



Captured by the Fae General (Fae Overlords #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: The fae general takes a war prize

On the run from an abusive husband, I just want a fresh start in a faraway town where no one knows my name. I never expected the first settlement I reached to be conquered by a fae army only hours after my arrival. I also never expected to be captured by General Tristan Dalgaard, the huge, black-winged fae male who leads the army.

War prize. That's what he considers me. The spoils of battle.

He says he'll never let me go.

Though General Dalgaard's massive size terrifies me, he has a surprisingly gentle touch as he tends my wounds. Not only does he promise he'll never hurt me, but he shields me with his body during an enemy attack. He also comforts me whenever I awake from a nightmare. As the weeks pass, he seems determined to win my trust, and I slowly, very gradually, find myself falling for the handsome fae general.

But am I destined to remain his prisoner, or is there another path for us?

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TRISTAN

Unease spreads through me, though I'm not certain why.

I glance around the banquet hall of the castle that stands within yet another conquered human kingdom.

Faelights dance along the stone walls, casting an orange glow on the drunken revelry of fae soldiers, fellow highborn fae, and Prince Lucas's scheming advisors.

Weary and frightened human servants flit amongst the gathering, passing out wine, ale, and stronger spirits.

I keep scanning the cavernous room as my unease deepens. I feel as though I'm looking for something, yet I can't imagine what it might be. Or who it might be.

I watch as Prince Lucas enters the hall and takes a seat on the throne.

We recently conquered this human city known as Sorsston together, and I can't help but notice the Summer Court prince has been behaving strangely ever since.

He's also been absent frequently, only making appearances in the banquet hall in the middle of the night.

During the days and evenings, he's presumably conducting patrols of the countryside, though it's a task he's never shown much interest in before.

Usually, he stays close to our twenty-eight thousand strong Summer Court army.

As the uncomfortable sensation continues tugging at me, I keep glancing around the room.

What am I looking for? A human man plays a flute, while a human jester strives to juggle all the oranges a laughing fae soldier keeps tossing at him.

I wonder if the musician and the jester will survive the night.

Probably not. Human entertainers rarely do.

If the musician strikes a wrong note, or if the jester drops an orange, they'll likely be slaughtered by whichever fae soldier is standing closest.

A trembling, golden-haired human servant girl catches my notice as she approaches Prince Lucas. From across the room, I cannot quite make out her features, but I'm drawn to her nonetheless, and I slowly walk closer.

The servant girl passes the prince a glass of wine and turns to leave, only for him to order her to halt. For some reason, I feel the need to move even nearer, and so I do.

An unexpected protectiveness rises from deep within, even though I haven't fully glimpsed this servant girl's face yet.

What is happening?

I've never found myself drawn to a human woman before. Perhaps I've had too much to drink this evening. I glance down at my cup. But no, I'm only on my second drink, and I'm always careful not to become inebriated in case I'm suddenly called to lead a battle.

Finally, I reach the dias where the prince is seated on the throne. I don't like that he's talking to her, nor do I like how close she's standing to him.

To my shock, a murderous impulse seizes me as I eavesdrop on the conversation he's having with the trembling human female.

Now that I study her features up close, I realize I've seen her around the castle before, though until now, I've never felt so inexplicably drawn to her. Or protective of her.

"Turn around and face me, girl," the prince says, his voice booming in the banquet hall.

Does he plan to take this girl to his quarters tonight?

He has a habit of taking human females to his room, only to leave them untouched.

I know this because I never detect his scent on the women the following day.

It's a game I suspect he plays to appear vicious to our people, though I've never called him out on it because I've done the same fucking thing.

The girl turns and faces the prince, her eyes wide with fear. The fear she's displaying causes another surge of protectiveness to rise within me. Perhaps a bit of possessiveness too.

"Yes, your lordship. Er, your majesty. Forgive me, but no one told me how I ought to address you. Please don't have me killed," she whispers. "I will bring you more wine or anything you desire."

"How old are you?" Prince Lucas asks.

“Nineteen, sir.” She’s pale with increasing fright, and I watch her slender throat move as she swallows hard. She’s so petite and fragile looking, it makes me want to surround her with my arms, envelop her entire body with my wings, and shield her from all danger.

A growl builds inside me, but I force it back. I can’t challenge the prince for a human servant. We’ve served together for over three centuries, and I’ve witnessed him kill advisors for less. Not that I believe he could succeed in killing me, but I have no wish to fight the royal fae to the death.

As the prince makes a show of perusing the female’s body, I remind myself that it’s only a ruse.

He’s not going to claim her. He might drag her kicking and screaming to his quarters, but he won’t claim her.

He’ll glamour her and release her in the morning untouched.

But he’ll allow all the soldiers in the banquet hall to think he violated her, he’ll allow everyone to believe he’s that perverse and cruel.

A bored, fatigued look enters the prince’s eyes, and he lifts a hand as though he’s about to dismiss the girl, but she bursts into tears before he can speak.

“Please don’t have me killed, sir.”

I’m taken aback by the sight of her tears, and I find myself wishing I could draw her close in a caring embrace.

I also long to whisper calming phrases into her ear and comb my fingers through her golden tresses until she ceases sobbing.

But I'm the general of the Summer Court army, and I can't be seen showing such regard for a human servant.

Nevertheless, I'm unable to walk away from the scene, and I step onto the dias and move to the prince's side.

"Good evening, Prince Lucas," I say. "Or rather, good morning. I seem to have lost track of time." I clear my throat and point at the sobbing girl.

"Would you like me to have this servant removed from the hall?" I cannot keep my gaze off the pretty female, and when her eyes briefly meet mine, I go tense as my chest tightens with a strange but powerful emotion I cannot name.

Or maybe I'm just afraid to name it. Tenderness? Affection?

Gods, it can't be. Surely I'm just physically attracted to this human. That's all. Nothing more. Nothing serious. I pray the prince gives me leave to escort this female from the banquet hall. I'm suddenly aware of the dozens of eyes that are upon us.

"Good evening. Good morning. Whatever the fucking time it is," Prince Lucas snaps. "No, you don't need to concern yourself with this servant. She is doing an excellent job, and I would like... I would like to see that she gets a raise."

Excellent job? A raise? Though I'm shocked, I'm careful not to reveal my surprise as I nod and say, "I will relay this information to the castle steward."

My chest pangs when the girl sobs harder. I don't like seeing her upset. The need to comfort her is becoming so strong, I'm not certain I'll be able to resist the urge to draw her close and circle my arms around her small, shaking form.

The prince growls, though it's a distinct growl of frustration, not one that indicates

he's about to attack the girl. I carefully watch the interaction unfold, ready to intervene if he decides to hurt her.

I'll summon my wings and slice his throat with the sharp, pointed edges if I must.

The girl falls to her knees. "Please, please, please," she repeats over and over.

She's in complete hysterics, the poor thing, apparently convinced she's drawn the ire of Prince Lucas, never mind that he just complimented her skills and announced she would receive a raise.

Perhaps she thinks it's a trick or that he's cruelly toying with her.

I exchange a look with the prince, and I can't be sure, but he appears uncertain. Almost regretful. It reaffirms my belief that he's never actually harmed any of the females he's taken to his quarters in whatever human castle we're occupying.

Though I remain tense and the surges of protectiveness for the girl keep coming, I'm able to take a deep breath that's somewhat calming. It helps take the edge off my need to steal away with the girl. Not that I'm sure what I would do with her if I took her into my possession.

A crowd has gathered around us, and I shoot murderous looks around the banquet hall.

My comrades want blood. They're hungry for it.

They want to watch as Prince Lucas smashes the girl's skull on the stone floor.

It's happened before, though never with a female servant.

Only males. I've watched the prince kill because it was expected of him.

It's expected of him now, but I don't believe he'll do it.

If he tries to appease the crowd with violence, it'll be the last thing he ever does.

I watch as Prince Lucas steps down from the dias and lifts the sobbing girl to her feet. It's all I can do to keep from snarling as he holds her up. He's touching her, and it should be me touching her. Not him.

He makes brief eye contact with the girl, and she suddenly ceases crying.

A glamour, I realize. He's glamourised her into a state of calm.

Then he quickly walks her through the crowd, and I get the sense that he wants to remove her from the presence of the bloodthirsty onlookers as quickly as possible.

As he walks her through the gathering, I follow closely, not taking my eyes off the pretty human female's golden head.

"Sorry to disappoint, my dear friends, but I prefer to fuck in private," Prince Lucas calls out, and the spectators laugh and start to scatter.

It's a ruse, I remind myself. It's just a ruse. He's not really going to fuck her.

Yet I keep following, and once they reach the hallway that contains the prince's quarters, I summon an invisibility shield and move even closer, careful to keep my footfalls light.

The prince ushers the young woman into his quarters and shuts the door, but I press my ear to the wood and listen. I'll flash into his quarters and bludgeon him to death

with my fists if he even tries to hurt her.

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“Please have a seat wherever you’d like,” I hear him say in a casual tone. “Get comfortable. I won’t hurt you.”

Seconds later, she starts screaming.

The glamour. He must’ve lifted the glamour.

Of course he did. He needs the bloodthirsty crowd in the banquet hall to hear her screams. He needs them to think he’s tormenting her.

He needs the soldiers, other highborn fae, and his advisors to believe he’s as cruel as his two older brothers, both of whom have had turns leading the Summer Court army.

Still, just to make sure he’s not truly harming her, I flash into the room all while keeping my invisibility shield in place.

I’m taking a huge risk, yet I cannot resist the overwhelming urge to guard the female’s safety.

If the prince knew I had the ability to bypass the numerous wards he’s erected around his quarters, he would likely dismiss me as general, and I’m careful to remain quiet.

I worry that if I summon a soundproof bubble around myself, he’ll finally sense my magic and detect my presence.

So, I stand utterly still against the wall as I observe the goings-on in the room.

Relief fills me when I glimpse the prince seated on a plush chair, drinking a bottle of wine as the girl continues to sob and scream. She's in hysterics again, but she's safe. He doesn't appear inclined to hurt her.

But if he tries, or if I suspect he's even contemplating it, I'll end him before he can take his next breath.

Why am I so drawn to this golden-haired female?

What is it about her that makes my chest tight and makes me want to slaughter any individual who's ever done her wrong?

My mouth goes dry, and I gulp hard. My heart thumps so loudly in my chest, I'm surprised the prince doesn't hear it over the girl's screaming. Like me, he's always had exceptional hearing.

An unnerving thought strikes me, and I almost gasp.

Could this female be my fated mate?

I stare at her, astounded, as I contemplate the possibility.

It's rare for a fae to be fated to a full-blooded human.

And I'm not just any fae, I'm a highborn one.

I'm the highly respected and feared general of the Summer Court army, and I've never lost a battle.

How could I be fated to a human? Most highborns are fated to other highborns.

I should be fated to a highborn fae female who commands powerful magic and exceptional battle skills.

I suppress a growl as I remind myself that my oldest friend, Lord Kaiden, otherwise known as Warden Valloc, recently mated with a human... sort of. A highborn fae just like me, he believed the female named Mira was fully human when he set out to claim her, only to later discover she was part-fae.

But as I study the weeping human female, I don't believe she possesses any fae ancestry. She's so tiny, there's simply no way. Her delicate ears are curved rather than pointed, and though she has expressive, soulful blue eyes, they don't glimmer the same way a fae's would.

No. She's not my mate. She's just an attractive human female who's garnered my admiration and nothing more.

Yet I cannot summon the will to depart Prince Lucas's quarters, and I eventually resolve to stay all night if I must. I'll stay until he sets her free, and I'll make sure nothing bad happens to her in the aftermath of her release.

Then I'll depart Sorsston when the majority of the army leaves in a few days, and I'll never see her again.

This last thought makes my chest tighten further, but I push the feeling away.

Lonely. I'm just lonely and impatient to finally meet my fated mate. I'm over nine hundred years old and I still haven't encountered the female the gods have marked as mine, though I pray the day comes soon.

But how will I know when I've met the female who's meant to be mine forever? Will it feel similar to what I'm experiencing for this small human woman?

At last, the girl stops weeping, and the prince treats her with kindness and offers her a bottle of wine. I watch, stunned to my core, as Prince Lucas engages her in a friendly, albeit unusual, conversation.

“What’s your name?” the prince asks.

“Amelia, sir.”

Amelia . My heart quickens. The pretty, feminine name suits her delicate, golden features.

“Hello, Amelia. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” The prince straightens in his chair. “Tell me, have you ever been in love?”

I tense at the strange question, and I scoot even closer to Amelia, ready to intervene if I must.

“No,” she says after a long pause. “I’ve had crushes, but I’ve never been in love.

I’m promised to an old lord who lives on the edge of the kingdom, though I haven’t met him yet.

” She sighs. “We’re supposed to be married next month.

I doubt I’ll love him, but my father says he’s a decent man. I hope we can become friends.”

“Are you certain your old lord survived the battle?” Prince Lucas asks as I reel from the shock of learning about her betrothal. I’m equal parts surprised and angry, though it’s difficult to sort out the exact cause of the irritation that’s quickly building to rage.

Betrothed. Fucking fires.

“Oh yes. He sent his sons to fight in his stead,” Amelia says.

“My father received a missive from him two days ago informing us of his survival. Sadly, his sons both perished.” Her cheeks become flushed, and she swallows hard.

“My mother says he’ll want to be getting me with child as soon as possible since he’ll be needing to create an heir before his time in this realm comes to an end. ”

I’m on the verge of roaring my rage, but I quickly remind myself that she’s not my fated mate. I’m simply entranced by her beauty and so impatient to meet the female who will belong to me forever that I’ve allowed my imagination to get the better of me.

Amelia . Gods, I love the sound of her name, and I long to say it aloud just to savor it on my tongue, but I don’t. I won’t risk getting caught. Though she might not be my mate, I’m still going to remain in Prince Lucas’s quarters and keep watch over her. I feel compelled to do so.

The remainder of the conversation is so very odd, and it makes me see the prince in a new light.

He truly isn’t the cruel, conniving monster he wants the soldiers to believe he is.

He engages the girl in a lively conversation about love and asks how he might woo a particular human who apparently holds his affection.

Remarkable. I almost have to cover my mouth to keep from gasping, but I press my lips together and breathe slowly through my nose. The prince proceeds to ask the servant girl for advice on how to make the young human woman called Yvette fall in

love with him. How extraordinary.

I peer at Amelia as she becomes animated, and perhaps a bit drunk on the wine, while she excitedly offers Prince Lucas advice on how to steal Yvette's heart.

Gods, Amelia is so radiantly beautiful, and she emanates so much sweetness that I'm not certain I'll manage to resist the temptation to take possession of her.

I could claim her as a war prize. Why not?

"Here's what you do, sir," she says with a gesture toward the prince.

"You take your lady on moonlit walks, tell her you think she's the most beautiful woman in the entire realm, and perform acts of kindness not just to her but to people she cares about.

If you can make her family and friends like you too, then she'll more easily fall in love with you.

As for gifts, you don't want to go too large at first, as you don't want her to accuse you of trying to buy her love.

So, start small, and try to make it personal.

A bracelet made of beads the color of her eyes, or a box of candies from her favorite shop. "

I listen intently, wishing I could dismiss the invisibility shield, step forward, and swoop Amelia into my arms. I wish I could fly her to every candy shop in the realm and buy her whatever she craves, and I long to shower her with lavish gifts even though she believes a male shouldn't go too large at first. I want to drape her in rare

jewels and the finest silks.

Slowly, very carefully, I push off the wall and approach her. I sink down on the floor next to her, and I breathe deep of her sweet, floral scent. I lean as close as I dare and smell her hair.

A slight shiver affects her body, and I immediately send her a wave of summer warmth, wanting to ensure her comfort.

It pleases me when she ceases shivering and her eyes briefly flare with relief.

Summoning more of my summer magic, I send her another wave of warmth followed by an infusion of scents reminiscent of the season.

Honeysuckle, lavender, gardenia, and jasmine, just to name a few.

She peers around the room as though searching for the source, but her gaze softens as she takes a deep breath, and she appears even more relaxed than before.

Gods, why is everything about her so enticing?

I think of the female soldiers in the Summer Court army. I've enjoyed discreet amorous encounters with many of them, though it's been a while since I've done so. Maybe I'm due for some female companionship. Maybe that's another reason Amelia has caught my attention.

I scoot even closer to her, admiring the way her face lights up as she talks about love.

Perfect. Amelia is so perfect.

Mine . The word resounds in my head, and I shove it away.

Eventually, the prince shocks me further when he promises to escort her outside the castle in secret, deliver her to her parents' house or to any location she desires, and give her twenty pieces of silver just to thank her for giving him advice.

It's perhaps the most shocking scene I've ever witnessed.

If the prince's father, King Haratt, ever found out just how merciful and secretly kind his youngest son was, he would likely disown him and banish him to the far reaches of the realm, if not kill him outright.

I almost laugh when I consider how close I came to attacking the prince in the banquet hall, all because I'd feared he might harm Amelia.

I remain in the prince's room until he escorts the human woman outside at dawn, summons wings, and flies her to her parents' house.

I follow them at a distance, keeping my invisibility shield intact.

The prince, of course, glammers Amelia after he passes her a bag of silver.

But I suppose he can't have her blabbing to everyone about how he helped her.

"Your services are no longer needed in the castle, Amelia," the prince says.

"Do not return. Marry your old lord in a month and have a happy life. Put the twenty pieces of silver in your skirt pocket and hide it from your parents and your soon-to-be husband. Keep it for yourself in case you ever have need of it. It's yours and yours alone.

Be well, Amelia." His eyes glow bright blue, and I suspect he's silently erasing her memories of him, and understandably so.

Prince Lucas turns Amelia to face the door, knocks on it three times, then bolts skyward.

I observe as a middle-aged woman answers the door, and Amelia soon enjoys a happy reunion with her mother.

I watch through the window as her father approaches and gives her a suspicious look, but he eventually welcomes her home, though his manner is standoffish.

Safe. The pretty human female named Amelia has been safely returned to her family. I exhale with relief. Then I launch into the sky and fly back to the castle while trying to ignore the painful tug in my chest.

Amelia . Will I ever see her again?

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Six months later...

AMELIA

I bolt upward in bed, pulled from sleep with an abruptness that leaves me disoriented and gasping for air.

My heart clenches with terror and I instinctively shield my face, expecting to find my bad-tempered husband looming over me.

When the blow I'm anticipating never lands, I peek between my fingers and glance around the room.

He's not here. I'm alone. I'm alone in the tiny room I'm renting at the boarding house in Glenville, a remote mountain town that's far from my home city of Sorsston. I arrived here just hours ago after several days of arduous travel on foot.

I lower my hands and exhale a long breath.

Safe. I'm safe. Well, as safe as I can be while on the run from the husband who would likely kill me if he ever found me. At the very least, he would drag me home and make me pay for leaving him. I pray he never finds me, and I vow that I'll do whatever I must to remain hidden.

Though I could've sworn I heard something when I awoke, a strange noise or perhaps an unusual vibration, I tell myself it was only a dream that drew me from my slumber, even though I can't remember any details.

I'm about to lie back down when shouts and screams ring out in the distance. I freeze and listen carefully as a slight tremor rattles the boarding house, and more cries rend the night, this time a bit closer.

The panic I initially felt upon waking returns.

No no no, please no.

It sounds like the town of Glenville is under attack. A sickening sense of remembrance falls over me. Just six months ago, only weeks before my ill-fated marriage to Lord Nevel, Sorsston was captured by the fae. I survived that attack, but will I survive this one?

I throw the covers off myself and rush to the window.

At first, I can't make out the enemy in the darkness.

It could be a fae army, or it could be marauding orcs or even a human foe.

Glenville isn't a large town, and it wouldn't take a massive force to conquer it.

But I'd mistakenly believed I would be safe here in this little settlement deep in the Warrlish Mountains.

A distant building goes up in flames, followed by another and another. Dozens of people rush through the streets in the firelight, though it's still difficult to discern whether they're all human or... other.

My question is soon answered when a massive, winged form swoops through the sky very close to the window. With a gasp, I yank the curtains shut and take two steps back. My heart gallops in my chest.

Fae. We're under attack by the fae.

Most fae don't have wings, but the highborn ones do, and the larger fae armies always have a good number of winged, highborn fae in their ranks. It's a terrible fact I learned when Sorsston was conquered by the Summer Court army.

Voices boom in the hallway, and footsteps pound right outside my door. The other tenants are waking up. I swallow hard and try to decide the best course of action. Should I hide in my tiny, rented room until the battle ends? Or should I make a run for it and try to escape Glenville?

In Sorsston, prior to marriage, I'd worked as a servant in the castle. During the attack on my home city, I'd holed up in a storage room with the other servants, and though it was a frightening experience, I survived unscathed.

The weeks following the capture of Sorsston, however, were equally terrifying, if not more so.

I'd remained in the castle, forced to serve the fae who'd conquered the city, forced to watch as many of my fellow servants were killed or taken as slaves.

Some simply disappeared, while others were used and violated in ways that make my blood run cold.

Somehow, I'd been lucky. It's weird because I can't recall exactly what happened, but I have vague memories of an encounter with a highborn fae in the castle.

The highborn fae rescued me from some danger, the details of which I can't recollect, then dropped me off at my parents' house and gave me a bag of silver coins.

Try as I might, I can never piece the memories together or make them feel entirely

solid.

But most fae are cruel, conniving, and violent. I can't count on a rare, kind fae to shield me from danger during this attack and probable occupation. The fae are known to inhabit and rule over the cities and towns they conquer. Indefinitely.

If I don't escape now, I might never get the chance.

I take another look out the window, and my stomach drops to the floor.

More buildings are ablaze, and the increasing glow allows me to glimpse additional highborn fae in the skies.

I watch as a huge fae male swoops down, picks up a human by his ankle, then bolts skyward only to release the man seconds later.

I cover my mouth as the man plummets to his death. How cruel. How horrid.

Escape. It's my only option.

I can't remain in Glenville. I don't want to find myself at the mercy of the fae. Not again. Plus, I didn't survive Lord Nevel only to become a captive again.

I just want to be free.

I just want to live somewhere in peace.

Surely that's not too much to ask of the gods.

The boarding house shakes again, and I spin around and remove my nightdress and don a sensible outfit that will allow for rapid travel.

I'd stolen some of Lord Nevel's clothes and dressed as a man when I escaped, and that's the outfit I select now.

After I'm dressed, I pack my things. It doesn't take long. I don't have much to my name.

I tie my hair back and tuck it beneath a hat, then face the door as I try to summon courage.

I survived the fae attack on Sorsston, and I survived that monster of a husband that my father arranged for me to marry.

Surely I can rush into the streets and slip into the forest. I can find another remote town where I might seek refuge, and I can start over again.

I have a decent bit of money left—ironically, the silver given to me by the highborn fae whose face I can't quite remember—and I can find another mountain town, one even more secluded than Glenville where I might make a life for myself.

As I exit my room, a pale-faced man runs toward me. I step out of his path and he hurries down the staircase. I say a quick prayer to the gods, pleading for a safe escape, and I follow the man.

The main floor of the boarding house is deserted. Chairs are toppled over in the large dining room, and dishes and random items are scattered on the floor. There's no sign of the elderly couple who own the establishment.

I rush to the door and peek outside only to wish I hadn't. Oh gods. There are so many broken, lifeless bodies on the ground. But I don't glimpse any fae soldiers on the street directly outside the boarding house, so I emerge and immediately head around the side of the building.

The forest isn't far, and it's easy to see the outline of the trees in the dark because of the multicolored, ussha-blessed glow that covers the plant life.

Ussha is the lifeforce of the fae that powers their magic, and it recently started spreading from their four main courts into human and orc lands.

It's beautiful, seductively so, but it's also a reminder of the danger that's encroaching on human and orc territories.

The fae recently began migrating beyond the Summer, Spring, Autumn, and Winter courts, following the spread of ussha across the realm.

They've already established numerous settlements in human and orc territories, and they've been quick to conquer plenty of human and orc towns and cities.

Usually they don't strike unless provoked, however, and I can't help but wonder why they're bothering to attack a town as small as Glenville.

Does Glenville even have a militia that could've threatened one of the nearby fae settlements? Or are the fae truly attacking us without cause this time?

Perhaps I should've inquired more about the recent happenings in the town before I boarded here for the night. But I'd been so exhausted and tired of sleeping on the forest floor that I was unable to resist the promise of a hot meal, a bath, and a soft bed.

I continue heading for the forest, thankful this area of town isn't under heavy attack at present. The bodies in the street all appear to have been dropped from high above, and I avert my eyes from the gruesome sight as I continue my escape. Please let me make it.

Where will I go?

I try not to think about how difficult it will be to navigate the mountainous terrain without a map.

I'd found myself in Glenville by sheer luck, having come across the town after several days of travel through the forest. Only once did I venture on the main road, when I'd had no choice but to use a sky bridge for quicker travel between two great, towering mountains.

Somehow, I'd managed not to encounter any dangerous fae creatures during my journey to Glenville, but the ussha glow appears brighter than ever, making me worry that the horrible beasts from the four fae courts might reach this area of the human lands soon, if they haven't already—creatures I've only heard stories about, like venomous, six-legged manggas, two-headed vemma birds, and dire wolves, just to name a few.

Of course, the most dangerous creatures of all are the fae themselves.

Just as I'm about to reach the tree line, I glance over my shoulder at the town.

So many buildings are ablaze, and with each breath, my lungs burn.

The screams are louder than ever, and the massive highborn fae keep swooping down to grab townsfolk before flying high and dropping them to their deaths.

A group of people rush into the forest, and I press myself against the nearest building as multiple fae soldiers give chase. Blood-curdling screams ring out seconds later.

The forest is so close. I just need to bolt across the small clearing and find a place to hide in the semi-darkness.

Though I find the ussha glow beautiful, I know it'll make hiding in the forest difficult. I'll have to find a hollow tree trunk or perhaps some thick shrubbery where I can hunker down until the battle is over. Then once the coast is clear, I'll run.

I'll run and I won't look back.

A massive highborn fae soldier exits a building to my right while dragging a flailing human male behind him.

Disbelief swirls through me. I know this fae soldier.

He's one of the highborn fae who occupied the castle in Sorsston for a while.

He's also the largest of his kind I've ever seen.

He has enormous, bat-like wings, and long, dark hair.

Like all the other soldiers, he's wearing a black, form-fitting leather-like ensemble that accentuates the muscles beneath his clothing.

I know from the attack on Sorsston that the material of his clothing is impervious to human weapons.

His name... what's his name? I rack my brain for the answer. I'd spent weeks serving him and his comrades meals in the castle. During that time, I'd overheard them talking about their conquests in the human and orc lands, and I'd learned quite a few of their names and titles.

At last, the identity of the huge, highborn fae soldier hits me, and the realization is like a blow to the chest.

General Dalgaard.

This highborn fae is the godsdamned general of the Summer Court army.

The human man keeps trying to stab the general with a small knife, but his efforts are futile. He can't manage to penetrate the general's clothing.

I cover a gasp and go still as I continue to observe the scene.

"Please!" the human man cries as he finally drops the knife. "Please let me go. I didn't have anything to do with the attack on that nearby fae settlement, I swear it!"

General Dalgaard growls, and his visage fills with rage.

"Doesn't matter," he says with another growl.

"A contingent of soldiers from this pitiful human town killed twelve of my people in that unprovoked attack. You will pay . This whole town will pay. Blood for blood ." He lifts the human man up by his neck and displays a malicious grin.

Sickness curls in my stomach as I watch the human man while he thrashes around, kicking his legs as his face turns red and finally purple. Eventually, he stops moving and his head slumps to the side.

Dead. He's dead.

The general's black wings flare as he tosses the man aside, and it's then that I notice his wings have sharp, pointed tips on the bottoms and tops. Gods. Not only is he the largest fae male I've ever seen, but he's the most lethal looking.

Highborn fae can summon and vanish their wings at will, and though I'd known

many of the fae occupying Sorsston could summon wings, I never saw them do it inside the walls of the castle. This is my first time glimpsing General Dalgaard's impressive wings, and my mouth goes dry.

The general's wings dip down, and he appears ready to bolt into the sky, but he pauses when a human man wearing armor runs out of the same building, holding a sword high as he charges toward General Dalgaard.

Armor and a sword? Well, perhaps Glenville does have a militia.

I can't help but wonder if this brave yet utterly foolish human man was among those who attacked the nearby fae settlement in question.

I glance at the forest again. I should make a run for it right now. While the fearsome general is distracted by the charging human man.

Except... I can't quite make my feet move.

I'm not proud to admit it, but I'm scared. I'm trembling and on the verge of shock. I'm terrified the general will chase me down and slaughter me next if he takes notice of me. Maybe I should wait until he vacates the area, then I can finally make a run for the forest.

General Dalgaard turns to face the charging human. Before the man can take another step, the general swoops his left wing outward across his opponent's throat. Blood spurts, and the man falls to the ground.

Oh gods. The general really is a brutal, deadly creature.

I gasp and I'm about to take a step back, only for the winged fae male to glance my way just as a harsh gust of wind blows my hat off. His eyes flare when he notices me.

Cold fear grips my heart, and my legs go weak.

Run. I need to run.

Why won't my legs work?

A whimper escapes me. This is it. I'm dead. In seconds, he's going to kill me. He'll probably slice my throat with his deadly wings, or maybe he'll choke me to death. I don't want to die, but if he's going to kill me, I pray he makes it quick. I pray he doesn't resort to torture.

General Dalgaard takes a step forward, and the interest lighting his eyes turns to... dark lust. I've been around enough fae to know that look when I see it, and it startles me to my core.

Somehow, I snap out of my fear-induced trance and force my legs to move.

I push off the building and run for the forest.

A deep, vicious growl sounds behind me.

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AMELIA

I'm almost at the tree line when I glance over my shoulder. I can't help it. I have to look. I have to know whether he's chasing me. General Dalgaard. Oh, gods. I can't believe I'm running from the fucking general of the Summer Court army. I'm dead. So dead.

Sure enough, he's giving chase. His huge black wings vanish in a flash of light, and I suppose that's because the forest is too dense for him to easily navigate with a pair of massive wings. Ice fills my veins, and I turn around and run faster.

I enter the forest and hasten my pace even as branches and overgrown shrubbery hit my face and impact my arms. I wince as a sharp pain pierces my left arm, and I soon realize I must've brushed against a thorny bush.

Despite the pain, I don't slow my stride, not even when I brush against another bush and thorns dig into my right arm.

Why hasn't the general caught me yet? Surely he's faster than me. He's a highborn fae.

I can't resist another peek over my shoulder, and when I scan the forest for any sign of him, I spot him on the edge of the clearing.

He's locked in battle with four armored human soldiers.

He summons his wings in a flash of brilliant light, then swipes a wing out and slices

one man's throat, felling him on the spot.

Then he turns in a circle as he appears to size the other soldiers up.

Oh, thank you, gods! Some of my fear dissipates, and I experience a surge of hope that I might actually survive this attack. If General Dalgaard remains distracted long enough, I might succeed in escaping him.

I tear my gaze from the clearing and focus on the path ahead, even though there's not really a path.

In this area of the forest, there's barely room for me to run amidst the thick vegetation.

Still, I keep going. I run and I run. My pack slams against my back with each rapid step, and I eventually slow briefly to readjust the straps, then I take off again at full speed.

I run until a coppery taste fills my mouth, both my sides ache, and my lungs scream for air. Even then, I don't stop.

I'm running blindly through the forest, with no sense of direction, but it's my hope that eventually I'll reach an area that will provide good enough cover for me to hide.

I keep an eye out for a hollow trunk or an area that's not so fully affected by the ussha glow, a dark place where I might conceal myself in case the general decides to come after me.

I pray he doesn't. I pray the human soldiers in Glenville keep him occupied long enough to permit my escape. Maybe he'll decide I'm not worth the trouble.

Yet part of me can't help but wonder if he's the highborn fae who helped me in Sorsston.

Someone helped me. A winged fae who flew me to my parents' home after I experienced a danger in the castle I can't quite remember.

I have vague recollections of a flight in the early morning.

Logically, I know I must've been glamourised.

The highborn fae who helped me didn't want me to remember the uncharacteristic kindness he showed me.

I suppose it's a power thing and has something to do with how vicious the fae want to appear to one another.

But in the clearing on the edge of Glenville, the general had looked at me with unmistakable lust in his eyes. Not just lust, but a dark, violent need. He'd also growled, and he'd started to chase me.

My heart sinks. Surely that means he's not the highborn fae who helped me in Sorsston.

It means he's just another cruel monster I served drinks and food to during the early days of the fae occupation in my home city.

Which means I really must remain hidden.

I finally pause to catch my breath and get my bearings. The vegetation has thinned just a bit, and dawn has finally arrived, allowing me a better look at my surroundings. Birds chirp and flit happily amongst the trees, and a silver fox darts across my path

and disappears in the underbrush.

My heart leaps when I spot what I think is a small opening in a rocky area in the distance. A cave. Maybe I could hide there. Just for a day or two. I can't keep running myself to exhaustion, especially when I don't have any water.

My stomach grumbles a moment later, reminding me that I don't have any food either. Thankfully, the forest is abundant with glowing ussha-blessed fruits and vegetables that are perfectly edible and quite delicious.

I hadn't been able to fit many provisions in my pack, and during my journey to Glenville, I'd survived on what I could find in the forest. I resolve that I'll quickly gather some food and then hunker down in the cave. To compensate for my lack of water, I'll pick the juiciest fruit I can find.

I untuck my shirt and hold it out as a makeshift basket while I start collecting. I pick a few apples, followed by some huge oranges and other items I can't put a name to—fae fruits and vegetables that have started growing in the human lands.

The best thing about fae fruits and vegetables, I decide as I approach the dark entrance of the cave, is that most of them glimmer and glow, even once they're plucked from whatever tree or bush they're growing on.

