turned into a terrible person. “Goodnight, Alfred.”

“Goodnight, Selene. Thank you for letting us stay. This is the safest I’ve felt in months.”

After checking the wards around the stable, I headed back to the house. Ethan and his mother showing up and causing trouble had made me extra cautious about my wards. Also, I didn’t trust Carol not to send more wicked magicals my way just for her entertainment. The Baba Yaga had never been an easy friend, not even when I still liked her. Stuck in the inn, I lectured myself daily about the need to find someone more normal to socialize with—someone who wasn’t the witch protectress. Or a member of the council. Or even another witch.

Sighing over my life choices, I nearly stepped on the fairy princess in her human

form. She was seated on the top step of the porch, looking as tired as she had when she visited me before. Now, I was grateful I hadn't let Farley stay. I wanted no listeners in the house when I got that bear into my bed. I wasn't usually a screamer, but kissing Farley made me groan loudly, and he growled against me the whole time. Sex between us would not be a quiet affair.

Peace's unexpected appearance unsettled me. She was yet another example of my poor judgment coming back to haunt me. If Ethan showed up to finish the set, I would turn him into a rat. Then I would call Fat Bastard to come exterminate him. Farley had given me some cat treats for their weekly visits. Getting rid of Ethan's dead body would be worth the whole bag.

How Ethan's conniving mother managed to keep her bastard child out of the magic pokey was beyond me. Thank the Goddess, his mother was finally and completely incarcerated. Knowing that lifted a heavy weight from my shoulders.

But why had Carol allowed Ethan to go free? I definitely did not understand her reasoning. Both of them had plotted against her. I shook my head to clear my thoughts of Ethan. I might have to get Farley to clean out the inn's old well so I'd have a place to put unwelcome trespassers.

Surely, even Jezel wouldn't find any harm in that. She used it for the same purpose back in her days as innkeeper.

"Hello, Princess Peace and Harmony."

"Hello, Innkeeper Selene. You can expect Lord Alfred and Prince Robin to show up soon. They are the friends I mentioned."

"I'm afraid you're too late. Alfred and Robin came earlier today. Everyone is here now except Batman."

Peace sighed as she gave me a compassionate look. “Is Batman also a troubled prince in need of a respite in your inn? I did not mean to add to your burdens.”

“No, he’s the fictional Knight of Darkness.”

“Like a vampire or demon?” Peace asked, tilting her head to one side as she gazed up at me. “By fictional, do you mean he’s a ghost?”

“Not exactly, but he is a figment of someone’s imagination,” I said with a chuckle.

I doubted the fairy princess was up to speed on human movies, so I reined in my amusement.

Peace lifted a hand to me. “When he arrives at the inn, please do not ignore Knight Batman on my account. Have you updated another room yet? If not, may I sleep in your garden in my smallest fairy form? I am utterly spent from my long journey. The only good news is that the crystal is now safely in its new location. I finally finished the task Mother assigned to me.”

“Good. Have you talked to your mother about your feelings yet?”

Peace ducked her head and nodded. “Yes. She is another reason I am here. I need some wise counsel, and you are the wisest person I know.”

“If I am wise at all, it’s because I’ve made a lot of mistakes and dealt with the consequences from them.” I sighed and gave in to destiny once more. “The room you stayed in before is available. You can sleep in it if you like.”

“Can we speak more about why I’m here in the morning? Running from my destiny is exhausting.”

I held the inn's door open for her to enter. "At least you've succeeded now and again. I've had no luck at all in escaping my destiny at all."

"You seem very sure of that," Peace said.

I smiled at her. "I am quite sure because if I had succeeded in escaping it, I wouldn't be here."

"Is any of your failure my fault?" Peace asked.

"No," I said with a laugh, feeling the innkeeper's outfit fade and my mucking stall clothes reappear.

Peace looked at my clothes. "I am unsure which outfit is more unflattering."

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I grunted. “Both are hideous, but the jeans and sneakers are good attire for cleaning stables.”

“Are you saying Prince Robyn cannot shift?”

I shook my head. “He doesn’t seem capable of changing forms. The curse isn’t allowing it.”

“I fear my role in what has befallen him. Mother insisted it was not my fault and that the curse will be good for his personal growth.”

“That means she said no when you asked her to remove it.”

Peace grunted in disgust. “You are wise and clever.”

At that point, I would have said anything to cheer her up. “I have a great fashion sense too. You should have seen me today before everyone showed up. I dressed up because Farley and I were supposed to have our third date tonight. When your cursed friends showed up early, the inn once again put that hideous pilgrim witch outfit on me. Lord Alfred didn’t believe anyone would find me attractive enough to date. Then Farley came, took one look at the gorgeous Prince Robin, and went full growly bear on him. We barely avoided a mauling.”

Peace visibly winced. “I am so sorry that I keep disrupting your sex life. I swear it is not my intention to do so. Also, I would never intentionally come between you and your mate.”

“No worries. Farley is not my mate. We’re just friends trying to be friends with benefits. Life keeps getting in our way, but our bad luck won’t last forever. We want each other too much.”

“Farley is the gigantic bear shifter—I remember him.” Peace bit her bottom lip. “Perhaps it is for the best that you saw his growly nature before you get intimate. Male bears wander off when they’re done with a female. I hope I am around to offer comfort when your bear has finished indulging his ravenous urges for you.”

“Do I dare ask how you know what bears are like?”

Peace shrugged. “I am friends with a few bear sows. They have a negative opinion of most male bears, especially the fathers of their children. I hear such abandonment is a bear thing.”

“Farley claims to be different. He claims to want a companion who would stay with him always.”

“Do you believe him?” Peace asked.

I shrugged. “I believe him enough not to be concerned about him leaving me. The truth is that I’m not in this for the long haul either. I only said “maybe” to Ethan’s proposal to keep his mother from bothering me while I figured out how to end things. You can shed all guilt about being with Ethan because I meant it when I said you did me a favor.”

“A favor should be mutually beneficial.” Peace sighed and shook her head. “Tomorrow, I must ask you for a true favor, but we will first find something mutually beneficial in our bargain—if you say yes. I do not mean to presume.”

I stopped at the steps leading upstairs to the bedrooms. “The room is just as you left

it. Only the sheets have been changed. Do you need anything before I head off to bed?”

Peace climbed the stairs slowly. It required a lot of effort, which meant she was as tired as she claimed. I felt as determined to ease her mind now as I did when we first met.

“I need many things,” Peace said. “But tonight I only need a bed.”

4

For breakfast, I pulled the remaining vegetables out of the refrigerator. I added apples to the tray for Prince Robin and a few strawberries to the one for Alfred. I tapped the wand on each and sent them both to the stables. Farley and I had used sawhorses and a nice board we found to create a makeshift serving table.

The loaf of banana bread in the oven neared completion. That tasty treat was for my reno crew. Paul and his mates had arrived before seven and were already hard at work removing the old front porch boards. They were singing like a barbershop quartet to cover the sound of their hammers. It was more enjoyable than the stripping songs they played on their vintage boom box while they worked, so I let it go.

I made a mental note to speak to Alfred later to see if the noise bothered him or Prince Robin. I hadn't thought to warn them about it.

I stood at the stove, busily preparing food for Peace and me. When she stayed here before, I'd learned that bacon and eggs were a cheat meal for her. Royal fairies only consumed the purest foods from plants, which seemed primarily to consist of wild berries. With me, she devoured my personal breakfast favorites with the same kind of relish Farley showed for food.

My stressed-out fairy guest stumbled into the kitchen, looking hungover and not well-rested at all. Like a good host, I pretended not to notice while trying to think of ways to rectify her sleeping situation. “Good morning, Peace. Did you sleep well?”

Peace shook her head and silently went to sit at the table. I poured her tea and added a healthy amount of honey to the cup. She sighed in gratitude when I set it in front of her.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

“Breakfast will be served shortly. It’s nearly ready to plate.”

I returned to the stove to finish. I caught myself humming and realized I was in an excellent mood today, despite my personal plans being disrupted the night before.

Outside the kitchen window, the probably reason for my good mood walked toward my back door with a large box of pastries in one hand and a bouquet of wildflowers in the other.

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I smiled and waved when Farley caught me looking. He smiled back, giving me fang.

Desire crawled through me with no prompting and no physical contact. Looking at Prince Robin conjured thoughts of sex that led to a single inevitable outcome. Looking at Farley sparked a profound sense of contentment and rightness. Desiring him was the kind of longing that I would move mountains to satisfy, especially knowing he longed for me too. Thinking of his fangs exploring my neck almost made me burn the bacon.

I turned the griddle off before he entered the kitchen. He kissed me soundly, not even noticing poor Peace sitting at the table. I could have stopped his tongue, but didn't want to. He finally pulled away and handed me the flowers. My giggle surprised us both. The effect he had on me was indescribable and unexplainable.

Farley was mainly a vegetarian, so I didn't offer him any bacon. I'd held back a perfect apple this morning and handed that to him instead.

"Should I call you Eve now?" Farley asked, raking the apple off my palm.

"Maybe. Should I call you Adam?" I asked with a grin as I put the flowers into a large glass jar I'd found under the sink.

Farley sighed. "It's better than you calling me Junior," he said, making sure I saw his fangs as he took a bite of the crisp fruit.

Another giggle escaped me. That happened to me a lot when Farley was around. "Princess Peace and I were just about to have breakfast."

Farley swallowed and turned to look at Peace, who tiredly waved at him. “Good morning, Princess. I didn’t see you there.” He turned back to me. “Where are your other guests?”

“Since Prince Robin can’t come inside the inn in centaur form, they are having breakfast in the stable.”

“Okay. I’m going to go check on Paul’s progress.”

“Do not go to the stable, Farley.”

“I won’t. Dad helped me figure out a way to control my response. I’m a grown bear. I don’t want to upset you again. I can control myself.”

“Except when you’re with me. Losing your control will be okay then,” I said, winking at Peace as I set her plate in front of her.

“Yes—except when I’m with you,” Farley promised as he headed to the front door.

Peace sighed and pushed her food around on her plate. “What is it like to be loved like that?”

I set my plate down and took a seat. “I’m not sure what I feel is love, but whenever Farley is around, I feel happy to be close to him.”

Peace nodded. “Fairies don’t seek happiness. They don’t know contentment. They seek power over others and themselves. There is no room in a fairy’s life for a man to bring her flowers he personally picked. There is no passionate kissing in a princess’s kitchen. There is only endless politics and deep discontentment.”

“I think I would seek intimacy as an escape from the dullness.”

“It doesn’t work that way. Sex is nothing more than a perfunctory act. It’s like eating bad food at a conference. Also, the good males aren’t always interested.”

Peace crunched a piece of bacon and frowned. “If I were happy, I would not be eating this disgusting food. I would be eating what you sent to the stables.”

“Hey now,” I said, glaring at the fairy. “I’m not that bad a cook.”

Peace sighed. “I did not mean to insult your preparations. All your food is delicious, but this fare is not healthy for a fairy. Does that sound better?”

I reached across the table and snatched a piece a bacon from her plate. I ate it while she watched me with wide eyes. I waved the last bite at her. “This is me saving you from your miserable foodie self.”

I laughed when she covered the rest of her food with one hand.

Peace looked at what she was doing and laughed. “You are so very strange. I admire you so much. If you were a fairy princess like me, we would be the best of friends.”

I chuckled as I finished my breakfast. “So what are we, if we’re not friends?”

Peace sighed and blew out a long breath before speaking. “That is what I need to talk to you about. I hope you will consider using me as a temporary employee. My mother says I owe you a month of service for emotionally wronging you. She insists I manually work off that debt. She would hear no arguments about it.”

I waved away her speech. “The only help I need is currently fixing my front porch. Please tell your mother that we’re all doing well. Without your mistake, I wouldn’t have gone to prison, or been put here, or met Farley. You already know I hate working for The Baba Yaga for free. Why would I accept free labor from you? That’s

not fair. While I'm not always a good person, making you my lackey is a bitch level I'd rather not stoop to. It would make me feel like Ethan."

Nodding, Peace ate more of her food. "You are a good person, Selene, but Mother was adamant. Worse, I am not permitted to use magic to complete the tasks you assign to me. Yet I have no practical skills. I do not cook. I also dislike cleaning. However, I can certainly see that you need help with both these things."

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“Are you saying the inn is dirty?”

Peace winced. “It could be cleaner.”

“It’s run down and hasn’t been cared for in over a century. It would take more than the weeks I’ve been here to get it into decent shape. Besides, the inn is my prison. It’s not a beach house I’m renovating. I’m only fixing things because I’m bored. This inn doesn’t belong to me. I’m not a true innkeeper.”

Peace’s eyes widened. “Wow—and I thought I was in denial.”

“You are in denial,” I said, taking my now empty plate to the sink. I rinsed it off and loaded it into the dishwasher.

Peace followed behind me. She rinsed her plate and tentatively loaded it into the dishwasher next to mine. “Is that correct?”

I shrugged. “Looks fine to me. I just stick them in there any way I can get them to fit.”

“Why would you do things so haphazardly without thought?” When I laughed, Peace made a face. “Your chaotic methods explain much.”

I rolled my eyes. The last thing I needed was to have Peace following me around all day.

She swallowed hard and lifted her chin. “Please, Selene. Please teach me all the

menial skills you do daily to survive. Perhaps if you see yourself as my teacher, my mother might accept my efforts as enough to restore the emotional imbalance I created between us. She is sending someone to check on me and ensure I am doing this. I cannot disappoint her again. Mother is threatening to leave her throne to my younger sister instead of me. Princess Allegheny thinks servants are toys. She would be a terrible leader for our people. She would treat the lesser fairies as her slaves.”

“I don’t know, Peace. I prefer doing things by myself. I like exercising full control.”

“I would follow your orders without complaint or asking too many questions. I will limit myself to asking for clarity.”

Caring for a centaur guest had created a lot more work than I had imagined. I needed to muck the stall twice a day to keep it clean enough for someone like Prince Robin.

“Have you ever owned a horse?”

Peace eyes lit as she nodded.

“Did you ever groom the horse? Or did someone else brush it down and clean out the stall?”

Peace softly sighed. “I am the firstborn princess of the fairy queen. I’ve had servants all my life. I have watched them do it, but they would never have allowed me to help.”

I fought hard not to roll my eyes. My parents made my siblings and me work as hard as they did. The fairy queen had not done her daughter any favors with all those servants. She was lucky that Peace was not completely spoiled.

“Perhaps you could lure Prince Robin into taking a walk so I can discreetly clean his

stall. Farley doesn't want me hanging around him, and I'm not keen on keeping him company. He ran away when Farley growled. I lost respect for him after that."

"Farley is a bear. Bears are scary." Peace bit her lip but still nodded. "Well, I can do what you ask, but there is something you should know."

"Like what?" I asked.

The fairy ducked her head and mumbled something.

I stared at her. "How about holding my gaze and speaking loud enough for me to actually hear it?"

Peace let loose a groan. "I don't want to tell you. You'll lose all respect for me. This is even worse than me sleeping with your boyfriend."

I fisted both my hands on my hips. "You asked me to let your friends stay. I thought Prince Robin was your friend."

"He is more than just my friend. Prince Robin is my intended."

I tilted my head and studied her. "Intended for what?"

Her sigh was loud. "When I am ready to settle down, I'm supposed to settle down with Prince Robin. I protested this choice to my mother for very good reasons. Instead of understanding, she cursed him with so much allure that females could not resist him."

I blinked in surprise, but then it hit me. "I get it. She turned him into the male version of you so he could catch up to you in experience. Only he hasn't. Lord Alfred said Prince Robin was... uh... abstaining. I think that was the term."

“Robin does not want me, Selene. He wants to marry someone like himself. I can’t be someone so inexperienced. His idea of a date is ordering in food and playing video games in the basement of his castle. I feel like I belong to a different generation. I’m only three hundred years old, but I am next in line to rule all fairies. I cannot shirk my duties to my people.”

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“If you’re three hundred, how old is Prince Robin?”

“I believe he is two hundred and ninety-nine.”

“So you’re the same age, but he’s a totally different person. And you have nearly nothing in common.”

Peace shrugged. “I do not hate him—quite the opposite. We have been friends all our lives. I sincerely want Robin to be happy with whoever he wants.”

“So your mother is making you work here at the inn while he’s hiding out here. That’s some next-level manipulation, Peace. The fairy queen and The Baba Yaga are two of a kind.”

Peace nodded and lifted both hands. “I do not mind being in Robin’s company. Mother was not cruel enough to make him irresistible to me. As the heir to her throne, I must choose him willingly. It is a royal law that even she has to honor.”

I tapped my finger to my lips as I pondered the situation. There was nothing to be done except to fake Peace working here until her situation either resolved itself or failed miserably.

I stopped tapping to study her. “Do you want me to walk with Robin while you clean out his stall?”

Peace winced and shook her head. “If I were willing to marry him, I still wouldn’t want to shovel his shit. Robin’s mother spoils him. He does nothing but play video

games all day. At least I'm out doing actual work for my kingdom."

"Is Robin the youngest child?" I asked.

Peace nodded. "Yes. His older brother, Earl, is the heir. His sister, Patrice, occupies the role of hospitality hostess, which means she gossips and arranges the court's entertainment. Robin does nothing and is never asked to do anything. I was supposed to marry Earl, but he found his true love nearly a century before Robin and I were born. Mother is determined to align our kingdoms so Robin and I have little choice. All we can do is avoid our commitment for as long as possible."

"Maybe Robin is more ambitious than you think he is. As the youngest child in my family, I expected to get my way all the time too, but I was never spared from hard work. Perhaps he's a software developer who creates the games. If so, he could be quite wealthy."

Peace made a sound that I couldn't interpret. "It would be shocking and unnecessary since he receives money from a trust. We both do."

I crossed my arms. "Are you going to clean the stall or walk the centaur? Choose."

Peace snorted. "I can see you will be a demanding boss."

"After I clean the stall, you and I are going to head to the basement and check out the rooms downstairs. While you're changing the sheets upstairs, I'm going to talk to Jezel. The upstairs rooms are for guests. Staff sleep in the basement."