This means the cave won't be so dark and scary.

I'll just have to venture as deep inside as possible so the glow of my harvest doesn't attract the general's attention.

How long have I been running through the forest?

At least two hours, I reckon.

Fae are notoriously fast, and they're great hunters. Highborn fae like the general even more so.

Yet he's not here. He hasn't caught me yet.

Maybe it means he's lost interest. Maybe it means he's not coming.

Dare I hope?

I hurry to the cave and cast a cautious glance inside, though I can't see much. Just a dirt floor and rocky walls. I listen but don't hear any sounds coming from within, and as I finally step inside, I pray I won't come face to face with a sleeping bear or some other dangerous creature.

To my vast relief, after a quick but thorough exploration, I determine the cave is unoccupied. It's a small cavern, and it doesn't take long to reach the back of it, but there's nothing here. I sigh and take a seat on the dirt floor, allowing the fruits and vegetables to tumble from my shirt.

Thankfully, the glow from the food I collected provides adequate lighting.

Fatigue pulls at me as I lean against the rocky wall. I'd had difficulty falling asleep last night, only to rouse about an hour after I finally drifted off, thrust into wakefulness by the screams and shouts of the Glenville townsfolk under attack by the fae. I suppress a shudder.

I try to relax and get some rest, but my hands start trembling and soon my whole body is shaking. It's impossible not to consider what almost happened, and as the dark scenarios play through my mind, my trembling deepens.

Gods, I came so close to capture.

If not for those human soldiers, General Dalgaard would've surely caught me.

Another shudder affects me as I consider that violent, lustful gleam in his eyes. He'd appeared so perversely pleased when he spotted me.

I suspect he recognized me.

I have a vague memory of meeting his gaze once in the banquet hall of the Sorsston castle, though I can't quite recall the details of the encounter.

A horrid thought strikes me, and I can't help but gasp.

What if General Dalgaard was the very danger I needed saving from while at the Sorsston castle?

What if the kind, highborn fae who helped me was saving me from the general?

Maybe the general was about to drag me to his quarters, only for the highborn fae who flew me to my parents' house and gave me twenty silver coins to intervene?

My heart seizes at the possibility. It makes sense, though it's beyond frustrating that I can't piece the memories together, and it doesn't help that my imagination is so vivid.

While I appreciate the highborn fae who saved me, whoever he might be, I wish he hadn't felt the need to glamour me. I don't like that he stole my memories.

Eventually, my fear-induced shaking ceases, and my fatigue expands to the point that my eyes grow heavy. I keep jerking awake each time I almost fall asleep, however, convinced that every little noise coming from outside the cave is General Dalgaard.

Please let me escape him.

The more I consider it, the more I worry he was involved in the dangerous situation at the Sorsston castle, the more I worry he's the fiend who threatened my safety.

My restless mind runs through countless dark possibilities as I consider what might've happened in Sorsston that had resulted in my early dismissal from the castle.

Did General Dalgaard attempt to violate me?

I shiver at the prospect. Did he try to kill me?

Perhaps I spilled a drink or dropped a tray of food and incited his wrath.

Or maybe he simply wanted to torment me just to hear me scream.

I'd witnessed such occurrences in the castle, watched helplessly as fellow servants were pulled aside and tortured in ways that still give me nightmares.

Did General Dalgaard succeed in hurting me before my highborn savior intervened? If so, perhaps that's another reason I was glamoured and had my memories stolen.

I'm on the verge of drifting off again when something crawls across my feet. I glance down and gasp at the sight of a furry, red-eyed creature with sharp, pointed teeth.

The animal isn't very big. About the size of a large cat. But in addition to its sharp teeth, it possesses a long tail that's tipped with a talon. It doesn't appear friendly.

My mouth goes dry as I wonder if I could defeat this small but dangerous looking beast in a fight.

I stare at the fae animal, even though I've heard it's never smart to make eye contact

with a predator. Does the creature hail from the Summer Court? The Summer Court is the closest fae court to the Warrlish Mountains, though I suppose it doesn't matter from which court the creature hails.

All that matters is that I manage to escape unscathed. The creature looks like it could do some serious damage with its teeth or its tail.

With careful movements, I start scooting away.

The little beast draws back its head and releases an ear-splitting screech. I gasp and scramble further away, but before I can flee the cave, it grabs hold of my leg. I scream as its teeth sink into my flesh.

After I slam my fist into the furry beast's head, it releases my leg and howls. Despite the throbbing pain in my calf, I make it to my feet and rush out of the cave.

I move as fast as I can through the trees, desperate to put as much space as I can between myself and the sharp-toothed creature. It soon becomes difficult to put weight on my bitten leg, however, and I limp through the forest while praying the animal doesn't chase me down.

Oh, gods. That was a small fae beast. What will happen if I run into a huge one, particularly one of those dire wolves I've heard about?

Or a mangga swarm? I've overheard hunters talk about outrunning mangga swarms that are over a hundred strong.

I can't imagine facing down such a foe, especially in my current condition.

My pack! I left my pack behind in the cave. Not that it contained much. Just some clothes, medicinal herbs, and a few small personal items. Thankfully, the bag of

silver is stashed deep in my pocket.

At least I still have the money.

If I can reach another town, I can afford lodging. The funds won't stretch forever, so I'll need to find a job, but with my experience working as a castle servant, that shouldn't be too difficult. I hope.

I pause in a small clearing and pull up my pant leg. A dark green substance oozes from each tooth mark in my calf. Oh no. That can't be good.

Dizziness grips me, but I lower my pant leg and keep going.

I don't make it more than a dozen steps before a branch snaps behind me. My stomach flips, and I turn around slowly while praying it's not the beast from the cave, or something worse.

A gasp catches in my throat.

It's something worse.

General Dalgaard stands amidst the trees, his dark gaze riveted on me. "Hello, Amelia. I've been looking for you."

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TRISTAN

It's her . The pretty, blonde human female who's occupied my thoughts for months on end.

Amelia .

She's frozen in place, her eyes wide with terror, and I don't like it when she looks at me with a panicked expression. I attempt to gentle my visage, and I hold my hands out in a show of peace, but it doesn't seem to quell her fear.

She takes a slow step back, though she doesn't turn and run off like she did during the attack on Glenville.

Surely she must realize there's no escape. Not this time. It's just the two of us. There are no human soldiers to distract me.

"You made it impressively deep into the forest," I say, matching each step she takes backward with a forward step of my own. The familiar warmth I'd experienced when our eyes met in the Sorsston castle returns, and I again start to contemplate the possibility that she's my fated mate.

"Let me go," she whispers.

"I can't let you go, sweet human. Do you really think I'll leave you alone and unprotected in the middle of the ussha-blessed forest?"

” I gesture at the glimmering leaves on the nearest tree.

“It’s not safe here. Come nightfall, this forest will be crawling with deadly fae creatures with a taste for human flesh. ”

“I’ll take my chances.” She lifts her chin, and an air of determination emanates from her. Her bravery is admirable, but I still won’t leave her alone and unprotected in this forest.

I’m taking her with me no matter what. I need to discover whether she’s my fated mate, even though I’ve spent the last few months trying to convince myself it couldn’t be possible.

“You aren’t wearing a pack anymore,” I say as I take another slow step toward her, my hands still out in a show of peace. “Did you lose it? Or did someone take it from you?” If someone robbed her, I’ll hunt the thief down and make them pay.

She winces, then blinks fast a few times, and I start to worry she’s in pain. Moments ago, she appeared to be limping, but I assumed perhaps it was a result of running through the forest for a lengthy period. Humans don’t have the same endurance as fae.

“I left it somewhere,” she finally says. “Not that it’s any of your business.” Another wince. Yes, she must be in pain.

I scan her body, but with her clothing on, it’s difficult to tell where she’s injured. Speaking of her attire, she’s wearing men’s clothing. Her husband’s?

Jealousy heats my blood, but as I step closer and take a deep inhale, I don’t detect the scent of a male on her, human or otherwise. How very strange.

Months ago, when I last saw her in Sorsston, she was betrothed to an old lord. Perhaps the wedding never happened.

Even if she'd gotten married a full six months ago, if the union was consummated, I would still be able to detect the aroma of a human male's seed on her. I resolve to ask her about it later.

"I remember you from Sorsston, sweet human." I take another inhale of her scent, only to pause when I detect something sour. Like an infection. Or... venom. Alarm fills me. If she's injured, I must treat her soon. Humans aren't as quick to heal as fae or orcs.

"I remember you, too." Her eyes flash with what I think is accusation, and she lifts her chin even higher. "I know you're General Dalgaard. You're responsible for thousands of deaths in my home city. Thousands of deaths in other human cities and towns too, I would imagine."

"It's my duty to lead the Summer Court army as we defend fae interests in the human and orc lands.

If your people don't want to be attacked and killed, perhaps they should stop attacking our new fae settlements.

"I've never felt so defensive of my position as general, but seeing the condemnation in her soulful blue eyes has affected me more profoundly than I would care to admit.

It's making me second guess my purpose in life.

I grew up wanting to be the fiercest soldier my people have ever known.

Given how quickly I moved up the ranks and attained the position of general, I

believe I've accomplished my goal.

I've never wanted anything more in life... until I stared into her eyes in the Sorsston castle.

Why didn't I take possession of her then?

I could've stolen her from her parents' house after Prince Lucas dropped her off, then kept her as my little war prize.

She narrows her eyes and draws in a breath, clearly about to offer a retort, another judgment on my character, but I clear my throat and hold up a finger.

"You're hurt, Amelia."

She glances down at her right leg before settling a questioning look on me. "How is it you know my name? Are you truly in the habit of learning the names of the servants from all the castles you wrongfully occupy? Or do you only learn the names of the women you hurt?"

"I don't normally learn the names of servants from conquered kingdoms, no, I will admit that, but I know your name because I overheard you telling Prince Lucas.

" I consider her comment about only learning the names of the women I hurt.

Is she accusing me of violating women in the kingdoms I conquer?

I'm about to refute this claim of hers when she finally replies.

"Prince Lucas?" A look of confusion descends on her. "I-I don't recall ever speaking with Prince Lucas. He's a Summer Court prince, I take it? Anyway, I don't recall him

being in Sorsston.”

I reach her just as she sways and nearly falls over. I catch her, grasping her forearms and holding her upright. She blinks fast and gives her head a shake, and I can’t help but notice she’s become increasingly pale during our conversation.

“Prince Lucas no longer helps lead the Summer Court army. I’m entirely in charge now.

However, months ago when we conquered Sorsston, he was there.

He talked to you, saved you from a bloodthirsty crowd in the banquet hall, returned you to your parents’ house, gave you a bag of silver, and glamoured you into forgetting most of the events. ”

Her head tilts to the side, and when she sways again, I lift her in my arms. Gods, it feels so good to hold her. But she’s clearly injured, and I must tend to her leg now.

“Bloodthirsty crowd? I remember you, but I-I don’t remember a…” Her voice trails off and she faints in my arms.

I kneel on the ground and set her upon a soft bed of clover.

Then I push up her right pant leg. The bite marks and green ooze reveal she’s been attacked by a hurllan, and an adolescent one at that given the tiny size of the marks.

She’s lucky she didn’t encounter a full grown one.

Hurllans aren’t venomous but their mouths are so dirty that an infection usually sets in rapidly after they bite someone.

I hold a hand over the bite marks and beckon healing light.

Gold rays emit from my palm as I move my hand back and forth over her injured leg.

It doesn't take long for the green ooze to disappear along with the bite marks, and the swelling in her leg also goes down.

Lastly, I heal the scratches on her face.

Is she hurt anywhere else?

I pull up her other pant leg but only glimpse smooth, unmarred skin.

I contemplate tearing the clothes off her tiny body, but I worry that if she awakens during the process, she'll assume the worst and believe I'm about to violate her.

I don't want to cause her such a terrible fright, so I lean close and take a deep inhale.

Relief fills me when I don't detect the scent of blood or another infection. Thank the gods.

I lift her in my arms and start walking through the forest. I resolve that I'll summon wings and fly her back to Glenville, where the Summer Court army has set up camp, once she's awake and I'm entirely certain she's in good health.

As though reading my thoughts, her eyes flutter open, and she stares up at me. She blinks a few times and wiggles in my arms, but I hold her more tightly to my chest, unwilling to put her down.

"Settle down, sweet human. You were bitten by a hurlan and likely still feeling weak. I healed your leg, but you might feel tired for about an hour."

She stills in my arms. “You healed me? How?”

I meet her eyes. “With my Summer Court magic.”

“Oh.” She lowers her gaze to my chest. “But why? Why would you heal me? Aren’t you going to kill me? Or do you simply want to keep me alive long enough to have your way with me?”

“I’m not going to kill you, sweet human, nor am I going to have my way with you. Not unless you’re eager and willing.” What am I doing? Am I actually bringing her back to the camp to keep as my war prize? If she lives with me among my people, that’s what she’ll be considered.

My little captive. The spoils of war.

“You didn’t answer my first question,” she says after a long pause. “Why did you heal me?”

We reach a small clearing that contains a multitude of glimmering, ussha-blessed flowers, and I finally summon my wings. Holding her close, I ascend into the sky at a slow pace, not wanting to scare her. She clutches onto me with a gasp.

“I healed you because there’s something about you that calls to me, Amelia, and I intend to keep you as mine.”

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AMELIA

There's something about you that calls to me

I intend to keep you as mine.

As General Dalgaard flies toward Glenville—at least, I assume that's where we're going—I can't stop thinking about the reasons he gave for healing me.

I don't quite understand, and more than ever I regret that the highborn fae in Sorsston stole my memories.

Was it truly Prince Lucas who saved me from danger and then glamourised me? It seems like a fantastical story.

A dark thought hits me.

What if the general is lying about the bloodthirsty crowd he mentioned earlier? What if he's lying to cover his own misdeeds?

What if my previous suspicions hold merit and he's actually the one who hurt me, or attempted to hurt me, at the Sorsston castle, forcing Prince Lucas to intervene?

And now I'm the general's captive.

Fear washes over me, and I shiver in my abductor's arms. But a second later, a wave of warmth surrounds me, and I detect honeysuckle and jasmine in the air.

It's something that's happened every time I've shivered during the flight to Glenville, and I can't fathom why General Dalgaard would use his Summer Court magic to ensure my comfort.

He tightens his hold on me, and I finally chance a look down.

We're traveling over the dense, ussha-blessed forest. I don't glimpse much beyond the treetops and the occasional multi-colored glow of smaller, fruit-bearing trees and the vibrant glimmer of flowers in small clearings.

In the distance, the snow-capped Warrlish Mountains rest against the backdrop of a radiant blue sky dotted with small, billowing clouds.

It's a beautiful sight from my current vantage point.

I consider what's happened and try to formulate a plan of escape. The general of the Summer Court army has captured me. He hunted me down after I ran away, having spent hours searching for me.

He claims he's drawn to me, whatever that means, and he also says he plans to keep me as his.

I shiver anew, and sure enough, I'm rewarded with another wave of summer warmth infused with honeysuckle, jasmine, and other scents to which I can't put a name.

Daisies? Roses? I'm not certain. My father arranged for me to start working in the Sorsston castle when I was only ten years old, and the majority of my tasks over the years were completed indoors within the dark, stone walls of the castle I always wanted to escape.

As a result, I never got outside much, and I'm not exceedingly familiar with the

various types of spring and summer flowers.

It would seem that feeling like a prisoner and longing for freedom has been a recurrent theme in my life.

First, in the castle serving in King Garrett's court, then in the castle again as I served our fae overlords during the early days of the occupation.

Next, during the five dreadful months I spent married to Lord Nevel.

Lastly, my present situation as General Dalgaard's captive.

What will happen once he takes me back to Glenville? Will the fae army occupy the small town for some time? Is there even a town left to rule over? There were so many lifeless bodies in the streets that I'm not certain it would be worth the effort.

The general slows his pace, and I glance down to find a sea of tents as far as the eye can see. The tents are surrounding what's left of Glenville, and the white structures are visible in the surrounding fields and the forest too.

Gods, did the general really bring the entire Summer Court army to attack Glenville?

I recall once hearing a fae soldier boast that the army was twenty-eight thousand strong. I doubt even five hundred souls called Glenville home. The people of this mountain town never had a chance.

The general straightens midair while holding me close, then descends into the expanse of tents. He lands next to the largest tent, a temporary structure that's at least four times the size of my parents' house.

I exhale a shuddering breath once General Dalgaard finally lands. I didn't think he

would drop me, not after going to the trouble of healing my leg, but I'm still relieved to be on the ground again.

A quick glance around the camp shows soldiers on patrol, human slaves rushing to and from various tasks, and even more soldiers conducting training exercises.

The fires have all burned out in Glenville, but very few buildings remain standing.

I'm heartened, however, when I notice the boarding house appears intact.

I pray Mr. and Mrs. Cornsbury, the elderly couple who run the establishment, didn't come to any harm during the attack.

I attempt to wiggle out of the general's arms, but a censorious growl rumbles from his throat, and he gives me a displeased look that makes me go instantly still. I lower my head and wonder if he'll punish me for resisting him.

Will he be worse than Lord Nevel?

I grow cold at the thought, but I fight back the ensuing shiver.

I don't want him to send me another wave of summer warmth.

I'm his captive, and surely that means he's not going to treat me well.

I don't want to find myself liking anything he does, and I resolve that I'll keep my guard up and remember who he is.

He's the fae general who's responsible for the deaths of thousands of my people. He's a horrid, irredeemable monster.

I lost friends, family, and acquaintances during and after the attack on Sorsston. I need to keep reminding myself of all those I lost. Uncle Kellen, Cousin Walt, my childhood friend Ben, and too many fellow servants in the castle to count.

“You needn’t fear me, sweet human,” General Dalgaard says in a strangely gentle voice. “Look at me. Please.”

I inhale a steadying breath and gradually lift my eyes to his. To my surprise, the sternness I glimpsed moments ago is gone, and there’s an undeniable tender glimmer in his stare that takes me aback.

“You’re mine, Amelia. My war prize .” Another growl rumbles from his chest. “Do you know what that means?”

War prize . Oh, gods. I can’t stop the fresh shivers that rack my body, nor can I find my voice. Not that I even know what to say.

If I were braver, I would curse him out and demand he release me.

General Dalgaard vanishes his wings in a flash of white light, then carries me into the large tent, all the while surrounding me with sweet, floral-scented warmth.

Two fae males wearing white tunics wait inside—servants?

—but they vacate the tent in a rush after the general jerks his head toward the exit.

Alone. I’m alone with General Dalgaard inside his tent, and he considers me his war prize.

How can he claim I don’t need to fear him?

Hours ago, I watched him kill several humans with ease, and he'd seemed to enjoy it. I can't imagine not fearing him.

He's a powerful, highborn fae from the Summer Court, and he insists I belong to him.

How long will I belong to him? I want to ask.

Maybe I'm another war prize in a long line of war prizes. Maybe hundreds of women have preceded me. What happened to the others? Did he kill them when he was finished? Or did he hand them over to his soldiers?

Finally, General Dalgaard sets me on my feet. I immediately take a few steps away, only to worry I just made a grave error. I don't want to incur his wrath.

Oh, gods, why can't I do anything right?

I wrap my arms around myself and lower my head, too terrified to meet his gaze.

He closes the space between us, the space I created, and places a finger beneath my chin, forcing my gaze to his. It takes all my self-control not to flinch at his touch.

My eyes burn as I look at him, and I blink fast to prevent the flow of tears. I want to weep and beg him not to hurt me, but I know such a display will only rouse the darkness that's within him.

Tears. Weeping. Begging.

A memory tries to resurface, something that happened in the Sorsston castle, but I can't quite make the experience whole.

Try as I might, I can't recall the events that resulted in a highborn fae flying me to my

parents' house and giving me a bag of silver.

Did a bloodthirsty crowd of fae really have their sights on me?

“As I already said, you're my war prize, Amelia.” His deep voice resounds in the tent and somehow fills me with warmth, though surely I'm imagining it. “Do you know what that means?”

It means I'm a prisoner.

It means I'm yours until you tire of me.

I don't say any of that out loud, of course, because I don't want to anger him. Instead, I shake my head and whisper, “No, sir, not really.”

“It means you're under my protection, sweet human.” His gaze softens further. “It means no one here will hurt you.”

“What about you?” I can't help but ask, even though I fear the answer. Even though I'm afraid that voicing the question might anger him. “Will you... hurt me?”

He draws back slightly, and his eyes fill with shock. “No,” he says in a resolute tone. “No, Amelia, I will not hurt you. I swear before the gods.”

I don't understand. I'm his war prize, and he probably intends to use me as his plaything, yet he claims I'm under his protection and he swears before the gods that he won't hurt me.

Is he lying? I used to believe fae couldn't lie, but during the fae occupation of Sorsston I quickly learned they could lie just as easily as my people.

I search his dark eyes for the truth. He looks so earnest.

But he's a highborn fae, and he's the general of the Summer Court army. He's supposed to be cruel and vicious. How else would he have attained such a high rank?

During the occupation of Sorsston, however, I don't remember him tormenting any humans in the banquet hall of the castle.

Most of the soldiers and highborn fae who "held court" murdered or maimed at least one poor servant.

Every morning after a long night of drunken, violent revelry in the banquet hall, I would be tasked with helping to clean the blood off the stone floor.

But General Dalgaard mostly kept to himself, and if he would've killed or tortured someone, I would've likely witnessed it, as most of the carnage occurred in the banquet hall.

Even if he'd done so elsewhere in the castle, I would've heard about it.

Not much happens in a castle without all the servants eventually finding out.

Gossip helps to liven the long days of drudgery.

"How does your leg feel?" General Dalgaard asks.

"It feels much better." I swallow hard. "Thank you for healing me." I can't believe I'd fainted in his arms and he'd healed me using fae magic while I was passed out.

"What about your face? Does that feel better too?"

“My face?” Confused, I reach to touch my cheek. But as I lift my hand, it brushes against his hand that’s touching my chin. I draw in a quick breath and drop my hand to my side.

“Yes, your face. You had numerous scratches all over it.”

Oh. “Uh, my face feels fine now, too. Thank you for that. As I ran through the forest, branches kept hitting my face.” It’s then that I realize my arms still hurt from the thorny bushes.

In all the excitement since he captured me in the forest, I’d forgotten about the injuries on my arms until now.

I try not to wince or show any signs of pain, but a suspicious gleam enters his eyes, and he gently takes me by my shoulders and steps back. He looks me up and down, his visage brimming with concern.

“Sweet human, you’re still hurt.” He gives me an encouraging look. “Please tell me where you’re injured, Amelia, and I will heal you.”

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TRISTAN

Regret spreads through me. I can't believe I'd missed Amelia's additional injuries, wherever they are on her body. Even as I take deep inhales now, I don't detect blood or an infection. But perhaps she has a painful bruise beneath her clothing.

Whatever is causing her discomfort, I'm eager to fix the problem for her.

I'm eager to heal her.

Already, my palms are tingling with Summer Court magic, and when she gasps and draws back, I realize she's glimpsed the golden light that's gathering in my hands.

"Don't be afraid. It's healing light," I explain. "But I must focus it directly on your injuries. Please tell me where you're hurt."

An uncertain look falls over her, and she wraps her arms around herself and hunches over a bit, as though trying to make herself appear small. I don't like it. I don't like seeing her cower.

Trust, I realize. She doesn't trust me yet. She's still afraid of me. Afraid I'm going to hurt her. Probably afraid I'm going to force myself upon her too. It's what most of my soldiers do with the war prizes they claim from the human and orc settlements we conquer.

A pained scream sounds nearby, and it's the worst possible timing.

Amelia's eyes flare wide, and she makes herself even smaller.

I suppress a growl of frustration and curse the soldier who's making the human female scream.

Then I quietly create a soundproof ward around my tent.

I'll still be able to hear what's going on outside, but Amelia won't.

"Come with me and sit down." I start guiding her toward the bed, then think better of it. I escort her to a plush sofa instead, and I help her take a seat.

"Please don't hurt me," she whispers. "Please don't force me to..." Her voice trails off, but I know what she meant to say.

I kneel in front of her and take her tiny hands in my much larger ones. Her eyes brim with tears as she meets my gaze, and her bottom lip quivers.

"I will never hurt you, Amelia, nor will I force myself upon you. I promise." I can't help but wonder if someone hurt her. The man she was supposed to marry? I still can't detect the scent of a male on her. If she went through with the marriage, it likely wasn't consummated.

"Why?" She blinks and a lone tear cascades down her cheek. "Why have you taken me as your war prize? Why do you want a war prize you aren't going to beat and fuck? I don't understand. Is this a cruel trick?"

I release one of her hands and reach for her cheek, intending to wipe away the fallen tear, but she flinches right before I touch her.

I immediately lower my hand, and rage starts to simmer within me.

She clearly believed I was about to strike her.

Is it because she assumes all fae are cruel, or is it because someone once hurt her?

I want to inquire about her past, but she just asked me a question, and I owe her an answer.

But gods. I can't tell her I suspect she might be my fated mate. I've already admitted that I'm drawn to her, but I can't confess that I want to keep her close while trying to figure out whether she's the female meant to be mine forever.

What if I'm wrong? Or what if she reacts badly?

"I swear this isn't a cruel trick, sweet human," I finally say.

"I truly don't intend to hurt you. As for why I've taken you as a war prize...

well, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since I saw you in Sorsston.

Since I stared into your eyes in the banquet hall for the first time.

I swear something passed between us during that moment, and all these months, I've regretted not stealing away with you then.

I even considered returning to Sorsston to look for you.

When I saw you in Glenville, it seemed a bit like... fate."

"Why didn't you take me from the banquet hall? What stopped you?"

I clear my throat. "Prince Lucas spoke to you, and though he had no ill intent, you

became frightened, and you started crying and begging him not to kill you. This scene drew the attention of all the fae in the banquet hall.”

“The bloodthirsty crowd.” Understanding starts to dawn in her eyes, and I know she’s trying to piece together the events of that night. Or early morning. Whatever the fucking time it was .

“Exactly,” I say. “The spectators expected Prince Lucas to hurt you, and I would imagine most wanted to watch him kill you. To satisfy their bloodlust, the prince glamourised you into silence and escorted you to his quarters. He made the crowd believe he violated you, though he didn’t harm you.”

“How can you be certain he didn’t harm me?” she asks. “I have only the vaguest recollections of that night.”

“Because I was there. I summoned an invisibility shield, and I followed you to his quarters, then I flashed inside the room and remained there all night, secretly guarding your safety just in case the prince changed his mind about not hurting you.”

She relaxes somewhat, no longer keeping her arms crossed so tightly over her chest. She straightens on the sofa and seems to have an easier time meeting my eyes. It brings me hope. Hope that she’s starting to trust me. Hope that she believes the story I’m telling her.

“I recognize you from the Sorsston castle, sir,” she says in a thoughtful tone, “and I remember you looking directly at me once, though when and why, I am uncertain. It’s all very hazy.”

“Perhaps I’m telling the story too quickly.” I offer her what I hope is a warm smile, and I’m careful to keep my mouth closed. I don’t want her glimpsing my sharp, pointed teeth just yet. Not that she doesn’t already know I have them. All fae do.

“Maybe you could start at the very beginning,” she suggests. “I would like to hear every little detail. If you don’t mind.”

“Of course. But before I start at the beginning, I would like to heal your injuries. I know you’re still in pain. I’ve witnessed you wince a few times since we entered this tent.”

A wary look fills her eyes, but she eventually capitulates with a brief nod. “Very well. It’s my arms. I believe I might have some thorns embedded in my flesh.”

I peer at her button-down shirt. A man’s shirt. “Are you wearing anything beneath this?” I give a gentle tug on the fabric.

“Yes, but only a chemise.” A pretty flush envelops her face. “Surely it wouldn’t be proper for you to see me like that.”

“We must remove the shirt if I’m to heal you, Amelia.” I infuse my voice with warmth. “Please. I promise I won’t turn into a ravenous, rutting beast when I glimpse you in a chemise. Besides, you can keep your pants on.”

She studies me for a moment, and I can see her mind working as she tries to assess my true intentions. I’m relieved when she finally relents and starts to work the buttons of her shirt open.

Just before she reaches the last button, she pauses and gives me a shrewd look. “You promise you’ll tell me everything that happened in the Sorsston castle? You’ll give me all my memories back?”

“I promise.”

“Very well.” She makes quick work of the final button and opens her shirt, revealing

the tight, low-cut chemise she's wearing beneath.

Gods, she's beautiful. My cock stirs in my pants, but I quickly avert my eyes, determined not to openly gawk at her ample bosom.

I don't want to do anything to shatter the trust we've started to build.

It's difficult to keep my eyes averted, however, because the dark outlines of her nipples are visible through the snug, sheer fabric of the undergarment.

She slips her arms out of the shirt and sets it aside, and I immediately take notice of the fading bruises covering both arms, as well as the thorns that are stuck in her flesh.

No wonder I didn't detect any obvious signs of injury.

The thorns are large and embedded very deep, likely stopping the flow of blood.

The numerous bruises are concerning, and I can't help but wonder where she'd gotten so many of them. Did she take a tumble a few days ago?

Knowing how fragile humans are, I imagine she's in a great deal of pain, and I waste no time in gathering golden, healing light in my palms. I hover my hands just above her arms, gliding up and down until the very last thorn ejects from her flesh and the wounds seal shut, and the final bruise fades.

"That's... incredible ."

I won't lie. The awe in her voice pleases me, and I find myself considering what other feats I might perform just to impress her. But the most important thing for now is that she's finally healed and she's no longer in pain.

I run my gaze over each of her arms again to be certain I didn't miss a spot, and I'm gratified when I find her skin untarnished.

"Does that feel better, Amelia?"

She nods. "Yes, thank you." She moves her hands over her arms as she inspects my handiwork. "Do all fae have healing powers?"

"Most highborn fae do, though we have designated healers who excel at mending the most grievous of injuries, such as dismemberment. But I'm perfectly capable of healing the type of injuries you had.

I'm sorry you got hurt in the forest. I take it you were running from the hurllan that bit you?

"I don't mention the old bruises, not yet, though I plan to ask her about them later.

"Um, I got some of the injuries while running from that furry little beast, but the thorns got me when I was running from you. Right after you spotted me in Glenville."

Guilt strikes me, and I wish I could go back in time and prevent her from getting hurt. "I'm sorry if I scared you in Glenville. I was so pleasantly surprised to see you that I fear I lost my senses. I believe I might've growled at you."

"Oh, you definitely growled at me," she says as she quickly puts her shirt back on, and I'm delighted when the hint of a smile tugs at her lips.

But her expression soon grows serious as she finishes doing up the buttons.

"I believe you owe me a story. You promised to reveal what happened in Sorsston

with the bloodthirsty crowd and Prince Lucas and... you . All the details. Please.”

“All the details.” I rise to my feet. “Are you hungry? Thirsty? I’ll get us some refreshments and then I’ll tell you everything.”

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AMELIA

I listen raptly as General Dalgaard reveals what happened in Sorsston.

I'm shocked to learn about the depths of Prince Lucas's kindness, and I wish I could recall his face.

I'm also a bit embarrassed by how hysterical I'd become in the banquet hall.

But in my defense, I was on edge after recently witnessing a fae soldier rip the arms off a male servant who'd dropped a tray of food.

Though I'm not happy General Dalgaard is holding me captive, I can't help but feel touched when I learn about how he stayed in Prince Lucas's quarters just to keep me safe. He'd also sent me waves of summer warmth when he noticed I was cold.

How incredible that I spent several hours in Prince Lucas's quarters and not only emerged untouched, but I spent those hours drinking with him and offering advice about how he might get a human woman named Yvette to fall in love with him.

"Wait!" I set my glass of water aside and turn to face the general fully. He's seated on the sofa next to me, but there's a fair amount of space between us. "Did Prince Lucas succeed in getting Yvette to fall in love with him?"

The general nods. "I believe so. Only a few weeks ago, I attended their wedding, and they looked very much in love." A strange, distant look enters his eyes, but he blinks and it disappears.

“A wedding? But I didn’t think fae held wedding ceremonies. I thought you just found your fated mate and then?—”

“Prince Lucas’s father, King Haratt, ordered him to marry a human. It’s my understanding that Yvette was the human he desired above all others.”

“Oh. I see.” Excitement churns through me. It’s rather thrilling to think that Prince Lucas used my advice to help him make Yvette fall in love with him. “Sorry I interrupted, sir. Please continue.”

“You don’t have to keep calling me sir , Amelia. You may call me by my name.”

“Okay... General Dalgaard .” My face grows hot, though I’m not certain why.

“No, my given name.” His eyes flare with warmth. “You may call me Tristan .”

My breath hitches, and pulsating heat abruptly quakes between my thighs. I try to push the sensation away, and I really hope the general isn’t glamouring me into a state of wantonness. It’s been ages since I experienced the slightest hint of carnal excitement.

“Please.” The general’s eyes darken in a way that makes me worry he somehow knows about the sudden ache that’s thrumming in my core. “Please say my name. I want to hear you say it.”

I draw in a deep breath and meet his eyes. “Tristan.”

A low growl emanates from his throat, but it’s not a scary, I’m-going-to-kill-you growl. It’s a sound of pleasure. His gaze flashes with... desire? I can’t be certain. We’re sharing a semi-intimate moment, and it’s taking all my willpower to keep from squirming on the sofa.

But I can't let him know about the warmth quaking between my thighs. I don't want him to view it as an invitation to ravish me. My face becomes even hotter at the thought.

"Thank you for saying my name, Amelia." He gives me a brief but affectionate smile, and gods how it steals my breath. "There aren't many souls who call me Tristan anymore. Just the Summer Court lord who fostered me after my parents died, and the lord's son who happens to be my oldest friend."