"You are not sleeping in the basement."

I lifted an eyebrow. "Because I'm not staff. I'm the innkeeper. Your mother will never believe you work here if you're sleeping in a guest room."

“Fine,” Peace said. “I will walk Prince Robyn.” She stomped to the kitchen door. “This is cruel punishment. Mother would never sentence Allegheny to manual labor.”

“Talking a walk with a handsome man is not manual labor. He even brought a saddle with him. If you’re feeling truly lazy, maybe you could ride him instead of walking.”

Peace glared at me. “Is that supposed to be innuendo?”

I grinned at her. “No, but now that you mention it, that is rather funny. We’ll prep the room upstairs for your mother’s spy. The distance between your sleeping quarters and theirs will send the perfect message.”

“This is very demeaning. I am not happy.”

“Well, get happy, Princess. Your new job is to keep the guests satisfied.” I chuckled and waved my fingers to shoo her out of the kitchen. “Don’t let Alfred hop along, if you can help it. He’s a disturbingly cute bunny but very judgy-mcjudgerton. Something tells me Robin’s celibacy is not merely self-inflicted. Lord Alfred strikes me as a consummate clock-blocker.”

“Do you truly think Sir Alfred is forcing him to be chaste?”

“Yes. He was unrepentant about interrupting my third date with Farley. The man needs to get laid so he’ll regret going so long without that basic human comfort.”

Peace winced. “Perhaps I would prefer being in the basement if you decide to indulge with Farley. You seem like someone who would make a lot of noise during sex. I imagine the bear will growl the whole time. It would be intolerable to have to listen to the two of you while I am practicing celibacy.”

I stared at her, blinking over the insults. She just didn’t know when to shut up. “Pot,

kettle, black—Princess Squeak-With-Every-Bounce. I thought you were a freaking pixie. Ooo. Ooo. Ooo.”

She threw up her hands and muttered something before stomping out. I was proud of myself for waiting until she left to dissolve into laughter. Letting the arrogant royal pretend to work here was probably the stupidest thing I’d ever agreed to do. On a brighter note, Carol would be appalled to find out I put a fairy princess to work in her inn. No doubt, the witch protectress would think I was extorting the fairy. Even if Carol believed my story about the situation, I knew she’d still hate the political optics because it looked really bad. The Baba Yaga was a protectress, not an extortionist.

In truth, I didn’t mind helping Peace deceive her manipulative mother. Getting Peace’s hands dirty with actual work would be enjoyable as well. I felt no debt was owed to me, but it wasn’t like I was getting paid to work here, either. If people knew Carol was using me as slave labor, then Peace being here would look even worse.

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I wondered how much extra jail time supporting the royal would cost me.

5

I giggled as Farley stepped behind me, pressing his enormous body seductively against mine. For someone who claimed to have no romantic experience, the genius bear shifter possessed some very smooth moves. His soft growl in my ear made me smile and moan. What he was doing made it nearly impossible to focus on what I was viewing through the window over the sink.

“Look at them. I think Peace likes Prince Robin far more than she wants to admit. She’s riding him in our backyard without even a saddle between them. He’s not a horse, for Goddess sake.”

“Why do you think he brought a saddle? Do he give rides to curse-attracted females to lure them into his bed?”

I turned to stare up at him. “No, the prince doesn’t seem like the sort to go around offering rides to people in his centaur form. He’s an intellectual like you. I’m sure being stuck in a centaur form is a true trial for him.”

“He might not deserve his fate, but I still don’t like him,” Farley declared. “And I certainly don’t want you imagining what it would be like to ride him with a saddle. If you want to ride a wild animal, I’ll change into my bear.”

I rolled my eyes. “Dude, stop with the man-drama. I saw a saddle when they checked in. It’s a large fancy leather one. When I discovered that Alfred was a lesser fairy

beneath his rabbit exterior, my mind took a completely different direction. I thought perhaps they might have a secret relationship that his family disapproves of.”

“Do they?” Farley asked hopefully.

I shrugged my shoulders. “I’m uncertain, but I don’t believe that’s the case. Even if it were, I’m not a witch who judges. ‘And it harm none’ applies to everything in my worldview of life. An innkeeper’s job is to respect a guest’s privacy and ensure their stay is comfortable. I’m going to do that for as long as I’m doing this job.”

Farley sighed into my ear and lifted his head to look where I was looking. “She looks miserable. Should I go rescue the princess?”

I laughed. “No, Peace needs to suffer. Plus, she is doing precisely what I asked her to do. Although technically, I suggested she take Prince Robin for a walk. Riding the prince bareback never occurred to me.”

“Is she doing it because she’s under his spell?” Farley asked.

I shook my head. “No, I think Peace is immune to the curse. The fairy queen did this to him. Worse, her mother convinced Peace that she owes me a debt because of Ethan. She’s manipulating both of them. While I don’t think her intentions are malicious, she still needs to sever her emotional attachment to them getting together. Attraction is either there or it isn’t. Robin is too much of a brainiac for her. Peace is too much of a socializing free spirit. When Paul’s around, Peace goes out to dance with him. Enjoying life is Peace’s default setting.”

“You’re saying they’re as different as you and me,” Farley said quietly.

“Except that we have a lot of chemistry. And I like our differences. You’re the most interesting male I’ve ever met.”

His arms tightened around me as I studied the couple for a long moment. Robin said something over his shoulder, and Peace laughed a bit. Then she ran her hands down his hair and gripped it at the point on his back where it turned into his mane. Maybe they had more chemistry than she was willing to admit to him or herself.

Robyn chuckled as she slid off his back and to the ground. Showing he had at least a little game, he reached out and took her hand in his. After staring at her for a long time, he pulled her along as he walked. They headed down the trail back to Assjacket. I hoped they wouldn't go too far.

“They seem to really like each other. I don't hate him when he's with her.”

I smiled and leaned back in his giant arms. “Their families betrothed them to each other when they were children. Peace claims that she and Robin are only friends. If Alfred is right about the prince choosing to abstain until he marries, Peace has been living a far more adventurous social life than him. The point of the curse seems to be to force Prince Robyn to give in to his baser urges and catch up a bit with her. I can even see why the fairy queen would think that was a good idea, but it's too much pressure.”

“Yes, well, that curse could also get him killed. Love and lust potions are fickle. That's how my brothers and I came to be. My evil witch mother tested a love potion on Dad Charlie. As infants, we were dropped off at Dad Chuck's door by mistake. Dad Chuck said he kept us and raised us because we smelled like family. Mom Hildy and Dad Chuck almost didn't get together because of us.”

“Luckily, things worked out for them in the end for them, though, right? Carol said they were the most loving couple she'd ever known. The Baba Yaga loved your Mom Hildy like a sister.”

Farley nodded. “It was Mom Hildy who figured out that Dad Charlie was our

biological father. But when I think of it now, I realize that the whole town raised us. That's one reason all three of us keep coming back to Assjacket to help everyone. All the people in the town are our family."

I reached up and placed my hand against his cheek. "I'm so glad your evil birth mother dropped you off with your real family. If your birth mother hadn't done that horrible, terrible thing to your dads, I never would have met you. I truly believe creating you and your brothers was the best mistake any magical could ever make. You can believe me, Farley, because I've made a lot of mistakes that did not turn out well."

My heart leaped when I glimpsed a hint of fang in his smile. I really, really liked him. Farley could have been any creature, and I would have liked him just as much. It was his heart and caring that drew me. He was a better person than I could ever hope to be. I found him inspiring.

Farley covered my hand on his cheek with one of his own. "When I first dreamed of you, Auntie Carol promised to help me find you. Despite being The Baba Yaga, she became a more significant part of our lives after Mom Hildy died. She's been there for Zelda, too, and I can tell you that hasn't been easy for anyone. My brothers and I got lucky that our mutual birth mother abandoned us because she kept Zelda and messed with her head. Zelda is still healing from her crappy childhood."

"I've heard a lot of stories about her, but never met her. I greatly admire Carol for not giving up."

"Zelda is mostly a good person and a very successful Shifter Whisperer. Mom Hildy would have been very proud of her work with the people in town." Farley winced as he ran a hand through his hair. "So I guess you also know Carol is dating Zelda's dad, Fabio. Well, Fabio is also Mom Hildy's younger brother. No matter how much I ponder the explanation, my family's story is too complicated to explain clearly. I

don't normally share this much."

"You don't have to worry about me. Carol constantly brags about her on-again, off-again relationship with Fabio. She seems pretty content with him now, and I envy her. Not every career woman finds that kind of support in a lover. I certainly never have."

"Until now," Farley said as he raised one finger.

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“There’s no need to make me promises.” I smiled at him. “All I want is the pleasure of your company.”

“Do we need to wait for that pleasure until your guests leave?”

My sigh was loud. “That would be the mature thing to do, wouldn’t it?”

Farley chuckled at the disappointment in my tone. “Maybe I could soundproof your bedroom.”

“Yes, well, I tried doing that with magic. The inn wouldn’t let me. My lack of privacy is something I need to discuss with Jezel. What if being an innkeeper were my permanent job? Am I supposed to give up my love life for the sake of my guests? That doesn’t seem fair.”

“We’ll work it out,” Farley promised.

“Yes, we will,” I said, echoing his determination.

I sighed deeply again. “Okay. I’m liking this too much, and I have work to do. Turn me loose,” I ordered, sliding away. “Unfortunately, I have to go muck out Prince Robin’s stall. Princess Peace is keeping him busy for me while I do it.”

“I’ll help you if you want,” Farley said.

“Maybe you can help me spread the fresh hay.”

Farley looked at the doorway. “Paul said the porch would be done shortly. He wants me to shift to my bear to make sure it can hold me in my largest size. Should I do that first?”

“Yes. There’s no need for both of us to get stinky. After I grab my stable-cleaning shoes, I’ll deal with my currently shitty life. Your Auntie Carol is going to pay big for getting me into this mess.”

“If you’re that miserable, why do you sound so happy?”

I thought about it and shrugged. “Because I will love getting revenge for my unjust incarceration. Honestly, I’m more cut out to be a jailer than an innkeeper.”

“You’re a very strange woman sometimes,” Farley said.

I laughed at his bemused tone. “You know, Farley, most people tell me that at some point. Consider yourself warned.”

The prince’s stall was messier than I’d expected. Sighing, I turned my attention to the lesser of two evils and checked out the rabbit’s area. Alfred had hopped off somewhere, likely spying on Peace and Robin. I examined his small, hollowed-out bed and found no tiny brown droppings that needed removal. Clearly, Lord Alfred was fastidious in every way.

Too bad I couldn’t say the same for Prince Robyn. His stall was a hot, centaur mess. At least the royal had only defecated in one corner, even if the mound was at least a foot tall.

I tied a cloth over my face to reduce the smell while I located the rake and wheelbarrow. Honestly, this work was no worse for me than composting my herb gardens back home. I was shoveling centaur manure like a madwoman when Jezel

showed up uninvited.

“Good Goddess, Selene, what in the seven hells are you doing?”

My answer got muffled by the cloth over my mouth. “What’s it look like? I’m cleaning the centaur’s room,” I said, pointing to the dwindling pile of poop. “It wasn’t going to remove itself.”

Jezel snorted. “I understand the task, but why are you not using the inn’s magic to get rid of it? If you had an entire house full of guests, you’d never get all the chores done manually. Pull out the inn’s wand, witch. That’s why I gave it to you. Even using your weaker normal wand would be better than shoveling the excrement yourself.”

Ignoring my translucent tormentor, I pushed the now full wheelbarrow to the end of the stables and set it just outside the door. Upon returning to the area, I gathered the breakfast dishes into a tub I’d brought with me and piled the trash on top of them.

“I thought I would start a compost pile on the edge of the inn’s grounds. In a few months, the real innkeeper will be able to use the decomposed materials to grow vegetables. They can call me if they want me to help. I wouldn’t mind that.”

Jezel rolled her eyes. “Good Goddess... not this nonsense, again.”

I stopped tugging on the fresh hay bale and stared at her. “What are you complaining about now?”

Jezel grunted indignantly. “You are the real innkeeper.”

Snorting, I went back to tugging hay out of the bale. “It is not nonsense... and no, I am not the real innkeeper. When my incarceration period is done, I will be leaving this place. Until then, I’m willing to do the job to keep busy because it beats doing

nothing. Also, I like the idea of making the inn's owner owe me.”

Jezel crossed her transparent arms. “Your foolish views on your presence here don’t explain why you are not using the inn’s magic to do guest chores. That’s a no-brainer as you people like to say.”

“Because I tried to use the inn’s magic to soundproof my bedroom, and the wand wouldn’t obey me. Also, you wouldn’t come when I called. Neither you nor your wand will control my power with your magical threats, bribes, or withholding. My bare minimum requirement for this Goddess-forsaken place is to be truly alone in the room where I fall unconscious every night. You need to wake up and smell today’s reality, Jezel. You’re determined to sell me your ancient shit and I don’t need more that. I have a wheelbarrow full just outside the stable.”

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Agitated, Jezel crossed and uncrossed her arms. “Your focus should be more on your work here and less on the progression of your relationship with the bear. There will time for him later if you absolutely must have him.”

I stopped spreading hay to glare at her. “Farley is the only thing that makes being here tolerable. No matter what you think, being an innkeeper is not my real work. The inn comes with an ugly uniform and a bossy ghost guardian who thinks I don’t use magic well. What witch in her right mind would accept such a situation? I’m going to be your witch robot.”

Jezel threw up her hands. “While I still lived in my mortal form, I spelled the inn to find a proper keeper whenever it needed one. The selection process it uses has worked for centuries. The last innkeeper was a darling widow. She wanted nothing more than to care for the guests.”

“If I’m correct about the last time this place was alive, your darling innkeeper would have worked in the early 1900s. Good luck finding a modern witch willing to give up her entire life for this place. I have physical needs and career plans, Jezel. Those plans do not include staying at this place like some country bumpkin old maid.”

Jezel watched me spread fresh straw in the stall. “I thought your bear said he would spread that for you.”

“He did, but Farley’s also helping Paul with the front porch. I’m trying to keep this place from falling apart. Yet, as I already said, you need to leave Farley out of this. Farley is a genius inventor, a weapons maker, and the creator of things I can’t even begin to explain. His father is a renowned scientist, and his brothers are extraordinary

too. If you're thinking of leveraging the bear shifter to keep me here at the inn, that's not going to happen, either. Farley comes and goes from the Assjacket area just like his brothers. No bear in that amazing family is going to stick around an old inn wearing a silly pilgrim costume and cleaning up after centaurs."

"You can't answer for him. The bear adores you. He would walk through fire to be with you. Few witches find that sort of devotion, Selene."

"Yes, I am well aware of Farley's good points," I said, glaring at her as I closed the stall door. The ghostly guardian of the inn needed a reality check, and I was the right person to give her one. "You and the inn hibernated during the last century while the magical world underwent a significant evolution."

"Life is cyclical. Things don't truly change. They just repeat."

I chuckled. "That's true, but also short-sighted. Are you aware that dragons live and flourish out in the open now? That came about because the previous witch protectress turned into one."

"I remember her well, but I prefer the newest one. The Baba Yaga is not as quick to make a rash decision."

I laughed. "If you think that, you don't know Carol very well. Putting me in this place to satisfy a councilwoman trying to stab her in the back seems pretty rash to me."

"You are rash by nature. I'm surprised you would notice."

"I hate it here," I said, finishing the stall. I turned to look at her. "The witch protectress operates as a free agent, rather than being a contract slave to the Council of Witches. She acts as she pleases. Don't even get me started on the brazenness of evildoers these days. You saw what Ethan and his wanker mother did while trying to

steal the fairy's power. Every action ripples, Jezel. The centaur is only here because the fairy queen cursed her potential son-in-law to torment her royal daughter. The inn is currently serving as nothing more than a respite for stressed paranormals needing time away from their manipulative families."

"Yes, I overheard your morning conversation with the fairy princess."

I huffed. "That doesn't surprise me since I have no privacy. You can add your spying and eavesdropping to the list of reasons I'm not interested in being your full-time lackey."

Jezel lifted a hand. "You had the inn's wand in your pocket. It was impossible not to overhear."

"You've been speaking to me in my head since your first appearance. You could have warned me you were listening, but you didn't bother. What kind of conclusions do you expect me to draw from your silence?"

"I was keeping silent to be polite."

I let my eye roll speak as loudly as my words because Jezel was pretending to be obtuse as well as innocent. Neither was true.

When I left the stable, I could feel her floating behind me. I heard hammering out front and moved through the yard to the back door. Once inside the kitchen once more, I took the wand out of my back pocket and smacked it down on the beautiful counter.

"If I leave this here, do you have to stay with it? Because I definitely don't want you trailing me to the bathroom and watching me clean up."

Jezel sighed without answering me. She might be from another era, but sarcasm was timeless.

I turned and went to my room. A quick wash and a change of shoes made me feel better. Jezel was right that it would be tough if I had to do that kind of cleaning manually every day. I had no idea how long Lord Alfred and Prince Robin would be staying. They could be here for weeks, and the thought didn't make me happy.

Needing more tea to even think about it, I put the kettle on to boil. Jezel's presence seemed to be gone. I tucked the wand in my back pocket, but I didn't bother calling her back because it wouldn't change anything.

Her idea of an innkeeper was a docile witch who used her magic only under duress. Carol often asked me to help her track down rogue magicals because I didn't mind confrontations or doing whatever was necessary to bring someone in.

Jezel should have discussed it with Carol before raising her hopes about me. I didn't run away weeping when I caught Ethan being unfaithful. Instead, I punished him. And despite my unfair incarceration, I still had zero regrets about my actions and would do the same again.

Life came with consequences. People who didn't think so were lying to themselves. I'd long ago decided that I'd rather live on my terms and deal with what came from my decisions, rather than cower in fear and never take a risk.

Docile was not a word that would ever describe me—not if I could help it.

And it wasn't my fault that the inn made a mistake in choosing me.

Farley volunteered to take Lord Alfred and Prince Robin to Assjacket for lunch. With Zelda and Mac both in town today, he assured me they would be safe. He mentioned a sandwich shop with outdoor seating where a centaur with a rabbit companion would feel right at home. The porch was finished, so Paul and his mates offered to join them in their half-forms. There was safety in numbers, so I sent them off with well wishes.

Since I was confined to the inn's border, I decided this was a good time to head down to the basement. A very quiet Peace trailed along with me. At the last minute, I'd relented and grabbed the inn's wand from the kitchen counter. My arms still hurt from shoveling, so I wasn't about to move furniture by myself.

"It's dark down here," Peace said as we descended the stairs.

I nodded. "Yes, it is. This is my first time checking it out. I recall someone saying that vampire guests stayed down here. I might leave one room set up for dark-loving creatures, but the others need to have some daylight. Hopefully, Paul and his mates can put in some windows."

Peace stood in the dark hallway and sighed. "This place is depressing."

I opened the first door and found a dark room with no windows. Door number two featured a large transom window that revealed the interior of a rain grate at ground level. Some light filtered through from the grate area, but not much. It must be why there were no curtains.

“Let’s keep this one on the short list and hope for a better one,” I said.

The fairy princess sighed loudly. “I don’t like sleeping below the ground. Can I sleep in the horse stall next to Robin’s?”

A grin took over my mouth. “Sure. However, since you’re now a member of my staff, you would have to clean out the stall for yourself. Why don’t you just shrink yourself and sleep in Prince Robin’s luxurious mane? I doubt he would mind.”

Peace shook her head. “Lord Alfred would never allow such intimacy between us. He would think it was inappropriate of me to even ask.”

I glanced at her and saw disappointment in her expression. “I know he’s not quite three hundred years old yet, but Prince Robin seems plenty old enough to make his own decisions about such things. Forget Alfred. The two of you should do what you want.”

“Robin would never defy Lord Alfred. He has been a second father to him.”

A thought occurred to me. “Was there ever a Lord Alfred in your life?”

“No,” Peace said, hanging her fairy head. “I kept running away from my assigned guardians because I hated following their rules. Mother eventually took me in hand herself. She forced me to sit at her side until she began giving me assignments outside our kingdom. In hindsight, I would have experienced more freedom if I had not pushed my caregivers away. Lord Alfred does not interfere with Robin’s choices unless they involve me.”

I paused with my hand on door number three. “Is it because Robin is allegedly betrothed to you?”

“Yes,” Peace said softly. “Lord Alfred believes I will still choose Robin as my husband. He does not see my flaws or my unworthiness.”

Her sad tone made me look at her. “Hold on... why are you unworthy? You’re three hundred years old. Were you supposed to be abstaining this whole time?”

“Mother never asked that of me. She rarely agrees with my decision-making, but she finds no fault in the males I take to bed.”

I blinked in surprise, but managed to nod. “Good for her, then. I’m not condoning your sexual choice to sleep with my former almost-fiancée, but in general, I think women should be able to do what they feel is necessary for their well-being. Deciding to share your body with someone is a very personal decision.”

“Sleeping with Ethan felt like a seduction game. I wanted to prove I could enjoy being with him without giving him what he wanted. It was not a good reason to share myself.”

“What is a good reason? Isn’t that a personal decision? Farley’s family says he’s been waiting for me all his life because of a dream he had during puberty. He tells me he’s dated no one else. I want to be with him, but his chastity puts a lot of pressure on me.”

Peace bit her lip. “Do you worry that he will be disappointed and regret waiting?”

My laughter echoed down the hallway as I pushed open door number three. The room had multiple transoms along the top of one wall. It was the only bedroom that had light so far. “I think this one will work for you.”

“The room is fine, Selene. I would like to hear your answer. Why did you laugh?” Peace asked.

I smiled at her. “I laughed because my desire for Farley is stronger than my concerns that he’ll be disappointed. It also doesn’t hurt that he already kisses me better than anyone else ever has. Farley and I both agree we are destined to be together, no matter how many unexpected guests show up or how often Jezel tries to stop us.”

“Does she not think the bear is worthy?”

I shrugged. “Maybe Jezel thinks I’m not worthy to be with him. I’m a woman with experience. Why would I pretend to be a virgin? If his male ego is that fragile, we’re doomed before we start. I’m not ashamed of anything I’ve done. You shouldn’t be ashamed of yourself, either—not even of being with Ethan. He told me it was not the first time he was unfaithful. It was just the first time I caught him.”

“My situation is different. Robin is not a virgin.”

I braked in front of door number four. “Did he tell you that?”

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“No,” Peace said, sighing heavily. “I know it because I seduced him when we were young. I wanted to get it over with. He was my first... and I was his. I did it to irk my mother... and his. He was a wonderful lover.”

I stared at her. “I’m weirdly happy for both of you. I would rebel, too, if my family ever tried to marry me off. They never liked Ethan, and I never told them about my almost-engagement to him. But I wasn’t ashamed of the sex we had. I was only ashamed because I was with him only because I was lonely. Everyone makes mistakes, Peace. Ethan was my worst one. Maybe he was yours as well.”

“He was,” she admitted, nodding her head. “Prince Robin, though, was not a mistake. However, when we were first together, I did not share his elation at how compatible we were. When I refused to make us official back then, he threw himself into his work. Our paths seldom crossed over the last century. I never asked him to be celibate, Selene. Why would he allow that to be his fate?”

I smiled at her question. “I asked Farley that same question, and he said he didn’t want to start something with someone who would never be me. I believe he felt it was too much trouble. You would have to ask Robin to be certain of his reasons.”

The fourth bedroom was another dark, cramped space. There were no windows, just solid walls.

“Room three is the only possibility,” I said.

Peace drew in a sharp breath. The innkeeper’s outfit appeared on my body before the doorbell even rang. I glared up at the ceiling. “Goddess damn it, Jezel. Now, I have to

walk upstairs in these stupid skirts.”

“Would you like me to answer the door for you?”

I held up a finger as I closed my eyes. I allowed myself to remotely view the person asking to be let in. It was a sturdy woman who wore a deep frown. “What will your mother’s spy look like?”

“I have no idea. My mother is the queen. She is the sneakiest fairy in the whole world. Her spy might not even announce her purpose in being here.”

I huffed. “So your mother’s spy could be the one ringing the doorbell.”

“Yes,” Peace said contritely.

I shook my head. “Stay down here and choose the room you want. When I return, we will get the inn to move some furniture in for you.”

Peace sighed. “Fine—if I must sleep down here.”

“You must,” I said, lifting my clothes out of the way to retrieve the wand from my panties.

Jezel always left my underwear on when she put me in this dress, but she took my pants every time. The wand had been in the back pocket of my pants, and now it rested against my bare backside.

If Jezel was trying to kiss my ass after our fight, she was positioned perfectly.

Wand in hand, I hurriedly climbed the stairs. Well, no, I actually didn’t get to hurry, because I was trying the whole time not to trip on all the layers of fabric covering my

feet.

By the time I finally reached the entryway, I was breathing hard. These clothes weighed a ton, and walking around in them was like wearing ankle weights during a workout.

I pulled open the door.

“Greetings, Innkeeper. The fairy queen has sent me to check on her daughter, Princess Peace and Harmony. Do you have a room for me?”

“Greetings. My name is Selene. What is yours?”

Her gaze shifted away from mine at the question. I suddenly knew with certainty that whatever she said was going to be a lie. I automatically didn’t like her because of it.

“My name is Gertruda.”

“Okay, well, welcome, Gertruda. My accommodations are modest due to recent renovations. I do have a room available if you can overlook the daily work being done.”

“I understand you provided sanctuary to the princess during her business travels. I would be most happy with the room you offered her.”

I smiled. “That room is not available. I have another you can use. You will be the first guest to use it since it’s been redone.”

It was difficult not to smirk when Gertruda the Barracuda’s eyes lit up with pleasure. I mentally asked Jezel to put the worst mattress in storage on her bed. It was petty of me, but I didn’t care. She was here to spy on Peace. I would prioritize Peace’s well-

being over this woman's sleeping comfort any day.

I opened the screen door we'd been speaking through and held it open. "You will need to wait in the parlor while I make final adjustments to your room, Gertie."

"It's Gertruda."

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I grinned as I led her into the drab parlor. The chairs I'd used for Peace were still there. My new guest frowned at them before looking around to frown harder at the room.

"This room is too shabby for visitors. When will this room be done?" she asked.

"You'd have to ask the actual owner. I'm just the temporary help."

I smiled a little when Gertruda's eyes narrowed. "Are you not the innkeeper now?" she asked.

"Yes, but not the permanent one," I said, lifting my chin. I smiled wickedly at her. "Excuse me. I need to see to your room. The princess is moving into staff quarters downstairs."

"It is good to hear she is taking her mother's advice."

I barked out a short laugh. "I think it rather shows a weakness in her character. Peace and I settled our personal account long ago. If I had my way, she'd be staying in her original room upstairs, but then what kind of report would you make to your queen?"

Gertruda the Barracuda's face reddened. "The queen has her reasons for what she's done."

"If you consider a profound disrespect for her daughter's well-being, then perhaps you speak the truth. However, I am not pleased with the situation. That said, I like Peace enough to allow her to decide what she wants to do."

Gertruda the Barracuda lifted her double chin. “You speak of things you do not know, innkeeper. One does not disrespect the fairy queen.”

“I would rather disrespect her than the princess. If the queen came here herself, I would tell her the same thing. She’s not being a good mother. She is being unnecessarily cruel.”

“You are being impertinent about matters that are none of your business.”

“Perhaps I am, but you’re here to steal my friend's happiness. Do not think that you will be allowed to criticize, coerce, or cause trouble for the fairy princess while under this roof. I may only be the temporary innkeeper, but I take the role very seriously. If you want to know how seriously, speak to The Baba Yaga.”

I touched the wand to my clothes, which disappeared in an instant. Luckily, my pants returned before I revealed too much. I glanced at my fuming guest, who now watched me cautiously.

“I’ll return to collect you shortly. In the meantime, I will put on the kettle to make you some tea. Please take this opportunity to reflect on our discussion. Or you may simply consider yourself warned. I will not mention it again unless you give me reason to do so.”

7

Peace settled for the room with the most light, despite it being the last one in the hallway. I tapped her doorway and visualized moving the furniture from the nice bedroom upstairs into Peace’s new room in the basement.

Peace entered the room and looked around. “This is a little better,” she admitted. Her gaze lingered on the furniture and some new area rugs that had appeared beneath it.

Her clothing trunks were stacked against the wall under the transom windows. Unfortunately, her new bedroom was nowhere as light and bright as either of the rooms upstairs.

Maybe there was a spell that could improve the space. Artificial light was better than none. Right?

Peace turned to me. “Thank you for going to all this trouble for me, Selene.”

I nodded. “You’re welcome. Do you want to take the tea tray up to the spy’s room?”

Sighing, she nodded. “It would be a good thing for me to deliver it.”

“Who is Gertruda?”

Peace thought for a moment. “I don’t know. Mother snatches up a lesser fairy and compels them to serve her when she needs someone. The Gertruda woman probably doesn’t remember who she really is or what she used to do. I will have to look into her life after this is done because my mother sometimes forgets to release her spelled servants. It is not unusual for me to do the restoration for her.”

“Are you going to be that kind of queen?” I asked.

Peace sat down hard on her bed. “No, I would rather spell my normal servants against harming me rather than take advantage of complete strangers. No-harm bindings are commonplace. I would at least have the illusion of trust.”

“I get the feeling that trust is in short supply for fairies.”

Peace shrugged. “That’s why violating your kindness was such a big deal. I owe you more than I can ever repay.”

I used the wand and pulled an extra chair from storage. I positioned it in front of her and sat. When I spoke, I chose my words carefully. “You do owe someone, but it isn’t me.”

She made a face. “Yes. I know. I owe Prince Robin too.”

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“Nope—not him, either. If Robin wants you, he needs to get you to see him as the best man. Actions speak loudly. Lord Alfred uses Robin’s chastity as a bargaining chip and/or a guilt trip. Take your pick. Either way, it’s a form of manipulation. The biggest thing I think Robin has going for him is that he’s never told Lord Alfred the truth. Men like to brag about the women they’ve bedded. Women tend to keep the truth to themselves out of fear of being judged.”

Peace nodded vigorously. “That is so very true.”

“I know. My sister told me that her husband was the only man for her. She said that was her choice, but that I had to make the right choice for me. I’m not the kind of person who commits fast... or ever. I said yes to Ethan for all the wrong reasons. I’m being much more cautious with Farley. He’s an easier man to like, even if he is a bear sometimes.”

When that got a chuckle out of her, I lifted a hand and waved it all away. “I don’t know how things work for fairy kind, but historically, the mortal world would see Robin’s chastity as him having a physical problem. Males are encouraged to sexually sample all the females they can. They’re expected to be the more sexually experienced ones in a relationship. Women are trained to abstain and save themselves for the right person. Less sexual experience is a preference. Yet neither has anything to do with sexual value or any other kind of value for males or females. It’s like what you like on a pizza. The only way you learn is to try various pizzas.”

Peace chewed her lip. “Who is the pizza?”

Laughing, I thought it through. “You and Robin are both pizzas. He’s cheese only,

and you're the one with everything."

She hid her giggle behind her hand. "He's not that boring."

I chuckled. "Maybe not, but it makes my analogy funnier. What does he normally look like?"

"He looks a lot like his centaur self, but with legs."

"I can tell you like him, Peace. He can tell too. You're doing your relationship an injustice by worrying about whether or not you're worthy enough. Everyone deserves to be loved for who they really are. That's a really, really hard thing to find in this world we live in. I would think two people who are three centuries old would have realized that by now. I'm only thirty-ish and I know that."

"What is thirty-ish?"

"It means that I don't like talking about my age."

"Ah... discreet deception," Peace said with a smile.

"I prefer prevarication. It sounds nicer." I stood and waved my wand at the chair, returning it to storage. "I need to go start dinner. When you're settled, come take tea to the spy. Tell her as little as you can. What you do is none of her business. Don't forget that."

Peace clapped her hands and giggled. "What happens at the inn, stays at the inn! I have found your mantra."

"Yes. That's right," I said with a chuckle, heading out of her room.

“Prince Robin seemed to prefer vegetables just like Alfred. I noticed he ordered a veggie burger and ate it, including the bread. It was nice to go to lunch with herbivores. Usually, I feel like the odd person out ordering the veggie burger.”

“Don’t bears eat ants?” I asked.

“Yes. Bears are omnivores. I prefer to limit my consumption of insects to when I need extra protein. You can get a lot of protein just from plants. But I love it when you cook for me. Your honey lemon salmon is the best.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Would that be good for dinner tonight? I think I have some in the freezer and I have another guest. The fairy queen’s spy arrived a couple of hours ago. She calls herself Gertruda.”

“And what do you call her?” Farley asked with a grin.

“I’ve decided that Gertruda the Barracuda has a nice ring.”

“Do you truly enjoy being rude?”

Laughter burst out before I could stop it. “Normally, my answer would be yes, but in this case, I’m irritated because she’s here to spy on Peace. No wonder the fairy can’t make up her mind about her life. Her mother interferes in everything she does, and it’s undermining her confidence.”

“Is Peace upset?”

I thought about it but had to be honest with myself. No harm had been done so far.

“No, Peace seemed to take Gertruda’s presence in stride.”

Farley smiled at me. “After I saw Peace riding on his back, I lost my urge to kill

him.”

“Well, that’s good news.”

“Robin talked about Peace all during lunch. Paul mentioned Peace liked to dance with him and his mates. Robin smiled and said her fun-loving nature was one of the things he liked best about her. Do you think she likes him back? Because he seems devoted to her.”

I shrugged while I lined up vegetables on platters. Just because the prince was stuck in centaur form didn’t mean she couldn’t serve him on a nice plate. “Peace likes Robin a lot, but I’m not sure she loves him. Between Lord Alfred cock-blocking Robin’s urges, and the fairy queen pussy-blocking Peace’s ability to feel sexy, the two of them don’t stand a chance of getting together. I gave Peace a pep talk, but there’s not much else I can do.”

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Farley reached into his back pocket and pulled out a notebook. He flipped a few pages and then stopped to read. When he raised his head, he smiled at her and showed his fangs.

“Were you checking your notes about me?” I asked.

“Yes. And I have faith in you. You are good at this job.”

I chuckled softly and waved at my platters. “Yes, I’m a real whiz at chopping vegetables and putting them on a platter.”

Farley rolled his eyes.

“What was that eye roll about?” I exclaimed, laughing at his action. “I thought I was the eye-rolling person in our relationship.”

“You do a lot more than chop vegetables, Selene. People who come here all have serious issues going on in their lives. You solve them. You solved your own issues and Peace’s at the same time. You solved mine.”

I snorted. “What are you talking about? You didn’t have any problems when we met.”

“I was lonely and looking for you. Finding out you existed solved the biggest problem I’ve ever had that I couldn’t solve by myself. I’m finally able to move on to solving other important things.”

I grinned at him. “Like how to make cold fusion work?”

“Among other things... I also thought that maybe you and I could visit modern deserts and see if we could put my hedge witch magic to work making small areas of them green. The Amazon rainforests are shrinking. Someone has to do something to fix them before they’re gone.”

I stopped to stare. “I would love to travel with you. That’s a great idea.”

“When we’re done fixing the environment, I want to wrestle one of those giant anacondas to see if I’m stronger than it is. Harrison and Garrison have already put bets on it. Dad Charlie chose to abstain.”

I set down my knife to keep from cutting myself. “Do you really think you can fight a more than twenty-foot-long snake that weighs over four hundred and fifty pounds?”

Farley rubbed his jaw. “You’re right. I weigh more and maneuver better. Maybe I’ll wrestle a hippo instead. I’m about the same size in my bear form.”

I leaned on the counter, but no sensible or sane statements came to mind. Giving in to my urge to shriek and rage would do no one any good. So instead, I looked at the bear I adored and shook my head. “Farley, I think I understand now why your family worries about you getting into trouble all the time. You need a keeper.”