I tilt my head to the side and study him, trying to discern whether he's full of dung, as my father might say.

"You've never asked any of your former war prizes to call you by your given name?"

"I don't mean to sound flippant when I ask the question, but that's how it comes out."

I hold my breath as I await his reaction, praying he'll keep his word about not hurting me.

I also try to ignore the unexpected pang of jealousy that heats my blood. Surely I'm just imagining it.

His dark eyes glint with amusement as he watches me. "You're my first war prize, Amelia. There have been no others. Just you. Only you."

I straighten and brush an imaginary speck of lint from my shirt. "Well, perhaps we ought to get back to the story. What happened after I gave Prince Lucas advice about how to make Yvette fall in love with him?"

General Dalgaard displays a knowing smile, as though he realizes I'm more than a bit flummoxed by his admission that I'm his first and only war prize, then he resumes

telling the story and giving me back my memories.

I don't ask any additional questions, and it doesn't take long for the general to reach the end.

I vaguely recall standing in front of my parents' house waiting for them to answer the door, followed by a happy reunion with my mother who I hadn't seen in months, and it's nice to receive a full explanation of the events that heralded that moment.

"Thank you for telling me everything," I say after a long, contemplative silence. Can I trust him? Gods, I hope I can.

Except... how could I ever trust a fae male who's holding me captive? If he were truly a decent individual, he wouldn't be keeping me against my will. He would set me free. He would set me free just like Prince Lucas did.

I regard General Dalgaard as my wariness grows. What will he expect of me here in this tent? Does he expect me to cook and clean? If he really doesn't want me for fucking, perhaps he'll treat me as a servant.

I suppress a sigh, not wanting him to inquire what's wrong. I don't owe him my thoughts, and I very much want to keep my secret yearnings private. I don't owe him anything.

Freedom. My heart aches.

Will I ever attain real freedom?

Escaping Nevel, an old human lord, had been difficult enough.

Not only is he strong for his age, but he employs over a dozen well-trained soldiers.

Soldiers who were ordered to keep me confined within the oppressive walls of his manor.

I'd had to bide my time for months as I studied their schedules and waited for an unexpected break in the routine to finally make my escape.

I sneak another glance at General Dalgaard.

Tristan . I'm still shocked he's invited me to use his given name.

How could I escape a powerful, highborn fae general like him?

Will he keep soldiers stationed outside the tent when he leaves?

In any case, if I tried to make a run for it, I would have to navigate a massive campsite filled with twenty-eight thousand lethal fae soldiers.

"Would you like more to eat, sweet human?" His eyes brim with... affection. That's the word that best describes the extreme warmth in his visage.

Sweet human . Why does he keep calling me that?

Every time he uses the endearment, my scalp prickles with awareness, a rather delirious but not unpleasant sensation, and heat quakes between my thighs. I also become a bit breathless.

I give myself a mental shake and glance at the empty plate next to my glass of water.

Before telling me the story about what happened in Sorsston with Prince Lucas, he'd provided me with a plate of various cheeses, strawberries, and slices of fresh bread drizzled with oil.

“No, thank you,” I eventually say. “I had plenty to eat. I appreciate the meal.”

He smiles, and it’s the first time I’ve seen him smile while revealing his sharp, pointed fae teeth. Though it makes him appear very intimidating, I can’t help but think it also suits him and accentuates his rugged, masculine features.

“I’m glad you got enough to eat, Amelia.

” He nods at the closed tent flap. “The two servants who were inside when we arrived will always be happy to bring you anything you might desire when I’m absent.

If you tap on the pole near the flap, they will attend to you.

” He clears his throat as a mildly uncomfortable look comes over him.

“Please don’t worry. They will not hurt you.

They were castrated long ago—no, I didn’t do it—and they are glamourised to obey my every command. ”

Castrated, glamourised servants? My stomach flips. The two males he’s speaking about might be fae, yet I can’t help but empathize with their plight. Did they have a choice about becoming servants? At the age of ten, my father dragged me to the castle, and I didn’t have any say in the matter.

A shiver racks my body. If General Dalgaard would glamour his servants to obey his every command, there’s always a chance he might do the same to me.

A warm breeze ruffles my hair, and it takes me a moment to realize my captor must’ve noticed my shivering.

I glance his way to find he's fixed a concerned look on me.

His perceptiveness makes me uneasy. He knew I was still injured, and he seems to have no difficulty discerning when I'm cold, even if I don't quite break into a shiver.

"What happens now?" I ask in a whisper as I peer around his tent.

Am I supposed to sit here and twiddle my thumbs whenever he goes off to war, or will I be given tasks to complete in his tent or within the barriers of the camp?

I can't imagine just sitting around doing nothing. I'm used to keeping busy.

General Dalgaard leans closer, and I'm not certain whether the next wave of warmth that hits me is from his fae magic or his natural body heat. "Now, we get to know one another, and we enjoy one another's company."

"You want to get to know me?" I can't keep the surprise from my voice.

"Yes, very much so." His dark eyes gleam with warmth, and I don't understand how he can look at me with so much fondness.

His proximity, however, is affecting me more than I would care to admit.

I'm tempted to lean closer to him, but I don't.

I'm also tempted to reach out and touch his black, unbound tresses.

How his hair didn't become tangled during the flight here, I'll never know.

Thank goodness mine was already tied back when he'd absconded with me into the skies.

“Why do you want to get to know me, sir?” I finally ask.

“Tristan,” he says in a gentle but corrective tone. “I asked you to call me Tristan.”

I suck in a shaky breath. “Why do you want to get to know me, Tristan ?”

“Because I want to learn why I’m so drawn to you.

I want to understand the connection I feel between us, and I’m genuinely curious about you, sweet human.

Curious about your past. Curious about your hopes and dreams for the future.

” He starts to reach for my face, but I flinch, and a burst of fear makes my heart pound rapidly.

Oh, gods. I lower my head, unable to meet his eyes.

Shame spreads through me. I know he wasn’t about to strike me, but I couldn’t help the reaction.

I’ve only been away from Lord Nevel for a week.

Will I ever be able to withstand the touch of another without flinching and experiencing a wave of panic?

“I’m sorry I scared you with that sudden movement,” General Dalgaard says in an apologetic tone.

“It’s...” My throat closes up and I can’t utter another word. The walls of the tent feel like they’re closing in, and I don’t believe there’s enough air in here either.

Suddenly, the scent of lavender reaches me.

I take a few deep breaths, and it helps take the edge off my panic.

A second later, I watch as a thick blanket rises from the bed and floats in my direction.

The soft blanket gently falls upon my shoulders, and I wrap it more firmly around my body as I continue to take deep breaths of the lavender-scented air.

Tears prick my eyes at General Dalgaard's kindness. When he noticed my fear, he didn't force his touch upon me. Not only that, but he apologized for scaring me, and now he's using fae magic to make me feel better.

"Who hurt you, Amelia?" he asks quietly.

I swallow hard, and I finally find my voice. "How do you know I'm not just wary of you? You are, might I remind you, holding me captive. You're keeping me as a war prize."

"The old, fading bruises on your arms, and the way you flinch," he says, "make me think someone has tormented you. Was it the old lord you mentioned to Prince Lucas? The old lord you were supposed to marry?"

I lift my gaze to the general's, and the deepening concern in his eyes is almost too much. Why does he seem to care? He's a highborn fae, and I'm a human. Why isn't he laughing at my fear? Most of his kind would take perverse delight in my discomfort.

"Yes, I suppose you could say someone tormented me," I eventually admit. "Yes, it was the old lord. I married him. I had no choice. My father arranged it."

“Did the old lord die? Or were you visiting Glenville with him?” A crease forms between General Dalgaard’s dark brows, and I know he’s trying to figure out why I’m so far from Sorsston.

“He didn’t die, though I wouldn’t be saddened if he did.

No, I wasn’t visiting Glenville with him.

That’s not why I was staying in this remote mountain town.

” I savor another inhale of lavender-scented air, and I snuggle deeper into the blanket.

“I ran away,” I finally admit, and for some reason, it feels good to share this information with the large fae male.

“I am sorry your husband tormented you, sweet human. Tell me his name, and I will bring you his head.”

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TRISTAN

It's just as I suspected. As I feared. The pretty little human married the old lord who lived outside of Sorsston, and the bastard abused her.

Guilt spreads through me. Fuck, I should've followed my instincts and stolen away with Amelia before her wedding date. I should've taken her moments after Prince Lucas left her at her parents' doorstep.

Murderous impulses also pervade my senses. Whether or not Amelia informs me of the old lord's name, I will find him, and I will kill him. Slowly. Painfully. I'll make him regret being born.

"Amelia?" I prompt. "His name. Please."

Her eyes widen. "Are you... serious? Do you truly intend to bring me his head?" She readjusts the blanket around her shoulders and emits a soft sigh, and I'm pleased that she's no longer in the throes of panic.

"Of course I intend to bring you his head. He hurt you, and surely he deserves to die."

"I'm not certain what to say, and I'm also not certain how I feel about you killing him and presenting me with his head." She exhales a deep, shuddering breath. "Don't get me wrong. I have no desire to protect him, and maybe he does deserve to die, but shouldn't we leave his fate up to the gods?"

"Some things should be left to fate," I say as I once again wonder if she's the female

the gods have marked as mine, “but I don’t believe punishment for wicked deeds should be left to fate.

I’m perfectly capable and willing to mete out justice on your behalf.

" Not only that, but I consider it my sacred duty to avenge the wrongs that were committed against her.

Gods, she’s not my mate— yet , my mind whispers—but I’m already acting like she is.

She opens her mouth and appears ready to speak, only to press her lips together and give her head a slight shake.

“I can’t. I can’t just give you his name and allow you to kill him.

No matter how wicked he might be. No matter how much he hurt me.

It feels wrong to speak a name, any name, and know that it’ll result in that person’s death. ”

“I know he lives on the outskirts of Sorsston,” I tell her.

She gives me a skeptical look. “What are you going to do? Fly all the way to Sorsston and start knocking on doors?”

“I might.” I consider her family members that live in Sorsston.

Her parents, as well as her four older sisters, all of whom are happily married, at least according to what she told Prince Lucas.

Yet she fled the Sorsston area, and she traveled all the way to Glenville on foot, an impressive feat for a tiny human female.

“Why didn’t you ask your parents or sisters for help, Amelia?”

” I ask gently. “Or did they refuse to hide you from your husband?”

A shadow crosses her face. “My father pretty much sold me to Lord Nev... uh, to the old lord. I overheard them talking about the payment on my wedding day, though my mother denied it when I asked her about it. It’s possible she didn’t know.

I would like to think she didn’t know. Anyway, as a result, I couldn’t return to my parents’ house. ”

“What about your sisters? Wouldn’t any of them provide you refuge?”

Her eyes dim, and she shakes her head. “Their husbands would never allow it. None of them would dare to defy Lord Nevel. He’s one of the wealthiest lords in the area, and he also employs many soldiers.

” She sighs. “Even if I thought one of my sisters’ husbands would agree to grant me refuge, I wouldn’t want to put them in danger like that.

Oh, gods, I just realized I accidentally spoke the old lord’s name. ”

“You did, and I appreciate it. It’ll save me from knocking on doors.” I offer her what I hope is a comforting look. “I’m sorry you couldn’t seek help from any of your family members, sweet human.”

“Thank you.” She frowns. “My father is probably livid with me, but my mother and sisters are likely worried sick. I’m sure they know I’ve disappeared by now. Lord

Nevel's soldiers probably questioned them and searched their homes, which I feel terrible about."

"Would you like to send your mother and sisters a letter?" I ask before I can think better of it. Gods, am I actually offering to permit my little war prize to write a letter to her family?

Her head shoots up. "Really? You would allow me to write to them?"

I give a cautious nod. "Yes, but there would be conditions."

"Conditions? Like not revealing the location of the Summer Court army?" For a split second, her eyes glint with mischief.

"Exactly."

Movement and shadows outside the tent catch my notice, and I suspect a commander is trying to get my attention. I rise to my feet and cast a glance at the closed tent flap.

"Are you leaving?" There's a note of alarm in Amelia's voice. "Is-is there going to be another battle? Are you going to conquer another human town?"

I turn to face her, and I strive to gentle my expression. "I must leave you alone for a little while and confer with my commanders. It's possible there will be another battle soon. There always is. Unfortunately, orcs and humans keep attacking our new settlements."

"I see." She regards me with a questioning look. "What about a treaty? Have you ever considered making a peace treaty with human and orc territories?"

"I'm a general, not a royal. Besides, there are four fae courts, and a treaty with human

and orc territories would likely require the agreement of the Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter courts.

I doubt it would ever happen, particularly when the courts are changing and ussha is spreading so rapidly across the realm.

” I consider my next words carefully. “Our priestesses tell us that we’re on the verge of a new age.

An age of total fae rule across the known realm.

They say it’s inevitable, and they say we must continue fighting those who attack our settlements.

They say we must fight and see the prophecy fulfilled.

” I briefly glance over my shoulder as the shadows near the tent flap shift again, then return my attention to the pretty little female.

“Total fae rule,” she whispers as she grows pale. “I see.” Her shoulders slump a bit, and her expression becomes troubled.

Regret wells inside me. I long to stay and comfort her, but I really must see what the commanders want. No one else in the army would dare to bother my warded tent. They might have news about another attack on a fae settlement.

I tell myself that Amelia will be safe inside my tent, and I will speak with her later and offer her reassurance. Life as she knows it in the human territories might be ending, but she’ll always be safe. I will protect her from any danger.

“I will return as soon as I can, sweet human.” I gesture at the large desk that’s pushed

against the far wall. “You may sit there and write letters to your family members if you wish. There is plenty of paper, ink, and quills. Please help yourself.”

I spin on my heel and exit the tent. Sure enough, about half of my commanders are standing outside, and none of them appear pleased that I kept them waiting.

I draw myself up taller and summon an aura of power and violence that causes each of them to take several steps back.

Commander Marss even lowers his head briefly.

“What news do you bring, commanders?” I ask, my gaze sweeping around the area. The nearest tents are far enough away that I won’t need to erect a soundproof bubble to keep others from overhearing our conversation.

“There’s been trouble in Sorsston,” Commander Klemat says.

“Warden Xall, as well as over twenty Summer Court soldiers, perished during an evening meal. Poison is suspected, though thus far, the servants in the castle aren’t being very forthcoming.

Somehow, even when glamoured, the servants don’t confess the truth.

They simply remain silent with a vacant expression. ”

It takes a lot to shock me, but this news does. I strive to maintain an impassive expression, however, as I contemplate the gravity of the situation.

The human servants, or whoever was involved in the deaths of Warden Xall and over twenty Summer Court soldiers, will face a grim fate.

Torture, and eventually, a slow and painful execution.

Their heads will remain on the parapet at Sorsston as a warning to others long after the crows have finished picking at their eyes.

Sorsston. Gods, am I really about to lead the Summer Court army back to Sorsston? It would appear so. But my resolve wavers a bit as I think about Amelia. How will she react to being brought back to her home city?

Fuck, I can't let her know about the servants in the castle and their probable involvement in the deaths of Warden Xall and the twenty-plus soldiers.

I'm not certain how long she worked in the castle, but if she counts some of her fellow servants as friends, she will likely be devastated by this recent development.

I clear my throat, draw myself up taller, and stare at the commanders.

"Prepare a contingent of fifty highborn fae to descend on the Sorsston castle as quickly as they can fly. Commander Groff, you will lead this contingent. Secure the castle, imprison every castle servant, and return the city to lockdown. No one comes in, and no one goes out."

"Understood, General Dalgaard," Commander Groff says, and the other commanders soon voice their agreement.

"Despite the loss of over twenty Summer Court soldiers, there should be about eighty soldiers left in Sorsston. The highborn contingent can also help reinforce their patrols and help keep the human occupants of the city in line." I glance to the north.

"The Winter Court army is currently razing the northern orc villages that recently attacked fae settlements, and with the Autumn Court army moving in from the west,

and the Spring Court army moving in from the east, I believe we should focus more on protecting the southern fae settlements near Sorsston and even farther south. Therefore, the Summer Court army will set out for Sorsston early tomorrow morning, and we should arrive at that godsblasted human city within four days.”

The commanders murmur their approval of my plan.

I suppose it was only a matter of time before I led the army south again.

Though we’re not at war with the other fae courts, we’re not exactly at peace with them either, and King Haratt has ordered me to avoid conflict with the Spring, Autumn, and Winter courts at all costs.

Though I lament the deaths of Warden Xall and the twenty-plus soldiers in Sorsston, perhaps this occurrence is a sign from the gods that it’s time to leave the human and orc territories near the Warrlish Mountains.

I issue a few final orders, and then I dismiss the commanders.

I turn and face my tent, and my heart skips a beat knowing Amelia is waiting inside. The beautiful female who might very well be my fated mate. My little war prize.

Will she ever forgive me for holding her captive?

Can I make her fall in love with me?

In theory, if she’s truly my fated mate, she’ll also feel intensely drawn to me, just as I’m drawn to her. But I worry the suffering she experienced at Lord Nevel’s hands might be obscuring any attraction she might otherwise feel toward me. More than once, she’s flinched from my touch.

I inhale a deep breath and step inside the tent only to find Amelia is sound asleep on the sofa, curled up beneath the blanket I'd draped around her shoulders earlier.

An utterly tranquil expression covers her visage, and my chest tightens with emotion at the sight of her sleeping so peacefully.

I send her waves of summer warmth infused with lavender, hoping it'll make her slumber even more restful.

After watching her for several minutes, I use my magic to darken the tent and summon tiny flashing orbs reminiscent of fireflies. I also beckon the sounds of a summer night—locusts, crickets, and trilling frogs.

Please gods, let her dreams remain pleasant.

Knowing I'm expected to make preparations for the impending departure of the Summer Court army, I spin on my heel and depart the tent.

AMELIA

I awake to the sounds of nighttime insects. Warmth envelops me, and I snuggle deeper in the soft blanket, half-wondering where it came from. I don't recall having a blanket this soft and warm at the Glenville Inn.

Is the window open? Hm. For the song of the nighttime insects and trilling frogs to be so loud, I must've left the window open.

My eyes feel so heavy, it's a struggle to open them, but I eventually rouse to full wakefulness and sit up... on a plush sofa inside a massive tent.

Oh, my gods.

Memories sweep over me, returning with a vengeance that leaves me gasping for breath.

I peer around the tent, shocked by the atmosphere that buzzes with magic.

I'm not certain whether it's really night, but there are fireflies inside the tent, or rather, little flashing orbs that mimic their radiant dance through the night.

The tent is dark but not so dark that I can't make out the large bed and other furniture.

The general isn't here.

Tristan . My face heats as his given name reverberates inside my head, and for a

reason I can't fathom, I find myself yearning to utter his name aloud.

"Tristan," I whisper, unable to quell the urge. "Tristan."

To my utter shock, warmth pangs between my thighs as I think about him and recall the tenderness he's shown me thus far.

Yes, he hunted me down and kidnapped me, and he announced that I'm his war prize and says he has no intention of letting me go. But he hasn't raised a hand to me. He hasn't hurt me in any way physically. Instead, he healed my injuries. More than once. And he seemed eager to do so.

He also gave me my memories back, for which I'm grateful. Having only vague recollections of the strange experience at the Sorsston castle has been bothering me for months.

My breath catches when I consider the general's reasons for keeping me here. He's drawn to me and wants to get a better understanding of why that is. He says he wants to get to know me.

Though there's no denying that I'm General Dalgaard's captive, I suddenly realize that I just slept deeply and peacefully for the first time in ages.

I didn't have to worry about Lord Nevel's soldiers tracking me down, nor did I have to worry about Lord Nevel himself bothering me.

At his manor, we had separate rooms, but he frequently visited me so he could try to...

A shudder courses through me as I attempt to push the dark memories away. But it's no use. The memories keep coming. I force in a few deep breaths and try to focus on

the ever-present scent of lavender and the repetitive, calming sound of the nighttime insects.

After a few minutes, the panic dissipates, though the memories don't.

To his great frustration, Lord Nevel had struggled to consummate our marriage.

During the five months I remained at his manor, he entered my room now and then in the middle of the night, but each time he failed to remain ready long enough to complete the act.

Well, long enough to start the act, now that I think about it.

His member rarely became stiff for more than a few seconds.

Each time it returned to its natural soft state, he would become furious, and he tended to blame me for his inability to consummate our marriage.

Filthy witch. You've cursed me with dark powers, haven't you? I bet you want me to die soon so you can inherit my estate. Godsdamn witch. I ought to turn you over to Warden Xall and ask for you to be burned at the stake.

His accusations and threats had terrified me, though I don't know if the fae warden of Sosstorn would've actually burned me at the stake. Surely fae, with their magical abilities, would be able to sort out the matter and determine whether someone is truly a witch or a mage.

I won't lie. More than once, I'd hoped Lord Nevel would die, though not because I was keen to inherit his sizable estate. I simply wanted out. I wanted to be free.

I study my current surroundings. Fireflies continue dancing around the tent, and I'm

not able to see anything beyond the structure, not a shadow outside the thick fabric, or even a hint of the moon or sun.

It's rather disorienting not knowing what time it is, but it's also pleasant in a way.

Because at the moment, I don't have anywhere to be nor any tasks awaiting me.

Best of all, I don't have to worry about my husband's soldiers snatching me away and dragging me back to the cold, cavernous manor that never felt like home.

I'm still wary of General Dalgaard, but there's something about him that makes me believe he's more trustworthy than the average fae.

Despite my previous suspicions that he might've hurt me in the Sorsston castle, I don't think he lied about what happened that night. The detailed narrative he supplied fits with the flashes of memory and feelings I've been experiencing related to the highborn fae who helped me.

It's shocking to learn General Dalgaard himself stayed with me, in secret, while I conversed with Prince Lucas.

Just because he wanted to ensure my safety.

As though summoned by my thoughts, the general himself steps into the tent, instantly filling up the spacious area with his formidable presence.

I peer at him in the semi-darkness, my heart pounding in my chest, my palms sweaty as my breaths become rapid and shallow.

Our eyes meet and his visage softens.

I push the blanket off myself and stand up, though I keep my head slightly lowered in a show of submission.

I'm not certain whether it's because of the power that emanates from him or my wariness around all males (that logically, I know is a result of Lord Nevel's brutal treatment), but I can't help the display of obedience.

Even though I'm also calculating the distance to the tent flap and whether I could dart around General Dalgaard and escape before he caught me.

But, knowing what I know about fae powers, particularly the powers of highborn fae such as the general, I suppose he's warded the tent to keep me inside. Part of me still wants to try though. Am I a coward if I never attempt to flee this tent?

"Amelia." His deep voice vibrates through me, inciting desires I'm not certain I can put a name to. All I know is that I like the way he says my name, as though he's savoring it, and it's causing a reckless, wanton feeling within me.

"Good evening, General Dalgaard," I say, only for my face to heat a second later. "Tristan . Good evening, Tristan. Um, is it evening? I'm not certain. The magic makes it difficult to tell." I glance around the tent.

He lifts a hand briefly, and the magic fades.

The fireflies disappear, the sound of nighttime insects and trilling frogs fades, and the room becomes illuminated.

Shadows appear outside the tent, and I'm surprised by the number of soldiers that are marching past. They seem to be in a hurry.

My stomach performs a quick somersault. Has something happened?

“Well, it would appear it’s still daytime,” I say.

“It is, though evening isn’t far off.” He approaches me, and the warmth in eyes deepens as he continues holding my gaze. I cannot look away. “Did you sleep well?” he asks.

“Yes, I did. Thank you for the blanket, and thank you for the pleasant, nighttime atmosphere.”

“You’re very welcome, sweet human.” He smiles. “I would be happy to summon the same magic every time you wish to sleep.”

I’m about to thank him again when I stop myself. I press my lips together and remind myself that he’s my captor. I’m not free to walk out of this camp. I should be fighting him, not thanking him for providing small comforts and kindnesses. A cage, however gilded, is still a cage.

“What’s happening?” I ask with a gesture at the soldiers’ shadows outside the tent. “Are you about to go to battle again?” My throat burns. Is he preparing to attack another human town? Is he about to slaughter more of my people?

His expression dims, and he appears suddenly guarded.

He’s silent for so long that I start to think he won’t answer, but finally, he says, “There’s been some trouble in Sorsston, and the Summer Court army is departing for the human city early tomorrow morning.

” He clears his throat. “You’re coming with us, of course—coming with me.

I will arrange for you to travel in a luxurious carriage. ”

“Sorsston?” Worry expands in my chest. “What kind of trouble? As you know, my parents and sisters all live within the walls of the city.”

“The trouble hasn’t affected the regular citizens of Sorsston,” he says a bit cryptically. “Your parents and sisters are likely fine.”

“What kind of trouble is it? Please tell me.”

He gives a slow shake of his head. “I’m sorry, Amelia, but I don’t think it would be appropriate for me to tell you what’s happened.

Perhaps after the situation is handled, I will be able to reveal more.

Just trust me when I promise you’ll be safe.

And if you’re worried about your family members, I will send a soldier to verify their welfare. ”

I’m about to ask him if I can visit them, but then I think better of it.

My father won’t want to see me, and he probably wouldn’t permit a visit with my mother.

As for my sisters, their husbands are probably of the same mind as my father.

By leaving Lord Nevel, I’ve caused problems. I doubt any of my brothers-in-law appreciated having their homes searched by Lord Nevel’s soldiers.

I’m certain my sisters would be understanding, but I don’t want to be the cause of discord in their marriages.

Alone. I'm about to return to Sorsston, the place I grew up and where my entire family still lives, yet I won't get to see any of the people I care about.

I've never felt so alone and utterly displaced.

Even if I managed to escape General Dalgaard, I wouldn't be able to reconnect with my family.

I blink back tears. Should I even bother writing letters to my mother and sisters?

The general takes a step closer and gives me a concerned look. He likely believes I'm on the verge of tears because I'm worried about the safety of my family members in Sorsston, yet it's so much more complicated than that.

I swallow hard and will myself to hold it together until he vacates the tent. The last time I cried in his presence, he tried to wipe away my tears. As though he, my captor, has the right to comfort me.

"I must finish preparing the soldiers for departure," he says, "among other duties. I'll return soon, however, and we can share the evening meal.

" He gestures at the large desk. "Perhaps in my absence, you can write the letters to your family." His expression becomes conflicted, and I get the sense that he's contemplating whether I might visit my family in a few days rather than write the letters.

I also sense that he fears it would be a bad idea.

My stomach clenches. How very odd. I can't hear his exact thoughts, but I swear that's the gist of what he's currently thinking. I just... know .

Oh, gods. My heart races as I try to understand what this might mean. I don't think he's glamouring me. His eyes aren't glowing, and though I'm a tad confused, I feel entirely present in the moment.

“Good idea,” I force out as I move to sit at the desk, partly because I need to put more space between us. “I-I'll write the letters now, and I'll see you later this evening, sir.”

He lifts one eyebrow at me. “Tristan .”

My mouth goes dry as I hold his penetrating gaze. “Tristan .”

TRISTAN

My thoughts remain on Amelia as I conduct further meetings with my commanders and make the final preparations for tomorrow's departure. I long to return to the tent and take her in my arms. I long to remain in her presence until I'm finally able to figure out why I'm so drawn to her.

How does one know when they've met their one true fated mate? How can I be so uncertain about Amelia? Either she is my mate, or she's not.

Many fae visit a high priestess during their youth to learn the identity of the mate the gods have marked for them, but such visits rarely yield definite results. Most often, the priestesses can only provide a first name or offer a clue about when and where they will encounter their fated mate.

Unfortunately, when my foster father, Lord Linnshire, brought me to a high priestess to learn the identity of my fated mate, the priestess simply looked at me and said, "Tristan Dalgaard, your fated mate will find you when the time is right."

That's it. That's the only clue she gave me. Even Lord Linnshire's son, my childhood friend Kaiden, received more guidance from the high priestess concerning his fated mate, though he didn't get a name, nor was he informed that his female would be part-human.

A growl vibrates from my chest as I head for the outskirts of the camp, searching for Commander Klemat.

Armed soldiers rush by but give me a wide, respectful berth, likely on their way for a shift patrolling the streets of Glenville.

Not that there's much left to patrol. In our fury over the deaths of twelve faefolk in the new settlement of Valltea, we'd left few survivors.

At last, I find Commander Klemat conducting a training exercise with the contingent he leads. Once he notices me standing along the tree line, he passes control to his first officer and heads in my direction.

"General Dalgaard." He gives me a brief nod. "Do you have new orders for me?" His tone is deferential but not as overly eager as many of the other commanders.

"Yes, several, actually." I straighten, glance around the clearing where his soldiers are continuing their training exercises, then return my gaze to him as I contemplate his trustworthiness.

He's only served with the Summer Court army for six decades, a much shorter time than the other commanders, yet I believe he's proven his competence.

"First, I must appoint a Warden to remain in Glenville indefinitely, as is our custom when a town or city is conquered, but I'm hesitant to appoint a highborn warden for a town as small as this one.

Your soldiers are among the fiercest in our army.

I would like you to select a soldier from your contingent, someone you feel would be happy staying in the north, to become Warden of Glenville. "

"Consider it done." Commander Klemat studies the soldiers as they spar in the clearing.

His gaze eventually moves to his first officer, a male by the name of Reast. “Officer Reast likes the north, and several of his family members have settled in the Warrlish Mountains. Though I’m reluctant to part with him, I think he would be an excellent choice to remain in Glenville. ”

“Very good. I’ve already selected twenty soldiers from various contingents who will stay behind and help guard this area of the countryside.

” As I talk, I can’t help but wonder what Amelia is doing at this very moment.

Is the sweet human writing letters to her family?

Is she taking another nap? “The soldiers I selected all have ancestral ties to the Winter Court,” I continue, “and though most of those ties are practically ancient, it will help make any encounters with the Winter Court army more... cordial .”

A satisfied look crosses Commander Klemat’s face.

“A wise decision, General. Officer Reast also has ties to the Winter Court. His sister recently mated with a highborn lord from the Starlit region,” he says, referring to a group of northern isles that holds the most breathtaking views of the night sky, or so the stories say.

“I’m pleased to hear Officer Reast has ties to the Winter Court as well.

The wardens and soldiers we appoint to govern and guard the most northern, eastern, and western settlements will largely be political appointments going forward.

Fae who have ties to the nearest court, whether through distant ancestral relations or through marriage,” I say, and I can’t help but recall Amelia’s question about whether we’ve ever considered making a peace treaty with human and orc territories.

I'd claimed it wouldn't be possible because the four fae courts would likely never come to an agreement, but perhaps it might work.

In time. If we keep positioning specific wardens and soldiers in strategic locations, a new kind of diplomacy might come into existence.

At least among the fae. I have my doubts that realm-wide peace that involves the cooperation of numerous human and orc territories could ever be achieved.

"You said you had several orders for me, General," the commander says with an expectant look.

"Ah, yes, I do." I issue the remaining orders, most of which involve tomorrow's departure from Glenville and our first day of travel as we make our way south.

Once my business with Commander Klemat is complete, I head to the other side of the camp where the carriages are kept.

The carriages have been out of use for some time, though we always travel with them in case any fae royals or lords visit and prefer to travel in luxury.

Most of the royals and lords who visit, however, typically prefer to walk alongside the regular soldiers or help patrol the skies with the other highborn fae.

The carriage master approaches when he notices I'm inspecting the largest conveyance in the collection.

There's a wary gleam in the elderly male's eyes, and I can't say I blame him.

During the three hundred plus years that I've been the general of the Summer Court army, this is the first time I've ever displayed any interest in the carriages.

“Good evening, General Dalgaard.” He removes his hat and stands tall, though he’s still about two heads shorter than me. “May I be of some assistance to you, sir?”

I study the male for a moment, wondering if his designing magic is as grand and opulent as I’ve heard.

It’s said he can transform the plainest room, or the interior of a carriage, into the most lavish of accommodations.

If Amelia is to spend four days on the road as the army marches south to Sorsston, I want her to travel in comfort and luxury.

“Yes, Master Nathanns,” I finally say, having finally remembered the male’s name, “I require an opulent carriage for my new war prize.”

His eyes flare ever so slightly, though he’s quick to don a neutral expression only a second later. No doubt he’s shocked that I’ve taken a war prize for the first time in history.

“Well, you have your eye on the nicest carriage in the collection, General, but I will be happy to work my magic until the carriage meets your specifications. What do you have in mind?”

“A comfortable sleeping area with lots of pillows and blankets,” I say, “as well as larger windows on each side. Don’t worry about warding them. I’ll do that myself once your work is finished.”

“A comfortable sleeping area,” he repeats with a nod. “Larger windows on each side. Consider it done. What else?”

“The interior should include a small garden filled with fresh blooming Summer Court

flowers and multiple errgunna butterflies. I would also like a bathing area installed in a corner, complete with fragrant, running water. A well-stocked eating area too, filled with ussha-blessed fruits and vegetables, a variety of fresh bread and cheese, and a tray of candies that replenishes itself whenever a piece is taken.” I almost wonder if I’m making too many demands, particularly when it comes to the running water and the replenishable candy tray, but Master Nathanns doesn’t bat an eye, so I continue.

“Please also include a closet filled with fashionable dresses fit for a queen, matching slippers, fine jewelry, silk undergarments, and proper sleeping attire.”

“Again, consider it done, General. Anything else?” Despite the many demands I’ve made of him, his expression is serene, and I start to think perhaps he’s eager to get started. It’s said that fae with designing and building magic are always excited to exercise their skills and meet a challenge.

“I think that should cover it, but please feel free to make any additions that you think would make the carriage more pleasant for a human female.”

“What about books?” he says, surprising me.