“I need you,” he said in his sexiest low voice while showing me his fangs again.

My panties nearly melted away as I stared at his knowing smile. He was learning about me... and learning to flirt. If he learned anything more, the bear would have me flat on my back all the time. That was too much power to give any man, and I had no intention of letting him know it.

I dropped my gaze and did some deep breathing, while visualizing myself mucking out Prince Robin's stall. There was nothing like visualizing centaur poop to calm down a person's libido.

Once I had my raging hormones under control, I blew out a breath and nodded. "I need you too, Farley. But I'm not sure I'm up to being your keeper."

"Well, I'm sure up to being yours, but my brothers said that's not a polite thing to mention to the woman you want to take to bed. They both said it would be better for you to discover that factoid on your own."

My smile was wide. "Your brothers are right, but I'm not your average woman. I enjoy hard truths."

"Then you're going to love mine because it's always that way around you," he said.

I didn't dare answer because that would lead to me laughing and jumping his bones, so I ducked my head and sighed. There was no way I was going to drag Farley to bed with an unfriendly stranger upstairs, a sad fairy in the basement, and a ghost-inhabited wand that didn't want me thinking of sex, much less having any.

How had my own life suddenly turned to centaur shit? And I wasn't talking about what I shoveled out of Prince Robin's stall.

Carol would pay for my current misery, but revenge on The Not-So-Great Baby Yaga couldn't happen until I'd helped Prince Peace and Harmony resolve her low self-esteem issues.

Damn the bear for being right. Helping people was the part I liked best about being here.

When the bullshit moved out of my way, I instinctively knew what to do to fix people's problems. Could I see myself doing this for a living, though? Sometimes I could, but not if it came with a sexually repressed ghost making all the decisions for me. And that Puritan slash Victorian outfit would need a serious makeover before I would ever commit.

Was an innkeeper supposed to give up men forever and walk in Jezel's sexless shoes? That bossy ghost was crazy if she thought I'd ever let that happen to me. If I stayed—and Goddess, I couldn't be serious about this—at the very least, she would have to bring her 1800s sexual beliefs into the 2000s. I would invite who I wanted to my bed and I'd do it whenever I wanted.

Those were brave thoughts and braver words, but my heart knew staying wasn't really an option.

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Jezel had no reason to change herself or the inn... and neither did I.

I didn't know who I felt most sorry for at that moment—me or Peace.

8

As a meddlesome boss, the next day I asked Peace to take Robin for another walk. I secretly watched until the centaur trotted off into the woods with a giggling fairy riding bareback on his haunches. Whoever thought of turning him into a creature to punish him should have made Lord Alfred the centaur and Prince Robyn the bunny.

One of Peace's hands clutched his mane desperately, while the other waved excitedly as she chastised him for going too fast. I couldn't hear the rest of their discussion, but his shoulders shook with wicked, male laughter. Their auras spread to encase each other, and they sweetly bickered. If that wasn't true love happening, I'd eat my wand and the inn's.

Bringing my attention back to my dreaded task of shoveling centaur poop, I looked at the massive pile with dread. Instead of getting the worst over as quickly as possible, I closed my eyes and sighed. My back hurt because this was day four of my shoveling stubbornness. My self-righteous refusal to do things my way had finally given way to a whopping amount of self-pity.

Groaning in defeat, I held up Jezel's wand—the inn's wand. It sparkled in the shaft of light filtering down across the remaining hay bales. "Okay, you win. Help me, Jezel. I need you."

When nothing happened, I punched forward with the wand like I was fencing with the beam of sunlight I stood in. I blew out a frustrated breath when my bossy ghost didn't appear.

"Please," I said in a more pleading tone despite my resolve not to beg.

Yet still, the spiteful ghost ignored me.

Was this supposed to even be happening? I thought I was the one who summoned her. I was the innkeeper, and she was only a ghost. How could she ignore me and the inn in my time of great need?

Staring at the giant pile in one corner of the centaur's stall, I made a mental note to buy fewer fibrous vegetables. Maybe I could convert Prince Robyn to being a carnivore before he left. Red meat can accumulate in the colon, leading to less frequent bowel movements. Right?

I shook the wand with more determination than Harry and Ron learning to levitate. "Innkeeper Jezel, I command you to appear."

By now, Jezel was surely laughing at my lame attempts to call her out. I stopped and hung my head in defeat as the whining began. "Come on, Jezel. I'm sorry. I warned you I wasn't the person you thought I was."

"Who are you speaking to?" Gertruda asked with a frown.

I hadn't seen her enter the stable. She was very stealthy. "No one," I said casually, suddenly on edge. How long had she been listening to me?

She smirked and pointed to where she'd come in. "I was taking a walk and heard you in the stable talking to someone. I thought I might catch Prince Robin and say hello to

him. Instead, I watched you stab a sunbeam with your wand while ranting to your invisible friend.”

I pretended not to have heard the insults in her jabs. Ignoring rudeness was a skill I’d learned from being called to see the Council of Witches so often. Those wankers thought crafting insults were a perk of their magical roles.

“Prince Robin and Princess Peace are out taking a walk together. I’m cleaning the prince’s stall while they’re out. And I wasn’t talking to myself. I was practicing for a play.”

“No, I’m quite sure I heard you talking to yourself. You seemed very animated too. One might think you had gone mad from the dull and dreary menial work you are forced to do.”

I stiffened and felt one of my eyebrows raise. “Well, if you must know, I was talking to an invisible friend. She’s a ghost that lives in my wand. She was the original innkeeper. Does that make more sense to you?”

Gertruda blinked several times before she burst out laughing. “My apologies, innkeeper. Your acting is superb. The level of sincerity in your tone is so realistic that I nearly believed your silly words.”

I smiled at her. Or smirked back. I doubt she would have noticed the difference. Gertruda the Barracuda was as pompous as anyone on the Council of Witches.

“You’re welcome to keep me company, Gertruda. I’m getting ready to shovel centaur shit into a wheelbarrow.”

Gertruda held up a hand. “No, no... I’ll leave you to it. I believe I’ll visit your beautiful backyard gardens. You’re quite the landscape artist too. What’s your

secret?”

I chuckled. “I’m a big believer in composting.”

Gertruda laughed again. She glanced at Prince Robyn’s stall. “I was mistaken, Selene. This job does suit you. You appear to have the perfect skills for it.”

She glided back out of the stable door, still laughing at me. I waited to make sure she was actually gone before heading to get the wheelbarrow. The only thing worse than dealing with the fairy queen’s spy would be Prince Robyn returning while I was still shoveling his poop.

Rolling my eyes, I started walking toward where I’d parked the wheelbarrow.

Stop, Jeziel ordered in my head.

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I did stop and I grinned. “Nice of you to finally say something. Where in the seven hells were you?”

I do not trust that guest. I’m stronger when I am in the wand.

“Oh,” I said, frowning at the news. Gertruda was rude. Was she also a threat in ways I had yet to discover?

That fairy is not who she says she is. I was trying to see through her glamour.

“She calls herself Gertruda. Peace told me her mother chooses a random lesser fairy and spells them to do her bidding.”

Jezel materialized with her arms crossed. “That is no lesser fairy. That’s a royal. They’re masters at disguises.”

“Gertruda the Barracuda is here spying on Peace to ensure she’s working for me like her mother ordered her to do. Peace’s mother keeps putting flaming hoops in front of her to jump through.”

“Is the fairy princess working for you?”

I huffed. “No, of course not. Well, sort of... I guess. I make her walk with Robin while I clean out his stall. It’s been good for them to spend some alone time together, even if I suspect Lord Alfred hops along in the woods in his rabbit form to keep watch in case his precious celibate prince tries to make a pass. Good Goddess, Jezel. Anyone with eyes can see those kids have a lot of shit to work out. The last thing they

need is a judgy audience.”

Jezel peered into the stall. “Looks like you have a lot of shit to deal with yourself.” Her gaze lifted to mine. “They’re both three centuries old, Selene. You’re only in your 30s.”

I waved away the numbers. “I’m sexually ancient compared to them. They want each other and want to be together, but their guardians won’t keep out of their business long enough for the love magic to work the way it’s supposed to.”

“What do you consider to be love magic?” Jezel asked.

“It’s that slight tingle that flutters in your belly when the person you desire is nearby. If you are together long enough, it splits. It moves from your belly up to your heart and also down your hips and into your...”

Jezel’s hand flew up, and my words faded away. “Stop explaining—I understand.”

When the pressure on my throat eased, I grunted in disgust. “I doubt that. You’re the most repressed woman I’ve ever met.”

Jezel looked like I slapped her. Her ethereal form puffed up more than Alfred in full fluffy bunny mode. “I am not repressed,” she said.

I rolled my eyes and turned away to fetch the shovel.

“Use the freaking wand, Selene. Send it all to the compost pile and spread some new hay, for Goddess’s sake.”

Tapping the wand on my hand, I grinned. “Swearing, Jezel? Is that any way for a repressed, dead witch to talk at her inn?”

“Selene...”

Chuckling, I twirled the wand and pointed it at the pile. The poop disappeared like magic. “Thanks, Jezel. You were right. That was much, much easier than shoveling it.”

I was humming and spreading new hay when I heard Prince Robin clip-clopping his way off the path from Assjacket, which now had a bunch of fine gravel covering it. Every other day it seemed either Paul or Farley did something new to improve the path.

The prince’s low voice rumbled, instantly producing delighted giggles in Peace. I smiled at their cuteness and ran to the end of the stable, waving the wand to move Robin and Alfred’s platters back to the kitchen.

I exited one end of the stable just as Peace and Robyn entered the other. Moving quickly, I nearly ran to the back door that entered the kitchen. Not surprisingly, I found Jezel waiting there for me. “That was quick,” I told her with a grin. “Wish I could pop around like you. Transporting takes more magic than I natively possess. Carol tried to teach me, but I couldn’t master it.”

Jezel lifted one translucent shoulder and let it fall. “If you stay, over time you’ll be able to do it because the inn will share its magic with you. Remember when the inn summoned The Baba Yaga and brought her here at your command? Well, it can do similar things for you. Perhaps you might consider that a perk for sticking around.”

My sigh was loud. “Jezel, I just can’t see how this gig could work out for the long term. I don’t want to belong to the inn... or to you. At the risk of sounding like a movie heroine, I’m not the ‘chosen one’ you’ve been searching for.”

“True,” Jezel said soberly, with a nod. “You weren’t the witch I was looking for, but

you're the most perfect witch I've come across. All the quirks that make you nearly too unique are the very things that also make you the perfect innkeeper. I didn't have to even ask you to watch over the fairy princess. You did it naturally."

I grunted. "I did it because I like her... and I like Robin. He's a good guy despite all the people hovering over him. Alfred's actually worse than you about sex, but no one is as bad for her as her mother. If I could solve Peace's problems with a wave of my wand, I would do that. You and I know magic can't fix everything. The only person who can fix Peace is herself."

Jezel crossed her arms. "Let me put this plainly. No matter how annoyed I get with you, I still want you to stay on as the innkeeper. What will it take to make that happen?"

I wanted to tell her nothing, but I saw a way to make the rest of my stay here more bearable—pun definitely intended. "To even consider staying, minimally I would need a sexy new outfit befitting a modern innkeeper... and the inn needs to allow me to soundproof my bedroom."

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“Because of the bear?” Jezel asked.

“No, Jezel, because of me. The bear is Mr. Perfect-for-me-now. I like sex and refuse to let my ex be the last experience of my life. I deserve to make my own mistakes about the men I’m attracted to, especially Farley. He’s the nicest man I’ve ever met.”

Whether or not Jezel heard me, I couldn’t tell. So I went on.

“Not getting any of that stuff won’t make me a slacker about the inn’s guests, though. I feel sorry for Peace and Robin. Their families are ruining their lives. How can they possibly fall in love with someone they’re never allowed to be alone with? Their families need to back the eff off.”

“Such love can happen,” Jezel said wistfully.

I couldn’t pretend that I hadn’t heard the longing in her tone. “Is that how it happened for you?”

“Yes. I had the misfortune to fall in love with a seaman.”

I raised a finger into the air. “Here’s a lesson on modern terms. We refer to men who take advantage as tools these days. It’s less gross than comparing them to body fluids.”

Jezel blinked at me. “What... no!” she exclaimed. “I meant that I fell in love with a sailor who made his living on the sea. He and his mates passed by the inn on their way back to the coast. I put them all up for a night.”

I looked her over. She'd divested her ghostly form of the same Goddess-awful outfit she forced me to wear and wore a straight, well-fitted black dress. It wasn't interesting, but she looked good in it. "Well, I can sort of see that happening for you. You're a beautiful woman, despite your antiquated taste in clothes. I'm sure all those sailors wanted to bed you. How many did you grant that privilege?"

"Innkeeper Selene..." Jezel hissed.

Her outrage was so great that I laughed and laughed. If hell were real, I would go there for teasing her about this. Rumor had it The Baba Yaga could toss people through the veil into the land of demons. I'd never seen her do it, but I knew Carol was capable of far more than most people realized. It was why the Council of Witches feared her.

Initially, three witches were eligible for the role of witch protectress. One of them was Farley's skeezy birth mother. The second was Hildy, the woman who truly raised Farley and his brothers, and the one he considered his actual mother.

Once, after a particularly grueling fight with some ogres, Carol told me that Goddess Morgana transferred The Baba Yaga powers from Farley's evil birth mother to her. Carol said the only reason that even happened was that Hildy first made Carol take her share of The Baba Yaga mojo so she could subdue. There was an entire history about the current witch protectress that the Council of Witches wouldn't let anyone discuss. Carol said it was because it did not shine a favorable light on them politically.

The truths Carol shared with me gave a whole new meaning to the concept of the power of three in the witch tradition. To this day, Carol remained a definite triple-threat witch protectress and a magical badass. I might not always like her, but I respected her. Whatever quirkiness had made me the target of her unique torture could not erase the decade I'd served her whenever she'd called on me to do so.

When I stopped thinking about Carol being The Most Bad Ass Baba Yaga, I noticed Jezel glaring at me for still laughing. “Sorry, Jezel. I was only joking about you taking them all on,” I said, wiping tears of amusement from my eyes. “It’s just hard to imagine you falling for some random man passing through the inn. Prince Robin is sexy times ten, but he ran away the moment Farley growled at him. The curse might provoke my lust, but I needed a lot more to be truly interested in someone.”

Jezel grunted in irritation. “The man I fell in love with was a British Captain—part warlock, part demon, and very powerful. I had never experienced such power in anyone outside myself. He shared my bed for the two weeks he was a guest. Then he left me, never to return as he had promised to do. I waited for a very long time. One day I scryed for him. In my vision, he was an old man, much older than me. He sat in a rocker surrounded by small children. I realized then that he'd forgotten all about me. I had been nothing more than a momentary diversion for him.”

“Ouch... that must have hurt. That stuff happens when one person cares more than the other does. I don’t seem to expect much from men. It keeps my heart safe, I think.”

Jezel swiped a hand through the air. “Only my ego was hurt by what I learned. I did not truly love him, and thankfully, he did not get me with child. The problem was that I badly handled being abandoned. Closing off my heart followed me to my grave and is a lingering character flaw that I’ve come to regret not healing. For that reason alone, I find myself in awe of your scathing arguments to allow you to be a trollop as often as you please.”

I nearly laughed again, but feared she’d get huffy and leave. She might be physically ethereal, but her feelings were totally solid. “Trollop must be the archaic name for a liberated woman. If I had been alive when you were, I likely would have been a true trollop, but so what?”

Jezel lifted an eyebrow. “As a true trollop, you would have turned the inn into a

brothel for magicals.”

The edges of my mouth quirked. “That’s harsh, Jezel, even for you.”

Jezel finally looked at me. “Yes, you’re right. I seem to be picking up your bad habits.”

“If so, that’s definitely going to make things livelier around here,” I said with a chuckle.

The ghost looked at me. “So what are you planning to do about the fairy queen’s machinations?”

“You mean her spy? I’m already calling her Gertruda the Barracuda. What more do you think I should do?”

“You’re a witch, Selene. Afflict her to restrict her.”

I tilted my head. “Are you actually suggesting I mistreat a guest?”

“You know you were already thinking about it—I’m merely giving you permission. And she is not a guest. One rule of the inn is that a guest must state who they are and what they are with all the clarity they possess. A guest is lying to you, and therefore lying to the inn. If we are right about her deceit, the inn will support you in your efforts to extract the truth. Its ability to do that exceeds both human study and witch divination. I suggest starting small. For instance, the well-being of fairies is severely affected by iron.”

I tapped the wand against my chin. “Right. So I could serve her tea in a ceramic-coated cast-iron teapot. Or I could switch out her side table. Or perhaps I could find an antique lamp made of iron. I’d change the bed, but that would be too obvious.

Everything we do needs to be subtle. We don't want her figuring it out too soon."

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Jezel gave a ghostly sigh. “There’s no hope of you managing subtlety, but try your best.”

I opened my mouth to defend my stealth skills, but she’d already disappeared. It was one of the many annoying things Jezel did that irritated me. It was also a perfect example of why my staying on here as innkeeper would be a terrible idea.

9

I carried the tea tray and breakfast up the stairs. The door to her room was open. Gertruda the Barracuda sat in a chair by the window. I set the tray on the small table beside her.

“I added a headache remedy to your tea. The side effect is that you will feel the need to sleep. If you prefer, I can brew you a stimulant to ward off the worst of those effects.”

Gertruda waved her hand. “I’m fine with some extra rest. Will you explain to Peace and Robin?”

I nodded as I poured her tea. “Of course. Perhaps you will feel up to visiting later. Peace eats with me, but I serve Robin in the stable. The prince has me searching for some magic to allow him to be human for a while. Unfortunately, I’ve only been able to grant that luxury to Lord Alfred.”

Gertruda stared at me. “How were you able to transform Lord Alfred? The curse extended to both of them.”

“The inn chose to allow it. My understanding is that these inns are sentient spaces. Its ethereal caretaker informed me that the inn always sees the real guest regardless of the form they arrive in.”

I waited patiently for her panicked blinking to slow. It gave me time to control my urge to grin at her. “Has my visit made your headache worse?”

“No, I’m...” she swallowed. “I’m fine. I find this inn to be a fascinating place.”

I smiled because she was right. “When I’m not seeing it as my prison, I find it fascinating as well. Can I get you anything else, Gertruda? I’m going to try to brew a curse-breaking tea for Robin this afternoon.”

Gertruda shook her head. I made it to the door before she spoke again. “Try brewing the tea with finely ground chestnuts, a dram of horsetail powder, and two strands of his mane. Tea isn’t meant for four-footed creatures. Consumption may allow the inn’s magic to prompt a change.”

And if Robin’s changes distracted us, we might forget to worry about her true identity. I wanted to haughtily inform her that there was no chance of that happening, but I held back.

“Thank you,” I said instead, adding a slight bow. “I will try that.”

Peace sniffed the tea that I was steeping and wrinkled her nose in disgust. “The tea smells horsey. Do you think it will work to convert him back?”

Considering that the fairy queen’s spy had suggested the formula and that she was very eager not to be caught lying to the inn, I felt reasonably confident. I doubted it was a cure, but I hoped it would allow me to use the inn’s magic to transform him.

Alfred's change back to human lasted for a few hours. Wouldn't it be great if Robin could do that too? And maybe I could keep Gertruda feeling bad enough to skip having dinner with the two of them. I was mentally rubbing my hands in glee as I thought about how to make her sicker.

Carol always joked that I had a dark side, but it had never been clearer to me.

"Robyn claims the curse doesn't bother him, because he finds solace in my presence. Fighting off strange women was the hardest part for him."

"Is Prince Robin handsome in his human form?"

Peace pondered my question while I transferred the tea to a portable cup I could take to the prince. It took the fairy princess a while to think it through, but then she smiled. "No, in human form Robin is handsome in a different way. Some men, as you know, are inherently beautiful—like all those in your bear's family. As a centaur, Robin is a gorgeous hunk of maleness. All I want to do is ride him."

I snickered because my sense of humor was worse than a twelve-year-old boy's. "Do you want to ride him in the literal sense, or are you implying a sexual interest in the man part of him?"

"Both, because he is very careful not to jostle me too much in his centaur form. But my carnal urges are only for the human Robin. The human version is the one I like best."

The magical alarm I'd set chimed through the kitchen. I smiled. "The tea should be potent enough now. Let's go find out if it works. Farley's brother is cooking dinner tonight. He'll be delivering it here in the next hour."

"A handsome bear that cooks would be quite the catch. Does Farley cook?"

“I don’t know,” I said with a laugh. “He has a lot of other talents. I’m good with the skills he’s shown me.”

“Farley makes you giggle,” Peace said with a grin.

“Look who’s talking. Prince Robin makes you giggle.”

“Does he?” Peace asked.

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She seemed so surprised that I snorted a bit. “Every time you go for a walk, you ride him into the forest, giggling at everything he says. His smile is so broad that I’m sure his face hurts for the rest of the day. I don’t know who came between you two, but I’m ready to kick their ass. A sexy man who makes you laugh is a keeper in my book.”

Peace smiled at my comments, but she didn’t reply. However, she fairly skipped beside me as we walked out of the house.

Robin kept his eyes on Peace while he drank the tea I made for him. The face he made spoke volumes about the nastiness of it, but magical cures were never tasty.

“Why don’t you and Robin do a lap or two until the cure gets digested?”

Robin made another face and handed his now-empty cup to a giggling Peace. I watched as they started their lap around the yard. There was no sign of Lord Alfred. Robin reported that he was resting with a headache after a mostly sleepless night. I would have to check in on him later.

In the meantime, I slipped the wand from my pocket. Hey, Jezel. Can you hear my thoughts?

Louder than I want to, she replied.

I ducked my head to hide my smile. How long should I wait before trying to transform him?

Given that he's a fairy, his body likely absorbed your magic the moment his lips touched the cup. Their bodies instantly consume power when it's available, which is why they require so little food.

My eyebrow lifted. "Fascinating," I said aloud, forgetting to merely think the thoughts. I clamped my lips together. Thanks.

You're welcome. Be gracious if it fails. The fairy spy could have misled you.

My instincts don't think so, but logically, you could be right.

There is only one way to know for sure.

I nodded reflexively and lifted my head. The prince and Peace were on the other side of the yard, walking through the lavender beds that Farley had coaxed back to life. I whistled and waved. Robin reached out a hand to Peace to swing her up onto his back. Her joyful laughter rang out as Robin jumped over the flower beds and galloped back toward me. It was a beautiful moment that I hated to interrupt with an experiment that might not even work.

"It's time to try," I told them.

Peace slid off the prince's back and skipped to my side. Most of the fairies I'd encountered in life were sultry, like a glass of fine wine. Peace was bubbly like champagne, her effervescence bursting forth in giggles, flirtation, and constant, cheerful chatter. If I had lived as long as she had, I'd be a crotchety complainer. Jezel had lived that long—in some form or another—and her nature was as salty as any sailor's.

Prince Robin took a couple of steps toward me.

I smiled to reassure him. “Bow your head, your highness.”

I chanted under my breath and touched the wand to his forehead. Magic surged from the wand into him. Robin drew in a breath and shrank back to his normal size, except for his clothes, which were completely missing. He looked down at himself and laughed.

I covered my mouth so I wouldn't do the same.

Beside me, Peace gasped and ran to throw herself into his arms to shield him from my view. He caught her and laughed about that too. I had expected him to be embarrassed and her to be the one laughing. They must have expected the same because they stared at each other in genuine surprise.

I let them do that for a bit, grinning the whole time. Eventually, I decided that allowing a guest to run around naked might be a bad precedent. I discreetly looked off and pointed my wand at the prince. When I dared looked back, the prince looked like he'd stepped out of a Disney movie. I could see what Peace meant about his handsomeness. He was more rugged in his human form. The clothes did nothing to disrupt his manliness.

Peace gasped again and stepped back to admire him. “You are yourself again.”

“I am,” he said.

And then he kissed her. I sighed as he swept her close and held on. Their kiss spun out while Peace kissed him back.

I turned away to head to the kitchen. Lunch was waiting to be served. Thanks, Jezel.

I could swear I heard a ghostly sigh. They were meant, weren't they? That kind of

kiss is the kind every woman dreams of.

I nodded and shoved the wand into my back pocket. Farley kissed me like that the first day I met him. Didn't your seaman kiss you that way?

No, my lover's kisses made me want to spend my nights with him, but I never cared where he was during the day. Do you miss your bear when he's not here?

Out the kitchen window, Robin and Peace held hands as they went to sit at the table I'd prepared under a beautiful oak. I thought about Jezel's question as I loaded their picnic lunch on a tray. I had made a separate tray loaded with delicious soup, fresh bread, and another variety of iron pot brewed tea for Gertruda the Barracuda. She might continue to feel bad, but I would never starve her. The tray for Lord Alfred consisted of carrots, lettuce, and a few strawberries.

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I paused my preparations to stare at the couple in my backyard who only had eyes for each other. Did I miss Farley being here? The short answer was yes, but I also wouldn't want him hovering.

"I'm trying to think of how to explain," I said aloud. "I long for his company in a way I haven't longed for any of the others. Most of the men in my life passed through my bed like your seaman passed through yours. They didn't stay in my life, but I also never expected them to. Ethan was outside my normal. He used our relationship to displease his mother. His infidelity made me angry, but it didn't break my heart. I don't think I love the way other women do."

You're not as blasé about love as you describe, so I will not go there. In many ways, I admire your modern views of men. You do not need one to survive. I didn't either, but I was lonely at times. It is not my wish for you to tolerate such a life. I would wish that for no one.

"Good thing, because I am not one for tolerating much of anything I don't think is fair," I said with a chuckle. "But you don't have to worry about the friction between us, Jezel. I'm only here for another forty-six days or so. We'll work together fine until then."

The inn and I want you to stay, Selene. The inn chose you above all other witches of your time. I trust the magic of this place. I will not stop trying to get you to stay.

"Noted," I said. "Give me the clothes, Jezel. I have to serve lunch to the fairy spy."

A ripple ran across my body. A form-fitting, single-layer, black dress covered me

completely. The fabric was light to the touch, but it lay on me like armor. I felt safe in it. The dress fell to mid-calf and came with matching black boots with a sturdy sole. I lifted each foot.

Is this a better outfit?

“It’s too conservative for my tastes, but way better than the corset skirts.”

Good. We will find something that suits. The hat must stay.

“Understood,” I said with a laugh.

And this time, I knew she meant it.

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By the time Farley came to dinner, Prince Robyn had returned to his centaur form. He’d gone to the stable, and Peace had gone to her room. Neither had wanted dinner, but I was making trays for them despite their protests. It was a telling sign of what I would be like as a mother, but that was a worry I’d indulge another day.

“Any luck cracking the spy yet?” Farley asked.

“No, but to be fair, I’ve been intentionally giving her a low-level headache with every meal. She’s emerged from her room once or twice, but hasn’t managed to harass Prince Robin or Peace yet. I truly hate politics and sneaking around, but Jezel’s suggestion to afflict her was a good one.”

“Too bad the fairy queen wasn’t willing to come here herself. If she saw Robin and Peace together, I’m sure she’d step aside and let them work things out on their own. A blind person could see they’re into each other.”

I smiled at him. “Just like I am definitely into you. I wish you were into me in more than the metaphorical sense.”

Farley growled, stood, and leaned over the kitchen counter to kiss me. “I have never hated a metaphor so much. When are your guests leaving?”

My laughter was soft, and my heart was light. “I don’t know, but it can’t be too soon for me.”

I rose to carry our empty plates to the sink. My regular clothes disappeared as the new innkeeper’s outfit appeared. My involuntary wardrobe change coincided with the doorbell ringing, as it always did. While Farley watched me with great interest, I reached under the weighted skirt to rescue the inn’s wand from the back of my underwear. I made yet another mental note to speak to Jezel about not leaving the wand in that same place every time.

“Nice outfit, babe. You look really good,” Farley said. “Do you want me to answer the door?”

“No,” I said with a sigh. “I’d better deal with whoever it is, since I might have to use Jezel to protect the prince.”

Wand in hand, I headed for the door. Caution. An army awaits you, Jezel announced in my head.

“Army?” I repeated aloud, smirking at the thought. How could I possibly provide rooms for an entire army? Was I supposed to rent them the entire yard so they could put up tents? This wasn’t a campground.

I opened the door and stared into the cold eyes of an irritated fairy fully dressed in battle armor. He gave me a once-over and came to an entire set of conclusions. I

watched as his assumptions passed through his gaze before he spoke. I suddenly could see the value of the horrific innkeeper outfit. It was so ugly that it naturally disrupted normal thoughts.

“I assume you are the innkeeper of this place,” the fairy leader said without bothering to greet me. His tone couldn’t have been more condescending. He sounded like Lord Alfred when we first met.

I narrowed my eyes. “That’s awfully presumptuous. Perhaps I just like to dress up for dinner, which you are rudely interrupting.”

“I’m not here to jest with you, woman. I’m here with a purpose.”

“If you’re not here as a guest or here to harm my guests, your purposes don’t concern me. Be on your way.”

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My stony stare and terse dismissal made him blink. I'd been practicing in the mirror in case Ethan returned. One thing I had to admit about this gig was that not a single day here was boring.

I tapped the wand on my palm, waved a hand at him. He slid back far enough on the porch for me to open the door and exit the house.

Once outside, I blocked the door with my body and crossed my arms. The wand sparked in my hand. It was the only warning I would give him.

"I have no vacancies tonight and clearly not enough room for you and your people to become my guests. So why are you here?"

"I have not come to stay, Innkeeper. I have come to rescue someone."

While I stood there absorbing his threat, the army leader waved a hand, and twenty archers raised their bows. He waved at the archers and sneered at me. "See? This is me not jesting about why I'm here."

I raised one eyebrow, pointed my wand, and their weapons disappeared from their hands. Soldiers turned to each other and exclaimed in shock.

I turned to glare at their leader. "And that was me showing you that you have no power here. Guests are protected by the inn. Your rudeness, Commander, makes me want to dig out my well. Now answer my questions before I get angry. Who are you, and why are you and your army here?"

He straightened to glare back at me. “I am Prince William of Locksley. I don’t know why you are holding my youngest brother hostage, but I demand you release him immediately.”

Oh, Good Goddess... I chuckled and uncrossed my arms. “Prince Robin of Locksley and Lord Alfred are here, but they are my guests. Their stay was arranged by Princess Peace and Harmony, who is also staying here. Who told you Prince Robin was here as a hostage?”

Prince William blinked at me in surprise. “Are you certain my brother is here as a guest?”

I pointed the wand at myself. “I’m an innkeeper, and this is an inn. The only person being held hostage in this place is me. Don’t ask why, though, it’s too long a story to tell. Just accept that your brother is here to seek a reprieve from his cursed life. I will allow no harm to come to him.”

Prince William looked back at his people. There were so many that they barely all fit in the yard. “Where is the informant? Bring him forward.”

Two soldiers made their way through the crowd, carrying a whining, resistant Ethan between them. Watching him getting dragged forward felt like some surreal scene in a fantasy movie. It was incredibly satisfying to see him being manhandled. I was beyond ready to sacrifice my ex and let the gods deal with him.

“Ethan. Ethan. What mischief are you up to now?”

The soldiers tossed him at the bottom of the stairs, where Prince William and I could stare down at him. Ethan bounced in the dirt, and then just as quickly bounced up to his feet. “I came here to right a wrong.”

“What did you hope to gain by lying to Prince William about his brother?” I asked.

Ethan glared for all he was worth. “I did not lie to him. His brother is here.”

“What were you hoping to achieve, Ethan? The inn’s guests are none of your concern.”

“And why I’m here is none of yours,” Ethan said snidely, throwing my words back at me with a grin.

I turned away to look at Prince William. “What did Ethan ask of you in exchange for his information about your brother’s whereabouts?”

“He asked us to kill you.” A frowning Prince William looked between me and Ethan. He raised a finger and pointed at Ethan. “How do you know him?”

“I’m ashamed to admit that Ethan is a former boyfriend. We broke up a long time ago, yet he’s been causing me problems ever since.”

The entire fairy army groaned and threw up their hands in disgust over having wasted their time. I deserved an acting award for not laughing at the look of shock on Ethan’s face.

“Nothing is amusing about this situation. She’s an evil witch,” Ethan yelled at them. When they smirked at him, he became angrier. “The woman is crazy too. She talks to a ghost and wields the power of this haunted house—more power than any fairy can ever hope to possess. Even your queen is not as powerful as she is. This place is a magical threat and should be burned to the ground.”

I blew out a breath and rolled my eyes so high they nearly touched the brim of my witch’s hat. “Yes, and don’t forget to tell them the part about me getting your mother

put in prison for trying to steal the fairy queen's crystal. That's my favorite."

I diplomatically omitted the seduction game Ethan had played with Peace. I feared one of the fairies would impale him to prevent him from bragging about their beloved princess.

To my utter delight, the entire fairy army groaned again and threw up their hands once more. It was a very Monty Python moment, and I grinned widely at Ethan for making it possible. "Whatever you're doing, it's not going to work. The truth will always remain the truth, no matter how many lies you tell."

I felt Farley step out of the door behind me. His clothes smoothly changed from jeans and a t-shirt into a version of what I had dressed Robin in earlier. Being almost seven feet tall, the entire army gasped when Farley roared at them in welcome. Then they cheered and clapped at the magic that had transformed him. Some probably clapped at how amazing he looked in his new outfit because he looked just as princely as Prince Robin.

Forgetting that we had an audience, I stepped toward him and smiled up at him. "Nice outfit," I whispered.

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Farley stared down into my eyes until his fangs appeared. His head was descending toward me before I snapped free of the spell his presence always wove around me.

Prince William straightened and cleared his throat. “Who is the bear?”

I smiled at Farley as I answered. “This bear is the new male in my life. Ethan refuses to believe I’ve moved on. Are you seeing the entire picture yet, Prince William?”

“I am,” the irritated prince said before he turned to glare at Ethan. “You, sir, are a liar. Bind him. Perhaps a month in our kingdom’s prison will be enough to teach the man not to lie to a fairy prince.”

“No! You promised me a reward if I led you to her,” Ethan said as two of Prince William’s men bound his wrists. “You won’t get away with this, Selene. I’m going to keep coming back until I get my way.”

“If you keep returning, I will eventually have to kill you, Ethan. You’re trying my patience.”

Prince William turned back, glanced at Farley, and then brought his full attention to me. “I apologize for my behavior earlier. Is my brother well? Is Princess Peace with him?”

I waved my wand at his army and returned all the weapons to his people. They roared in happiness. I smiled at their reaction. Goddess, this was fun.

I smiled at Prince William. “Your brother is quite well, but Prince Robin is here in

hiding. The fairy queen's curse draws too many women to him and makes most men hate him. Farley wanted to maul him. Were you aware of his struggles to handle the curse?"

Prince William sighed a little and nodded. "I was aware of it, but I had not seen Robin enduring it. I can say with certainty that it sounds like something the fairy queen might do to a person who wasn't pleasing her. Our mother sent me out to check on him. One of our most talented seers sent me here. Your ex-whatever was hanging out in the charming town nearby. He tells a convincing story about your wickedness."

I grunted, and then I laughed. "Ethan was not completely wrong. To be fair, I can be fiercely wicked when I need to be. Would you like to see your brother? The males in your army would turn instantly against him. Since he's your brother, I can take you to him and make sure you do not overreact to his presence."

Prince William grunted. "If the fairy queen ever cursed me, body parts would be falling off. My youngest brother gets cursed, though, and Robin becomes a chick magnet. Life is not fair, Lady Selene."

"Indeed not," I said, biting my tongue to keep from laughing again. "Princess Peace and Harmony seems to be unaffected by the curse... as am I."