“Does your war prize enjoy reading? If so, she might enjoy a selection of reading material to pass the time. Or, if she isn’t literate, as many humans aren’t, she might enjoy embroidery and sewing materials, or perhaps card and dice games.

If you could tell me more about her interests, that will help guide me in my creation.
”

Her interests? For a few seconds, all I can do is stare dumbly at Master Nathanns. I’m ashamed to admit that I don’t know whether Amelia can read, nor do I know if she enjoys cards or dice games or sewing.

Gods, I really don't know much about her at all. Only that I'm drawn to her and I want nothing more than to spend time with her. If it weren't for my responsibilities leading the Summer Court army, I would be at her side right fucking now.

I clear my throat. "Perhaps a small selection of books and the other items you mentioned. I believe she will appreciate having choices."

"Of course. Choices. An excellent idea. I will make it so." His eyes sparkle with delight, and I wonder how long it's been since he's used his skills.

I'm aware that some of the soldiers pay him to make their tents more comfortable, but I can't recall the last time his skills were called upon to upgrade one of the carriages.

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“Thank you. You will be well-compensated for your work, Master Nathanns.” I incline my head slightly in a gesture of farewell, then turn and face the bustling expanse of tents.

“You are too kind, General,” the carriage master says just before I start in the direction of my own tent.

Too kind. I almost laugh at his choice of words. I don’t believe anyone has called me ‘kind’ or anything similar in hundreds of years, if ever. I intend to treat Amelia with kindness, but no one else has ever called up my compassionate side before.

I’m aware it could be argued that there’s no kindness or compassion in the act of keeping a war prize.

Fucking fires. Does the little human view me as a beast?

My spirits plummet at the thought, but I’m still determined to keep her. Even if I discover she’s not my fated mate, I don’t believe I’ll be able to part with her. The level of possessiveness I harbor for her is simply too strong.

As I navigate the camp, I notice many soldiers casting questioning looks my way. My keen ears also pick up the phrase ‘human war prize’ being whispered again and again.

Well. It would seem the camp is already humming with the news of Amelia’s presence in my tent.

A female’s presence in my tent wouldn’t be so unusual, as I’ve taken orc and human

females to my tent many times under the guise of violating them, only to glamour them and send them away entirely unharmed a few hours later—the same tactic Prince Lucas once used to make the soldiers believe he was merciless and fierce and as dark as an Unseelie king.

But a war prize? I've never taken a war prize before.

Not until now. Not until I captured Amelia.

I suppose I can't blame the soldiers for their shocked whispers.

When I arrive at my tent, I find one of the servants standing outside holding a small bag.

I take the bag from his hand and peek inside.

It's filled with female clothing, small packets of medicinal herbs, a hairbrush, ribbons, and a small velvet pouch that contains a variety of gemstones.

At the very bottom, I discover a small leather casing that's filled with sheets of paper containing intricate charcoal drawings, mostly likenesses of people and animals.

How very interesting. Did Amelia draw these?

I glance at the servant. "Did Officer Yemmel drop this off?"

"Yes, General Dalgaard," the servant says in a monotone voice. After being under a glamour for years, he's lost all sense of character, to the point that his voice rarely carries any intonation. "Officer Yemmel told me to tell you that he found the bag in a nearby cave."

“Please retrieve a bottle of orc spirits from my personal collection and deliver it to Officer Yemmel immediately,” I say as I tuck the bag beneath an arm. “Be sure to tell him I’m grateful for his assistance.”

The glamoured, castrated servant scurries off toward the wagon that holds my belongings that aren’t currently in my tent. The other servant stands beside the tent flap, his expression so blank he almost looks dead. But I know if I issue an order, he’ll snap into awareness and comply.

I try to ignore the unexpected pang of guilt I suddenly experience over the treatment of fae servants. When I’d informed Amelia that the two servants who could help her were both glamoured and castrated, she’d looked equal parts shocked and horrified.

But it’s the way it’s always been, I quickly remind myself. For as long as anyone can remember. Fallen fae—those who incur the wrath of a royal—are either sentenced to death or condemned to a life of glamoured servitude.

I don’t know what supposed crimes my two servants committed to be maimed and damned to a lifetime of servitude in a Summer Court war camp. I only know that they were assigned to me over three hundred years ago upon my appointment as general.

A sigh escapes me as I eye the tent flap. Amelia is inside, and gods, how I long to join her. In time, will she acclimate to the fae way of life? Will she eventually think nothing of the castrated, glamoured servants we keep? What about the human slaves?

There are just as many human slaves in the camp as there are fae servants, and that’s not counting the number of war prizes my soldiers have claimed, females captured during battle and kept for the purposes of pleasure.

Most war prizes are human females and some males too, but there are also a few orcs among their ranks.

Given how strong and stubborn orcs are, we generally don't keep them as slaves, but a few of my soldiers have taken orcs as war prizes.

I glance around the camp, and it doesn't take long to spot the numerous slaves and servants rushing about making preparations for tomorrow's early departure.

Once we get on the road and Amelia travels in the carriage, she will likely witness events and situations that will leave her reeling with even more shock and horror.

I consider the violence she witnessed in the Sorsston castle during the early days of the fae occupation.

I was there. I know just how viciously my people treated the servants in the castle, as well as the citizens of Sorsston.

Perhaps she's used to the carnage. I drag a hand through my hair and suppress a groan, wishing I could shield her from the brutal reality of life in a war camp.

Just as I'm about to enter my tent, a highborn fae named Dresat lands directly in front of me.

His white, feathered wings disappear in a flash of light, and he regards me with a troubled look.

The male is one of the Summer Court army's most skilled aerial scouts, and I have a feeling he comes bearing bad news.

"Did you see something troubling during your scouting mission today, Officer Dresat?" I ask.

"Unfortunately, yes, General Dalgaard. The sky bridge is gone. I have no idea what

happened. Perhaps there was bad weather. But I noticed it was missing from between the mountains, and then as I flew lower, I spotted pieces of it in the depths of the canyon, though most of the remains were washed away by the river.”

“Godsblast the fates,” I say with a growl.

“I’m sorry to bring such grim news, General. I know this will make the army’s journey to Sorsston much longer than anticipated.”

“From four days to two weeks.” I glance around the camp, searching for any sign of my commanders.

I notice a few of them enjoying mugs of ale around a nearby campfire.

I return my gaze to Dresat. “Thank you for bringing this news. I will inform my commanders now and we’ll make the preparations needed for a longer, more arduous journey. ”

He gives me a brief nod, then summons his wings and shoots back into the sky.

With a deep sigh, I join my commanders at the campfire.

The news I share shocks them, but we’re able to come to an agreement about the next quickest way to Sorsston.

After that, I visit Commander Klemat again to share the news and modify some of the orders I gave him earlier in the night.

Two weeks. Two fucking weeks.

I’m more thankful than ever that Amelia will be traveling in the carriage.

Finally, I head for my tent, and the scent of lavender and gardenia reaches me as I enter.

I immediately scan the area in search of my sweet war prize.

When our eyes meet, my heart beats faster.

Warmth fills me, and my chest tightens with emotion.

Gods, I would love nothing more than to take her in my arms and hold her right now.

She's seated at my desk, holding a sheet of paper. She sets the paper aside, adding it to a stack of what I assume are recently completed letters, and she rises to her feet.

"Good evening, Amelia."

"Good evening... Tristan."

Hearing my name on her lips causes my scrotum to draw up tight with sensation and my cock to thicken hugely in my pants. If she wasn't watching me, I would reach down and readjust myself. But I don't want to frighten her, so I resist the urge.

There's a definite flush to her cheeks, which I find curious, and when I take a deep inhale, I swear I detect the feminine slickness between her thighs. My cock hardens further, and I can't resist taking another deep inhale.

She fears me, that much is obvious, and considering her past experiences with Lord Nevel (who will soon meet a much-deserved gruesome fate), I can't blame her for being uneasy in my presence.

But she also must feel an attraction to me, and this knowledge brings me hope.

Hope that she'll one day not only tolerate my touch, but long for it as much as I long to touch her.

Her blue eyes sparkle in the faelights, and I watch her carefully as she shifts in place, her manner adorably awkward. Her gaze eventually drops to the pack I'm holding underneath my arm, and I hold it out to her like an offering.

"You found my pack." Her eyes glimmer with tears. "Oh, thank you, Tristan. Thank you. I-I never thought I would see it again. Not that I have anything of real worth inside, but some of the items hold sentimental value to me."

I close the space between us, and as she reaches out to accept the bag, her fingers brush mine.

Her breath catches, and her eyes flare as the blush covering her face deepens to a bright shade of pink.

She slowly takes possession of the bag and retreats one step, though we're still standing rather close.

The aroma of her slickness increases, and suddenly all I can think about is tasting her and feasting on her nether parts until she shatters and screams my name.

I take a deep breath in an effort to calm myself, but it doesn't work.

My cock is at full readiness, and my need for her mounts with each passing second.

I have no intention of claiming her against her will, however, and I resolve that I'll flee the tent and jump into the nearest river to settle my urges if I must. Whatever it takes, I need to be patient with her and earn her trust. I pray it's possible.

“Thank you again,” she says in a trembling voice.

“You’re quite welcome, sweet human.”

AMELIA

My throat burns as I take a seat on the sofa.

I open the bag and start sorting through everything.

To my delight, nothing is missing. The velvet pouch of gemstones my late grandmother gave me is still inside, and so are the drawings of my mother, sisters, and favorite pets I've had over the years.

I glance at General Dalgaard as my heart wells with gratitude.

My hands tremble as I continue looking through the bag.

It's all here. Even the perfectly shaped, flat circular rock Ben gave me when we were both eight.

Ben . The burning in my throat intensifies.

Though I hadn't spoken to my childhood best friend in years, not since I started working in the castle, I'd learned he died during the Summer Court army's attack on Sorsston.

"How did you find this? Did you really go traipsing around the forest in search of my missing bag?" I'd told him I left it somewhere but hadn't provided any details.

He offers me a warm smile and sits on a chair facing the sofa. Facing me. His knees

are so close they're almost touching mine.

"One of my soldiers, Officer Yemmel, is a good tracker, and I asked him to hunt down your bag. I believe he followed your tracks in the forest. I was told the bag was found in a cave." He shoots me a questioning look. "Were you hiding from me in a cave, sweet human?"

"I was." I close my bag and hug it to my chest as I hold the general's gaze. "Until I had an unpleasant encounter with a furry, red-eyed beast."

"Ah. I see. I knew you'd met with a hurllan—that's what your so-called furry, red-eyed beast is called—when I saw the oozing green bite marks on your leg."

A phantom pain throbs in my calf right where the hurllan bit me. If I manage to escape General Dalgaard, will I run into more dangerous fae creatures in the forest? I shiver at the thought, and a second later, summer warmth surrounds me.

"You don't have to keep doing that," I say, and guilt pierces me when my tone comes out ruder than I intended.

Why am I so averse to hurting the general's feelings?

He's a monster. He's the leader of the Summer Court army.

His soldiers killed Ben and Uncle Kellen and Cousin Walt.

My friend, Riley, a fellow servant in the Sorsston castle, disappeared on the second day of the fae occupation in the city, never to be heard from again.

General Dalgaard's eyes darken with... heat?

A flush steals over me, and gods how it makes me feel like a traitor.

I don't understand why his presence makes me so achy between my thighs.

I don't understand why I long for his touch.

Never mind that I've flinched from him a few times.

But as I sit across from him now, I can't help but wish he would lean closer and place a hand on my thigh.

"I want you to be comfortable, sweet human," he eventually says, and his nostrils flare as he takes a deep breath. A noise that's almost a growl rumbles from his chest, and it vibrates through me and causes the heat that's panging in my core to deepen.

"You don't need to make me comfortable, and I wish you would stop calling me 'sweet human.'" I'm his captive.

I'm human and he's fae. Unless we are mates—a near impossibility—there will always be an imbalance of power between us.

He'll have all of it while I'll have none. My heart sinks at the realization.

He gives me a wary look and shifts in his seat. He clears his throat, and I sense his sudden worry. The emotion is so strong it almost feels like it's coming from me, and yet it's not. Oh gods. What is happening?

"Though I cannot explain why I feel this way, the thought of you being cold or hungry or in pain is deeply upsetting. The thought of you being afraid is also upsetting. I want to make you as comfortable as possible, and I want to keep you safe." His confession hangs in the air, and though I can't see it, I swear the magic in

the tent swirls around us, a whirl of lavender and summer enchantment.

The magic must be coming from the general. From Tristan. The male who's drawn to me and wants to keep me. The male who seems to care very much about my comfort.

I inhale a shaky breath, and when I meet his dark gaze, the emotions rolling off him almost become too much.

He's aroused, and intensely so. He longs to claim me.

Yet he's resisting, and just as easily as I can detect his need, I also feel his restraint and the level of regard he holds for me.

It's so shocking, I can't stop my mouth from falling open.

"I know I'm sort of pretty," I say, "but I'm no great beauty.

So, it can't be my appearance alone that makes you so drawn to me.

"I'm thinking out loud. "Perhaps I remind you of someone?" I won't admit that I can sense his emotions.

Nope. I'll take that secret to the grave.

If I admit such a thing, it'll only encourage him to keep me longer, and I really hope he decides to release me soon.

"I think you're a great beauty, sweet human," he says, disregarding my wishes as he uses the endearment yet again.

"Not only that, but when I look at you, especially when our eyes meet, warm

emotions tighten in my chest, and I have difficulty breathing. I wish I could hold you on my lap right now and caress my hands through your golden tresses. I wish I could place kisses along your neckline while you quiver in my arms.”

His gently spoken words are a stark contrast to the violence of which I know he’s capable.

I want to hate him. I want to dislike everything about him.

Yet I find myself yearning for the very things he just spoke about.

The mere idea of sitting on his lap while he strokes my hair leaves me breathless, and the thought of allowing him to place kisses along my neckline causes fresh pangs of heat in my core.

How can I desire him so fervently? He’s the enemy. His army killed people I loved, and even more people I care about have gone missing. All because of the Summer Court army. The army he leads. Thousands died during the attack on Sorsston.

I think about Prince Lucas and the human woman he married. Yvette. Despite the Summer Court army’s actions in my home city, I’d willingly given the prince advice about how to make Yvette fall in love with him. I pray I didn’t make a mistake. I pray she’s truly happy.

Is it possible for a human-fae mating union, or marriage, to work?

Does Tristan really think I’m a great beauty?

We’re still staring at one another, and I’m still having trouble catching my breath. His emotions keep radiating outward, and I can’t block them out even when I try. I know just how aroused he is. I know the depth of his tenderness toward me, as well as his

confusion over the matter.

He's not the only one who's confused about whatever is happening between us.

Just as he's drawn to me, I'm drawn to him.

Now that I'm fairly certain he won't strike me, I find myself aching for his touch.

The only male who's ever touched me in an intimate manner is Lord Nevel, and I hadn't liked his touch. Not even when he tried to be gentle the first few times.

But Tristan? The warmth that emanates from him makes me want to experiment with a male's touch. Not just any male, but him. Only him. Perhaps I've gone mad if I'm craving the touch of my captor, but I can't seem to suppress the longing and the eager curiosity.

My stomach suddenly emits a loud growl, and General Dalgaard gives me a concerned look.

"Sweet human, you sound famished. Forgive me for not providing the evening meal to you sooner." He practically jumps to his feet and steps outside.

As soon as he's gone, I'm finally able to draw in a full breath. What is it about him that makes me so flustered? I can scarcely form a coherent thought in his presence. I also can't control the lustful urges that keep building inside me.

I can't hear anything going on beyond the tent, and I'm certain the huge fae male warded the structure to not only keep me inside, but to prevent sound from traveling in and out. Earlier in the day, I'd heard the terrified screams of a human female, and only seconds later, everything went silent.

If he lifted the soundproof barrier, what would I hear? Would I hear the screams of my fellow humans? Would I hear prisoners being tortured?

Coldness grips me, and I wrap my arms around myself as I consider my plight and the plight of other humans in the camp.

Orcs, too. As we'd landed next to the tent, I'd glimpsed a few dark green forms on the camp's edge.

The chill that's descended on me deepens when I think about the poor castrated, glamoured servants.

The very servants that are likely fetching my dinner.

Is there any hope for humankind and orcs? What if the fae priestesses are right and a period of total fae rule over the known realm is inevitable? Will any territories remain untouched by the fae?

General Dalgaard enters the tent carrying a tray that holds two large, covered plates. He sets the tray on a table, then turns to face me. The warmth in his eyes chases away the remaining coldness brought on by my musings about the bloody war that might never end.

Technically, none of the four fae courts have declared war on the human and orc territories, though their brutality would suggest otherwise.

Their response to a human or orc attack on a new fae settlement is always overzealous.

For every dozen fae deaths, they claim the lives of a few thousand humans or orcs.

The general approaches me and gestures at the table. “Would you please join me for dinner, sweet human? As I’ve already told you, I would like to get to know you better. I think sharing a meal would be the perfect opportunity.”

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I glance at the table, then meet his expectant gaze.

My heart thunders in my ears, and giddy nerves soon descend.

It's difficult not to feel touched by the fact that he wants to get to know me.

Lord Nevel didn't care to know me. Not really.

He only cared for one thing, and I paid the price when he couldn't obtain it.

At last, I rise to my feet. As I face my captor, I'm forced to crane my neck just to peer up at him. Gods, he's tall. About three full heads taller than me. If I had to guess, I would say he weighed four times as much as me. His shoulders are broad, and his muscles are massive.

He holds out a hand. "Join me?"

I sense his hope that I'll take his hand. I also sense his genuine desire to converse with me over the meal. He wasn't lying when he claimed he wanted to get to know me better.

I exhale slowly and stare at his hand, tempted to accept it but also anxious.

His hands are so very large, and if he wanted to, he could easily hurt me.

In the early hours of morning, I'd watched him strangle a human soldier with just one of those hands.

He'd held the man up as though he weighed nothing and choked the life out of him.

I search the emotions that are billowing outward from General Dalgaard. Tristan. But I don't sense any deceit or cruelty. He's not trying to trick me. He's not pretending to be kind just to later visit violence upon me. At least not now.

"Amelia?" His tone is encouraging, and he continues holding his hand out. Though I sense his struggle to remain patient, there's truly no viciousness brimming within him, which is surprising for a fae male. His people aren't known for patience, particularly highborn fae.

I draw in a deep breath and finally place my tiny hand in his much larger one.

The awareness that passed between us earlier when our fingers touched not only resurfaces, but it ignites to a full-blown inferno of need.

I almost retract my hand. Almost. Instead, I summon bravery and continue examining his emotions.

Warmth. Arousal. Pleasure. He's overjoyed that I willingly placed my hand in his. He's delighted to be touching me.

He guides me to the table, then releases my hand and pulls out a chair for me.

Disbelief reverberates through me, and I'm unable to suppress a small gasp.

No male has ever behaved so gentlemanly toward me.

I search my memories but can't recall a single time a man ever pulled out a chair for me, and I flush as I finally take a seat.

I'm hyper aware of Tristan's large form hovering behind me as he pushes my chair up to the table. I'm his war prize, but thus far, he's treating me like a female he's courting. It doesn't make sense, but perhaps I shouldn't complain.

For the umpteenth time in his presence, my breath catches as he moves to the side but leans close as he removes the cover from my plate and sets it aside. I mourn the loss of his warmth when he settles in his chair across from me.

The delicious aroma of the food finally catches my attention, and I glance down to find a roasted turkey leg, fried squash, boiled potatoes, and something green and round for which I don't have a name, a vegetable that must be native to the fae lands.

The plate also holds a small bowl of some sort of berry cobbler.

I don't have a name for the berries either, though I recognize them from the forest. More than once, I'd enjoyed a handful for breakfast as I made my way north to Glenville.

"It looks delicious. Thank you." I smile at Tristan as he lifts the lid off his own plate. It feels so natural sitting across from him, as though we've shared a thousand meals before.

He picks up a fork, and I do the same. "I hope you like it. If you don't, I will be happy to have the servants fetch an alternative meal. Whatever you desire, Amelia, I want you to feel comfortable asking. I won't deny you anything. Within reason, of course."

"I'm sure it'll be delicious," I say as I gather a bit of the fried squash onto my fork. "An alternative meal won't be necessary." Besides, I would hate to make the servants do extra work on my account. I would prefer to do what I can to make their lives easier.

We eat in silence for a few minutes, and it's the best meal I've had in ages. The food is seasoned to perfection, and the fae-berry cobbler is perhaps the most scrumptious dessert I've ever tasted.

Tristan leans back in his chair and waves his hand.

I'm about to ask what he's doing when two wine glasses float toward the table.

Moments later, a bottle of wine floats over too, and the items land gently near our plates.

Fae magic. I'd witnessed some magic in the banquet hall, though I never really got used to it.

Each time I would witness some fantastical act in the Sorsston castle, particularly a violent one, I would be left reeling with disbelief.

"Are you all right, sweet human?" He uncorks the bottle and pours us each a generous serving of wine.

I accept my glass and nod. "Yes, I'm fine. I-I was just thinking about all the magic I witnessed in the Sorsston castle. Like the time a fae soldier caused a servant to choke on his own spit, and the time another soldier made it rain in the banquet hall."

His eyebrows lift ever so slightly, and he raises his wine glass and swirls the contents. "If humans suddenly possessed magic, don't you think a great many of them would use it to commit acts of violence and mischief?"

I take a quick sip of wine. "If I possessed magic, I would only use my powers for good. Like the fae who can make things grow. I would help gardens and crops grow faster. And if I could make it rain like that soldier in the Sorsston castle, I would

make it rain when there's a drought.

"My mind races with all the other possibilities.

What a pity the gods have wasted magic on such cruel-hearted creatures as the fae.

A smile tugs at Tristan's lips. "I wish I could see you wield fae powers, sweet human. If only I could transfer some of mine to you, I would do so in a heartbeat. Just to see the delight in your eyes when you made crops grow fast and tall, or when you called rain from the skies."

I take another sip of wine. It's good. Too good. I need to pace myself and make sure I don't become tipsy in the general's presence. I've been known to become rather chatty when I've consumed too much alcohol. "Can you make crops grow faster, and can you make it rain?"

"I'm able to influence plant growth, yes, but I've never succeeded in making it rain.

The powers an individual highborn fae possesses are largely dependent upon which courts the fae's ancestors hail from.

My father and all his ancestors came from the Summer Court, while my mother's side was mostly from the Spring Court.

It's thanks to my mother's side that I'm able to influence plant growth.

"He sets his wine glass down and makes a sweeping gesture with both hands, and suddenly the tent becomes a beautiful, ussha-blessed forest at nighttime.

Or maybe we're no longer in the tent. Maybe he actually transported us into the forest. The table and chairs remain, however, and I look around and try to glimpse the

walls of the tent, but I can't make the barrier out. It truly appears that we're in the middle of the forest.

He leans forward and the glow of the fruit-bearing trees bathes his face in purple and blue. His eyes sparkle in the darkness, and my heart skips a beat at how ethereally handsome he looks. His hair is swept back over his shoulders, his pointed ears on display.

"I'm able to create a summer atmosphere, nighttime or daytime, though I usually prefer the night." He snaps his fingers and fireflies glitter all around the space. He snaps his fingers again and the song of locusts, crickets, and trilling frogs echoes in the forest. Or the tent. Wherever we are.

"What else can you do?" I'm so curious about his powers that I can't help but ask. Even though I don't want to get to know him in return. At least that's what I keep telling myself.

He waves his hand, and the nighttime forest disappears, and we're seated in the regular tent as though nothing just happened.

The abrupt silence is startling. "As you already know, I can summon an invisibility shield and flash from one location to another, short distances, mind you. I'm also able to create strong wards, and I can break through most wards created by other highborn fae.

Prince Lucas never found out that I passed through his wards and kept watch over you in his room that night. "

"It sounds like you're more powerful than most highborn fae." Not that there was ever any doubt. Any fae who holds the rank of general must be among the most powerful of his kind.

He grins. “Well, I don’t mean to brag, but yes, I am among the most powerful.

” He reaches for his wine and takes a leisurely sip, then sets the glass aside and regards me with a look that’s far too inquisitive for my liking.

Before he next speaks, I already know what he’s about to say.

“I’m supposed to be learning about you, sweet human, not the other way around. Please, tell me more about yourself.”

TRISTAN

I walk at the head of the army as we march south.

A third of my commanders are up front with me, another third are taking up the rear, and the remaining third are patrolling the skies.

We've been on the road for twelve days, and we've made such good time that it's possible we'll reach Sorsston by tomorrow evening, a day earlier than planned.

Not for the first time, I lament that we no longer possess horses large enough to carry our substantial frames, which would make travel faster for the non-highborn fae soldiers who can't summon wings.

Long ago, when my people were split into two kingdoms—the original fae courts, Seelie and Unseelie—our soldiers rode giant horses called namulas.

But the creatures died out thousands of years ago during a plague that affected fae as well as animals living in the two fallen courts.

Though we're maintaining a rapid pace on foot, I still itch to summon my wings and soar toward Sorsston at full speed. As the general of the army, however, I'm expected to remain with my soldiers.

I glance at the floating carriage that holds my war prize.

Amelia. The carriage glides a few feet above the ground, and it's spelled to travel

within five hundred feet of me.

If I were to move to the rear of the marching army, the conveyance would follow, and if we came under attack and I suddenly took to the skies, the carriage would remain on land but float to an area away from the fighting.

Amelia's profile in the large window brings me comfort.

I like that she's always within viewing distance, though I keep trying to refrain from constantly staring at her.

The soldiers are already whispering about my taking of a war prize for the first time ever.

I don't want to add to the whispers, though if the gossip continues, I might have to make an example out of one of the blathering soldiers.

What if Amelia really is my fated mate?

The thought is as enticing as it is unsettling.

I yearn for her, that much is true, and I would be devastated if something happened to her, but does that mean she's my mate?

I think about the evening meal we shared about a week and a half ago, when she told me more about herself. Though she was initially reluctant to tell me about her upbringing, as well as her years spent toiling in the Sorsston castle, after some persistence on my part, she'd finally opened up.

As our conversation comes back to me now, I attempt not to glance at her profile in the carriage window.

“Well, as you already know, I have four older sisters,” Amelia says.

“Agatha, Addison, Aria, and Anne. Yes, all A-names. My mother’s name is Aurora, and she has two sisters, Audrey and Adeline.

A-names for girls is sort of a family tradition, I guess you could say, because it goes back even further than that in our family tree.

Anyway, I grew up with my parents and sisters in a small house on the edge of Sorsston, though still within the tall stone walls of the city proper. ”

“I see. How old were you when you went to work in the castle?” I brace myself for the answer, knowing she was probably far too young to be torn away from her parents. I’ve heard it’s common practice among humans to send a child into service at a young age while the parents collect the money.

Her face falls, confirming my suspicions.

“I was just ten years old. My parents were struggling to put food on the table. It was decided that my older sisters would try to marry well as soon as they came of age, but for that to happen, they needed dowries. So, my father took me to the castle only a few days after my tenth birthday, and I spent the next nine years working there. I was allowed to go home and visit my family once a year, but my sisters would sneak away to come see me as much as possible, though those visits tapered off after they got married and started having children.”

The standoffish greeting her father gave her when Prince Lucas dropped her off suddenly makes sense. What a horrid man her father must be to send his youngest daughter away like that. “Your mother never visited you at the castle?”

“No. Not even once. My father wouldn’t allow it.

” She swallows hard and her eyes dance around the tent before she returns her gaze to me.

“According to my sisters, he told Mama he would sell me to the fae for a bag of silver if she ever visited me. He worried that if my family called on me too much at the castle, it might cause problems and result in my dismissal. I’m grateful my sisters still visited in secret, as often as they could, and I don’t hold it against them that I had to work in order to fund their dowries. ”

“What does your father do for work? Forgive me, but I am having unkind thoughts toward him right now and I don’t understand why he didn’t work extra jobs to keep you from being sent to the castle at such a young age.

You were only a child.” Among the fae, children are precious.

We don’t reproduce as frequently as humans, and most fae couples only have one or two offspring.

As such, it would be unconscionable for us to basically sell one of our children into service.

She sighs and shifts in her seat. “He’s a barrister, though not a very successful one.

Years ago, he was involved in a scandal, and not many people in Sorsston want to be associated with him as a result, though he charges bargain prices since he’s not in high demand, and he does get some work that way.

” Her face turns red. “I’m sure you’re wondering about the scandal. ”

“I am.” I give her an encouraging look, hoping she’ll feel comfortable enough to tell me.

She stares at me for a full minute, then says, “When I was about eight years old, he had an affair with a young widow who lived nearby and got her with child. When the truth came out, he was sentenced to spend three days in the stocks, and he also had to fund the young widow’s travel expenses so she could go to Trevos and live with her sister. ”

Gods. What a terrible husband and father. Compassion for Amelia and her mother and sisters flares inside me, and so does a wave of violence toward her father.

“Why did your mother never leave your father?” I eventually ask. “You mentioned she has two sisters. Why didn’t your aunts not take your mother and sisters in?”

“She didn’t have any real way to leave. No money of her own, no family nearby, no friends willing to help. My aunts live too far away, and travel between kingdoms is dangerous. With five daughters... well, I think my mother worried we would run into slavers on the road.”

“Gods, sweet human, I am sorry for your mother’s plight, as well as yours and your sisters,” I say.

Her comment about her father threatening to sell her to my people is unnerving.

Until now, I’ve never given much thought to the human children who are purchased by wealthy fae, children that are used for hard labor or sometimes kept as pets until the fae lords and ladies tire of them.

But knowing Amelia could’ve endured such a grim fate is sobering.

“Well, perhaps my father should’ve just sold me to the fae.” She lifts her chin and gives me a bold look. “I ended up a fae’s captive anyway. Perhaps he should’ve sold me and hastened the process.” Her tone borders on bitter, but her voice also trembles

with emotion.

“I think you will find that I will treat you far better than any fae lord or lady who might’ve bought you.

” Doesn’t she realize our situation is different?

Doesn’t she feel the intense pull between us?

Given that I keep detecting waves of her excitement in the air, I know she’s attracted to me, though whether the attraction is purely physical, I’m not yet certain.

“All my life,” she says in a much softer tone, “I’ve yearned for freedom. I’ve yearned for... escape . Whenever I think I’m close to it, I suddenly become trapped again. Sometimes I fear the gods are torturing me for their own amusement.”

Freedom. Escape. She’s yearning for the one thing I can’t give her. The prospect of letting her go fills me with rage and preemptive sorrow and loneliness. I won’t let her go. Even if she begs me to release her.

Does that make me a monster? Perhaps.

But just as she calls forth the gentle side I never knew I possessed, she also evokes the dark, vicious part of me that would go to depraved lengths just to keep her at my side.

“Were you close to achieving freedom before your father sold you to Lord Nevel?” I ask, finally breaking the tense silence.

She shakes her head as her eyes fill with self-recrimination.

“Silly me, I thought marriage to a rich old lord would be my salvation. It would help me escape the castle, and though I’m not proud to admit it, I thought I would one day end up a rich widow.

Probably a young widow, given Lord Nevel’s age.

He’s almost seventy-five. Anyway, despite our age difference, I’d planned to be a good wife to him, but our marriage didn’t turn out how I’d hoped.

I suspect my father knew Lord Nevel’s true character but didn’t care.

He sold me to the old man anyway.” She starts to take another sip of wine, only to stop herself and push the glass away.

It’s her third glass. Maybe it's upsetting her stomach.

“Well, sweet human, I still plan to bring you Lord Nevel’s head.” I wave a hand in the air, and a pitcher of water and a clean glass float over from a side table. I pour her a cup and push it toward her, and she accepts the drink with a polite smile.

“It’s really not necessary,” she says after taking a long sip of water.

“He’ll die alone, and that’s good enough for me.

His sons are gone, and unless he can prove I’m deceased, he won’t be able to remarry for five years.

The laws in Sorsston dictate that a person must be missing for five full years before they can be legally declared dead.

He’s strong and reasonably fit, but given the way he drinks, I doubt he’ll make it to

eighty. ”

I decide not to say any more on the matter, though I still plan to bring her the godsblasted lord’s head. In a bag, of course. If she wants to look inside and glimpse his lifeless face, she may do so. If not, she can rest assured the man is dead and he’ll never hurt her again.

She stifles a yawn, and I notice her stealing glances at the bed.

Well, she’s not the only one who’s thinking about tonight’s sleeping arrangements.

I suppress a growl. I would like nothing more than to curl up beneath the covers with her, holding her close all night as she slumbers peacefully in my arms.

But fucking gods, I can’t in good conscience force her to sleep next to me.

She’s become more comfortable around me since our encounter on the edge of Glenville, but I doubt she would consent to sharing a bed. Even if I promised to keep my pants on all night.

I clear my throat and gesture at the bed.

“You may sleep there tonight, and I’ll take the floor.

” If she asks me to sleep outside the tent, however, I won’t agree.

Despite the strong protective wards I’ve erected around the tent, I want to remain as close as possible to her at all times.

The mere prospect of any harm coming to her is agonizing.

“Very well,” she says with a pretty blush. “Thank you. Um, would you mind leaving the tent while I get changed into a nightdress?”

“Of course. I’ll be back in a few minutes.

” Even though there’s a curtain that shields the bathing area where she could change, I decide it might be best if I give her total privacy.

I gather our plates on the tray, step outside the tent, and hand the tray to my servants.

It’s the first time I’ve ever carried my own dinner tray outside, but the servants don’t show any hint of surprise.

They’re far too glamoured for that. I would be surprised if they held any thoughts in their head beyond serving and obeying.

As I stand next to the tent flap, my mind conjures an image of Amelia stripping off her clothing.

Gods, the thought of her changing in my tent is enough to send a fresh surge of heat through my veins, and my cock lurches in my pants.