Beside me, Farley grunted indignantly and received my elbow to his eight-pack as a reward.

"I was able to break the curse and return Prince Robin to his human form for a short while today, but my efforts don't last. Not even the inn can permanently undo the fairy queen's magic. All I can do is offer your brother solace."

"That may mean our queen has given up on Robin and Peace making a genuine

match.”

That was news to me—well, the giving-up part was. “Would she really give up on them after all this time?”

Prince William shrugged. “Our queen does as she pleases. From what I know, Princess Peace feels no need to make a permanent match with any male. Our mother gave up years ago on that working out. She’s been recently shopping for other eligible matches for Robin. He’s turning 300 this year, you know. I was already married for half a century by the time I was his age.”

“I would not give up on them yet,” I said, crossing my arms again. “Peace and Robin are quite fond of each other. For some of us, friendship comes first.”

Prince William snorted. “If my brother weren’t such a money-maker, no one would care if he was fulfilled in his personal life. His games generate a substantial amount of money for our kingdom, which our parents use to purchase weapons, jewels, and magical objects. Our mother says the fairy queen aspires to be a top fairy character in one of his games. Maybe the curse is her way of making him view her as a villainess.”

“I think it’s shallow of her majesty the queen to expend so much magic on such a petty goal. Princess Peace and Prince Robin currently view her as a terrible person, so she has been successful. Every time I have to clean Prince Robin’s stall, I think poorly of her as well. I was not equipped to deal with a centaur.”

Prince William burst out laughing. “I must return to my people tonight, but may I one day soon return to have a sojourn here? My wife would appreciate a stay in this fascinating place. Forgive me for doubting your hospitality.”

“For as long as I remain the innkeeper, Prince William, your family will be welcome

here. However, my time as an innkeeper is limited. Please try to visit within the next fifty human days. I do intend to leave when my time is up.”

“That would be a loss for the inn and its guests.” Chuckling, Prince William turned and walked down the steps.

Ethan complained as they dragged him away. Was it terrible to be so relieved that Ethan wouldn’t be returning to harass me for at least a month?

As the fairy army opened a portal and left, Farley snorted in disgust beside me. “The fairy queen does not sound like a nice person.”

“No, she doesn’t, does she?” I tapped my wand on my chin as I thought about it. “I feel sorry for Peace having a mother like that.”

Farley looked back at me. “What’s with the new outfits? I like this one.”

I smiled at his genuine pleasure. “Jezel and I are trying to compromise.”

Our clothes returned to normal as we walked. “Let’s talk about this inside while we eat our dessert.”

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“Perfect,” Farley said and held the door open for me. “The inn keeps changing my clothes. Do you think it considers me to be an innkeeper too?”

I couldn’t stop the giggle. “Or maybe Jezel just likes playing dress-up. She sees you as the male doll I’m currently playing with.”

“Is that a metaphor? Because I would love to play with you. Though I think it would be more fun if we played with each other.”

“Well, I’m not a genius like you,” I said, grinning at him. “But I would sincerely like to confirm your theory.”

Farley stopped me from moving deeper into the kitchen. He backed me against the counter and lifted me until I sat on it. His strength continually amazed me. It also made me weak. When he stepped between my legs, I kissed him without holding back.

I was tired of waiting. I could tell he was tired of waiting too.

When I groaned into his mouth, Farley tore his mouth from mine and bent his face to my neck. Every hair on my body stood at attention as his fangs scraped against my throat.

Purple glitter exploded in the air around us. I threw back my head to get him to move lower.

Until I heard coughing...

We yanked apart to look at the source of the cough. Farley stayed where he was and roared in rebellion. When recognition hit, he sobered.

I covered my face with a hand to keep from laughing in horror. Two more minutes and Farley might have had me naked. Damn you, Carol. She'd pussy-blocked me. Between her and Jezel, Farley and I would never make it to bed.

A deeply frowning Farley cleared his throat. "Sorry for roaring at you, Auntie Carol. I... we weren't expecting anyone."

Carol had the grace to look embarrassed. She covered her eyes with both hands and shook her head. "No, no, Farley. I'm the one who should be apologizing. You're a grown bear, and I should have sent a text before popping in uninvited and startling you."

"It's okay," he said quickly. "I'm sure you had a good reason."

Not that her interrupting me mattered like it should have, I wanted to add with all the snark I possessed. She might be The Baba Yaga, but that didn't give her the right to pop into my life whenever she pleased.

Noting the blush climbing Farley's face, I gently pushed him away until he no longer rested between my thighs. His rebellious growl expressed how we both felt. I sighed and patted his jaw.

"You owe me, Yo Baba Rude Yaga. After dealing with the fairy army and Ethan, we were celebrating and got a little carried away."

Carol covered her eyes and moaned. "I'm truly sorry, Selene. I swear I'm not torturing you on purpose."

“So you say,” I said, crossing my arms. “I’m not convinced.”

Carol dropped her hands and blew out a breath. “I came to warn you that Lady Meagan escaped her cell.”

I smacked my forehead. “How in effing hell did that happen? Something needs to be fixed at that stupid prison. People are always escaping.”

Carol shook her head. “Stop exaggerating. It’s only been one or two. In this case, Lady Meagan bribed a guard. We caught the guard, but not Lady Meagan.”

“Ethan just got sentenced to a fairy prison for a month. I don’t think even his mother can get him out. He lied about why Prince Robin was staying here. After I took the army’s weapons and refused to fight, Prince William figured out Ethan was lying to him.”

Carol’s sigh was loud. “Have you resolved the prince’s curse yet?”

I looked at Farley. “I warded the grounds, but Ethan’s mother got through the wards last time. Someone needs to warn Princess Peace and Prince Robin that Lady Meagan might show up. Also, Prince Robin needs to know his brother came by to check on him and that I sent word to his mother that he was fine. Can you tell them?”

“Yes, I can do that. I think I have my urge to maul him completely under control now. I don’t feel it at all whenever Peace is with him,” Farley said with a fanged smile.

I ignored Carol watching. “I’m really sorry we got interrupted again.”

“Me too,” he said with a little growl.

His clothes changed again while the three of us watched. He looked down at himself in surprise. “I’ve never worn a custom suit before. I usually borrow one of Dad’s. Garrison is going to love this outfit.”

I giggled. “You look far more handsome than Prince Robin, but don’t tell him I said so. It might hurt his feelings.”

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“I won’t tell,” Farley said. On his way out, he walked to Carol and kissed her cheek. “Don’t harass my girlfriend. Selene gets mean when someone mistreats her.”

Carol laid a finger beside her nose. “Witch’s honor—I promise to be on my best behavior with her.”

Farley turned to smile at me as if he had solved all my problems by getting The Baba Yaga to make that promise. Goddess, the man was so naïve about his so-called auntie. Not that I would ever try to convince him otherwise. We all needed our illusions, and Farley had lost enough of his when Hildy died.

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Carol and I waited until the front door closed behind Farley before speaking again. The Baba Yaga went first—no surprise there. “What in the seven hells was that centaur shit about?”

I blew out a breath. “Since I’m dealing with both literal and metaphorical centaur shit every day lately, you’re going to have to be more specific about what you’re referring to.”

Carol blinked at my flat, belligerent tone. “I was talking about Farley’s change of clothes, Selene. What kind of magic changes a person’s clothes at will? He doesn’t possess that sort of magic. And whatever it is, better not to try to change mine. I have specific tastes and an image to uphold.”

I lifted both arms in the air and looked around. “It’s the magic of this place, Carol.

Jezel likes to play dress-up with me and Farley, which she does every time the doorbell chimes or she gets a wild hair. Yet I have no idea why the inn changed Farley just now, simply because I asked him to see Peace and Robin. Maybe Jezel finds his boyishness charming, and she can't resist him any better than I can."

Carol ran a hand through her hair. "This is beyond what I can take in. Let's say the inn works in mysterious ways. Now, what was up with your caution about not hurting Prince Robin for? Did Farley hurt him?"

"No, I would never have allowed that to happen. The curse on Robin turns him into an irresistible centaur and makes all males hate him. I had to stop Farley from mauling him that first day, but he's gotten that reaction totally under control now. His father works miracles with those triplets of his."

Carol found a seat at the counter and dropped into it. "This is too much. Can I please have some tea?"

I laughed at her exasperation. It was a rare occurrence for The Baba Yaga to admit to being exhausted with her life, but in reality, everybody had their coping limits. Even magicals could only take so much. Right? Maybe I wasn't a weenie witch after all.

"Let me get a fresh pot to make you some tea." I ducked into the pantry and grabbed an unused teapot from a shelf holding an assortment of them.

"You don't have to treat me like a guest, Selene. You can serve me from your regular pot."

I chuckled. "No, I can't. I've been using it to brew a special kind for the fairy queen's spy. The iron might not bother you, but let's not take any chances. I want you to be at full power in case Lady Meagan shows up while you're here."

Carol chuckled as I loaded my iron-pot tea on a tray to take upstairs. She chuckled louder when I added an assortment of cookies and cheese to it. Gertruda the Barracuda liked her evening snack. Indulging her helped my cause, so I was happy to oblige.

“The iron is giving the spy a low-grade headache, but I see no reason to starve her.”

“Are you trying to prevent the spy from being around the royals?”

“Yes, I am doing it on purpose. She came here specifically to harass Peace, and I’m not going to let her. Peace and Robin are talking, flirting, and enjoying each other’s company for the first time in centuries. Whatever happens between them here at the inn is their business, not the fairy queen’s. Gertruda the Barracuda alluded to the fact that the queen has given up on seeing Robin as a proper suitor for her daughter.”

I waved a hand and sent the tray upstairs. I raised my wand and held a finger to my lips to keep Carol silent. I poured tea from the new pot into a cup in front of Carol. She gave me a thumbs up.

“Gertruda?” I called.

A muffled voice came through the walls. “Yes, Selene?”

I winked at Carol as I talked. “I’m in the middle of some innkeeper duties, so I magically delivered your evening tea. Will you need anything else for an hour or two?”

“No, I’m fine. Thank you for sending more of that wonderful cheese. It is quite delicious. Is it local?”

“Yes, there’s a store in Assjacket where they sell local produce and dairy. Would you

like me to procure some for you to take home?”

“That would be delightful.”

“Consider it done, then. I will add the cost to your room charges. We can settle up later.”

“Thank you, Selene.”

“My pleasure,” I said, before shutting off communication.

Carol grinned at me over her teacup. “So, back to my yet-to-be answered question.”

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“I was able to disrupt the curse, but only for a short while. The fairy queen’s spy gave me a partial fix that I could brew into a spelled tea for him. Peace and Robin enjoyed a meal together as humans before he reverted to a centaur.”

“You’re hosting a spy at the inn?”

Carol’s tone was haughty, and I didn’t appreciate it. “With Jezel’s help, I constrained her. She’s only been out of her room once or twice. It’s hard to cause problems when you can’t get time alone with your targets.”

Carol grinned widely at me. “You and the ghost make a good team.”

“Doesn’t matter if we do,” I said, trying to sound as matter-of-fact as I could. “I’m leaving when my fifty days here are up. If you extend my sentence again, I’m going to report you to the Council of Witches. It’s not fair for me to be stuck here and for my tormentors to be running loose.”

Sighing, Carol nodded. “You’re right. Consider the rest of your sentence remitted.” She waved a hand while sipping. Magical freedom felt like a cool breeze blowing away the heat of all my anxiety.

I flexed my hands as my natural magic returned with full force. My gaze narrowed as I stared at her. “You reduced my magic.”

The most badass magical in the world looked unrepentant. “You would have left if I hadn’t nullified it a bit. You’re a force of your own, Selene, which is why I’ve asked you to help me so often. Not all magicals use their magic as deftly as you do. You

think fast and react well.”

“Should I be flattered or pissed at you?”

Carol laughed and shrugged. “Take your pick. Both are reasonable responses.”

I set the wand on the counter, put my face in my hands, and moaned. “Did you imprison me because you thought I did something wrong? Or because you wanted my help and feared asking?”

“Mostly, I did it for Farley so he could get to know you. I figured out years ago that you were the woman he kept dreaming about. However, you were with Ethan then and in no place to deal kindly with my nephew. Now I realize that I should have introduced you two anyway because it wasn’t my place to intervene. Farley might have ended things between you and Ethan before Lady Meagan attempted her coup. But I’m glad you were here to deal with both of them.”

I grunted. Knowing Farley’s innate goodness now, I couldn’t fault her for wanting to protect him from my crazy relationship with Ethan. I felt the need to shield him from everything that came before I knew him. Maybe I should be flattered that Carol thought I was deserving of him, even after I let Ethan use me.

I grunted as I refilled her tea. “I get why you did it, so I’m not mad. Farley is a great person who deserves to be protected. If I could get the fairy queen to have the same epiphany about her daughter, my favorite royal couple might have an actual chance of working out. They’re under too much pressure from their family. Goddess, I’m so blessed in my parents.”

“My parents would never have won any parent-of-the-year prize, but I was blessed with others who raised me well,” Carol said.

Carol's parents had disowned her because of her magic. It was a common, and unfortunately, true rumor that no one talked about out of respect. I really needed to call my parents and tell them how much I appreciated them.

Letting the rest of my anger slip away, I put two cookies next to Carol's teacup. She smiled and dipped one into her cup. I allowed a moment of silence to celebrate our reconciliation—and my newfound freedom.

After she devoured the first cookie, Carol sighed. "Will you stay until the current guests leave? I suppose I'll have to look for an innkeeper."

"I'll stay, but... Jeziel said the inn finds its own keeper when it wants one. It may revert to simply being a vacation house for you after I leave."

Carol shrugged again. "Fine. That will save me the trouble of finding your replacement. I guess I'll keep fixing it up and see what happens. When I discovered this place, I was compelled to fix it."

"Feeling compelled is the perfect word to describe the main magic of this inn."

"The last time I was this compelled, it was to date a fairy prince I knew in school. Iren was destined to become someone else's life mate, but I never forgot our time together. He was a great person, and I was made better by knowing him."

I nodded and smiled. "That's how I feel about meeting Farley. He makes me laugh and makes me a better person." It was true, so I didn't mind saying it to anyone who would listen. "This inn is great too, Carol. You're right to want to save it. Now and again, I've felt that way about it too. I definitely feel like that about its guests. Helping them has been the upside to my incarceration."

Carol's smile was warm. "Is being an innkeeper hard work? I could see it being my

retirement job in another century or two.”

“Well, it’s challenging, but the magical rush is nice. Jezel, the resident ghost here, infused this place with all her magic when she died. She’s been a piece of work to deal with, but lately, I’ve concluded that she’s not completely set in her ways.”

“Yes, I saw the pilgrim outfit she dressed Farley in last time I was here. It was hideous, especially those buckle shoes.”

I laughed at the memory. “Yes, well, she and I had a heart-to-heart about those vintage clothes she favors. My new innkeeper outfit looks much better as well. It’s actually a type of magical armor.” I paused in my story. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

“You can ask me anything,” Carol said, dipping her last bite of cookie into her tea. “I reserve the right not to answer.”

“It’s not that personal. Plus, it’s not about you and Fabio.”

“Okay, then let’s hear it,” Carol said.

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“Is Zelda next in line to be the witch protectress? I’ve never met her, but from Farley’s stories, it seems like she’s the one most qualified. Farley has shared many stories about Hildy. Thinking of all you and Hildy went through together before you became The Baba Yaga, I was just curious about who could follow in your footsteps.”

The current witch protectress smiled at me. “Fabio’s daughter is definitely in the running. She’s wild-natured. Mac and the kids have matured her. She’s closer to being the right person than she ever was. Why do you ask, though? Are you interested in the job?”

“Me? No way,” I exclaimed in shock, before I burst out laughing. “I’ve seen what you do. So, no, I’m not interested. But I do enjoy working with you. I hope you continue to call on me when you need my help.”

Carol snorted. “And I hope you don’t ever feel the need to do to Farley what you did to Ethan.”

I chuckled low. “No worries with that. Farley is nothing like Ethan. We probably won’t work out long term, but that’s on me, Carol. Love isn’t in my DNA, but your nephew is honorable. He’s also incredibly easy to like. Whatever happens between us, I will do my best to remain his friend. And I will protect him with my life.”

Carol stood and dusted the cookie crumbs from her hands. “Well, now that confession time is over, I need to get back to looking for Lady Meagan. Thanks for the tea. Watch your back, Selene.”

“One more question before you go. Did it hurt when the inn summoned you?”

Her face wrinkled as she considered it. “It irritated me, but no, it was painless, except for the momentary weakness. The lack of control wasn’t enjoyable, but it hindered nothing magical I did. Are you thinking of summoning me again?”

“No, not you,” I said.

“Who then?” Carol asked.

I clacked my teeth and grimaced. “I think I might summon the fairy queen. If I talk fast enough, she’ll have little choice except to hear me out.”

“Abducting the fairy queen might net you time in a fairy dungeon, but it sounds exciting. Congratulations, Selene. You’re becoming an even bigger shit starter than me. The warlock posse is going to love hearing about it. I think they have a betting pool going on what happens to you.”

“Are they betting on whether or not I stay alive?”

“No,” Carol said with a smile. “They’re betting on whether or not you stay here.”

“Well, I’m not staying,” I said, sinking as much finality as possible into my tone. “Being an innkeeper is not the life I’ve dreamed of.”

“Being The Baba Yaga was my dream, but the reality of it is nothing like I expected. Don’t say no without giving it some thought. You were magical enough to stop a fairy army even though I’d dialed down your own magic. Imagine how much power you would accrue if you stayed on here. Imagine all the adventures you would have.”

“But it’s your inn...” I reminded her.

Carol waved a hand. “It was an inn in need of help, and I answered. We both know I don’t have time for it. Gotta run. Bye.”

A burst of purple glitter later, and The Baba Yaga vanished. I picked up my wand, waved at the glitter, and sent it flying to fall into the trash. And I managed to do it before it turned to dirt.

Would I feel any different about staying if I owned the inn? That was a possibility I hadn’t allowed myself even to consider. Completing the renovation would still take an enormous amount of work. If I sold my current house and Carol offered me a good deal, I might be able to renovate a couple more rooms. The dining room and parlor leaped to mind.

Paul and his mates would probably do the work if I asked.

It wasn’t like I would be tied to the place forever if I chose to stay. When there were no guests, I could do whatever I wanted. And I’d be close to Farley until we got tired of each other. My parents and siblings could come and stay at the inn during the holidays. I’m sure there were many negatives to consider, but none leaped to mind.

How crazy was I for even giving the idea some serious thought? Didn’t I already have an herb sales business and routine part-time work? Goddess knew, I had supported myself all these years in a variety of ways. What would change outside of my address?

I flexed my hand and watched my magic spark. How could I not have known Carol had dialed it down?

I enjoyed the inn’s guests, and I for sure wasn’t ready to put all those miles between Farley and me yet. Maybe I could stay for a short while—just until I got bored.

Goddess, I truly hoped Jezel wasn't aware of what I was thinking. I didn't want her to believe that she could talk me into other things if I stayed.

12

The next day, I decided to tackle the biggest obstacle in my plans first. Jezel paced in front of me while she considered what I wanted to do. Or floated. It was like her feet made any noise against the floors.

"Are you sure this is wise?" Jezel asked.

I snorted. "Goddess, no. I'm sure it isn't wise at all, but I still want to do it. If I talk to her, I might get her to see the need to let Peace make her own decisions. If her daughter is to be the future fairy queen, the least Peace ought to be able to do is choose her own consort."

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“Are you truly over her betrayal?”

“We didn’t know each other then, so technically she wasn’t betraying me. The betrayal began when she asked me to protect her from Ethan and his mother without first confessing what she had done. We’ve since worked all that out. I’m over it.”

“Yes, so you’ve said,” Jezel said flatly, throwing the phrase in my face.

“And that body bump she had with Ethan wasn’t actually about sex. It was about power, political decisions, and protecting a fairy crystal. Additionally, the man is not particularly skilled in bed. I was leaving him anyway, and she provided me with yet another good reason to do so.”

Jezel grunted in disbelief. “What would you do if she lured your bear into her bed?”

“If she ever tried to do that, I’d beat her with the iron poker sitting by the fireplace in the parlor. Farley is off limits. What has that got to do with anything?” When Jezel snorted, I grinned. “Peace would never do that, but even if she did try, Farley would never take her up on it. He and I belong to each other for now. When he’s near me, I’m completely unaffected by Prince Robin’s curse.”

“Watching you play the people in this place is like experiencing my time with my seaman all over again. I worry that something will go wrong and that your heart will get broken.”

I covered my mouth to hide my smirk while I considered what to say. Oh, for the right words to use that wouldn’t make Jezel conclude I wasn’t a skank as well. The

ancient witch had a bad enough opinion about Peace.

“There have been many men in my life, and none have been the right one. There are more frogs than princes in the world, Jezel. Modern women know that. The odds of finding a good male are not that great.”

“They have never been great. Few women get that lucky.” Jezel sighed and crossed her arms. She floated in place instead of pacing now. “If you’re not afraid to get hurt, I will try not to live out my fears through you.”

“Or you can go find another widowed spinster to run this place instead of me,” I said.

“No other innkeeper before you has ever had to face an entire army. You never felt a moment of fear. I would have known if you had. You waved the wand in the air and sent their weapons into storage. I didn’t have to even put in an appearance to strike fear in them. I don’t know whether to consider you stupidly foolish or incredibly brave.”

I chuckled. “Let’s go with me being brave about the fairy army and foolish about the fairy queen. If I bring her here, do we have enough power to restrain her if she gets mad? I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in a fairy prison.”

Jezel sighed. “There’s a special cage in storage. I had to use it on a dragon-mage once. He was very randy and wouldn’t leave me or the other female guests alone. One night in it convinced him to stop his devilry. I feared you might need to place Prince Robin in it.”

I choked back a laugh. “The dragon mage’s name wouldn’t happen to be Zenos, would it?”

Jezel’s eyes widened. “Dear Goddesss, are you saying that cad still lives?”

I chuckled. “He claims to be immortal. However, the good news is that he’s now mated and his womanizing days are behind him. I never dated him, but my mother did. It was before she and my father got together.”

Her ghostly features wavered with her appalled expression. “Good Goddess...”

“Yes, I had a similar reaction when she told me. I’ve even met him, though not through my mother. Zenos was Carol’s magic mentor.”

Jezel scrubbed her ghostly face with both of her ghostly hands. I wondered if she truly felt her own touch or if she was just recalling how she had once reacted to such shocking news. “Are you okay?”

She lowered her hands and stood stiffly to face me. “I don’t know how I am. Hearing he lives makes me wish I had gone into the light instead of attaching my eternal spirit to this inn.”

I smiled. “I’m glad you didn’t go into the light, Jezel. The inn wouldn’t be the same without you.”

“Do you truly believe that?”

I made a “V” with my fingers and placed it over my nose. “Witch’s honor. I know it to be the truth.”

Jezel studied me for a few moments, and then sighed again. “So back to the cage... I think you should place it in the darkest room downstairs. Fairies require light to be at their best. The dreary dark might discourage her from fighting back.”

“That’s a good idea.”

Her nod was brief. “When are you planning to do this?”

I rose from my seat and drew in a breath. “As soon as I finish my counseling session with Peace.”

“Counseling?” Jezel asked.

“Don’t worry. I’m taking the wand with me so you can eavesdrop.”

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“I do not eavesdrop. Hearing is an unavoidable part of being in spirit form and residing in the wand, which is merely an extension of the inn. I would never violate someone’s privacy on purpose.”

“Aren’t you the same witch who suggested I poison the fairy queen’s spy with iron-pot tea? That’s worked beautifully, by the way.”

Jezel grunted. “Those two things are not in any way related.”

I waved the wand around just to see Jezel wince. “I disagree. Once you start bending the rules, it’s hard to find a place to stop. I’ve been lucky to have people in my life who stopped me from using my powers for bad things. For instance, the spell I put on Ethan was one of the worst things I’ve done to anyone in my life. I did it for nothing more than petty revenge.”

“Yet you would do it again. I can sense your lack of remorse,” Jezel said, looking at my face.

“Yes, I would do it again. That was the point of why I tend to surround myself with people better than me. I warned you I wasn’t the innkeeper you were looking for.”

Jezel rolled her eyes. “Well, the inn thinks you are, so you must be.”

“Well, let’s see what the inn thinks after I’ve caged the fairy queen. The inn might change its mind about me.”

“But you won’t change yours about summoning her.”

“No,” I said, smiling at her. “It’s the only way I can think of to help get this resolved. People avoid things they don’t want to deal with or pretend they aren’t as they seem. Queen Mum needs a life lesson about both and about listening to her eldest child.”

I convinced Peace to walk with me through the gardens. As a fairy, she possessed a relationship to the natural world that I envied. She also had excellent ideas about where plantings would do their best.

“How are things between you and Robin?” I asked.

“They are good. We are catching up with each other. I’m glad to discover we can be friends again,” Peace answered quickly.

“Can I ask you something?”

Peace shrugged, but she wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“If your mother didn’t care who you ended up marrying, what would you do about your love life? Would you wait another millennium to choose someone? Or would you give Robin a real chance?”

“My mother is an unchangeable force. She has made up her mind.”

“Haven’t you done the same?” I asked. I looked away and shrugged. “You’ve ruled Robin out simply because your mother chose him. You even tried to ruin things between you before you even knew each other. That’s your real problem with him wanting no one else but you. It’s that you don’t want your mother to be right.”

Peace frowned at me. “Things are not so complex as you make them seem. Robin and I are not equals in any way, no matter how much I wish to find common ground with him.”

“Would you truly like to be his equal?”

“Yes,” Peace said. “I think I would like that very much.”

I pulled the wand from the back of my jeans. “I’m an innkeeper, Princess. Your wish is granted.

Peace’s squeal echoed through the garden. In the stable, an excited centaur broke the walls of his stall trying to get out it.

13

Lord Alfred hopped around me as we left Robin and Peace meandering in the backyard. They were holding hands and laughing. I wish I’d thought of making them equals from the very beginning. Now the curse couldn’t bother either of them.

“How could you do this to them?” Lord Alfred demanded.

“Peace said she wished she could be Robin’s equal. I couldn’t turn her into a software engineer or a gaming nerd, so I had to go a different route. The bottom line is that what I did worked. Now she’s his true equal. I don’t see what your problem is.”

“Princess Peace and Harmony is the future fairy queen. She’s of royal blood. You turned her into a creature she was never meant to be.”

“Her mother, the queen, obviously doesn’t care what kind of fate her daughter meets. Why should you care, Alfred?” I shrugged when he didn’t answer. “Prince Robin is a royal and just as important. His mother cares about him and sent someone to make sure he was doing okay. I met Prince William, his royal brother. Despite his initial threats to unleash his army on me, I thought he was nice.”

Alfred stopped hopping. “I thought his mother sent an emissary to check on him. Robin didn’t say Prince William came here in person.”

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I stopped walking to look down at the rabbit. “Didn’t Farley tell you about my standoff with him? Once things got worked out, I offered to let him stay, but he said he had to report back to his mother about Robin being okay.”

Alfred rubbed his furry chest with his tiny furry paws. If I had a strawberry on me, I would have given it to him for being so damn cute.

“I wasn’t awake when Farley came to tell us the story. I was napping after a late night. The second-hand version was not as alarming.”

I giggled. “Have you been keeping company with a local pub bunny, Alfred? I hope you’re practicing safe relations with her.”

He drew himself up. “I’ll have you know that I only look like a rabbit. I am not one.”

“Oh, well, sorry if I offended you. Why were you having a rough night? Was your hay burrow not comfy?”

He rubbed his tiny paws together. “Can we get into all this later? What I do in my off hours is of no concern to anyone but me.”

I shrugged and started walking again. “You don’t have to tell me at all. I’m actually too busy to talk anyway. I have to move a queen-sized cage into one of the basement bedrooms.”

“Why?” Alfred asked cautiously while hopping madly to keep up with my long-legged strides.

I looked sideways but kept walking. "I'm going to summon the fairy queen and talk to her. I seem to be the only person not afraid to do so. Someone needs to convince her to let Peace choose the love of her life for herself."

"You can't abduct the fairy queen," Alfred said, stopping to stare up at me.

"I'm not abducting her. I'm merely summoning her. As soon as we have our little chat, she'll be free to go."

"You can't do this," Alfred exclaimed, stomping one bunny foot.

"Well, yes, I can." I pulled the wand from the back pocket of my jeans. "Just like I can do this..." I touched the wand between Lord Alfred's ears and chanted. The bunny grew into a well-dressed man. "It should last longer this time."

"Selene, wait!" Alfred called, running after me. In his human form, he was taller than me. "You can't summon the queen. It won't work."

I lifted one eyebrow and held my wand in my hand. "Why would you say that, Alfred? What secrets have you been keeping? Be careful how you answer. The inn doesn't like deceivers."

Alfred held up both hands. "Be careful where you point that thing. There's a good reason why you can't bring the fairy queen to this place."

I crossed my arms and glared. "Explain," I ordered.

Alfred ran both hands through his hair and made it stick out all around his head. "Because she's already here. I've been reporting to her this whole time."

My eyes narrowed to slits. "It wasn't personal, Selene. I was doing my job," he

exclaimed.

“Remember that because I’m about to do mine. Deceiving an innkeeper is a magical offense.”

Alfred stared at me with wide eyes as I stomped my way back to the house.

Jezel stared at the cage. “It’s too nice for her. She was blackmailing a bunny.”

“He wasn’t being blackmailed. Alfred was just doing his job. Robin is the one who deserves our pity. His every move was being watched, catalogued, and reported back to the fairy queen. Now, tell me her name so I can proceed. They live for ages. I’m sure it’s the same one you knew when you were alive.”

Jezel snorted. “Address your summons for Fairy Queen Elsbeth.”

“Thank you.” I lifted the wand and cleared my throat.

“Bippidity, dippity, flippity, flue.

You must come to the inn when I summon you.

Today, I summon Fairy Queen Elsbeth.”

An ancient fairy instantly appeared in the cage. She was bent over with age and shrunken to the size of a hobbit. The woman looked at her hands and then through the bars of the cage at us. I hadn’t provided a chair, so she couldn’t even sit.

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“Have I finally gone on to my Next Great Adventure?” she asked.

“No, ma’am. You’re still alive,” I said as I magically moved a chair from the parlor to the cage. “I’m terribly sorry to bring you here. Something must have gone wrong with my spell to summon the fairy queen.”

Groaning with the effort to move, the woman sat down in the chair, folded her hands in her lap, and mildly glared at me. “Well, who in seven hells do you think I am?”

“But...” I looked at Jezel. “She’s not the right one, though. Are you as confused as I am?”

Jezel grunted at me... or at everything. She was such a negative witch I couldn’t tell. She ran a ghostly hand over her perfectly pinned-up hairdo and sighed loudly. “The inn did not make a mistake, and neither did you. Since Elsbeth still lives, she’s technically still the fairy queen. I guess her daughter is acting in her stead. Normally, that doesn’t happen until death.”

“I might not be as dead as you, Lady Ghost, but I’m close enough to see the afterlife,” Queen Elsbeth said with a crone-like cackle.

I turned back to stare at the woman. “Are you Princess Peace and Harmony’s grandmother?”

“Yes. Are you her champion?”

“Uh... more like I’m a concerned friend.”

Queen Elsbeth breathed out so hard that she deflated until she looked skeletal. “Good Goddess, what has my daughter done to her eldest child now? Can’t she leave the girl be for a few centuries? I told Margotta over and over that she needed to butt out of the girl’s life and do something about her wicked second child. Peace is going to have to kill her sister one day. That’s a terrible way to prove you’re the rightful queen.”

Well, now, that made sense. “So, your daughter, Margotta, is the one pretending to be Gertruda the Barracuda. I mean, the one pretending to be Lady Gertruda.”

“Pretending?” Queen Elsbeth repeated. Then she rolled her eyes. “She’s spying on Peace and Robin, isn’t she?”

I blew out a breath and nodded. “Yes, she’s here pretending to be someone she’s not. Plus, she ordered Peace to work for me so she would look bad to Robin. Peace has nothing good to say about her mother.”

“Ah... sweet little Prince Robin. Is he well? They were the best of friends as children, you know. They deflowered each other behind Margotta’s back. I was quite proud of their rebellion. Peace confided in me because she couldn’t confess to her mother.”

“Your daughter had recently cursed Prince Robin and turned him into a centaur. His new attractiveness drew a lot of unwanted attention to him. I thought it was to make him Peace’s equal, because she’s a woman who knows her mind about males, but then I discovered from Prince William...”

“Ah... handsome Prince William. How is that strapping young fairy? His mother and father produced such handsome sons. Robin is the youngest of their brood.”

“Uh... well, when Prince William came here, he was leading an army.”

Queen Elsbeth quietly clapped her wrinkled hands. “I heard he got married too.”

“Yes, I believe that is correct. He asked to come stay at the inn sometime.”

“Oh? Is this an inn?”

“Yes, and I’m the innkeeper—at least for now.”

A locket hung around Queen Elsbeth’s neck chimed loudly. “Time for my medicine. May I have some tea, Innkeeper? Do you have a name?”

“My name is Selene.”

“What a wonderful witch name... and perfect for an innkeeper. Yes, Innkeeper Selene—that has a delightful sound to it. I take my tea with honey and a bit of clover milk. If you don’t have clover milk, regular dairy will do.”

“I have almond milk.”

“Sounds delightful. Bring tea and we’ll discuss what to do about my family. Since I’m not dead, I might as well help sort this crap out. Right?”

The smile bloomed slowly on my face, but it soon took over. Goddess, I could only hope to be this self-possessed and confident at her age. “May I move you to the parlor. It hasn’t been renovated yet, but you don’t belong in this cage. I feel bad for bringing you here.”

“Nonsense,” she said, waving a hand. “This will make a great story to tell my friends later. Adventures don’t come to me as often anymore.”

“Okay... well... before I go, I need to warn you that I turned Peace into a centaur. I’m not turning her back until your daughter removes the curse from Robin.”

Queen Elsbeth laughed. “You’re devious, and I appreciate that. You should have turned Margotta into something.”

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“I did something worse. Before I tell you what I did to her, let me go make our tea.”

“Of course, dear. Leave your ghost to keep me company. I’ll try to remove that horrible look from her face.”

“What look?” Jezel demanded.

I shrugged without trying to explain. I had enough shit to answer for.

Elsbeth pointed a shriveled finger. “You look like you need some prunes. I get that look every now and then if I don’t eat enough fiber. But then, I guess ghosts don’t need fiber.”

Elsbeth crone-cackled again, and Jezel looked ready to zap her.

“Do not hurt the fairy queen while I’m gone,” I told her before I raced upstairs to make tea.

Farley was in the kitchen when I came rushing in. Jezel had dressed me in my new innkeeper dress before I did the summoning. It was so much easier to wear that I nearly forgot it was on.

“I like that dress more every time I see it. I like how it shows off your curves.”

“I’m glad you like it, but please move. I summoned the wrong fairy queen, and now I have to serve her tea because she needs to take her meds. She’s a zillion years old.”

Farley chuckled. “You’re in luck. The teakettle is nearly done boiling.”

“No, not that one. I can’t use water from it because it’s iron. It might make her sick. Goddess, it might even kill her. No, no... I can’t kill the fairy queen. I need to use the stainless steel tea kettle Paul brought me.”

I grabbed the stainless version from the pantry, walked back to the sink, and held it in my hands. My mind was a jumble of concerns. What was I going to do now? I hadn’t made a Plan B and Plan A had gone crazy.

Outright laughing now, Farley gently freed the stainless teakettle from my fingers, filled it with water, and switched it with the iron one still on the stove. “It looks like I’m not the only one who needs a keeper.”