Will she wear one of her dresses tomorrow? I don’t like that she was wearing Lord Nevel’s clothing, at least I still suspect the attire belongs to him, and I decide I’ll burn it at the first opportunity. I want to get rid of anything that might remind her of the horrid male.

At last, I step back inside the tent, and I find her already abed with the covers pulled up to her chin. She casts me a worried look, then turns on her side, facing away from me, and whispers, “Goodnight, Tristan.”

“Goodnight, sweet human.”

“General Dalgaard. Um, excuse me. General?”

Commander Klemat’s voice pulls me back to the present.

I turn to look at him as he keeps a rapid stride next to me while the Summer Court army continues the march south to Sorsston.

He has a question about an injured soldier whose wounds are strangely resistant to the powers of our best healer, and we discuss the issue while I contemplate the night ahead.

I don’t enjoy sleeping on the floor of my tent, which I’ve done every night since I captured Amelia, but I do enjoy sleeping close to her.

I glance in her direction, and this time when I peer through the window of her carriage, our eyes meet. My heart pangs with warmth.

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AMELIA

The carriage is so extravagant, I can't help but feel out of place.

Surely I don't belong here. I was raised in a tiny house and frequently went to bed hungry as a child, and then I spent years working as a lowly castle servant.

I never expected to find myself surrounded by such luxury.

Even Lord Nevel's manor can't compare to this level of opulence.

Although I really am grateful that I don't have to walk all the way back to Sorsston. I was stunned when the general informed me that the sky bridge was destroyed and our trip south would take longer than expected.

I settle deeper into the comfortable, padded seat and try to resist glancing out the window at General Dalgaard.

Tristan . My pulse quickens. He's difficult to miss whenever I surrender to temptation and peer out the window, as he's the largest fae male in the Summer Court army.

He stands over a head taller than most of his comrades, even the other winged highborn fae.

How long until we reach Sorsston? My stomach bottoms out when I consider the homecoming that won't quite feel like a homecoming. I'm returning as a fae general's captive.

As a war prize.

I doubt I'll have the freedom to waltz out of camp and visit my family. Not that a visit would be a good idea...

The letters. By now, the letters I wrote to my mother and sisters have already been delivered by messenger bird.

Tristan promised they would arrive well ahead of the army.

I'd kept the letters as vague as possible, not divulging my location or the fact that I'm traveling with the Summer Court army.

I didn't breathe a word about the general either.

If they knew I was a fae general's war prize, it would only make them worry.

Well, it would probably just make my mother and sisters worry.

My father would likely believe I was getting what I deserved.

I glance around the carriage. If I'm counting correctly, it's the twelfth day of travel, and I'm still taken aback by the luxuriousness of the conveyance, as well as its size.

It's practically the size of a small house.

Not only is there a kitchen area that contains vast amounts of prepared food that's enchanted not to spoil (including a tray of decadent candies that replenishes itself whenever I take a piece), but there's a bathing room that contains running water and a toilet.

There's also a tiny garden that contains about a dozen resident butterflies that constantly flit from flower to flower.

Then there are the dresses and shoes and jewels, as well as the games and books.

I doubt the other war prizes in this endless procession of soldiers are traveling in such luxury.

I suspect most, if not all, are walking on foot just like the soldiers.

Every now and then, I'll spot a browbeaten human walking among the fae.

Most are women, though I glimpse a few males.

How many are slaves, and how many are war prizes?

I can't help but wonder, though I suppose it doesn't matter.

Either way, they're prisoners, and they'll likely never escape their masters.

Will I ever escape General Dalgaard?

I chance a peek out the window at him, and the gods really must hate me, because our eyes meet yet again. He probably thinks I'm growing to like him for all the staring I'm doing.

If only the carriage had curtains so I might shut him out, but curtains are an addition to the conveyance that are suspiciously missing.

I suspect the general wants to be able to look in on me whenever he desires. Not once during the march south has he walked out of eyesight of the carriage. At least not

while I was paying attention.

After trying and failing to amuse myself with a card game, I soon push the cards aside and heave a long sigh.

Restless yet tired, I'm not certain whether I'd rather walk outside among the fae for a little while or curl up in the daybed and take a nap.

Yes, in addition to the plush seating area, there's also a small daybed that's piled with covers and pillows.

I strive to remain awake, however, because I don't want to find myself tossing and turning tonight. Sleeping in the same tent as Tristan is difficult enough because I'm so aware of his proximity, but if I end up lying in bed awake all night, it'll make for a trying time.

My heart commences racing when I consider our sleeping arrangements. For the past twelve nights, he's slept on the floor next to the bed. He's also slept in his clothes, though whenever I see him in the morning, he appears freshly bathed and dressed in a clean uniform.

Will he eventually demand to sleep next to me?

Warmth quakes between my thighs at the possibility.

The last few times he's touched me have been surprisingly pleasurable, like when he's guided me into a chair or placed a hand on my lower back as I walked inside his tent.

I'm no longer flinching at his touch, and I'm shocked by how quickly I've started to trust him.

Am I a fool? He's fae. Not just any fae, but a fierce fae general.

I shouldn't trust him. I should remain on guard and expect the worst. What if he's tricking me? What if he's waiting for the perfect moment to treat me with cruelty?

I remind myself that a decent male, even a fae one, wouldn't keep a woman as a war prize. A respectable, peaceable male wouldn't hold a woman captive. It's only common sense.

And yet... I can't help but yearn for his touch.

The truth is, I'm looking forward to this evening. After camp is set up, the general will retrieve me from the carriage and bring me to his tent. We'll share a meal and converse with one another before going to bed.

I groan and lean against one of the soft, velvet pillows.

I glance at the beautiful dresses that are hanging in an open closet, then look down at my own attire that's shabby in comparison.

The pants and shirt I'd been wearing when General Dalgaard captured me mysteriously vanished (though the silver I'd kept in my pocket later appeared in my bag), so I've taken to wearing the old dresses I brought along when I ran away from Lord Nevel.

Today I'm wearing a faded blue gown that's decorated with fraying ribbon.

Longing fills me as I return my gaze to the beautiful dresses, particularly the vibrant purple one.

Perhaps if I wore one of the new dresses, I wouldn't feel so out of place sitting in this

opulent carriage.

Okay, I suppose that's a stretch of reasoning, but I really would like to try the dresses on and wear them.

If only for a little while. Just to know what it's like to wear something so fine.

When I worked in the Sorsston castle, especially as a young girl, I used to dream about what it would be like to wear fancy clothing and jewels, as well as shoes that actually fit.

I used to fantasize that a handsome lord would visit the castle, become instantly besotted with me, and whisk me away to his grand countryside manor.

My heart breaks a little when my gaze snags on the stack of books that rest on a side table. Mama used to read to me every night. Before I was forced to work in the castle. Before I went from being tucked in nightly by the mother I adored to seeing her but once a year.

I blink back tears and retrieve one of the books.

I open it to the first page and start reading.

I was one of the few servants who could read, and sometimes I would sneak a book from the castle library and read to my roommates at night.

Sharing the experience of getting lost in a good story was always a pleasant way to spend the evening.

Though the book I'm holding is an interesting retelling of an old fairytale about an army of pixies, my eyes soon grow heavy, and I find myself nodding off. Eventually,

I give up trying to stay awake, and I lean further against the pillows, telling myself I'll just sleep for a few minutes.

Unfortunately, my slumber is far from restful.

I keep dreaming about Lord Nevel and jolting awake whenever he's about to strike me.

Then I fall back asleep only to dream about the fae attacks on Sorsston and Glenville.

I jolt to awareness again and force myself to stay awake this time.

I rush to the bathroom sink, where I splash my face with cold water.

It helps. Sort of. The shock of the cold makes staying awake easier, but it does little to calm the residual panic from the bad dreams.

The carriage comes to a stop, and I move to the window and peer outside to see what's going on. I'm greeted by the most breathtaking sunset I've ever seen. Gods, is it evening already? It would seem I've lost track of time.

The door opens behind me, and I whirl around to face General Dalgaard. Tristan. His eyes flare with warmth as he looks at me, and I'm suddenly eager to move closer to him. For a reason I can't quite fathom, his presence brings me comfort and helps chase away the lingering terror of my nightmares.

Safe. Why does he make me feel so safe?

Though I first encountered him in Sorsston six months ago, we've truly only known one another for about two weeks. That's it. Yet I'm aching for his touch and overwhelmed by the desire to be close to him.

His emotions reach me, just like they always do, and I sense his happiness over our reunion, as well as his anticipation for the evening to come.

I keep getting a visual of the bed in his tent.

My heart races faster and heat pulsates in my nether region.

He wants to sleep next to me, very badly, though he's conflicted about it and doesn't quite know how to broach the subject.

He holds out a hand, and I approach him and place my hand in his. "Come, sweet human, and we'll enjoy our evening together."

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TRISTAN

I guide Amelia toward my tent. Normally, my tent is erected in the center of camp, but I decided on a change for tonight and ordered it placed on the edge of camp.

It's my hope that perhaps after the evening meal, the pretty little human will agree to join me for a leisurely, romantic walk in the ussha-blessed forest.

Yes, I'm absolutely planning to steal one of the ideas she gave Prince Lucas by taking her on a moonlit walk.

Just as we're about to reach the tent, war cries sound along the perimeter of the camp, and an ear-splitting horn resounds over the mountainside.

The soldiers around me draw their swords, and all the highborn fae in the camp immediately take to the skies.

All of them except for me. I clutch Amelia close.

I cannot leave her side during an enemy attack.

"Orcs!" someone shouts. "Bloody fucking orcs!"

Amelia gasps and tucks herself more deeply into my embrace, seeking refuge in my arms. If it weren't for the seriousness of the situation, I would pause and savor the moment. But we're under attack, and I must protect my female while issuing orders to my soldiers and commanders.

Before I'm able to draw a breath and shout the first order, three orcs roll a catapult out of the forest and aim it in our direction.

The multiple projectiles they've loaded into the apparatus are on fire, and I watch in shock as the first flaming projectiles hurl through the air, splintering in different directions.

Fucking gods. Dark magic sizzles in the air.

The orcs must have a human mage among their ranks.

I grab Amelia and roll onto the ground while holding her, careful not to crush her with my weight. I position the length of my body over hers and shield her while the projectiles rain down on the camp.

Pained cries of fae ring out, but so do the screams of dying orcs. Don't the orcs realize how many highborn fae always remain with the Summer Court army?

Yes, I sent a good number of highborn fae ahead to Sorsston, but enough of us remain to combat the enchanted catapult as well as the human mage.

Amelia shudders beneath me, and I duck my head down and press a kiss to her forehead. "All will be well, sweet human. Don't be afraid. I will keep you safe. As soon as the flaming projectiles stop falling, I'll get you into the warded tent."

One of the projectiles strikes my back. Despite the pain, I will myself not to flinch.

Fae soldiers are taught not to respond to pain, and though some among our ranks are crying out, I would be setting a poor example if I showed any reaction.

Besides, I heal more quickly than most fae, and I'm confident any bruises or wounds

I just incurred will be fully healed by the time the battle is over.

When a few seconds pass and the cascade of flaming projectiles ceases, I glance over at the catapult and notice the orcs are struggling to light the second batch of projectiles on fire. A tall human male with glowing red eyes emerges from the forest and heads for the catapult.

I scoop Amelia into my arms, jump to my feet, and bolt for my tent. I rush her inside and place her on the bed. “Stay here. I will return as soon as I can. Please try not to worry. I promise my army will have no difficulty vanquishing this foe.”

She stares at me with wide eyes, her face unsettlingly pale, and gives a slight nod. “O-okay.”

I spin around and rush to the tent flap. Just before I step outside, her voice comes to me again, and her words send me reeling with shock.

“Please be careful, Tristan!” she calls.

Buoyed by her apparent regard for my safety, I summon wings and launch into the sky with a roar.

I kill the mage first. He’s so weakened from his efforts trying to make the enchanted catapult work, that he’s unable to fight back when I grab him by the ankle and soar upward as he dangles from my hand.

I take him higher than the clouds, then let go.

Moments later, as I zoom down toward the camp, I witness the satisfying splat of his body impacting the ground.

He lands on a rocky area amidst the camp, and his head splits open so beautifully it causes my bloodlust to heighten.

I want more. More death. I want to savor the screams of my enemies.

In between slaughtering orcs, I locate several of my commanders and issue orders, then I set myself to the task of hunting down the orcs that have infiltrated the camp. As I kill and kill and kill, I keep one eye on my tent. If anyone dares to go near it, I'll spill their guts in the dirt.

It's not long before the very last orcs are rounded up. Even by orc standards, their war party was a small one, yet they'd attacked us. No doubt, they'd foolishly believed the human mage would turn the tide in their favor.

I oversee the interrogations, which don't yield any useful information, followed by the executions of the remaining orcs. Then, I order extra guards to be posted around the campsite, as well as additional highborn fae to patrol the skies.

Finally, I head for my tent. For Amelia. I long to hold her in my arms and make sure she's all right. If she's scared, I pray she will accept my comfort.

As I approach my tent, I notice the flap is slightly ajar, and a pair of bright blue eyes are staring out. Those eyes widen suddenly, and the tent flap returns to its proper place. Stunned, I enter and peer at my little war prize.

"How did you do that?" My voice comes out harsher than I intended, and guilt slams into me when Amelia takes a quick step back. "I warded this tent, and no one should be able to move the flap aside, even a small amount. No one but me or any fae servants we invite inside."

"I have no idea. I simply did it." She takes another step back. "I-I wasn't trying to

leave the tent. I just wanted to see what was happening.” She draws in a huge breath, and her hands tremble at her sides. “You, um, killed a lot of orcs. And that red-eyed human, whoever he was.”

“The red-eyed human was a dark mage,” I tell her, and she gasps.

“A dark mage? Oh, gods.” Her eyes gleam with worry. “Are there more of them in the area?”

“Mages tend to work alone, except for when they take on an apprentice. But given how untried this particular mage was, I don’t believe he had an apprentice.

Fear not, sweet human,” I say, finally gentling my tone, “I don’t believe there are any more dark mages in the area.

No orcs either, for that matter. I’ve dispatched scouts to be certain, and extra soldiers will remain on guard all throughout the night, and highborn fae will continue to patrol the skies. No harm will come to you, I swear it.”

She wraps her arms around herself and her trembling increases.

How the fuck did she manage to pull the tent flap back and watch the battle? I still can’t fathom it.

If she’d attempted to step outside the tent, would she have succeeded? I seriously hope not, though I resolve that we’ll test her abilities soon.

If my wards won’t keep her inside the tent, I’ll have to post guards outside.

I approach Amelia slowly, longing to hold her. I don’t like that she’s shaking, and as I consider the harsh tone I’d used moments ago, I start to worry that perhaps I’m

partly the cause of it.

“Amelia, I am sorry I raised my voice at you.” I mean it.

I am sorry, deeply so. I wish I could turn back time and re-enter the tent and address the issue of her possible ability to bypass my wards with more calmness.

I know Lord Nevel was physically abusive, and I suspect he probably shouted at her plenty too.

I don’t want to be the sort of male who takes my anger out on her, not verbally or physically, and I resolve that I’ll better manage my emotions going forward.

She lowers her head slightly and nods. “It’s okay. I’ve been yelled at much worse.” Her lower lip wobbles, and her eyes fill with tears.

“Amelia,” I say in the gentlest voice I can muster. “I truly am sorry.”

“That’s not why I’m upset.” To my shock, she steps closer to me.

“I was worried about you. A couple of times, I saw an orc come up behind you, during the few times you were on the ground, and each time I swear my heart nearly stopped.” She shudders, and a tear cascades down her cheek.

“You saved me. You shielded me with your body. And then you carried me to safety and stormed straight back into the danger. I-I’m glad you’re unharmed, Tristan. ”

Her words reverberate in my head, shocking me to the depths of my being. I’m glad you’re unharmed, Tristan. Is she starting to care about me?

“Amelia, sweet human, would it be all right if I... held you? I don’t like seeing you

shaking and afraid, and I would very much like to comfort you right now. If you'll let me."

She sniffles and another tear falls. "I'm not afraid anymore. But yes, yes you may hold me."

I open my arms, and she steps into my embrace.

AMELIA

My trembling gradually lessens as Tristan holds me. He runs his hands up and down my back and occasionally strokes my unbound hair. At some point, I wrap my arms around his waist and hug him back.

How can this be happening?

I don't have the strength to push him away. He might be the enemy, and he might be my captor, but I need him right now. I desperately need the comfort he's offering.

Why am I so relieved that he survived the battle unscathed? Is it because he shielded me with his body, protecting me from the flaming projectiles? Or is it because I'm starting to fall for him in a romantic way? My breath falters at the prospect.

I keep my face pressed to his chest, and with each deep inhale, I soak up his fragrant Summer Court scent. His arms feel like the sweetest refuge. Even though they shouldn't. Even though I should be pushing him away and demanding he set me free.

His emotions are so clear to me, it's almost as though I can read his thoughts. Almost. He's dismayed that I'm so upset I'm shaking, but he's thrilled to be holding me. He's thankful I'm allowing him to comfort me, and he's hopeful it means I'm starting to trust him.

Can he sense my thoughts and emotions? It's a startling possibility, and I pray he has no idea what I'm thinking.

My power to bypass his wards, at least partially, plus my ability to sense his thoughts and emotions... what could it mean?

Not for the first time, I consider the prospect that I'm his fated mate. But if I am, wouldn't he have known the first time he laid eyes upon me? I've heard that's how it usually works with fae couples, but maybe since I'm human things have become a bit muddled.

In any case, he didn't claim me as a mate. He claimed me as a war prize. Never mind that he hasn't physically claimed me. Yet.

It's my understanding that in fae culture, war prizes and concubines hold a slightly higher status than mere slaves, including pleasure slaves. But I'm not free to leave.

If I'm not his fated mate, and since he hasn't physically claimed me yet, I'm starting to believe there's no way I could be, what will he do with me once he meets his actual fated mate? I mean, assuming that happens during my lifetime.

It occurs to me that I don't even know Tristan's age.

He could be one hundred or a thousand. Fae typically live for thousands of years.

They are practically immortal and only perish due to a grave injury, something so terrible a skilled fae healer can't be of help.

At nineteen, I probably have seventy or eighty years left if I'm lucky.

When I start to show my age, will Tristan cast me aside?

I should rejoice at the idea, but instead, it leaves me saddened and even a bit angry.

But how could I blame him, or any fae, for parting ways with a human war prize/slave/ concubine who starts to show their age?

Not only do fae live for thousands of years, but they also retain their youthful appearance.

Most of the fae occupying the Sorsston castle didn't look a day over thirty by human standards.

I try to banish the morose thoughts as I sink deeper into Tristan's arms. He truly enjoys comforting me, and he hopes he's being helpful.

Gods, how can such a ruthless fae male treat me with so much gentleness? It boggles the mind.

I've watched him slaughter humans and orcs, and even a dark mage, and I could've sworn his eyes gleamed with pleasure with each kill he made, yet he hasn't visited any brutality upon me.

Earlier, not long after he raised his voice at me, he issued a heartfelt apology. He wasn't faking either. I know because I'd felt his genuine regret. I also know he's shocked I bypassed his wards. I'm shocked as well, and I kind of want to try to step outside the tent. Just to see if I can.

My trembling gradually stops, and I start to feel much calmer. I'm safe. Tristan is safe. The danger has passed. The marauding orcs are all dead and so is the mage.

A weird dark thought passes through my mind. If Tristan had perished during the attack, what would've happened to me? It's a rather selfish thought, but I can't help but wonder. I doubt his army would release me. Would I have become a pleasure slave for one of his soldiers?

Yes, there are quite a few reasons I would like Tristan to remain healthy and whole. For as long as I'm traveling with the Summer Court army, my wellbeing depends on his survival.

But if I'm being honest, I would like him to survive not just because my wellbeing is tied to his, but because the thought of any harm coming to him is devastating.

How much longer does he plan to lead the Summer Court army? Does he have any plans for retirement?

At last, I withdraw partially from his arms, and I peer up at him as my heart pounds a rapid rhythm in my chest. Part of me wonders what it might be like to kiss him.

Not that I would ever initiate such an intimate act.

I worry if I did, he might become ravenous and be unable to stop himself from claiming me, despite his promises not to force himself upon me or harm me in any way.

Our eyes remain locked for what feels like hours, yet I cannot look away.

His gaze is dark but warm, and everything about him feels so very safe.

I've been wronged by too many men during my short life.

My father, the castle steward who used to punish me for the smallest infraction, fellow servants who happened to be duplicitous, and Lord Nevel, of course.

But, Tristan? I feel so safe with him at this moment that I'm starting to believe maybe he won't trick me in the end. Maybe he won't hurt me.

But despite the kindness he's shown me thus far, the uncertainty of my future with him is a dark cloud on the horizon. If something happens to him, or if I'm not his fated mate, there will be a bad ending for me. Eventually.

Whatever happiness we might enjoy would be very short-lived.

A few years at most. As soon as I look older than him, surely he'll cast me aside. I've heard stories about that sort of thing.

About fae masters who toss their pleasure slaves aside as soon as they appear older than the masters themselves.

Why am I allowing myself to find comfort in Tristan's arms? Why can't I find the strength to push him away?

Despite my rambling, dismal thoughts, pleasure ripples through me as he runs his hands up and down my back.

Suddenly, I remember the kiss he gave me.

During the attack. While he was shielding me with his body, he leaned down and placed a quick kiss on my forehead.

I suppose if it hadn't been a life-or-death situation, I would've melted and repositioned my face closer to his in hopes of a kiss on the lips.

He delves a hand in my hair and continues peering down at me. My neck starts to ache from the strain of staring up at him, but I don't lower my head. I can't. Because what if... what if he decides to kiss me right now?

Sparks fly between us, a heightening tension that's causing my heart to patter and my

pussy to clench.

Summer heat swirls in the air, and the sound of locusts, crickets, and trilling frogs reaches me.

It's nighttime, so the magical atmosphere could be coming from the nearby ussha-blessed forest, but I sense that Tristan is the true source.

I also sense that he can't control it because it's a natural response to his mounting need for me.

An erotic vision bursts into my head, one that I know comes from him, and it leaves me gasping for air. I'm bent over the bed, naked, and he's approaching me with his turgid cock in hand, preparing to impale me. My pink center glistens in the faelights, and I'm trembling not with fear but desire.

It takes great effort not to become wanton and press myself against Tristan. He's fully erect. I know he is. If I take one step closer, his hardness will press directly on my stomach.

"Are you feeling better, sweet human?"

"Yes," I somehow force out, though my throat is so dry it burns. "Thank you, Tristan. Thank you for saving me and for comforting me." The sudden warmth of my cheeks rivals the pulsing warmth building between my thighs.

Pleasure flares in his eyes. "I'm glad to hear it." His deep voice rumbles through me, eliciting more quaking waves of sensation that I wish I could tamp down. "I know you just experienced quite the fright, but are you hungry? I don't want you to go to bed hungry."

“Maybe some bread and cheese might help settle my stomach. A little wine, too, perhaps.”

“I will gather the food myself and pour us glasses of wine.” He guides me toward the table and helps me into a chair. “It’ll just take a moment. I’ll get you some water too.”

“Thank you.” I watch as he slices bread and arranges it on a large plate, then slices several varieties of cheese and adds that as well.

He sets the plate on the table and walks away only long enough to fetch the wine and water, as well as the glasses.

My heart constricts as I observe his movements.

He could so easily call a servant to fulfill these tasks, but he’s doing it himself.

For me. Probably because he worries I’ll become anxious if I’m around another male tonight, even if his male servants are castrated and glamoured into submission.

I appreciate his thoughtfulness. More than he probably realizes.

We enjoy the quick, appetizing snack, and I down two glasses of wine in quick succession. I only drink a few sips of water after he insists.

It’s late. Nearly the time we usually go to bed.

“Well, the camp sounds quieter. I suppose we should turn in for the night,” I say with a shy glance at the bed. I’m so torn. Torn between putting up walls and holding him at a distance (because really, what sort of future might we share?) and inviting him to join me in the bed.

Tristan glances toward the tent flap, then gives me a strange look. “What do you mean the camp sounds quieter? You can hear it now , and you could hear it earlier ?”

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“Of course I can, and yes, I could hear it earlier too.” But it suddenly strikes me that this is the first time I’ve been able to hear the goings-on outside the tent in quite some time. Not since I heard the human female’s screams that first night and a second later it all went quiet.

A deep frown mars his visage. “The soundproof ward is still in place. You shouldn’t be able to hear anything.” He rises to his feet, rounds the table, and helps me out of my chair. “Please come with me. I want to test something.”

“All right.” I stand with his help, and I revel in his closeness. His body heat wafts onto me, and his summer scent is so enticing, I find myself wishing he would hold me again.

He presses a hand to my lower back and guides me to the tent flap.

Before we reach the exit, I know what he’s about to ask.

“Try to leave the tent, sweet human. Try to step outside. I want to see if you can do it.” He moves back and nods at the tent flap, though his features remain tense.

I know he’s worried. Worried his wards won’t work on me any longer.

“Very well,” I finally say as I eye the exit. I reach for the flap and pull it aside. Not just a crack either, but I’m able to yank it fully aside. Hm. Maybe I really can bypass his wards.

“Gods, sweet human, you shouldn’t be able to do that.” He growls, but it’s a slight

growl of frustration, not the angry, intimidating kind. “Go ahead. Try to step outside.”

We exchange a quick glance, then I easily step outside. Still holding the tent flap open, I say, “Ta da!” as though I’ve just performed a magic trick. Well, maybe I have. If I’m bypassing his wards, does it mean I must possess some magic? My head spins at the idea.

“Gods be damned,” he says, then he utters some additional curses that make the tips of my ears go hot. He drags a hand through his hair and starts pacing the tent. Then he pauses, his eyes go wide, and he motions toward me. “Come back inside, Amelia. Please.”

Knowing I’m probably safest in his tent, I comply without argument.

He pulls me close, and I gasp. Before I can ask what he’s doing, he’s already pushed my hair out of the way so he can inspect my ears. I almost laugh because when he encountered me in Glenville, my hair was tied back, my curved, human ears on full display.

“You are tiny, Amelia, and your ears don’t have the slightest point.” He draws back and holds me out by my forearms. “How are you bypassing the wards? Tell me. Now. I promise I won’t be angry with you, but I must know the truth.”

“I honestly have no idea.” My mind reels. I’m shocked by my apparent abilities to thwart his wards, and I wonder what it might mean, just as I wonder what my ability to sense his thoughts and emotions might mean.

As he stares at me, a scream sounds in the distance. This time, I think it’s a human man, but it’s still unsettling. What is the poor man’s fae master doing to him? A shiver racks my body as I glance at the tent flap, wishing I could rush outside and help the man.

“Godsfuckingdamnit,” Tristan says with a growl, though I know his frustration isn’t directed at me. I’m suddenly aware of his anger toward the fae master who’s tormenting his war prize or slave.

He releases me and steps back. He lifts a hand and the air buzzes with magic.

A look of intense concentration comes over him.

A soundproof ward. He’s trying to erect another soundproof ward.

But it doesn’t work. When he lowers his hand and gives me a questioning look, all I can do is respond with a half-shrug and a shake of my head.

“You can still hear the screams?” he asks in a tone of astonishment.

“Yes, and they’re getting louder.” I can’t keep the catch of emotion from my voice. My heart is breaking for the poor human man.

Tristan curses again, runs his hands through his hair, then bolts out of the tent. I hurry to the flap and open it so I might see what he’s doing. He makes it five steps before he pauses, spins on his heel, and faces me.

He summons his massive wings in a flash of brilliant white light, then draws in a huge breath.

“Officers Zants and Vernn,” he bellows, and within moments, two soldiers hurry into the small clearing and stand at attention, awaiting whatever orders their ill-tempered general is about to issue.

“Officer Zants, please try to step inside my tent. Don’t hesitate, just fucking do it. ”

The soldier pales and casts a wary look at me, but he soon heads in my direction, and I release the flap and step back.

I'm not sure whether to hope my captor's Summer Court magic is diminishing, or whether I'm truly capable of feats most humans aren't.

If the general has suddenly lost his power to wield magic, escaping him might be easier than I expected.

But if this test proves I'm the one at fault in this situation—and given the fact that Tristan can still summon his wings and I just watched him wield magic during the orc attack—surely my captor will be extra vigilant about my safety going forward. I can sense his thoughts.

At present, he's picturing over a dozen well-trained soldiers stationed outside his tent. Soldiers he plans to put on a permanent detail if it's discovered I'm the problem here. My heart races with nerves.

Escape might be harder than ever.

Not that I had any real plan. Only a desperate wish. The same desperate hope I've always had for freedom.

Officer Zants's shadow appears at the flap, and I can tell by his movements that he's trying his best to enter the tent, but he can't. He can't come inside because of Tristan's powerful wards.

“That's enough. You may stop. Officers Zants and Vernn, you will both remain here and guard my tent until I tell you otherwise.

No one comes in, and no one goes out. If my war prize attempts to leave, you will put

her in restraints—as gently as possible—and you will await my return.

Physical restraints, mind you, not spelled ones. ”

If my war prize attempts to leave...

Disbelief spirals through me, and angry tears prick at my eyes.

Hearing Tristan address me as his war prize in front of others is hurtful in a way I never imagined. Yes, I know what I am. I know my status in this fae camp.

But until now, given his gentle treatment of me, I suppose I was under the illusion that I meant more to him than a mere war prize.

I repeat one of the bawdy curses I recently heard my captor use and wipe away a fallen tear.

You will put her in restraints...

Panic descends, and the scent of lavender reaches me, and a blanket suddenly rises from the bed and floats in my direction. Oh, for fuck’s sake. Did he truly spell his tent to comfort me in his absence?

How is this magic working, but not the soundproof wards or the wards meant to keep me inside his tent?

When the blanket starts to fall upon my shoulders, I step out of the way, grasp it from the air, and toss it onto the ground. It works. The blanket stays there. But the aroma of lavender remains strong, and there’s a definite buzz of magic around me.

I hate that it’s calming, and it takes everything inside me to keep from crying. I blink

fast and snuffle, determined not to allow another tear to fall. General Dalgaard isn't worth it.

You will put her in restraints...

Each time those six words echo in my head, my heart breaks anew.

TRISTAN

I find Commander Klemat standing outside his tent, a mug of ale in hand.

He's alone and thank the gods for that. He tenses when he notices me stalking in his direction.

Given my dark mood, I don't blame the highborn male.

He likely worries I'm on my way to berate him for some failing during the recent battle.

I glance around the area, and though this section of the camp isn't very crowded, I quickly erect a soundproof bubble, wanting our conversation to be private. The commander's eyebrows lift slightly, and I know he senses the magic I just used.

Well, at least my magic appears to be in working order. I can summon wings, and I can create wards. But for some reason, it would seem Amelia can bypass both the soundproof wards and the protective wards I've placed around my tent.

Her ability to so easily bypass my wards makes me wonder if perhaps she can bypass wards erected by other highborn fae. Which is why I've come calling on Commander Klemat. Of all my commanders and soldiers, he strikes me as the most trustworthy.

Gods, I miss my childhood friend Kaiden.

We were raised together and he's like a brother to me, and until about a year and a

half ago, he was part of the Summer Court army.

Well, technically he's still part of the army, but Prince Lucas appointed him to become the Warden of Trevos, and he's remained in the human city ever since with his part-human, part-fae mate Mira.

If Kaiden were here right now, I could confide in him and ask him to help me test Amelia's abilities to bypass fae wards. Instead, I must take a risk and hope Commander Klemat is as loyal as he seems.

"Good evening, General Dalgaard," Commander Klemat says in a wary tone once I reach his tent. "Is something amiss? Would you like a mug of ale?"

I swallow hard and will myself to speak in a civil tone.

It's not his fault I might have a problem on my hands.

A big fucking problem. How will I keep Amelia from running away if she can just walk straight through my wards?

I'll have to keep soldiers posted outside my tent at all times, and I'll have to order soldiers to guard her carriage when we're traveling.

I can only imagine the additional gossip that will cause among my soldiers.

"Good evening, Commander Klemant," I finally say. "No, thank you, I don't require a mug of ale. I've come to ask for your help, as well as your discretion, as I attempt to sort out a delicate matter that involves my war prize."

His mouth drops open for a moment, then he takes a long swig of ale, no doubt in an effort to hide his surprise. He swallows the ale quickly. "I would be honored to help

you, General, and I promise your secrets are safe with me.”

I study him for a moment, trying to ascertain whether he’s attempting to ingratiate himself to me, or if he’s being genuine.

Perhaps a mix of both. In any case, there’s no time to delay.

If Amelia can bypass not only my wards, but wards created by other highborn fae, I need to know about her skills immediately.

“Thank you, Commander. If you help me, and if you speak of this matter to no one, I will be in your debt. I will owe you a favor of equal magnitude.”

His eyes flare with shock, and he’s not the only one who’s experiencing that particular emotion.

In my nine hundred plus years, I’ve never been in debt to anyone or promised a favor in return for some service.

I’ve never liked the idea of being in debt to a fellow highborn fae, but here I am, anxious to discover what’s going on with my war prize.

“Tell me what you require of me, General,” the commander says, “and as long as it’s within my power, I will help you.”

“Walk with me,” I reply, knowing the soundproof bubble will remain intact as we navigate the camp.

We set off, and I explain my desire for the commander to create a protective ward around my tent that should, in theory, keep Amelia from leaving. Unless it doesn’t. Unless she can bypass his wards just as she’s able to circumvent mine.

I don't give him any more details than necessary; I simply tell him what I need him to do.

I'm sure he'll infer the problem I'm having with Amelia if she steps outside the tent after he creates a protective ward, but it can't be helped.

I remind myself that he's promised secrecy, and by assisting me this evening, he's earning a favor.