I bit my lip and nodded. “I had it all planned out. Now everything is shit and I’m making tea.”

His smile was brilliant when he turned back to me. “Was part of the plan turning Peace into a centaur? She and Robin were racing to town and back. I came to see what was going on. They look so good together.”

“Will you think poorly of me if I say yes?”

“No, I adore the way your mind works. I adore how much you care.” His words were nice, but Farley’s honest answer was to growl softly and push me against the counter. His mouth pressed against mine and wiped all my worries away.

Making me forget the crapfest of my life was a gift he had—a gift just for me.

Not being a total idiot, I kissed him back and moved my hands up to his face. “I can feel you through this dress, which already makes it ten times better than the old outfit.

I couldn't feel anything through those ginormous skirts and layers."

Farley gave me a fanged smile and touched our foreheads together. "Can I stay and spend the night? I don't care about anything except being with you. I'll be the best distraction you could ever find."

Yes, I already knew that just from the way he kissed me. If he were as naturally talented at everything else we might do in bed, I might never let him go.

"I'd love for you to stay—if I don't end up in a fairy prison. I summoned Peace's grandmother instead of her mother."

His head dipped to my neck, and his body sagged against mine as he laughed. I knew it was so Farley could chuckle against my shoulder. "It's not really that funny. Summoning her was Jezel's fault. Jezel's the one who gave me the fairy queen's name. I expected to see Gertruda the Barracuda in the cage."

"I have faith in you sorting this out. I promise this will be incredibly funny when you think back on it later. Is the fairy queen really, really old? Most people think she's already dead," Farley said, kissing his way up my face until he towered over me again.

"Let's just say her picture should be under the word 'ancient' in the dictionary, but she's much sharper than she appears. It sounds like she's in some special home for elderly fairies. My summoning her seems to have made her day."

Farley laughed again but also hugged me tightly in support. He might laugh at my actions, but I knew he'd be there for me, no matter how this worked out. It was nice to be liked so much. It was nice to be wanted by the best bear in the world.

The tea kettle whistled. "That's my cue to serve my new guest. Wish me luck."

“I’m wishing you luck and that it resolves quickly. I’m going to text Dad and tell him I won’t be back tonight. Then I’m going outside to judge the centaur races. Princess Peace keeps accusing Prince Robin of cheating. I explained how much shorter her strides were than his, but the facts seemed to upset her. Princess Robin laughed at her reaction. Then she screamed something about only wanting the bare necessities from me. I started to explain about homophones, but she whinnied too loudly to hear me.”

My face heated. I could well imagine Peace going blank from all those facts. I focused on Farley’s fangs when he went into lecture mode so I could pretend to pay attention.

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“Do you seriously have to tell your father about tonight?”

Yes, I was pleading, but I wasn't in the habit of announcing my romantic exploits to others. If I got congratulations flowers from Paul and his mates tomorrow, I was going to spell Farley's mouth shut.

“I don't want to be rude to Dad. He'd tell me if he was going to be away overnight.”

“Would he? Because I don't think so. I think he'd sneak away from his petri dishes and enjoy his booty call without anyone ever knowing. I think he'd pretend he went for a walk and fell asleep in a field.”

Farley's newest trick was simply ceasing to argue. He kissed me, lovingly patted my bottom, growled a little because he liked it, and then headed out of the kitchen so I could make Queen Elsbeth's tea.

“Bare necessities,” I repeated with a snort. “I wish I'd thought of that.

But if I had, then I would be the one getting the lecture on homophones. That would have been both bad and boring.

14

I returned to the basement and found Jezele leaning against the wall of the cage. The door was open. When she saw me carrying the tea tray, a table instantly appeared for me to set it down on.

“If you could materialize, I would happily serve you tea and cookies too, Jezel.”

“No need to worry about me. I remember precisely what tea tastes like and can recall it any time I wish. Being one with the inn also allows me to live vicariously through its guests.”

Queen Elsbeth smiled as I poured her tea and put in the honey and almond milk.

“It doesn’t make it taste like almonds, but there is a bit of a nutty taste.”

She cautiously sipped the hot brew. “Delicious,” she pronounced. “Jezel and I have been having the most marvelous talk. She’s been alive almost as long as I have.”

Jezel looked at me. “Like you, Queen Elsbeth considers me prudish as well.”

“I never said you were prudish. I simply said things are different now. Women freely exercise their choices. Many live as only men were allowed to do back in your day.”

Queen Elsbeth softly cackled as she sipped her tea. “I suggested to her that humans have so many rules about love and sex because of the great pleasure they get in breaking them. The forbidden can be so much more fun.”

I waved my hand—no wand needed for this magic—and the other chair from the parlor appeared. I lowered myself into it and smiled. “I’ve never denied myself a lover or a friend. People think I should stay mad at Peace forever just because she slept with my ex-boyfriend once. But that’s about timing. I was done with Ethan, but hadn’t broken things off yet. She gave me good reason.”

I looked at Jezel. “And don’t ask me again what I would do if the male were Farley. As a fellow witch, you know I would turn her into some hideous creature for revenge.”

“Peace has a good heart.”

“Yes, she does.”

“Yet you turned her into a centaur,” Queen Elsbeth said with a grin.

“I did that to thwart your daughter’s evil plans.”

“Margotta is not evil—far from it—though the jury is still out on her secondborn. Margotta is what you humans refer to as a plane mother.”

“Plane mother?” I asked.

Queen Elsbeth looked at Jeziel. “Did I get that modern saying wrong?”

Jeziel snorted. “I have no idea. Modern jargon makes so little sense to me that I don’t bother learning it. Plus, it never stops changing. I’m tired of trying to accommodate stupidity.”

I grinned at Jeziel’s rant. “I’m sure I must frustrate you daily.”

“More like hourly,” Jeziel said.

I looked at Queen Elsbeth. “What I think you mean is that your daughter is a helicopter parent.”

“What’s the difference?” she asked.

My laughter sneaked out past my smile. “My ex’s mother was like that, and now her adult son feels entitled to everything he decides he wants. Ethan is the reason Prince William showed up on my doorstep. He told them I was evil and holding Prince Robin hostage. Ethan wanted Prince William to kill me.”

“How exciting,” Queen Elsbeth said.

I shrugged. “We sorted things out.”

“Of course, you did,” Queen Elsbeth said with a grin. “May I have some more tea?”

She set her cup down on the table. I rose from my chair and refilled her cup. “I’m sorry I summoned you by mistake, but it’s been a pleasure to meet you.”

“The feeling is mutual. So what were you planning to do to Margotta?”

“Confine her to this cage and force her to remove the curse from Prince Robin. He and Peace need a chance to be normal together. Parents hovering in the background while plotting and planning aren’t conducive to romance.”

“No, they’re not. Hovering parents are real bone killers. I read that online,” Queen Elsbeth said flatly.

Jezel’s gasp made me snicker. This impromptu tea party was turning out to be fun.

“Will I cause you or fairy kind any problems if I confine the acting queen for a

while?”

Elsbeth lifted an eyebrow. “You underestimate yourself. Discovering Queen Margotta’s disguise won’t bother her half as much as you changing her daughter into a centaur. Are the kids having fun playing at being horses together?”

I nodded. “They’re racing. I hear Princess Peace is upset because her centaur legs are shorter than Prince Robin’s. He’s winning too much.”

“Peace hates losing. It’s going to take a few more centuries to knock that need to be on top all the time out of her.”

“Is that a sly dig about the positions she prefers in bed? Or are you speaking of Peace’s competitive nature?” Jezel threw up her hands. “This lack of clarity is precisely why I hate modern speech.”

I chuckled at her outbursts, which always delighted me. “Good for you for seeing both possibilities. In this instance, it’s about Peace’s competitive nature. You need to have dinner with Farley and me on metaphor nights. Only with you, we’d have to discuss nuances.”

“If this situation weren’t partly my fault, I’d leave you to your own devices until you swore never to mock me again.”

“I’m laughing with you, Jezel, not at you. I think you’re great.”

She stopped fussing and studied me. “Am I great enough to make you want to stay?”

I didn’t answer her question, but I did smile.

Queen Elsbeth insisted on staying. Despite being abducted by mistake, she acted like

she'd always planned to be a part of my hot mess. I hoped I could rock that kind of attitude at her age.

“Ready?” I asked her and got a thumbs-up in reply.

I sent the second chair inside the cage, and then raised my wand.

“Bippidity, dippity, flippity, flue.

You must come to the inn when I summon you.

Today, I summon Fairy Queen Margotta.”

I snorted at being right when Gertruda the Barracuda materialized in the empty chair. Lord Alfred had known all along. He was now officially uninvited to return, and my weakness for bunny cuteness now sickened me. Next time, I would do more digging into personalities and spend less time cutting guests so much slack.

“Why, Gertruda? What are you doing here? I summoned Queen Margotta—not you.”

“Don’t play coy with me, witch. I can tell this is your work. I was resting when I felt your tug.”

Her head turned at a nearby cough. “Mother? Why in seven hells are you here?”

“I’m here because I’m still the real fairy queen,” Queen Elsbeth said in her most queenly tone. “I can be anywhere I want to be.”

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I turned to Jezel. “Can the inn remove her camouflage?”

“Since she lied about her identity, the inn is within its rights to still that magic away. None of my guests ever lied outright. And no, Selene, my seaman doesn’t count.”

I inclined my head toward her. “Son of a biscuit, Jezel, I wasn’t going there. Let’s try not to fight in front of guests. Strip her of her magic.”

Magic encircled the cage. “You can’t do this,” Queen Margotta declared. “I’m the fairy queen.”

“Not yet, you aren’t. And I say she can do anything to you that she wants,” Elsbeth announced with a cackle.

The magic coating Margotta melted away to reveal a short, beautiful woman who looked like her daughter. “Great disguise, Queenie. I bought it completely. Unfortunately, the inn didn’t. That’s why you’re now in a cage.”

“I’m only here because Alfred betrayed me.”

“No, Alfred saved your royal ass because I was going to zap you into your Next Great Adventure for lying about who you were. He pleaded with me to spare you, so I brought you to my makeshift dungeon instead. Ironically, I don’t care about your deception anymore because I found another solution to my issue.”

Margotta perked up. “What issue? Perhaps I can help. Perhaps we can strike a deal.”

“It’s far too late to offer to be helpful. I already turned your daughter into a centaur. Well, the inn did. Your presence in my cage tells me you’re not more powerful than the inn.”

“You did what?!!!” Margotta yelled as she stood to glare at me. The outrage was very Gertruda of her. “When I am out of here, I swear I will turn you into a goat.”

I laughed at the threat. “Not before I can turn you into one. We’re on my territory. Besides, your mother would likely help me.”

“I would. I think Margotta would make an excellent goat,” Elsbeth said with another cackle.

I smiled wide and saw her wink.

Margotta slowly sat back down in the chair. “I don’t understand how this could go so wrong. All I wanted was for Peace to be happy.”

I snorted. “Happy, but only on your terms and with the male you chose for her. Robin was your choice initially because you wanted to be politically connected to his parents. You didn’t curse Robin to help him. You cursed him hoping Peace would be upset enough by his new mojo with women to never to want him. I think you have someone else in mind for her now—someone who you think might bring a higher gain to your fairy queendom. Don’t you care at all about what she wants?”

“Wanting the best match for your child is not a criminal act. Peace is a princess. The political gains of her marriage can support her rule.”

“They won’t make her glad to bed him every night. Or happy to raise his children. The inn and I think cursing the only man Peace has ever loved is a crime. If it’s not, then it should be. Robin did nothing to deserve what you did to him. His brother

knows it. His parents know it. Peace knows it. You lost respect all around for doing that to him.”

Margotta snorted. “I did my daughter no actual harm. She doesn’t love Robin. If she had loved him, she would have married him long ago.”

“Did you marry the man Elsbeth picked for you?”

“No,” mother and daughter answered.

“Then butt out and let Peace choose her own life mate. Promise me that, and your deception will be forgotten by me and the inn. Peace may never forgive you, but that’s between you and her. She pretty much hates you at the moment.”

Margotta looked like I’d slapped her. “I’m her mother. She can’t hate me. It’s not allowed.”

“No, the innkeeper is right, Peace hates you,” Elsbeth said. “She told me she did. I don’t think she would shed a single tear if she never saw you again. And your other daughter hates you for giving all your attention to irritating Peace. Go find a man and get a life of your own, Margotta. It may yet save you and your children.”

“I never hated you, Mother,” Margotta said.

“Of course, you did. And I don’t want you to repeat my mistakes. Peace’s father was a far superior fairy to the man I promised you to. You were right to get with child by him. You were right to do as you pleased. With the exception of the cruel tricks you play on your subjects, you’re a decent queen.”

Margotta scrubbed her face with her hands. “Why did you never tell me any of this before now?”

“Because you would never have believed me—until now. Also, the innkeeper’s mistake brought my family situation into sharper focus for me. I want you to be successful as a queen. I want you to mend your relationship with both your daughters. Peace will make a good queen without or without your help, but you will miss a lot of wonderful things if you don’t get this right. Don’t wait until you’re ancient to learn these life lessons.”

Margotta sighed at the lecture.

My legs were getting tired while they fought, and I wished I had another chair. Surely, the inn had some others in storage? I hummed a game show theme in my head while mother and daughter cleared the air between them. The conversation was tense and I tuned out after a few minutes.

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Finally, Margotta turned to me. “Would you truly leave Peace as a centaur?”

“Yes, but she would probably want me to extend her legs. She's always losing to Robin in races. Farley's helpful explanation of the physics of why only upset her more.”

“Princess Peace and Harmony hates to lose.”

I laughed. “So do I. That's why I don't make a habit of it.”

Margotta looked at her mother and lifted a hand in the air. “Fine. You have my word. Peace can pick her own life mate.”

“And marry whenever she's ready—not when you say she is.”

“Fine—that too.”

Magic spread to the cage and wrapped around all of us. After it dissipated, I made a sound in my throat. “Now what happens?” I asked Jezel.

She lifted a hand. “If the fairy queen breaks her word, the inn's magic will collect her and return her to this cage.”

“Seriously?” I asked.

“No, I would say... allegedly. No other innkeeper, including myself, has ever needed to take this level of disciplinary action with a guest. Most deceivers never got beyond

the front door. You somehow managed to let two inside.”

I opened my mouth to protest on principle, but Jezel was right. I let Peace in without knowing about her and Ethan. I also let in the fairy queen disguised as her own spy. “They were both in the same family, so you really can’t consider that a trend. It was more of a coincidence.”

Jezel chuckled at my defense. “I will still point it out if it happens again.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, I’m sure you will.”

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After I released Queen Margotta from the cage, I moved Queen Elsbeth into the room Peace once used. I made her more tea and settled her in to rest.

Queen Margotta, in her true fairy form, followed me outside as we went to find the royal centaur couple. We found them in the backyard. Princess Peace had the saddle strapped on. A squealing Lord Alfred skittered nervously in the seat.

Robin walked beside them with his hand on Peace’s flank. For support, maybe? I was going to go with that instead of wondering if it was an excuse to touch her shapely flank.

Queen Margotta chuckled. “When the girls were very young, I used to turn them into hybrid creatures to entertain them. Peace wanted to be a pony so badly, but then she couldn’t get all four legs to work at the same time. Those happy days are centuries old now.”

“Well, I think she has four legs figured out. Today, she and Robin were racing.”

“You probably think I’m a terrible person.”

“No, but I thought Gertruda was, and I was determined to keep her away from them. Some would say I was interfering. I would say that I was looking out for a friend. Your daughter owned up to her mistake with Ethan. She bravely pretended to give up the crystal to help me and The Baba Yaga trap Ethan’s mother. I admire your daughter and find her entertaining. I also want her to be happy.”

“My daughter is lucky.”

“Maybe, but mostly she’s kind. She’ll get the job done, but she maintains her relationships while doing it. I have concluded it is Peace’s superpower.

”Mother?” Peace asked when she saw her.

I waved Peace over. “Gertruda had to leave, so your mother decided to visit in person. She brought your grandmother. I put her in your old room. You can visit her when you’re back on two legs. The spell should be wearing off soon.”

Margotta grunted beside me, but she didn’t correct a thing.

As I went to find Farley, I was feeling pretty proud of how I’d worked things out.

Wrapping things up had taken longer than I’d hoped it would. The spelled fairies were finally back to being human. Mother and daughter were still bickering, but the real fairy queen took care of that with a single utterance of, “Hush now. You’re embarrassing us in front of the innkeeper.”

Everyone settled their debts with the inn, which was a significant amount from Prince Robin. That would be some nice cash to start up a witch’s garden behind the kitchen.

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I dashed to the bedroom and then halted after it closed. The room was lined with painted panels. It was like being surrounded by clouds. I walked to touch one and smiled at the sound-dampening foam.

I heard the shower kick off and smiled wider when a seven-foot-tall Viking shifter emerged from my bathroom. His hot gaze landed on me with a possessiveness that thrilled me to my toes. Water dripped down his chest still. I badly wanted to lick it off, but first, I needed to take some precautions.

“Don’t move. Stay right where you are,” I ordered, quickly opening the bedroom door again.

I rushed back into the kitchen, waved the wand to secure all the doors, and then I stashed it—and Jezel—in a drawer for the night.

I returned to the bedroom and found Farley exactly where I left him. I smiled in approval and shed my shoes. I’d snuck in earlier and put on my black date dress to celebrate the occasion.

I happily locked the door behind me and walked to the fantasy man I’d been waiting too long to get my hands on. He chuckled against my lips when I unwrapped his towel and slung it away.

He’d said that he’d been looking his whole life trying to find me. As he pulled my dress off and carried me to bed, I suspected I might have been doing the same.

If the doorbell rang, I would ignore it. Or maybe I wouldn’t even hear it from in here

thanks to the best boyfriend a witch could ask for. My moans bounced off the walls back to us as Farley used his fangs on me. He growled against me and vibrated both of us. It was perfect... absolute, positively perfect.

Tonight was only for us, and nothing was going to get in the way this time.

— THE END —