As soon as we reach my tent, I dismiss Officers Zants and Vernn.

I don't ask them if Amelia gave them any trouble during my absence, though I am anxious to step inside and discover whether my war prize is in restraints.

I pray she behaved herself. I pray she's not tied up inside my tent.

I doubt she would ever forgive me for such brutal treatment, and I'm also not sure I would be able to allow Officers Zants and Vernn to live after knowing they put their hands on her, never mind that they would've only been following orders.

I face Commander Klemat. "I must speak with my war prize, but I'll be back in a moment, then you can build the protective ward around my tent... and we'll see what happens."

"Understood, sir." He straightens and I can't help but think it's a bit comical that he's still holding the mug of ale. But it gives a casual appearance to our clandestine activities, and if anyone's watching us at this late hour, they'll likely think we're enjoying a social occasion.

I step into the tent, and relief fills me when I spot Amelia pacing the area freely. She halts in her tracks and gives me a murderous look.

“How dare you?” She blinks fast, and I despair over the gleam of tears in her eyes.

I growl. I can’t help it. “Surely you must realize that if you can bypass my wards, sweet human, I’ll have no choice but to keep you guarded every hour of the day.”

“Guards? You really think guards are necessary? There are twenty-eight thousand fae soldiers in this camp. Do you really think I’m capable of sneaking away and escaping the notice of that many fae?”

“To be honest, I don’t know what you’re capable of. You shouldn’t be able to walk beyond my protective wards, nor should you be able to hear what’s going on outside the tent. Yet you can. So very easily.”

“In that case, perhaps you should just let me go.” She crosses her arms over her chest and lifts her chin, her demeanor so beautifully defiant that I wish I could kiss her right now.

But she would probably try to bite off my tongue, and there’s no time. Commander Klemat is waiting.

I sigh and glance at the tent flap, then I direct my focus on her. “I’m not letting you go, sweet human.” I step closer, until my body is almost touching hers and she’s forced to angle her neck to peer up at me. “You’re mine, and I intend to keep you. Possibly forever. Probably forever .”

She pales, and her eyes glimmer with hurt. My chest abruptly aches, and sorrow becomes a heaviness that weighs my entire body down. It’s as though I can sense the turmoil she’s feeling, and gods how it runs deep. I almost gasp. Am I imagining it, or am I actually detecting her emotions right now?

“Forgive me,” she says in a taunting tone.

“I seem to have forgotten my place. Given how gently you’ve treated me thus far, it’s sometimes easy to forget that I’m your war prize.

But that’s what I am, isn’t it? I’m your human captive, and you’re my fae master.

I’m nothing to you but a warm hole you’re eventually going to decide to fuck.

” She emits a crazed laugh and shakes her head slightly.

“Maybe you should stop being so gentle. Maybe you should treat me the way your soldiers treat their war prizes. Maybe you should hurt me and make me scream for the whole camp to hear.”

I force in a deep breath. “You can goad me all you like, Amelia, but I will never hurt you. If I ever make you scream for the whole camp to hear, it’ll be when I’m feasting on your pussy—at your own invitation—and your cries of pleasure are rending the night while you shatter on my tongue.”

She gasps, and her eyes widen with outrage. “I am not goading you. And I will never invite you to-to... do what you just described.”

“Feast on your pussy?” I grin when she flushes bright red.

“Are you sure you don’t want to invite me to do that right now?

Because despite what I’m sure are your best efforts, you’re aroused, sweet human.

” I flare my nostrils and inhale deeply, just for show.

“I can easily detect the slickness that’s growing between your thighs, and it’s not the first time I’ve smelled it.

Frequently when I'm close to you, you become excited. ”

She shakes her head. “No, no, you're lying. I'm not... aroused .” She whispers the last word as though it's the most scandalous curse in existence.

“I've never lied to you, sweet human, nor do I ever intend to. I want there to be honesty between us.”

She snorts. “As much honesty as can exist between a slave and her master?”

“You're not my slave, and I'm not your master.” Except, I am her master. In a way. I captured her, and I'm refusing to let her go. But I'm not ordering her around and forcing her into my bed.

“Slave, prisoner, war prize, call me whatever you'd like, but I'm not free, and I'm living under your authority.

Whatever happens to me, whether I live or die, whether I'm hurt or tormented, is tied to you and the decisions you make.

” Her bottom lip trembles, and I long to gather her in my arms. But I doubt she would accept my comfort when I'm the source of her grief.

“I'm at your mercy,” she continues. “Do you know what it's like to be at someone's complete mercy? ”

“Amelia, sweet human, I am sorry you're upset, truly I am, and I am sorry I'm the cause of your distress.

I hope we can continue this conversation later.

But right now, I need to test whether you can bypass the wards of all highborn fae.

Commander Klemat is waiting outside. After I step out, he's going to erect a protective ward around the tent, and I want you to try to leave."

"Very well." Her tone is bitter. "I suppose you need to figure out whether you must keep me surrounded by your soldiers going forward. What an embarrassment it would be for you if your war prize managed to escape."

She's upset, and rightfully so. As I head for the tent flap, I consider how I might mend the difficulties between us. She wants freedom, but it's the one thing I refuse to give her. If I continue treating her with gentleness, will she learn to be content as my war prize?

"If you managed to escape, Amelia, I would be too concerned about your safety, knowing that you would be wandering through the dangerous, ussha-blessed forest, to even feel any embarrassment. I would be fraught with worry, and I wouldn't stop looking for you."

Most of the fire leaves her eyes, and her expressions softens a bit. She no longer appears angry enough to plunge a knife into my heart. But she doesn't respond to my truthful and somewhat vulnerable statement, so I step out of the tent.

It's time for the test.

AMELIA

I would be fraught with worry, and I wouldn't stop looking for you.

As I await Tristan's instructions, his gently spoken words ring in my ears. He meant it, too. Every word. Yes, he's intensely possessive of me, and that's one reason he'll never let me go, but he also cares for my safety. He really would be sick with fear if I went missing.

Even if I escaped, where would I go?

I would have to worry about Lord Nevel and his soldiers tracking me down. More than once, Tristan has mentioned that he plans to bring me my husband's head, but if I run away, Tristan will likely spend all his time searching for me, and Nevel would keep his head for a while longer.

Despite the argument we just had, the thought of leaving Tristan fills me with grief. I want to escape him, yet I would miss him. My chest goes tight, and each breath becomes painful when I consider never seeing him again.

I wish he hadn't referred to me as his war prize in front of his soldiers. It made me feel small and insignificant, and when he returned to the tent, I'd lashed out. Yes, I was goading him when I suggested he should treat me as a war prize and cease being so gentle.

Gods, I can't believe I'd allowed my emotions to get the better of me, and my face heats with shame.

“Try to step outside the tent, Amelia!” Tristan finally calls, and my stomach dives to the ground as an idea takes root.

Yes, I’m curious about whether I can get around wards set by all highborn fae, but maybe I should pretend I can’t. Will it give me an advantage if I conceal this ability, assuming I even have it, from my captor? I’m not sure, but just in case it will, I decide I won’t even try to leave the tent.

“All right,” I reply. “I’m coming.” Except I’m not. I’m about to have a little trouble opening the tent flap.

Knowing Tristan can likely see my shadow, I reach down, grasp the thick fabric, and groan as I keep my arm in place.

“Oh, it would seem I can’t even open it,” I say as I congratulate myself for outwitting a highborn fae general. I let go of the fabric and step back. “I can’t make it outside.”

Tristan sticks his head in the tent and gives me a scolding look that takes me aback. “Amelia, the ward hasn’t been set yet. I know you were faking.”

I gasp. “But you told me to step out!” Indignation sweeps through me. “And just a few moments ago, you blathered about how there should be honesty between us. You lied!” The irony of my accusation strikes me, and I hope he doesn’t point out that I’m the one who just sort of lied.

“I told you to step out, yes, but I didn’t specifically say the ward had been set. Technically, I didn’t lie to you.”

I release a dramatic huff. “Fine. Let’s try again.”

“Yes, Amelia, let’s try again.” The reproachful gleam in his eyes shifts to one of mild

amusement. Then he disappears and the tent flap falls back into place.

A minute passes, then another. I resist the urge to resume pacing the tent as my impatience grows. Will he try to trick me again? Or will a protective ward actually be in place the next time he instructs me to step outside?

I suppose I'll have no choice but to be honest this time.

My face heats anew. I'm embarrassed that he caught me trying to fool him, particularly when I was so certain that I was the one doing the tricking.

The humiliation is sobering and serves as another reminder that he has all the power, and I have none.

"Okay, Amelia, let's try this again." His deep voice incites butterflies in my stomach. "Please try to step outside."

Why can't I sense whether he's trying to trick me again? I can usually sense his thoughts and emotions without fail, but right now, it's like there's a wall there. A wall I can't break through.

I draw in a huge breath and try to step outside.

It works. I manage to pull the flap aside and step into the open air near the ussha-blessed forest. Fireflies dance all around us, and a warm summer breeze ruffles my hair.

I peer at Tristan. His eyes have gone wide, and his mouth is hanging open. But a second later, he composes himself and displays an expression of casual disinterest. He glances at the fae male standing next to him.

“Thank you for your assistance, Commander Klemat. That will be all. Please feel free to call upon me for that favor I owe you at any time.”

“You’re quite welcome, General. Goodnight.” The highborn fae walks away and disappears into the camp.

Tristan approaches me as the fireflies continue dancing around us. It’s a beautiful night, and in the right company, I might consider it romantic. As his gaze holds mine, the glow of the fae vegetation bathes him in a multitude of colors. His wings are still out, and they suddenly flare wide.

“Do you truly have no idea how you’re able to bypass fae wards?”

“I truly have no idea.” Alongside my confusion, a sense of giddiness fills me.

For so long, I’ve felt powerless, but I can do something most humans can’t.

Something most fae can’t do either, now that I think about it.

It’s my understanding that when Tristan infiltrated Prince Lucas’s wards and flashed into his quarters to protect me, he was performing an unusual feat that the prince would’ve never expected.

Anguished screams echo from the other side of the camp, and I tense and look in the direction of the sound. This time, it’s a woman’s screams. I wonder what happened to the man who was screaming earlier. What if he’s dead?

“It’s not right,” I blurt. “What your people are doing to mine.”

“My people only attack yours when we’re provoked. If one of our new fae settlements are attacked, we seek revenge. Blood for blood.”

“Blood for blood.” I shake my head. “That seems to be a favorite saying among your people. I must’ve heard it spoken a hundred times in the Sorsston castle. But what did that poor woman who’s screaming do? I doubt she personally attacked one of your precious fae settlements.”

“If we could figure out why wards are no longer effective on you, perhaps I could create a soundproof ward to keep you from hearing the screams.”

“It wouldn’t matter. It would still be happening.

The pain and the violations.” I sigh. “Yes, I was goading you earlier. You were right about that. I don’t want you to hurt me and treat me the way most war prizes or pleasure slaves are treated.

But I wish this wasn’t happening at all.

None of it.” I make a sweeping gesture at the camp.

“I wish there was a way for our people to make peace.”

“For as long as history has been recorded, sweet human, fae and humans and orcs have been fighting one another. But my people also fight amongst themselves, just as human kingdoms go to war against other human kingdoms, and it’s the same with the orcs.

You have a gentle heart to desire peace, Amelia, but I doubt it’ll ever happen.

As for me, I’m bound to protect my people, and I will never stop.

” He sighs and glances around the camp. “The regular faefolk who inhabit our new settlements possess little magic and they struggle to protect themselves from well-

trained human and orc soldiers.”

“I can’t fault you for protecting your people, Tristan,” I say, “and I suppose you’re right that realm-wide peace would never happen, but isn’t there something you could do about the way war prizes and slaves are treated in your camp?”

He gazes at me as though I’ve gone mad, and perhaps I have.

Fae are so different from humans. Most of them possess a sadistic side and take great delight in the pain and tears of humans.

They don’t value our lives and don’t view us as individuals.

How many humans has Tristan felled on the battlefield?

Hundreds if not thousands I would guess.

“Return to the tent, Amelia, and I will have a servant bring you the evening meal, just in case the snack you had earlier wasn’t substantial enough.

I must attend to some business,” he says a bit cryptically, “but I will join you as soon as possible. Yes, I am stationing guards outside the tent, and yes, they will be instructed to put you in restraints if you attempt to leave.” To his credit, when he mentions having me put in restraints, his dark eyes brim with regret.

I also sense that he hates the thought of the guards putting their hands on me.

He hates it so much that he worries he’ll lose control and kill them if they touch me.

“I will remain in the tent,” I say in an obedient tone. “I promise I won’t try to leave... tonight.” I add that last word because I can’t vow I’ll never try to escape. Maybe one

day the opportunity to leave will present itself.

“I’m glad to hear it.” He waits and watches until I’m back in the tent, then he calls for a servant to deliver our meals. He also orders Officers Zants and Vernn to stand guard outside the tent.

I close the flap and settle on the sofa. My mind won’t cease spinning. Not only can I bypass Tristan’s wards, but I can bypass wards set by all highborn fae. How shocking. How unexpected.

It’s even more surprising than my ability to discern Tristan’s thoughts and emotions.

My ears aren’t pointed, not even slightly, and neither are my teeth.

But is it still possible I have a small amount of fae blood?

Maybe an ancient ancestor of mine took a fae lover.

My heart sinks a second later, because it’s far more likely that if an ancestor of mine reproduced with a fae, whatever happened between them likely wasn’t consensual.

The woman’s screams suddenly fade, and I peer at the tent flap in question. Did Tristan make the fae soldier stop hurting his slave? Is that the business he had to take care of? Hope rises within me at the prospect.

Maybe sharing my feelings about how humans and orcs are treated in his war camp had an effect on my black-winged captor. Even if he’s doing it to garner my favor, I don’t care. All that matters is that the woman is no longer screaming, and I pray that means she’s no longer being tormented.

A servant enters the tent carrying a tray that holds two covered plates.

I give the male a polite smile as he sets the tray on the table, but he doesn't make eye contact with me.

He simply turns and vacates the tent, leaving me alone again.

I wish I knew his name. I've never heard Tristan call him by name, only an impersonal 'you there' or 'servant.'

Though I'm starving, I decide to wait for the general. It feels wrong to start eating alone, and the truth is, I've started to enjoy the evening meals we share.

At Lord Nevel's manor, I usually ate alone. I would arrive in the opulent dining room each night to find a singular place setting with no sign of my husband. If he wasn't passed out drunk somewhere, he was out riding the countryside with his soldiers.

Once, I tried to join the servants for dinner, but they'd appeared horrified by my arrival in their small dining room, and the bravest among them spoke up and pleaded with me to leave because they feared Lord Nevel would punish them for daring to dine with me.

So, yes, the evening meals with Tristan have served to quell some of my loneliness. But I doubt my sense of solitude will ever fully go away because of the glaring fact that there's no one I might turn to for help. No friends or family who might try to mount a rescue even if they knew my location.

Guilt blankets me. While I like the idea of someone trying to help me escape the general, I hate the thought of anyone getting hurt or dying in the process. It's a double bind, that's for sure.

Approaching footsteps catch my attention, and my anticipation to spend the evening with Tristan grows, even though we'll probably just eat dinner and then go to sleep.

Except, during our argument earlier, he'd mentioned we would finish the conversation later. My stomach does a little flip because I don't think we'll ever manage to resolve the issues that loom between us.

At last, I see a brilliant flash of light coming from outside the tent, and Tristan finally enters. He must've just vanished his wings.

He strides to the table and reaches out a hand. Uncertain what he's about, I place my hand in his. To my utter astonishment, he leans down and presses a firm, lingering kiss to the back of my hand. Heat promptly spasms in my nether area.

Oh gods, can he detect my sudden excitement?

I flush when he glances up. Our eyes meet. After a few seconds, he stands taller and releases my hand. He takes a seat across from me and lifts the lids off our plates.

"It's been a long, eventful day, sweet human. I don't want to fight with you." His voice resonates with honesty, and waves of warmth keep hitting me. Not physical waves of warmth, but waves of deep affection that seem to wrap around my heart.

"I don't want to fight either."

He smiles. "Good. Let's enjoy this meal, and let's enjoy one another's presence. We can talk later, perhaps before bed. Civilly."

I emit a playful scoff. "I was more civil than you were earlier. You threatened to have me restrained." I pick up my fork. "Perhaps we should do a little less talking and just eat for now."

"You are as wise as you are beautiful, sweet human."

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TRISTAN

After we finish the sumptuous meal of seared elk steaks, roasted vegetables, and frosted apple cake, Amelia feigns tiredness and expresses her wishes to go to bed.

Well, I'm not certain whether she's faking.

Perhaps she really is exhausted. Even though she sometimes changes behind the curtain that shields the bathing area, I step outside the tent and allow her to change in complete privacy.

When I re-enter the tent a few minutes later, I find her in bed with the covers pulled up to her chin.

Just a short while ago, I'd hoped that perhaps she would invite me to share the bed with her tonight. My heart plunges to the floor as I wonder if she'll ever permit me to hold her while she sleeps.

She turns on her side, showing me the back of her golden head. "Goodnight, Tristan."

I quickly remove my boots and uniform, then I don a tunic and a pair of regular pants, the sort of casual attire regular faefolk usually wear.

"I'm not going to sleep yet." I take a seat on the bed.

She gasps and turns to face me. Her knuckles go white as she takes a firm grip on the covers. "What are you doing?"

I hold out a hand in a peaceful gesture.

“I’m not going to hurt you, sweet human, please don’t fear me.

” Longing pulsates through me, a blend of the overpowering need to be close to her as well as the physical need to claim her.

I won’t claim her though, not unless she pleads for it.

I doubt that’ll happen tonight, but I would settle for nearness.

I would settle for holding her in my arms for a few minutes.

The worry fades from her eyes, and she pushes the covers down a bit and sits up against the pillows.

“Do you want to talk? Is that it? I confess that despite the long and very eventful day, I’m not that tired.

Perhaps that means I lied to you, a very small lie, but in my defense, I don’t see how we could ever reach an agreement.

I want freedom, and I’m starting to believe I’ll never convince you to release me. Perhaps I shouldn’t waste my breath.”

“You’re right, you’ll never convince me to release you,” I tell her since I’ve promised to give her honesty. “Amelia, I would very much like to hold you for a while.”

Her breath catches in her throat, and her face grows dark pink. It doesn’t take long for the scent of her excitement to heighten. I inhale deeply of the enticing, feminine aroma, though I make no mention of it. By now, she knows I can detect her arousal.

She knows there's no hiding it from me.

"You want to hold me?" she asks. "That's it? Just hold me?"

"I would like to do a great deal more than hold you, sweet human, I will admit to that, but I would ask the gods to strike me dead before I forced myself on you. I won't violate you, nor will I touch you in an intimate manner unless you invite it.

I would like to hold you and savor the feel of you in my arms." The embrace we shared after the orc attack resurfaces in my mind.

Gods, I want to experience that level of closeness again. With her.

She's quiet for so long that I start to fear she might not answer. The scent of her arousal remains heavy in the air, and I notice she shifts in bed slightly, perhaps in an effort to relieve the aching in her center.

"Very well." She inhales shakily and the flush covering her face spreads to her neck. "I-I think I would like it if you held me. I know I shouldn't like it or want it, but yes. My answer is yes."

Joy abounds within me. "Thank you for agreeing. Thank you for trusting me." I stand up just long enough to peel the covers back, then I join her in bed and sit up against the pillows. "If at any time you become uncomfortable, please let me know. I don't want you to be scared."

Her eyes glimmer with tears, but she blinks fast, and the sheen of emotion disappears.

And just as I sensed her sorrow earlier in the evening, I sense her gratitude right now.

I pray it's not my mind playing tricks on me.

It's another sign that she might be my fated mate, but I decide to maintain my silence on the subject for now.

I urge her to lean forward, and I wrap an arm around her and guide her to rest her head on my chest. She scoots closer, bringing her body flush against mine, and allows me to hold her. Her cheek rests on my chest, and her hair tickles the exposed flesh at the neckline of my tunic.

"How old are you?" she asks abruptly.

"Nine hundred and fifty-seven."

"Oh, goodness. That's quite the number. Compared to me, you've lived dozens of lifetimes." There's a long pause, then she says, "Tell me about your life in the Summer Court before you became a general."

I reach for her head and gently comb my fingers through her silken tresses.

I'm pleased when she not only permits the touch, but the aroma of her excitement heightens.

She emits a soft sigh that makes my cock thicken in my pants.

But she's not lying on my center, and the covers are pulled up to my waist and bunched in such a way that she likely won't notice the bulge.

I've chosen this particular position so I wouldn't frighten her with my inevitable hardness.

As I continue stroking her hair, I begin telling her about my life in the Summer Court.

“I lived in a countryside manor in the province of Herrnton. My parents were both highborn, and unfortunately, I barely remember them. They died during a landslide caused by a sudden storm, their bodies buried under so many rocks and debris that they were unable to escape and suffocated to death. A tragic end, though I take comfort in knowing they were found together, locked in an embrace. They were burned that way too on a funeral pyre. Together.”

“I’m so sorry, Tristan. Gods, how awful. How old were you?”

“Not quite two years old.”

“Oh, no. I really am sorry.” She glances up and gives me a comforting look that causes my heart to constrict.

“Thank you, sweet human, but I am fine.”

“What happened to you after they died?”

“At first, I was given to my Uncle Gress. But my uncle and a distant cousin of mine started fighting over control of Herrnton, since I wasn’t yet old enough to assume lordship of the province.

They both gathered armies and waged war until nothing was left of Herrnton, the forests scorched, the wheat fields razed, and all the faefolk long fled.

Uncle Gress decided he no longer had any interest in raising me, and I was given to the lord of the nearest province.

Lord Linnshire and his wife raised me as if I were their own blood, though sadly, Lady Linnshire died about a hundred years ago.

Their son, Lord Kaiden Valloc, became like a brother to me. ”

“Lord Kaiden Valloc. Hm.” She shifts in my arms. “That name sounds vaguely familiar.”

“After the Kingdom of Trevos was conquered about eighteen months ago, he was appointed as the warden. Warden Valloc. Perhaps you heard some of the soldiers in the Sorsston castle talking about him.”

“Yes, now that I think about it, I do recall hearing his name in the castle.” She snuggles deeper in my arms, and I maintain a leisurely pace of stroking her hair.

“How did Lady Linnshire die, if you don’t mind me asking?

I know fae usually live for thousands of years and only perish from grave injuries, so I’m a bit curious.

But if it’s painful to talk about, you needn’t tell me. ”

“She was killed by a malevolent creature called a greshhlin.” The dark memories of that day return, bringing sharp waves of heartache. Lady Linnshire was the only mother I ever really knew, and I’d loved her dearly, though I regret not telling her as often as I should have.

“A greshhlin? I’ve never heard of them.” She tenses. “Have greshhlins migrated to the forests in human and orc territories yet?”

“I’m pleased to tell you that the greshhlins are no more.

They’re all dead. Finally. But they plagued the Linnshire lands for hundreds of years and killed thousands of faefolk during that time.

As soon as I was strong enough to fight them, I was tasked with keeping them warded in caves, as they were exceptionally difficult to kill, though they frequently escaped and wreaked havoc on the countryside.

Lord Linnshire and his three brothers, as well as Lord Kaiden, helped as well.

It was never-ending, though eventually, it was Lord Kaiden's part-fae mate, Mira, that helped vanquish the greshhlins. ”

“How could Mira have helped kill such powerful creatures when she's only part-fae?”

“Her fae ancestry gave her the ability to influence plant growth at levels rarely seen even among full-blooded fae. Once the greshhlins were trapped in a ward, she caused the nearby plants to feed off the greshhlins, causing them to decompose into the soil and nourish the plants.”

“How extraordinary.” Her hand comes to my chest, and she swirls her fingers over the thin fabric of my tunic.

Her touch causes pleasure to ripple through me, and my cock hardens further in my pants. But I'm still in control of my urges. I won't force her. I couldn't fathom it. No matter how badly I want her, she'll always be safe when we're together.

“Yes, it was extraordinary,” I say. “I wasn't there, but Kaiden told me all about it.”

“How am I able to bypass your wards, Tristan, and the wards of other highborn fae, if I don't possess any fae ancestry myself?”

A slight growl of frustration emits from my throat.

I'm not frustrated with her, but I'm irritated because I have no fucking idea how Amelia is suddenly impervious to wards erected by highborn fae.

"I don't know, sweet human," I finally say, as I continue to consider the situation.

"Hm. Have you or any of your family members, perhaps a grandmother, dabbled in witchcraft?"

"Not to my knowledge. I highly doubt it."

"Perhaps the next time we're near a temple, I'll take you to visit a high priestess. If anyone will know the reason behind your powers, it'll be a high priestess."

She lifts her head off my chest and gives me a wary look. "A fae temple? I-I don't think that's a good idea. Please don't take me to see a priestess."

I caress a hand down her back. "Why are you afraid of visiting a fae temple?"

"Because of the human sacrifices," she whispers.

"The human sacrifices?" I ask.

"Well, I've heard that fae priestesses like to roam the forests looking for unsuspecting humans to capture and use for ritual sacrifices meant to appease the gods."

I bite back a smile. "Amelia, I'm pleased to tell you that fae priestesses don't capture humans, nor do they use humans or any other creature in ritual sacrifices.

Well, not since the old days. During the time of the Seelie and Unseelie courts, I believe the Unseelie priestesses engaged in such dark practices, but I can assure you that it doesn't happen today.

But my people like to stoke rumors about our mercilessness, and we know some of those rumors get turned into stories that are passed down through the generations.

But just like the stories about fae being unable to lie, this story isn't true either. ”

Her gaze brims with relief. “Well, I’m glad to hear it. When I was a child, I used to have nightmares about being kidnapped by a fae priestess.”

“Ah, but it was really the fae generals you needed to worry about.” I waggle my eyebrows at her, and to my great delight, a smile tugs at her lips.

“Yes,” she says with a hint of laughter, “I should’ve been more worried about fae generals.”

She’s still staring at me, and her face is close to mine. So close that if I leaned forward a smidge, I could press my lips to hers. When I notice her glance at my mouth, I expect she’s thinking the same thing.

My suspicions become stronger when the scent of her arousal hits me, a sweet, pungent wave of excitement. My mouth waters.

Gods, I want to taste her. I want to kiss her too.

I want to do all manner of things that would likely scandalize her.

Not for the first time, I imagine she’s naked and bent over the bed with her legs spread wide.

I picture myself approaching her, rubbing my hard appendage as I prepare to mount her from behind.

A tiny gasp escapes her, and her eyes go wide. But surely she has no idea what I'm thinking. What I'm fantasizing about. Among my people, some mated couples are able to read each other's thoughts, but more often the mating bond manifests to only allow them to speak to one another mind-to-mind.

I remind myself that even if Amelia is my fated mate, I haven't claimed her physically yet, so there's no way, to my knowledge, that the mating bond could've started to manifest. She probably just gasped because the ache between her thighs became too intense.

"I'm fully aware of how aroused you are right now, sweet human. As a highborn fae, I possess a keen sense of smell." I use a compassionate tone, not wanting her to experience any embarrassment over something she can't help.

She flushes. "You said you just planned to hold me. Not offer commentary about my possible excitement."

"I imagine you'll have difficulty sleeping tonight unless you take care of matters."

"Take care of matters?"

"By pleasuring yourself, Amelia. By stroking yourself to a blissful climax."

AMELIA

Self-pleasure. Oh, gods, Tristan is referring to self-pleasure.

I know the basics, but I've never actually done it.

In the castle, I didn't have any privacy, as I always had at least five roommates. And after that, Lord Nevel's household wasn't exactly conducive to feelings of lustful exploration.

As I hold Tristan's gaze, breathless anticipation sweeps through me, and my core clenches tighter, pulsating so fast and deep that I fear I might lose my senses.

Yes, I can imagine having trouble sleeping if I don't experience a so-called 'blissful climax.' If I lie down and try to sleep, I will likely toss and turn all night.

But surely I can't engage in self-pleasure in General Dalgaard's tent. Whether or not he's present while I'm rubbing myself. It would be the height of madness.

What if he takes it as an invitation to claim me?

The image of him mounting me from behind enters my consciousness, a detailed fantasy he's conjured more than once.

"We'll be sharing this tent indefinitely, Amelia, and at some point, you won't be able to hold out any longer.

If you want to touch yourself right now, it's okay.

I can stay here with you, or I can step outside and give you some space.

" His tone is deep and seductive, yet I don't sense he's trying to take advantage of me.

The predominant emotion that's rolling off him is one of concern.

He truly thinks I'll be miserable all night if I don't enjoy a release.

Gods, he's probably correct. The aching in my core keeps getting stronger.

Is it wrong that I want to touch myself right now?

Is it wrong that I want him to stay in the tent?

My body feels aflame with desire, and I can't remain still any longer. I press my thighs tightly together as I squirm in place.

I've never even shared a kiss with Tristan, yet I'm considering asking him to remain in the tent while I stroke myself. Or try to stroke myself. What if I can't do it right? My face heats with the knowledge of my inexperience.

Technically, I'm a married woman. Not that the union was consummated. But Tristan doesn't know that. He probably thinks Lord Nevel took me to bed. He probably thinks I know enough about lovemaking—ugh, I'll admit that's a poor word choice—to bring myself to a release.

"Are you all right, sweet human?" His deep voice vibrates through me. "Would you like me to step outside?"

“I-I have never... never before...” My voice trails off and I try to push away the shame I’m feeling.

“You’ve never?” he prompts, his tone so gentle it makes me want to latch onto him and never let go.

“I’ve never touched myself before.” I draw in a huge breath as a pleasurable shudder courses through me.

His nostrils flare and a low growl rumbles from his chest. His gaze becomes more heated, and I know if I were to reach for his cock, I would find it fully erect.

Of course, I would have to toss back the covers and unfasten his pants first. Heated desire pummels me at the thought.

Oh gods, my face must be a vibrant shade of red.

“You’ve truly never touched your pussy before, Amelia? You’ve never stroked your clit?” His gaze still brims with desire and curiosity.

I shake my head. “No. I-I haven’t.”

The look of curiosity he’s wearing deepens, and I sense he’s hesitant to ask his next question.

He doesn’t want to make me think of Lord Nevel, nor does he want to shame me for any pre-marital intimate encounters I might’ve enjoyed with another male, but he wants to get a better sense of my carnal knowledge.

“Have you ever experienced a climax, sweet human?” he finally asks.

“No, I haven’t.” A whimper escapes me when the aching in my core mounts, and I’m on the verge of begging him to help me. Begging him to teach me. Maybe it’s messed up—he is, after all, my captor—but I feel entirely safe with him.

The faelights in the tent dim slightly, and though I didn’t see him move a hand or even lift a finger, I know he just used his summer magic.

The air is buzzing with it. Fragrant summer and spring scents keep reaching me, and the sound of nighttime insects becomes louder.

The intermittent flashes of fireflies glow from outside the tent, and I suspect Tristan summoned the tiny creatures closer.

He reaches for my head and slowly, sensually, combs his fingers through my hair. Then he cups the side of my face. A short while ago, I was flinching from his touch, but now I lean into his palm with a contented sigh.

I peer into his eyes, waiting for him to ask the next question that rests on the tip of his tongue. I know the exact question he’s about to ask, and I’ve already decided on the answer I’ll give him.

Anticipation skitters through me, causing the heat panging in my core to increase until I feel feverish and so unsettled that I almost reach beneath my nightdress to rub myself.

The faelights reflect in his eyes, and as he sits up higher, his long dark hair shifts forward over his shoulders. I know he’s not a fae royal, but I think his features are as regal as they come. He’s a magnificent specimen of masculine beauty. Everything about him draws me in.

“Amelia, would you like me to stay and offer you some guidance? I could instruct

you on how to best pleasure yourself, and I could help you bring yourself to a climax.” He draws in a long breath and doesn’t exhale immediately, and I know he’s waiting for my answer.

He’s hopeful I’ll say yes, but he’s already promised himself he’ll be understanding and patient if I refuse his offer.

My heart swells with warmth, and not for the first time, I cannot reconcile how brutal he is on the battlefield compared to his gentleness toward me.

“Yes,” I force out. My mouth has gone dry, and it’s a struggle to say a single word, but I finally manage.

“Yes, please stay. Please... offer me guidance.”

His dark eyes glimmer. “It would be my honor.”

A long silence stretches between us. We hold one another’s gaze, and it’s like the entire realm has faded from existence. It’s just us here in this tent, and all the troubles we’re both facing don’t seem to matter at this moment.

At last, he breaks the silence. “Get atop the covers, then lean against me, with your back to me.”

My face heats as I comply with his wishes. I stand up briefly and allow him to rearrange the covers atop himself, then he spreads his legs and gestures for me to take a seat between them.

Oh, gods, we’re going to be so close.

If I scoot back far enough, my bottom will press against his hardness.

I remind myself that he's fully dressed and there will be a thick cover between us. Also, he's an honorable male. At least when it comes to me. He won't hurt me. He won't try to take advantage.

Frantic need sweeps through me, and another whimper leaves my throat. I draw in a shaky breath and climb on the bed. With his help, I take position between his spread legs, and I lean back against his chest.

Just as expected, and secretly hoped, the telltale hardness of his male appendage pokes at me, though rather than nudging at my bottom, it pushes against my lower back. My pulse races and my palms break into a sweat.

Pressure coils in my center, and a moan builds in my throat, though I somehow manage to keep quiet. The idea of becoming so wanton that I can't control the noises I'm making leaves me flushed with embarrassment. But I don't want to stop.

Even if I lose control, I want to keep going.

I want to see this experience through to the very end.

I'm aware that my nightdress is rather sheer, and Tristan can probably see the outlines of my nipples, but it can't be helped.

Speaking of my nipples, why are they so hard, and why do my breasts feel heavy?

I yearn for him to touch me there, to cup my bosom and knead the peaked mounds, but I would never dare make such a wanton request.

"Is this a good position?" I ask.

"Yes, sweet human. This is perfect." He leans close, and his cheek brushes mine. His

hair also tickles my face, and his fragrant summer scent washes over me. Pleasurable sensations prickle along my flesh everywhere he touches, and my breath keeps catching in my throat.

He settles his arms on either side of him, and I sense his reluctance to become overly involved in my self-pleasure.

He doesn't want to scare me by touching me too familiarly.

Too intimately. Gods, is it wrong that I want him to?

Is it wrong that I want it to be his fingers that are stroking me to a blissful climax?

"Are you wearing any undergarments beneath the nightdress, Amelia?" His warm breath dances along my earlobe, inciting goosebumps and causing my nipples to harden further.

"No, I'm not wearing anything beneath the nightdress." I'm trembling with need, and even his body heat and summer warmth can't calm the constant tremors. I don't feel cold, however, not really, even though I can see the goosebumps rising on my arms.

"Well, that will certainly make things easier." More warmth dances along my earlobe, and I can't help but lean my face closer to his. His stubble brushes along my cheek. "Hike your nightdress up a bit and reach your hand underneath to touch your pussy."

"O-okay." I draw the fabric of my nightdress higher, until it rests midthigh, then I slowly reach for my pussy. But as I aim for my nether area, the nightdress hikes up even higher, revealing more of my thigh than I intended.

Tristan's cock lurches against my back, and I whimper as I wonder just how large he

is. I suppose, being a highborn fae—and a huge one at that—he's probably quite well-endowed.

At the Sorsston castle, I saw more naked fae males than I would've liked walking around in the midst of their nightly revelries, and even the regular soldiers had intimidatingly massive appendages.

I push away thoughts of the Sorsston castle and those dark days, and I return my focus to the present, to Tristan and the intimate experience we're about to share.

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“Very good,” he says in a praising tone. “Now drag a digit between your nether lips and feel just how wet you are. Do it slowly, up and down a few times.”

“Okay.” I start to draw one finger through my folds, up and down just as he instructed. Whenever I reach the top, I touch a pulsating part of me that’s extra sensitive, and I gasp and my hips lurch in response. I pause with my finger pressed hard on this location and savor the sensations.

“There it is. I believe you’ve found your clit, sweet human.” His voice still holds a note of praise, and he briefly caresses my arm, which causes my finger to resume moving up and down through my slit.

The moan that’s been building in my throat finally releases, and my face grows hotter. I commence gyrating my center against my stroking digit, eager for the times I brush over my clit.

“Good, good little female. Keep going just like that. It’s important for you to keep spreading your moisture over your clit. Later, I’m going to instruct you to circle your clit and apply a bit of pressure, but for now, I just want you to keep getting it nice and slick.”

His words cause fresh spasms of heat in my center, and I feel as though I’m burning up. Perspiration trickles down my temple, and I suddenly wish I could tear the nightdress off.

As I continue rubbing myself, taking care to spread moisture over my pulsing clit with each upward stroke, Tristan occasionally runs a hand through my hair or touches

my arm to better help guide my movements.

The scent of what I think is my arousal finally reaches me, and I gasp because it's a sweet, pungent aroma.

As though reading my mind, Tristan rubs his stubbled cheek against mine and says, "You smell delicious to me, Amelia. I pray to the gods that one day, you'll agree to let me taste your sweetness, you'll agree to let me feast on your slick, aching pussy."

A series of whimpers emanate from me, followed by another deep moan. At some point, I added a second finger as I stroked without realizing it.

My fingers glide through my folds with ease because I'm so thoroughly wet. So thoroughly aroused.

"All right, sweet human, I want you to listen to me very carefully." This time when he speaks, his lips brush my ear, and I shiver as the heated pulses between my thighs come faster.

"Dip your finger into your slick core, the very part of you that would accept a cock. Push inside just a little, gather as much moisture as you can, then drag it over your clit."

I struggle to take in air as I follow his guidance.

I close my eyes and reach lower, until I find the part of me that's meant to accept a cock.

I push two fingers inside, perhaps going as deep as my knuckles, and gasp at the delicious sensation of being filled up, even partially.

My back arches and my hips undulate, and Tristan's enormous bulge presses into me from behind.

I keep my fingers submerged for a bit as I imagine it's his cock nudging between my thighs, and he's preparing to impale me. He's preparing to claim me and fill me with his seed.

"Oh!" I call out, overwhelmed by the pleasure wrought from my fantasy about the huge fae male who's holding me captive. The huge fae male who will never let me go.

"Naughty female. You aren't quite obeying my instructions." The scolding yet playful voice he's using only causes my excitement to mount higher.

My clit pulsates faster even though I'm not touching it, and my core clenches around my partly submerged fingers. I keep whimpering and moaning, and I can't quite pinpoint the moment I lost all control of my responses.

"I-I'm sorry," I blurt. "It's just that this feels so wondrous.

" I still haven't removed my digits from my core.

I can't admit that I've never had anything inside me before.

I can't reveal that, despite being married, I'm still an innocent.

Maybe I'll tell Tristan later, but not now, not when I'm so close to experiencing the bliss he promised.

I'm certain that when I remove my fingers from my core and stroke my clit, I'll shatter within moments.

“Very well, sweet human, I suppose I can tolerate a moderate amount of disobedience from you. Just this once.” The amusement in his voice warms me from the inside out, and I relish his closeness as he places a hand on my arm again.

“Since this apparently feels so good to you, perhaps you might try thrusting your fingers—yes, I suspect you’re using more than one right now—into your core.

Go ahead. Start thrusting, and feel free to move your hips as you do it. ”

As my eyes remain shut, I withdraw my digits partially, then push back into my core. I do it again and again.

Oh, gods. Oh, yes.

The friction of the in-and-out movement steals my breath, and my center gyrates of its own accord. My nightdress shifts higher on my thighs, but I’m so lost in the pleasure that I don’t bother checking to make sure it’s still covering my nudity.

“How does that feel, Amelia?” His deep voice rumbles in my ear, delighting my senses and reminding me just how aroused he is. Throughout this entire experience, I’ve been aware of his excitement, and I know just how badly his cock is throbbing.

“It feels so good.” I whimper and revel in the feel of his hardness pressing into my lower back. Would it be wrong to suggest he seek his own pleasure after I find mine? Would it be appropriate if I watched?

“Keep thrusting your fingers into your pussy for as long as you desire, sweet human.” He keeps his hand on my arm, though his touch is light.

He’s allowing me to set my own pace. “But when you’re ready to enjoy a climax, all you need to do is circle your clit with precise motions while applying a modest

amount of pressure. ”

“All right. Thank you.” My eyes finally flutter open, and I move my head to the side and look at him.

Our gazes collide and something profound passes between us.

His dark eyes are glowing with lust, and his erection feels larger than ever pressing against my back. But in addition to the erotism of the moment, there’s also a vast amount of affection.

Affection that’s passing between us like an unbreakable chain.

Like a tether between our souls.

A kiss. At this moment, more than anything, I want him to kiss me.

He starts to lean closer, and I close my eyes in anticipation of his lips pressing against mine. But it doesn’t quite happen the way I want. Instead, he places a soft, lingering kiss to my cheek.

My heartbeat quickens, and with the next thrust in my core, I drive my fingers as deep as I can manage, continuing until a pinch of pain forces me to stop.

I open my eyes and hold his stare. He cups my face and caresses his thumb along my cheek.

As I continue plunging my fingers in my core, building to a faster rhythm of thrusts as my hips keep undulating, the movement causes me to push back on his appendage.

His eyes momentarily go back in his head, and a lusty growl reverberates from his

chest.

He tears his gaze from mine and peers at my center where my fingers are working furiously in and out of my core. Then I see it. I see myself from his view, a vision that flashes in my mind in perfect detail.

My nightdress has shifted so high that my pussy is on full display, and my legs are slightly parted to reveal the slickness that's gleaming on my inner thighs.

Only a slight amount of golden hair covers my nether area, and I can see just how pink and slick I've become during the guided session of self-pleasure.

I gasp and look down, needing to see for myself.

"Oh!" I withdraw my digits from my core, ready to pull my nightdress back in place, when I notice how intensely my fingers are glistening. I pause mid-movement as I stare at the sight. I knew I was wet, but I didn't realize just how soaking wet I was becoming.

Tristan's deep, sudden growl echoes in the tent.

"Gods, Amelia, you have the most stunning little pussy. Look how wet you've gotten. Look at how slick and pink you are. And look right there," he says with a gesture toward my spread center. "Right there at the top, that engorged button is your clit."

I whimper with need, and for some reason, I don't cover myself.

Though I'm embarrassed, and though I know it's not proper for me to show my naked body to a male who's not my husband, or mate, being exposed in front of Tristan adds to my excitement.

My pussy throbs and throbs, and I find myself thinking that maybe, just maybe, I should resume caressing myself while the huge fae general watches.

“Go ahead, sweet human. Touch yourself again.”

TRISTAN

I can't tear my gaze from Amelia's spread center. Her mound is swollen and slick, and her clit is poking out from between her folds as though it's begging to be sucked. I growl as I imagine taking that engorged nubbin into my mouth.

She sucks in a shaky breath and reaches for her pussy once again.

"That's it, sweet human. Resume pleasuring yourself."

This time, she aims for her clit. She presses down on the button and a groan catches in her throat. She thrashes a bit in my arms, and I tighten my hold on her, reaching down to place a hand on each of her thighs, keeping her spread wide as she circles her clit.

Gods, is this really happening?

Truth be told, I didn't anticipate the events that would be set into motion just by my request to hold Amelia. I'd expected to snuggle her for a few minutes before retiring to the floor for my slumber. But I never expected how excited she would become as I embraced her and caressed her hair.

She whimpers as her hips shoot upward, and when she comes down, her lower back impacts on my agonizingly hard cock.

My growls join her whimpers and moans, and the friction of her body constantly rubbing against my rigid length makes me ravenous to claim her.

Ravenous to bend her over the bed and plunge deep in her chasm, ravenous to take her from behind and pound her hard.

“That’s it, sweet human. You’re doing such a good job of rubbing your clit. Just as I knew you would.” I infuse my voice with praise.

She cries out and strokes herself faster, and her movements become frantic and shaky. The aroma of her slickness fills my nostrils. Fuck, yes. She’s climaxing. She’s experiencing her first release as I hold her close and offer guidance.

I continue whispering words of praise and encouragement in her ear as she rides the waves of the orgasm. Her face twists with pleasure, her cheeks are flushed, and her hair is in complete disarray. Gods, she’s so beautiful. And she’s mine. All mine.

My war prize, and possibly, my fated mate.

I push aside the guilt that follows for not having told her of my suspicions yet. Later. Soon.

But we’ll be arriving in Sorsston tomorrow, and I’ll be busy sorting out the mess at the castle for a while. I resolve that as soon as I figure out how the warden and over twenty fae soldiers were killed, I will take the time to explain everything to Amelia.

I don’t want to tell her tonight, and likely shock her with the revelation, only to not be able to spend much time with her in the coming days.

Once I tell her, it’s my hope that she’ll agree to let me claim her.

It’s my hope that she’ll be just as curious as I am regarding our potential bond, and she’ll want to see if a true mating bond forms between us after we join our bodies as one.

I remove my hands from her thighs and lean deeper into the pillows. She ceases moving, and her hand falls away from her center. She remains in my arms, panting breathlessly, and I'm stunned when I receive a wave of her emotions.

She's satisfied beyond measure, as well as surprised by how pleasurable the experience was. She's also grateful to me for teaching her how to properly touch herself.

My cock surges when I sense her next thought.

She's curious about my state of excitement. She enjoys the feel of my hardness against her lower back, and she wonders if I might seek my pleasure next. She wonders if perhaps she can watch me stroke myself to a release.

Gods. My blood becomes so heated that I instantly break into a sweat, and I push away the summer warmth and invite a cool spring breeze, a feat of which most Summer Court fae aren't capable.

"Mm. That feels nice." Amelia sighs and starts to close her eyes, but a second later, she jolts and scrambles to push her nightdress down, covering her nudity.

I sense her conflicting emotions, but I take heart in the knowledge that she's not only attracted to me, but she feels safe with me. She only wishes I wasn't keeping her as a war prize. She wishes we'd met under different circumstances.

I caress her arm and place another kiss on her cheek. I would love to press my lips to hers and kiss her soundly, but I'm still of a mind to earn her trust. I worry if we move too fast, that might never happen.

"Are you all right, Amelia?" I ask softly.

By now, her breathing has calmed, and she remains languid in my arms. I can easily sense her fatigue, and I will happily hold her like this all night if she wants.

“Yes, Tristan,” she eventually says. “I’m all right. A bit shocked, I suppose, and maybe a little embarrassed. I can’t believe we...we...” Her voice trails off, but I know what she meant to say.

“You can’t believe we just did this?”

“Yes. I hope you don’t think I’m a lustful, unchaste woman. I try to be a decent person and appease the gods, but with you, it would seem I couldn’t control my urges.”

“The gods don’t expect you to be chaste, sweet human.

Anyone who told you that just wanted to keep you innocent for their own purposes.

Among the fae, it’s rare for both parties to be inexperienced when they enter a mating union.

Until we meet our fated mates, we fornicate to our hearts’ content, and the gods don’t punish us for it.”

“Fornicate to our hearts’ content.” She chuckles. “You have a way with words, Tristan.” She grows quiet, though I sense her continued thoughts regarding my own state of arousal. My cock remains hard as ever.

Gods, am I a dolt for wanting to take things slow? I have a feeling that if I pushed, just a little, I could have her on her knees in seconds sucking my cock. While the idea of her lips around my length is a pleasing one, I don’t want her to regret anything in the morning.

Which is why I must force myself from this bed and sleep on the godsdamn rug-covered floor of the tent.

“Perhaps you should go wash up a little before you sleep, sweet human.” I gesture to the bathing area, which contains a spelled, self-cleaning tub filled with steaming water, as well as several self-cleaning basins for quick washing.

The area also holds a toilet, and the floor-length curtain can be pulled across for privacy’s sake.

She scoots forward on the bed, out from between my legs, and turns to look at me. Her face holds a deep blush. “Yes, that’s a good idea. I’ll go do that and then?—”

“And then we will go to bed,” I say, cutting her off before she can suggest more carnal activities. Like seeing to my pleasure.

Her face starts to fall, but she’s quick to recover with a forced smile. I know it’s forced because, fucking gods, I’m getting better at sensing her emotions and thoughts with every passing minute.

“Yes, then we will go to bed.” She covers a sudden yawn that’s not false in the slightest, and hurries to the bathing area. She pulls the curtain.

I gather a blanket and a pillow from a chest, then arrange yet another makeshift bed on the floor of my own tent.

But Amelia is worth it. If taking things slow so I might better earn her trust will endear me to her more, then that’s what I’ll do.

I’ll sleep on the floor for a fucking year if I must, though I sincerely hope we start sharing a bed long before that much time passes.

I hear splashing water, and after a short while, she emerges from behind the curtain, looking refreshed and more confident than she had moments ago when she'd been on the verge of shyly suggesting I take a turn pleasuring myself.

Perhaps while she was in the bathing area, she gathered her thoughts and saw the wisdom of waiting.

She casts a mournful glance at my makeshift bed. I've already gotten part way under the covers, and my head rests on the pillow. I offer her what I pray is a reassuring smile.

“Goodnight, Amelia.”

She hops on the bed and gives me an affectionate look. A grin tugs at her lips, the hint of a sweet smile. “Goodnight, Tristan.”

I wave a hand and the faelights dim.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:39 am

AMELIA

Seated in my opulent floating carriage, a sense of dread fills me when the tall stone walls of Sorsston come into sight, as well as the castle towers.

Tristan has mentioned nothing about the possibility of me visiting my family members, but in all fairness, I haven't asked if I could see them. The truth is, I'm not sure I want to.

Guilt hits me. I should want to visit Mama as well as my sisters, but the situation is so complicated I doubt the visits would be happy ones. The letters have likely reached them by now, so at least they know I'm alive and safe.

That's the gist of what I told them in the five letters I wrote, one to my mother and one to each of my sisters.

I told them I'd left Lord Nevel because he was a violent man who was treating me with great cruelty, and I told them I was somewhere far away, safe and sound. I told them I probably wouldn't see them again but begged them not to worry.

My guilt deepens. Despite my best efforts, they are all likely worried about me. Not that I can blame them. If the situation were reversed, I would be worried sick about whichever one of them had fled Sorsston after suffering an abusive marriage.

As the city grows closer, my unease increases. I try to convince myself it's nothing, but it doesn't work. I try to tell myself that I'm only upset because I'm in close proximity to the family I can't visit, as well as my friends who are still working in the

castle.

I used to dream about leaving Sorsston, even as a child. I used to wish I could travel across the realm, going from city to city as I sold charcoal drawings, likenesses of people I would draw on the spot in a bustling marketplace.

I withdraw the leather casing from my bag that contains the only drawings I have left, the ones I hid from my father and somehow managed to smuggle with me on the fateful day he brought me to the castle.

I sort through the pictures, images of my mother and sisters, as well as our old dog, Miss Peaches, and a cranky cat that used to linger on our porch that I'd lovingly named Prince Whiskers.

My heart aches as I stare at the images.

It's been ages since I've drawn anything. I never managed to get my hands on a charcoal pencil while I was working in the castle. Later, after my marriage, I'd asked Lord Nevel to buy me one. He'd erupted in a fury and said he would buy me a 'stupid fucking pencil' the second I birthed him a son.

Given that it's been years since I've drawn anything, I'm not even sure the skill remains, though my fingers itch to try.

I glance out the window at Tristan, and as though he senses me staring, he looks my way and offers me a warm smile and a wave.

I return his smile and wave back, and I can't help but notice the strange glances that pass between his soldiers.

I suspect they're starting to realize the way he treats me is rather unusual by fae

standards.

If I asked Tristan for a charcoal pencil, I'm certain that he would not only procure one for me, but he would probably buy me a dozen if not a hundred. He seems so eager to please me. A glance around the luxurious carriage is proof enough of that.

As I peer at the replenishable candy tray, I begin to wonder if he included it because of the advice I'd given Prince Lucas regarding how to make Yvette fall in love with him.

According to Tristan, I'd told the prince that one way he might encourage Yvette's affections was to surprise her with thoughtful presents, like a bracelet with beads the color of her eyes, or a box of candies from her favorite shop.

The carriage comes to a stop, and the soldiers immediately get to work erecting tents in neat lines right outside the walls of Sorsston. I swallow hard as I glance at the castle towers.

Have any of my fellow servants perished or disappeared during my absence? My spirits darken at the thought, and all the horrifying acts of violence I witnessed in the castle come rushing back.

I glance at Tristan again, but he doesn't meet my gaze this time. He's busy giving his soldiers orders. A group of fae males surrounds him, along with a few females, some with their wings out, likely the highborn fae who'd patrolled the skies during our journey south.

My stomach flips when I consider where we might be sleeping tonight.

Will we sleep in Tristan's huge tent? Or will we sleep in the castle?

During the early days of the fae occupation, most of the highborn fae took rooms in the castle.

My throat burns when I consider reuniting with my fellow servants, though I doubt Tristan would permit me to spend any time with them.

He'll want to keep me sequestered, and protected, in whatever room we'll be sleeping inside.

To my great relief, a few seconds later, I spot Tristan's servants erecting his tent near the carriage. Thank the gods. Surely if they're going to the trouble of setting up the massive tent, that means we'll be sleeping there.

Maybe it makes me a coward, but I'm averse to staying in the castle and possibly encountering my fellow servants because I want to remain in ignorance about who's still alive and who's not. My eyes sting, and I blink fast. I just don't want to know.

I consider Tristan's strange behavior last night, when he'd suddenly excused himself from the tent just before dinner. Not long after his departure, the screams of the human woman stopped, and for the remainder of the night, I didn't hear any other screams.

Did he order his soldiers to stop hurting their war prizes and pleasure slaves?

Maybe... maybe I shouldn't allow myself to remain in ignorance about the status of the castle servants.

Maybe I should do whatever I can to improve their treatment.

I decide I'll ask Tristan about it as soon as the opportunity presents itself.

Given how eager he is to please me, maybe he'll do what he can to ease the lives of my former workmates.

I watch as the castrated, glamoured slaves carry furniture and other items into Tristan's tent.

Every night, it's arranged the same way, and though it's an astounding realization, his tent has started to feel welcoming.

Almost like a home. It's the one place no one has ever hurt me.

It's quickly become my refuge, just as Tristan has.

The huge fae general who's beginning to hold my affection approaches the carriage. My pulse races as I wonder if it's too late to push him away, too late to guard my heart.

Sometimes it feels like falling for him is inevitable, which is a scary thought because how could we ever share a happy ending? Among his people, I have no rights, no freedoms. Only anguish awaits at the conclusion of our time together.

Despite my dark musings, I can't help but smile when Tristan opens the door and gives me a tender look. I sense his happiness to be near me after a long day of travel.

He takes my hand and assists me in stepping out of the carriage. "Come, sweet human, and I will help you get settled in the tent. Then I'm afraid I must leave you alone for dinner. Unfortunately, I must attend to some matters within the walls of Sorsston, and I'm afraid I might be gone all night."

"Gone all night?" I think about the fact that I can bypass his wards so easily, as well as the wards created by other highborn fae.

If I ever had a chance of escaping him, it would be here in Sorsston.

Rather than heading north into the mountains, this time I could head south toward the ocean I've never seen.

Maybe I could buy passage on a merchant vessel that's headed for some faraway isle, a place Tristan might never think to look.

As he guides me into the tent, he tenses, and I sense a sudden change in his mood. I dare a glance his way to find him glaring at me, as though he somehow knows the turn my thoughts just took. Worry ripples through me at the prospect.

"Yes, gone all night," he finally replies in a terse tone.

He grasps my upper arms and gazes down at me, and there's not much kindness in his eyes.

"There will be guards stationed all around the tent, over a dozen of them, Amelia, so don't go getting any ideas about escape.

How many times must I tell you that you're mine?

" His fingers start to tighten on my arms, but then he releases me and takes a step back, and I sense his guilt over grabbing me and speaking so harshly.

Then I sense something else—his recognition of my thoughts.

He's furious that I was just thinking about running away. Not just furious, but hurt. He's also stunned that I would consider hopping a merchant vessel and sailing away from the continent.

Oh, Gods. He knows my thoughts.

He knows.

I gulp hard and wonder if he already realizes I'm able to sense his thoughts and feelings. I also wonder how long he's had the ability to decipher mine. Not long, I hope.

I blink back tears. "All right. I won't try to escape." I don't bother adding 'tonight' or anything specific to my promise, because what does it matter? Why should it matter if I ever break a promise to him?

"Try to get some rest, sweet human." His voice is far gentler than it was moments ago, and I sense his reluctance to leave. I sense his frustration that duty is calling him to the... castle .

The castle! My anxieties about my former workmates increase. I try to penetrate his mind further and discover what I might about the trouble in Sorsston, but it doesn't work.

I suppose I'm only able to learn his thoughts when he's actively having them. I can't sift through his memories looking for anything specific. What a shame. It would be helpful now and then.

"I'll see you when you return." I try but fail to force a smile. I'm too worried about the servants in the castle, and I'm too unsettled by the realization that he can sometimes sense my thoughts.

He casts a look around the tent, meets my eyes one last time, then steps outside, leaving me alone.

TRISTAN

As I navigate the corridors of the castle, I contemplate the true cause of Warden Xall and the soldiers' deaths.

A fae herbalist found no evidence of poison, and thus far, the servants are remaining silent.

Before my arrival in Sorsston just a few hours ago, torture wasn't working to free their tongues, and I haven't ordered them to endure any further agony under questioning yet.

Instead, I recently ordered all the guards, soldiers, and highborn fae out of the dungeon.

If it weren't for Amelia, would I have personally tortured every servant from the castle upon my arrival in Sorsston?

Gods, I probably would have.

Months ago, before I'd stared into her eyes in the banquet hall of the Sorsston castle, I likely would've committed the most violent acts against the servants as I questioned them. But at present, I can't fathom it.

If the pretty little human learned I tormented people she once considered friends, I doubt she would ever forgive me.

I growl as I descend the steps to the dungeon. The servants are being held in several cramped cells, though they're being given plenty of food and water.

I summon an invisibility cloak before I reach the bottom of the steps, then I silently flash into the area where the cells are located.

I lean against the damp stone wall and watch the servants, most of whom are seated on the floor.

Some are huddled under thin, threadbare blankets.

This far beneath the castle, there are no windows, but the faelights that were placed along the walls cover them in an orange glow, making the cells well-lit.

There's nowhere the prisoners might hide, no shadows in which they can cower.

Most of the servants are sitting quietly or trying to sleep, but a few are engaged in conversation. As I continue leaning against the wall, I listen in. It's a tactic that I hope will reveal the truth about what happened to Warden Xall and the soldiers. Eventually.

Much to my dismay, when I arrived in Sorsston, I learned none of the highborn fae I sent ahead had thought to spy on the prisoners and eavesdrop on their conversations.

It's a mistake I doubt any of my commanders will make again, particularly since I threatened to tell King Haratt of their failures.

No one wants to find themselves on the bad side of the Summer Court king, and as a result, I suspect my commanders' performance will improve significantly in the coming months.

To my surprise, the servants keep asking one another why they're all imprisoned.

Some speculate that Warden Xall and the soldiers aren't really dead, and they believe my people are just having fun with them 'in the dark, perverse way fae like to have fun.' Eventually, they'll be released and go back to serving the fae in the castle.

Still, others insist they're being held captive because my people are planning to serve their hearts on platters soon.

Ah, that millennia old rumor that fae like to eat human hearts. Mentions of it usually make me laugh, but I can't find much humor in it now.

I stand against the wall and listen to the servants for hours, but their conversations give me nothing to go on.

I'm starting to believe there's another force at work here.

What happened to the servants that always causes them to freeze up and fall silent whenever they're glamoured and questioned about the fae deaths that occurred in the castle?

It doesn't make sense, but I'm determined to get to the bottom of it, and I'm determined to make the responsible party pay tenfold. No one kills a fae warden and nearly two dozen fae soldiers and gets away with it.

Justice will be served. Eventually.

Once I find the fucking culprit.

A dark thought strikes me. What if another highborn fae is behind the attack on Warden Xall and the soldiers?

It's possible a highborn fae glamour'd the servants not to speak about what happened, though the hypothetical highborn fae would have to possess powers greater than mine, as even my truth glammers haven't worked on the servants.

I search my mind for a reason someone, particularly a highborn fae, might want Warden Xall dead.

A reason someone might want to kill the soldiers occupying the Sorsston castle.

The other soldiers in Sorsston weren't killed, and enough of them remained to keep control of the human city until our highborn reinforcements could arrive.

Despite my urgency to solve the issue, my thoughts soon stray to Amelia.

My sweet human. I regret that there's tension between us.

I know she's upset about the soldiers guarding the tent.

She's not certain she would actually attempt escape, but she wants the option.

She doesn't believe we might find happiness together.

I rake a hand through my hair. After teaching her how to bring herself to pleasure, I was so certain we were about to embark upon a new beginning in our relationship.

Relationship . I almost scoff at my word choice.

Though I've treated her with gentleness, she is my war prize. I suppose what we have couldn't be called a relationship, but gods, how I wish it could. I want nothing more than for her to belong to me by choice .

I want her to choose me. Forever.

Just as I want to choose her.

Knowing I won't be able to restrain the growl that's building in my throat, I flash out of the dungeon and reappear on the steps that lead to the main level of the castle.

After removing my invisibility shield, I stomp up the steps as I finally release the growl, my mood growing darker by the second.

I don't like that I'm here in Sorsston. When I find the offender behind the attack, they will suffer until they plead for the mercy of death, and even then, I won't kill them.

I'll prolong their misery until their body finally gives out.

Maybe I'll heal them in between torture sessions just so I can keep starting over with a blank canvas.

It's the middle of the night when I emerge from the castle. I summon my wings in a flash of bright light, then I bolt skyward.

TRISTAN

The old lord groans and thrashes in pain.

He's slumped on the cold, stone floor of his manor, bleeding from multiple wounds.

After assessing the situation at the castle, I decided to pay a much overdue visit to Lord Nevel before returning to the camp.

Earlier in the night, one of my soldiers learned the location of the manor and provided me with directions.

I've spent hours beating Lord Nevel, interrogating him, and beating him some more. I've also summoned my wings a few times so I could thrust one outward, slicing his arm or his chest or whatever part of his body I felt like maiming.

"I'm sorry!" he cries as he attempts to use a chair to pull himself upward. Weakened from the hours-long torture session, he falls back on his ass with another groan. "Oh, gods, forgive me. I'm sorry."

"You broke so quickly," I tell him with a smirk. I land a kick in his side, and the impact of my foot striking his ribs sends him flying into the wall. "Are you frightened, Lord Nevel? Are you in pain and scared for your life?"

"Yes!" He starts weeping, and his tears cascade through the blood on his face.

"Hm. Well, now you know how Amelia must've felt when you hurt her."

“I didn’t beat her as savagely as you’re beating me!” he says in a defensive tone. “Oh, gods, I think my ribs are broken. You broke my fucking ribs!”

“Ah, your ribs are nothing. Before I’m finished with you, Lord Nevel, I’m afraid your neck will no longer be attached to your body.”

“I’ll pay you. Handsomely. If you let me live, I’ll give you fifty silver coins.” The old lord resumes weeping, though he’s a bit quieter this time.

I feel no pity for him. His pain feeds my bloodlust and satiates my long-held desire to avenge Amelia’s treatment at his hands.

“I’m a highborn fae and the general of the Summer Court army.

I have no need for the paltry sum of fifty silver pieces.

” I approach him and draw my foot back, preparing for another kick.

“Though I would never accept your offer, I still find it insulting.” I kick him harder this time, and I hear the cracking as more ribs break.

He gasps for air, and I’m certain I’ve just punctured a lung.

Though I’d planned to torture him for longer, the sun is shining through the windows. Morning has arrived, and I’ve been away from my sweet human all night. I’m eager to return to her, eager to present her with Lord Nevel’s head.

“Please don’t kill me! I really am sorry!” The old lord gasps and rolls toward the wall, giving me his back. He’s still weeping. “I-I was frustrated and I took that frustration out on her. It wasn’t right, but…” His voice trails off and he struggles to breathe. He doesn’t have much longer.

“What are you talking about?” I ask. My heart breaks for Amelia, knowing she spent five months within the walls of Lord Nevel’s manor, suffering at his hands. I suppose I could glamour him and make him give me a truthful confession, but I much prefer to beat the information out of him.

“I couldn’t... couldn’t consummate our marriage.

It was my fault, but I blamed her every time I wasn’t able to, wasn’t able to remain...

ready to take her.” He covers his face with his hands.

“My two sons died during the fae attack on Sorsston, and I wanted so badly to get Amelia with child and create an heir. But I couldn’t.

I couldn’t even fuck her once!” He shudders and makes a gasping, gurgling sound.

Disbelief sweeps over me, as well as a fresh wave of fury toward Lord Nevel. He wasn’t able to consummate his marriage to Amelia, he wasn’t able to remain ready enough to claim her even once. So, he blamed her for his failure, and he made her suffer for it.

I drag the old lord away from the wall, then leave him drowning in a pool of his own blood in the middle of the cavernous entry hall.

I visit the courtyard of the manor just long enough to take a sword off one of the soldiers I killed upon my arrival.

Fourteen soldiers were guarding the estate, and I’d made quick work of slaughtering the whole lot.

I hold the sword up, inspecting its sharpness and decide it’ll serve my purposes.

Given my summer magic and the sharp points on my wings, I don't usually carry weapons, but I'll need a long, sharp sword for what I'm about to do.

I return to the entry hall and find the old lord on the verge of death. With an echoing growl, I bring the sword down on his neck with so much force that his head goes rolling across the carpet.

It's done. He's dead. He'll never bother Amelia again.

Though she was hesitant to reveal his name and thought his fate should be left up to the gods, I pray Lord Nevel's death will bring her comfort. I search the house for a bag, and during my search I discover several servants huddled in the kitchen.

"Don't be afraid," I tell them. "I won't hurt you. My quarrel was with your master, and he's dead now. So are his soldiers. Do any of you happen to have a sturdy grain sack I might borrow? Or something else that would work well for transporting Lord Nevel's head?"

AMELIA

Fists rain down on me, and I try to shield my face. Lord Nevel's sneering voice fills the room. He's hurling accusations and curses at me again. I make myself as small as possible on the bed, praying he'll tire himself out soon and leave me alone.

Fear grips me, and when I peek out from between my fingers to look at him, his features are twisted and grotesque. He slaps me, and my head reverberates with the force of the blow. He appears more incensed than ever.

"Please stop," I beg. "Please leave me alone."

He grabs my throat and squeezes. "I'm going to kill you, you fucking witch!"

He squeezes harder, and I thrash around, desperately trying to fight him off. It doesn't work, and I soon find myself on the verge of passing out.

On the verge of dying.

Black spots cloud my vision, and I feel myself slipping away and away, though unfortunately, as my consciousness fades, my fear remains as strong as ever.

"Amelia!" a familiar voice reaches me, and the pressure around my neck ceases. I gulp in a huge, much-needed breath and bolt upward in bed.

I open my eyes and find myself staring at a huge, dark-haired fae male. Tristan. Oh, gods. It was just a dream. A horrible nightmare.

I blink a few times and see the light coming from outside the tent. It's morning. Has Tristan been gone all night?

He scoots closer and places a comforting hand on my arm. "Sweet human, are you all right?"

I stare at him as the residual fear from my nightmare dissipates. I'm safe. I'm in Tristan's tent. I'm his captive, but I'm safe. Safe from Lord Nevel. Even if the bastard is still looking for me, he'll never manage to steal me away from the powerful, fae general who's promised to never let me go.

"I-I had a bad dream," I finally say. I force in a few deep breaths, and though my fear has started to fade, I'm still trembling in the aftermath of the shock. "It felt so real, and I was certain I was about to die." I wrap my arms around my center and burst into tears.

Tristan lifts me in his arms and carries me to the sofa, then he sits down and holds me close.

He nuzzles his nose to mine for a moment before placing a tender kiss on my forehead.

He also withdraws a handkerchief from his pocket and dries my tears.

As quickly as I started crying, I stop, and I sink deeper into his embrace, soaking up the comfort he's offering.

"Shh, sweet human, it's all right. It was just a nightmare. Nothing will hurt you. I will always, always, protect you." He kisses my forehead again, and I sense his worry and his affection for me.

He strokes my hair and keeps kissing my forehead and cheeks. He also finishes drying my tears with the handkerchief, then he sets the cloth aside and gives me a reassuring look. “Do you want to tell me what you were dreaming about?”

“Lord Nevel,” I whisper, and I hate saying his name aloud.

Tristan’s visage melts with understanding, and he increases the caresses to my hair.

I close my eyes briefly and relish his warmth and the profound sense of safety I feel in his arms. Lavender and other calming scents fill the air, and I’m touched that he’s doing everything in his power to help me settle.

“Amelia, there’s something I must tell you. Perhaps it will help with the nightmares, and perhaps it won’t. But I must tell you. It feels wrong to keep it a secret from you, even for a little while.”

As I stare at him, the truth fills my head in a series of images.

He’s thinking about how he spent the early morning hours.

He’s remembering the visit he paid to Lord Nevel and the brutality he visited upon the man.

Oh, gods, he’s also recalling the old lord’s confession about why he kept beating me—because he couldn’t consummate our marriage and blamed me for his failures.

Tristan knows.

He knows everything.

“You killed Lord Nevel,” I say, deciding I can no longer hide my ability to know his

thoughts, especially when I'm aware that he can sense mine.

"You tortured him, questioned him, and eventually, you cut off his head. His head rests in a grain bag right outside the tent. No, to answer your question, I don't want to see it.

Feel free to place his head on the parapet if you want.

Or toss it into the forest for the boars to find. "

Tristan draws back slightly, and his dark eyes go wide. He opens his mouth as though to speak, but then a knowing look comes over him. Before he says a word, I have a good idea of what he's about to say. "You can sense my thoughts, and you now realize that I can sense yours."

"Yes." There's no point in lying. No point in hiding the truth. Not anymore.

Are we fated mates?

Or are we only meant to be war prize and master?

I'm not sure, but I pray there's a path for us that doesn't involve heartbreak. The thought of one day being parted from Tristan makes my soul reverberate with sorrow.

Can you hear me, Amelia? To my great shock, his voice resounds in my mind. I gasp.

Yes, yes, I can hear you , I send him the thought, pushing it down the tether that I sense strengthening between us. Can you hear me?

Yes, sweet human, I can hear you. His deep voice is a soothing rumble in my head.

Oh, gods, what does this mean? I ask him.

I peer at him intently, not brave enough to voice my ideas on the matter, even though I'm certain he knows them.

He's having the same thoughts right now, and it would seem it's a suspicion he's harbored for months, since the moment he looked into my eyes in the Sorsston castle.

Yet he tried to push it away and tried to convince himself it simply couldn't be possible.

Because I'm a full-blooded human, and he always believed the gods would match him with a powerful, highborn fae female.

He cups my face. "I think it means you're my fated mate."

AMELIA

I think it means you're my fated mate.

Tristan's words keep repeating in my head. I hold his gaze as the sounds of the camp waking up surrounds us.

"You always expected to mate with a highborn fae female," I say.

"I know that's why you didn't steal me away from my parents' house that morning.

Because you believed that surely you were just physically attracted to me and nothing more, particularly given how rare it is for a fae to be fated to a full-blooded human."

His expression becomes anguished. "If I'd followed my instincts and stole away with you that morning, you wouldn't have endured so much pain at Lord Nevel's hands. Gods, I am sorry, Amelia."

I feel a smile pulling at my lips. "You're sorry you didn't kidnap me sooner? Please don't be. You could've never known what would happen. Besides, if you interfered with my impending marriage to a rich lord who lived in Sorsston near my family, I'm not sure I would've ever forgiven you."

He exhales slowly. "I am glad he's dead and I hope his demise brings you some measure of peace, sweet human."

"Well, I'm not sorry he's dead, and yes, I do feel a strange, almost guilty sense of

relief, and peace, just knowing he's gone." Perhaps Tristan is right that sometimes it's better to take matters of vengeance into your own hands, rather than leave a wicked person's fate up to the gods.

I'm not sure if you realize this , he says down the bond that links our minds, but it's highly unusual that we're able to communicate via our minds before we've consummated our mating union.

I can't help but wonder if it's related to your abilities to bypass my wards.

There is something very special about you, sweet human.

I flush at his praise, even though I don't believe there's anything that remarkable about me. I mean, so I can bypass the wards of highborn fae. It's a power that I'm not certain will ever be useful, particularly if Tristan keeps soldiers guarding the tent to prevent my escape.

My heart skips a beat. He believes I'm his fated mate, and I can't deny that I share his belief. If we can discern one another's thoughts and feelings, as well as speak mind-to-mind with ease, surely it means we're mates.

I'm also fiercely drawn to him, and the prospect of ever parting with him makes my heart seize with pain. I know he feels the same way about me, and he detected the strength of the attraction between us long before I felt it.

I just remembered a story I heard as a child , he says through the bond, and I want to test something.

Another test? I ask. Why can't I sense his exact thoughts at this moment? Is he blocking me out?

Yes, sweet human, I'm hiding a few thoughts from you right now, but I promise I don't have bad intentions. Get dressed. I must take you into the forest.

The forest? Confusion sweeps through me.

After just coming to terms with the fact that we're fated mates, I expected he would want to take me to bed and consummate the mating bond.

I glance at the rumpled covers on the bed, and I suppose he's reluctant because I just had a nightmare about Lord Nevel, and the bastard's head is resting in a grain sack right outside the tent.

I grab a fresh gown, and for the first time since I've been Tristan's captive, I select one of the beautiful gowns he gifted me, the dark purple dress I've had my eye on for a while. I take the gown and a pair of slippers and change in the bathing area with the curtain pulled shut.

I almost laugh at what I'm doing. We're mates, and we'll likely join our bodies as one soon. Oh, and last night he saw me naked from the waist down as he watched me stroke myself to a climax, a release he'd guided me toward. Yet I'm changing behind a curtain.

After I emerge into the open area of the tent, I notice Tristan holding back a grin. "Stop reading my thoughts! I don't need you listening in when I'm contemplating my own ridiculousness."

"There is nothing ridiculous about you, sweet human." His eyes gleam with warmth. "You are intelligent, skilled, exceptionally beautiful, and you possess one of the kindest hearts I've ever encountered. You are the most astounding female I've ever known, among fae and humans and orcs."

His compliment makes my face heat. Well, shall we venture into the forest? I ask through the tether.

He nods. Yes, Amelia. I am anxious to discover whether my theory about you holds any truth.

Theory about me? Now you've really piqued my curiosity, I say down the bond. Are you sure you can't tell me ahead of time why we're headed into the forest? Also, are you going to teach me how I can block you from sensing my thoughts and emotions?

He smiles as he guides me toward the tent flap. "I'm sure I can't tell you ahead of time. And yes, if you really want me to teach you how to block me from sensing your thoughts and emotions, I can, however it's my hope that you won't do it often."

"Fair enough."

We emerge from the tent into the early morning light. As I turn to face Tristan, my eyes snag on the bloodied grain sack that rests on the ground, and I take a quick step back as my stomach clenches.

Tristan rapidly guides me away from the bag that contains my former husband's head, and he calls out for a soldier to dispose of the sack and the contents within. The soldier rushes past us to comply, and I breathe a sigh of relief knowing the sack will be gone when we return.

I'm sorry that you found the sack so unsettling, sweet human. I just wanted you to know beyond a doubt that the godsblasted male is dead.

I'm okay, and you don't need to apologize. I suppose if I'm to live among your people, I will have to get used to such grand displays of vengeance and brutality.

He'll never hurt you again, and neither will anyone else. I'll maim anyone who dares to try.

Tristan wraps an arm around me and leads me to the ussha-blessed forest. It's startling how vibrant the glowing vegetation has become in the forests surrounding Sorsston during the last few months.

It would seem the spread of ussha continues at a rapid pace, and soon the entire realm will be ruled over by the fae.

We walk along a well-worn path that I suppose hunters use, and eventually we come to a clearing that contains hundreds if not thousands of glimmering flowers in a variety of colors. The sight is so beautiful, it takes my breath away.

"All right, what now?" I ask, turning to stare at my soon-to-be mate. Unless he decides not to claim me. My stomach tightens at the thought. The truth is, despite all that's happened, I want him to claim me. I'm starting to realize just how much I want to belong to him. But not as a war prize.

He gazes at the field of ussha-blessed flowers, then he lifts a hand and the air buzzes with summer magic. Wait, no, it's Spring Court magic he's using. He's using the powers he inherited from his mother's side of the family.

He waves a hand, and one of the glimmering blue flowers suddenly starts growing, and it doesn't stop until it's nearly as tall as me. He turns to me and gestures at the meadow.

It's your turn, sweet human. Try to influence plant growth.

What? I'm not fae. How could I ever hope to influence plant growth?

He stares at me intently. “I realize you aren’t fae, but you’re able to walk through powerful wards as though they are nothing. Just like I can. I suspect that you’ve tapped into my magic. I suspect you’re an usshan.”

“An usshan?”

“Yes, an usshan. Usshans are humans, or orcs, who can tap into the magic of their fae mates. I heard stories about such humans and orcs when I was a child, though I’ve never met one before.

It would reason, if that’s what you are, you should be able to do almost anything magical of which I’m capable.

It’s possible you might even manage to summon wings one day, though I doubt that would occur until long after we’ve consummated our mating union and you gain more experience using fae magic.”

My mouth falls open and I stare at him in wonderment. Could it be true? Could I be an usshan? Why are my palms suddenly tingling? I take a deep breath and gaze at the meadow.

Mimicking his earlier movements, I lift a hand and aim it toward an area that’s filled with sparkling purple flowers. I concentrate on the smallest flower in the bunch, wishing it were taller and thicker, wishing it would grow as high as Tristan’s flower.

My entire arm tingles and a slight vibration runs through my body, taking me aback. Oh, gods, is it working? I stare at the flower, still willing it to grow. The idea of being able to not only influence plant growth, but to perform other amazing feats with the use of fae magic, is thrilling indeed.

At last, the small purple flower shoots upward. It grows and grows, and it doesn’t

stop until it's as tall as Tristan's flower, just as I'd hoped.

Stunned, I turn to look at my fated mate.

Mate . If I'm able to influence plant growth, then it means he's truly my fated mate and I've tapped into his fae powers. Because I'm an usshan.

He smiles, guides me into the middle of the meadow, then pulls me close. He waves a hand and the flowers directly around us grow taller than us, giving us plenty of privacy. My heart races. Is this it? Is this the moment he's going to claim me?

"No, sweet human," he says gently, and his eyes gleam with reverence as he peers down at me, "this is the moment I'm going to kiss you. Finally."

He clutches my face and presses his lips to mine.

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TRISTAN

An usshan. Not only is Amelia my mate, but she's an usshan.

I resolve that once the situation in Sorsston is sorted, I will take a leave of absence from the army so we can spend time together undisturbed.

Fuck, maybe I'll even retire from my posting as general.

If King Haratt doesn't understand, he can go fuck himself.

But I must spend time teaching Amelia how to use her fae magic.

She's only aware of a tenth of what I'm capable of.

She has no idea I can glare at someone's throat and cause them to choke to death, or that I can glamour someone into telling the truth or even into killing themselves.

Yes, I will have to give her proper instruction to make sure she doesn't inadvertently harm someone.

She would never forgive herself if that happened.

As I guide her toward my tent, my spirits sink at the sight of my commanders. Gods, what do they want? Oh, right. I'm still the fucking general and they must need my guidance about something. Or perhaps they're bringing news from the castle.

I send Amelia a wave of affection and reassurance, then usher her inside the tent.

As I approach my commanders, I emit waves of dominance that make some of them cower.

I don't want any of them to suspect I'm considering retirement from the army.

I don't want any of them to believe I'm weak or giving up.

As far as I'm concerned, I'm not giving anything of real value up.

Instead, I'm gaining a treasure. I'm gaining Amelia.

Usshan or not, she's not cut out for life in a war camp.

I can only imagine the heartbreak she would feel the next time the Summer Court army attacked a human city and slaughtered thousands.

I must get her away from the brutality of my people, away from the brutality of my former life.

I almost snort. My former life. I'm already thinking of my time as general as though it's in the past. That's how certain I am that the best course of action is whisking my fated mate to a safe, peaceful location where we might build a life together.

Perhaps we'll settle in Giarrla, the same fae settlement that Prince Lucas and Yvette recently moved to.

As far as I know, the prince is the only highborn fae living in Giarrla, and the town is predominately occupied by regular faefolk who possess very few powers.

But it's a mostly peaceful area, and if another highborn fae— me —moves there, Giarrla will be safer than ever before.

I continue staring at my commanders, wondering why the fuck none of them have spoken yet. Are they truly that intimidated by me? I growl. “What is it? What news do you bring?”

“Three separate orc armies are headed toward Sorsston. They were just spotted by our aerial patrols,” Commander Marss says. “They’re coming from the east, the west, and the north.”

I growl again, and I glance to the left as a highborn fae lands nearby and approaches our gathering. It's Commander Klemat. I give him a brief nod before returning my gaze to the others. “How large is each army?”

“We estimate that each army is roughly ten-thousand strong,” Commander Klemat says. “Not only are they closing in fast—they’ll be here before nightfall—but they outnumber us.”

“They only outnumber us by two thousand,” I reply. “And they’re orcs. They don’t possess any magic. They rely on brute strength and use rudimentary weapons. I’m confident we can vanquish them.” Besides, in my three hundred plus years leading the Summer Court army, we’ve never lost a battle.

All the commanders murmur their agreement, and we formulate a plan of defense.

It feels a bit strange formulating a plan of defense, however, because the Summer Court army usually attacks.

We’re usually the ones surrounding a city or another army that’s on the road.

Nevertheless, I'm confident we'll be victorious in the end, just as I'm certain we'll suffer very few losses.

Orcs heal faster than humans, but they don't heal faster than fae.

Many wounds that can take out an orc can't succeed in destroying one of my people.

Amelia . I must keep her safe.

I sense her presence in my mind. I suddenly realize our shared ability to sense one another's thoughts and emotions must only work when we're in close proximity.

Whenever I'm far away from her, like in the castle, I'm not able to sense much, if anything.

Will that change once we consummate our mating union?

After issuing a few final commands, including an order that all the human and orc slaves and war prizes be relocated within the walls of Sorsston, I turn to my tent. I half expect to find Amelia peering out, but the flap remains closed.

Still, I know she overheard the conversation I just had with my commanders. The soundproof ward that's still in place simply won't work on her.

Because she's an usshan, which means one day, with proper training, she will likely be as powerful as I am.

It's a startling realization, and I almost laugh aloud. I resisted the possibility that she's my mate for months just because I believed I should mate with a powerful, highborn fae female.

Yet Amelia's power will one day match my own.

Together, we'll be an unstoppable force, and it's a relief to know she'll eventually learn how to defend herself. I plan to always protect her and keep her safe, but I'm glad she'll have the ability to do it herself if the day ever comes.

I enter the tent and find Amelia standing close, waiting for my return. She settles a worried look on me. "Thirty-thousand orcs?" she whispers. "That sounds dangerous."

"It's not as dangerous as it sounds." I debate whether to tell her about the trouble in the castle that involves the servants.

Finally, I release a flood of memories and let her see for herself.

I let her know about Warden Xall's death, as well as the twenty-plus fae soldiers, and I show her a vision of the servants in the dungeon.

I can't lie to her or hide anything from her. Not when she's my mate.

"I knew the trouble that brought the entire Summer Court army back to Sorsston had something to do with the castle. I sensed that much last night before you departed the tent. But thank you for sharing the details. I don't like it.

I don't like knowing the servants are suspects in some horrible plot against your people.

I'll be honest. One or two of them might've done it, but I doubt all the servants agreed to such a plot.

I know them, and most of them value their lives too much to take that sort of risk. "

“I suspect whoever killed Warden Xall and the soldiers did it in order to draw the entire Summer Court army to Sorsston,” I say.

“Also, the same individual, or individuals, might be responsible for the destruction of the sky bridge that delayed our travels south. A delay which allowed the three orc armies more time to take position.”

“It’s quite a plot.” Her visage darkens with worry, and I sense she’s anxious about the impending battle. She fears I’ll get hurt, and she’s also apprehensive about what might happen to the people of Sorsston, including her family, if the orc armies prevail.

I gather her close for a tender embrace, soaking up the feel of her as though it’s the last time I’ll ever touch her. But not only am I determined to win the battle, I’m confident the Summer Court army will be victorious. I only wish I knew who was behind the carefully orchestrated plot.

The orcs aren’t working alone, and I’m starting to believe my suspicions about a powerful, highborn fae’s involvement will eventually prove true.

I press a kiss to Amelia’s forehead, and I revel in the soft sigh she emits as she tightens her arms around my center. I wish we could stay here like this all day, joined in a tender embrace. If only.

“Come, sweet human, I must get you behind the walls of Sorsston. Actually, I want you to wait out the battle inside the castle. I’ll find a comfortable room for you, and I’ll ward the fuck out of it so no one can get in.

But you must promise to stay put. There will be plenty of soldiers inside the walls of Sorsston and within the castle, but as the battle unfolds, things might become a little chaotic. ”

“I promise I’ll stay put,” she says. “I only wish I knew how to tap into all your magic so I might fight at your side.”

I smile down at her, and my heart swells with affection for the pretty little human who’s stolen my heart.

“I know we haven’t consummated our union yet, Amelia, but you’re no longer my war prize. You’re my fated mate.”

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AMELIA

We hurry through the camp as soldiers rush about getting ready for the coming battle.

Tristan guides me through the open gates of Sorsston, though I know the gates will be locked soon.

He carries my bag, as well as another much larger sack that's filled with enough provisions to last a full week.

I hope the battle doesn't take that long.

When we reach the courtyard of the castle, I spy a familiar figure being guided through the crowd, and my heart leaps with joy.

"Riley!" I shout, and my former workmate turns at the sound of her name. The huge fae male holding her hand looks over his shoulder at me, and his eyes flare wide when he notices Tristan.

Riley extracts her hand from the fae male's and rushes toward me, and we share a happy embrace.

I haven't seen her in about six months. After she disappeared during the early days of the fae occupation in Sorsston, I'd feared the worst. I'm glad to see she's alive, though I sincerely hope her fae companion is treating her well. Is she his war prize?

"General Dalgaard," the fae male says in greeting with a cordial nod.

“Commander Carr. It would seem our females are friends. Perhaps they can ride out the battle together. I’m planning to put Amelia in a comfortable room, and I’m going to place extensive wards around it, of course.”

Riley and I exchange a hopeful look. “Oh, that would be wonderful,” I say with a smile.

The matter is quickly settled, and I’m relieved that Commander Carr readily agrees to allow Riley to stay with me during the battle. The four of us hurry into the castle, and Tristan leads the way to one of the larger bedchambers that I’m certain once belonged to King Garrett’s late queen.

Riley and I stand in the center of the room while Tristan creates the protective wards.

When I sense he’s also creating a soundproof ward, I know he’s doing it for Riley’s benefit, since I’ll be able to hear everything that’s going on no matter what.

But at least I’ll be safe as long as I remain in the room and within the barriers of the protective wards he just erected.

Once Tristan is finished, Commander Carr practically runs over to Riley and gathers her close. To my surprise, she hugs him back and seems reluctant to part with him. Hm. Perhaps she’s found a bit of happiness with the fae commander.

Tristan grasps my hand and places a gentle kiss upon the back of it, then he wraps his arms around me and holds me tightly. He presses numerous kisses to my forehead and my lips, and my heart constricts with the knowledge that he’s about to go off to war.

I blink away tears when he pulls apart from me. He gives me one last kiss and steps back. Command Carr also extracts himself from his embrace with Riley, and the two

fae males finally head for the door.

“Don’t worry, sweet human,” Tristan says. “All will be well, and I will see you soon.”

He departs the bedchamber, and Commander Carr follows. The door shuts behind them.

Please keep Tristan safe. Please please please.

I don’t pray to the gods very often, but I suddenly find myself sending up countless prayers for my mate’s safety. I’ll be devastated if anything happens to him, and I doubt I would ever recover from the loss.

Riley grasps my arm and guides me to a massive, tufted sofa, and we both take our seats and turn to face one another. She looks about as worried as I feel, and I hope it’s a sign that she’s more than Commander Carr’s unwilling captive.

“I feared you were dead,” I finally say.

She gives me a watery smile. “Not dead. I’m quite well, all things considered, but I never expected to find myself back in Sorsston, particularly not back inside the castle.”

“What happened to you?” I ask.

“What happened to you ?” she counters with a teasing smile, and we share a laugh. “Very well, I suppose I’ll go first. Perhaps by the time we’re finished sharing our stories, the battle will be over, and we’ll be reunited with our masters.”

“So, you’re the commander’s pleasure slave, then?”

She sighs and lounges against a pillow. “Not a pleasure slave. A war prize. Though I think the line between those two things is a bit blurred. Although, it’s my understanding that fae soldiers tend to share their pleasure slaves with their friends, but they won’t share their war prizes with anyone and are much more possessive of them.

” She goes on to explain that only two days after the Summer Court army captured Sorsston, Commander Carr spotted her in a corridor and immediately took her as his war prize.

“Does he treat you well? I mean, is he ever cruel to you? Does he hurt you?” I hold my breath as I await her answer.

She stares at me for a long moment. “He was a bit cruel to me at first. He taunted me a lot and he seemed to like my tears. But he never hit me. The worst he ever did was bind my wrists when I tried to run away. As the months passed, he started treating me with more kindness, and now...” Her voice trails off and her face grows dark pink.

“Now, I think I’m falling in love with him.

I know it might sound crazy, but I cannot imagine parting ways with him, though I know one day it’ll happen. One day, he’ll meet his fated mate.”

My heart goes out to her. I’m glad she’s found some happiness in her current situation, but there’s no changing the fact that the future holds sorrow for her. Unless they’re fated mates. But since they’ve been together six months and a mating bond hasn’t formed, I doubt that’s the case.

“Well, I’m glad you’re happy, Riley, and I hope he doesn’t meet his fated mate for several decades.”

“I hope the same.” She clears her throat and gestures at me. “What about you and the general? Are you his war prize? I would imagine so. He seemed quite besotted with you as you said your goodbyes.”

I draw in a slow breath. “I started out as his war prize,” I admit. “But now, well, we just realized we’re fated mates.”

Her eyes go wide. “Fated mates?” She jumps off the sofa and heads for the bag she’d brought.

“I believe Commander Carr packed some wine. I’m going to pour us both a drink and then you’re going to tell me all about you and the general.

And you mustn’t leave any details out. I want to hear everything. ”

She fetches us each a glass of wine, then we enjoy a few sips before I resume my story.

I tell her everything, just as she requested, and it feels like a weight off my shoulders to finally talk to someone who’s not Tristan.

He’s an understanding male, but Riley is a fellow human, and we’re around the same age and used to work together in the castle.

We have a lot of shared life experiences, and there’s a special kind of liberation in discussing the unexpected path my life has taken with someone who can fully grasp my point of view.

“Oh! I just thought of something!” Riley says. “Sorry to interrupt, but oh my goodness. Since you’re General Dalgaard’s fated mate, that means you’re probably going to live for thousands of years, since you’ll absorb enough of his magic through

the mating bond to cause your lifespan to match his.”

“Yes, I know, it’s rather overwhelming to consider,” I admit. It’s a realization that’s hovered in the back of my mind for a while now, though Tristan and I haven’t really discussed it. It’s about as shocking as learning that I’m an usshan.

As we continue our conversation, I don’t tell Riley about the battle horns I hear in the distance. I also don’t mention the numerous blasts or the war cries. The fighting has already started.

Tristan .

I love him. With my whole heart.

The realization is calming but also terrifying. Because what if he doesn’t come back?

May the gods grant him strength to vanquish his enemies.

TRISTAN

A hulking orc rushes toward me, battle-ax held high. I stand in his path with a gloating smile, then step aside at the last moment and swoop my wing outward across his neck. He falls to the ground. I pick his ax up and hurl it at the head of another orc that's rushing straight at me.

I've lost count of the number of orcs I've slain. We're only an hour into the battle, and the ground is littered with corpses. I launch into the sky, seeking a quick aerial view of the progress my soldiers are making.

It's a relief to discover only a few of the corpses on the ground belong to the Summer Court army.

We're winning, but the battle isn't over yet.

My thoughts stray to Amelia. I pray she's doing well.

I pray she hasn't become sick with worry.

Though I doubt I'm close enough for her to sense my thoughts, I attempt to send her a wave of affection.

When I don't receive anything in return, nor do I sense her presence in my mind, I have to resist the urge to fly closer to the castle.

I remind myself that the faster this battle is won, the faster we'll be reunited.

Along the tree line, I spot several catapults being rolled out by the orcs. I growl. If they hurl flaming projectiles at us, some will inevitably breach the stone walls that surround Sorsston and buildings will catch fire.

I almost expect another red-eyed mage to emerge from the trees to speak an enchantment on the catapults, but that's not quite what happens.

Instead, a large fae male strides out of the forest. Is he highborn?

My question is answered when there's an abrupt flash of light and his silver, translucent wings appear.

Who the fuck is he? Why is he fighting on the side of the orcs? Well, perhaps he's not entirely on their side. He might be using them for his own purposes.

Keeping one eye on the traitorous highborn fae, I fly from catapult to catapult, damaging the apparatuses with dangerously fast gusts of summer wind that also blow many of the orcs back into the forest.

The silver-winged fae suddenly takes notice of me. I can feel his attention falling on me as though he just touched my shoulder. It's an eerie sensation, and I tread air in the sky and turn to face him.

Our eyes meet, and I release a threatening growl that bellows across the field. He shoots into the clouds, then tries to dive into me with a sword aimed at my head. I shift out of the way and slice my wing across his stomach. He bellows in pain, and as he glares up at me, his eyes flash with rage.

"What's your name, traitor?" I ask in a taunting tone. Still treading air, I give him a wide, teeth-baring smile. The sort of mocking grin I often display to my enemies before killing them.

“I am no traitor.” The sword falls from his grip, and he presses both hands to his injured stomach as he beats his wings furiously and flies upward to face me. “I am Prince Finn of the Autumn Court.”

A bark of laughter escapes me. “Prince Finn? You mean, the Exiled Prince? Didn’t your father put a price on your head? If I remember correctly, you killed your older brother and tried to blame the death on a cousin who was executed before the truth could come out.”

He sneers. “I did my father a great service by killing my older brother. He was weak and had no business being next in line for the throne.”

“And now you’re... what? Joining forces with the orcs? To what end?” Knowing that I’ve already gotten under his skin, I give him another mocking smile.

“My father always believed the Summer Court army posed the greatest threat to the Autumn Court.” His tone is that of a sniveling, spoiled child trying to justify their poor choices.

I think of the glamoured servants and the destroyed sky bridge.

What a shame the gods have wasted such powers on the Exiled Prince.

“Ah, yes, I suppose in centuries past, the Autumn and Summer Courts have had quite a few skirmishes, but we’ve never gone to full war. King Haratt seems to be on good terms with your father at the moment. I know your father spent an entire month visiting the Summer Court recently.”

Prince Finn gasps. “You must be mistaken. My father would never visit the Summer Court. He would never?—”

“As the general of the Summer Court army, I can assure you that I’m privy to such knowledge. I exchange letters with King Haratt frequently.”

He goes pale. “You’re General Dalgaard?”

I summon an aura of violence that causes him to pale further. It would seem my reputation precedes me, if this pathetic, scheming fool is already on the verge of soiling himself.

“Ah, let me guess. You concocted a plan to destroy the Summer Court army in hopes that your father would invite you back into the fold?” I laugh. “You idiot. You’re going to die today. Or maybe instead of killing you, I’ll deliver you to the Autumn Court and let your father deal with you.”

“No,” he whispers as a faraway look enters his eyes. “No.”

“How did you kill Warden Xall and the soldiers?” I ask, still unsettled that a highborn fae herbalist couldn’t find any evidence of poison.

He smirks. “Rallunna venom. It’s deadly and untraceable.”

“Rallunna venom,” I repeat. “Interesting. Well, it’s been a delight chatting with you, but I think it’s time I killed you already.”

The Exiled Prince’s visage firms into an expression of utter resolve.

He intends to see the battle through, no matter the outcome.

No matter how many misguided orcs must die for his cause.

Orcs that no doubt jumped at the opportunity to slaughter a massive fae army in the

belief that it would keep their territories safer.

He bares his teeth at me and snarls. Golden light gathers in his palms, though I know it's not healing light.

The odd frequency of the magic buzzes through me, and I put a bit of space between us.

If one of the glowing orbs he plans to hurl at me even grazes my flesh, it'll leave me paralyzed for several hours.

I release a deep, thunderous growl of my own, then I summon an invisibility shield and fly toward him.

I won't be able to maintain the shield for long, as it drains my energy, but I plan to kill Prince Finn well before that happens.

While the idea of handing him over to the Autumn Court holds a certain appeal, he's too dangerous to keep as a prisoner.

I swoop a wing out, preparing to slice his neck, when a booming noise rumbles over the countryside, and King Haratt descends from the clouds.

AMELIA

Booms keep sounding in the distance, though I know the battle has drawn nearer. Every few seconds, a tremor affects the castle. Riley and I keep exchanging worried looks.

I glance around, wishing this room had a balcony, but I suppose that's one reason Tristan selected it.

He wants to keep me as safe as possible.

I suspect this room served as more of a haven for the former queen during times of war.

Having worked in the castle, I know there are far grander rooms containing balconies on the higher levels.

There are two small windows in this room, though they're blackened out, and they were like that upon our arrival. I sincerely hope this room was used as a haven for the former queen and not as a prison.

A crack of what sounds like thunder rumbles so loudly that I almost cover my ears.

"Do you think it's about to storm?" Riley asks.

I search my mind for any sign of Tristan, but I'm not able to sense his comforting presence. He's too far away. "I-I can't say for certain, but I doubt it's a storm." Is a

highborn fae wielding their power? Is that what caused the sudden crack of thunder?

I listen carefully and don't hear anything else. In fact, it's so silent that it sounds like the battle abruptly halted. My stomach flips repeatedly. Please let Tristan be all right. Please let us be reunited soon.

What if the real reason I can't sense his presence in my mind is because he's... he's... I can't complete the thought.

But, if he's alive, then I would still be able to tap into his Summer Court magic.

But how could I test the theory without stepping outside the wards?

I'd promised my mate I would remain inside the warded room, and I don't want to break that promise.

Especially if it puts my life in danger.

The battle might not be over. Or, if it is over, maybe the orcs won.

If I step into the corridor, I could be snatched up by a huge orc warrior.

A shiver courses through me at the thought.

An idea hits me, and I try to summon a warm summer breeze and the scent of lavender. My body starts to tingle, and I think it's about to work, but my focus breaks when I hear rapid footsteps in the corridor.

Riley and I stand in unison, and we stare at the door.

I swallow hard. If the orcs won, they won't be able to enter this room. But we can't

stay here forever. Even if we ration, the provisions we'd brought won't last much longer than a week.

Suddenly, a warm, familiar presence enters my mind, and I pray I'm not imagining it.

The door bursts open, and my fated mate rushes toward me with his arms spread.

"Amelia." Tristan embraces me before I can even finish processing the fact that he's alive and unharmed. But my heart soon bounces with joy, and I throw my arms around him and return the hug. I soak up his comforting, summer scent.

I'm vaguely aware of the happy reunion going on nearby. Commander Carr is raining kisses on Riley's face as she giggles and tries to kiss him back. Their lively interaction soothes my soul. I hope she'll be all right.

Tristan cups my face and presses his lips to mine. He delves his tongue into my mouth and kisses me soundly. Heat quakes between my thighs, and if we were alone right now, I might rub my body against his.

You're alive. I'm so happy to see you. You aren't injured, are you? I send down the tether, gratified that I'm able to feel his presence in my mind again. He didn't look injured when he rushed into the room, but I want to be certain.

Gods, Amelia. I am happy to see you as well. And I just suffered a few scratches, but they've already healed. He keeps sending me waves of affection as he continues kissing me.

Tell me what happened. Please, Tristan. Show me.

Very well, sweet human. He sends me a rapid series of images, showing me his point of view during the battle. I'm shocked to learn about Prince Finn's involvement with

the orcs and the trap he set for the Summer Court army. But it's over. It's truly over.

Though it wasn't easy, Tristan succeeded in killing Prince Finn, and the abrupt arrival of King Haratt made the orcs think twice about continuing the battle.

The Summer Court king, as it turns out, hurried to Sorsston after receiving a warning from a high priestess who'd had a vision about the battle.

In the end, the orcs surrendered after watching too many of their comrades fall and realizing they'd been used by the Exiled Prince.

The surviving orcs were allowed to return to their various territories, under the condition that they don't attack any more fae settlements or take up arms against the fae in any manner for a full five years.

A temporary armistice, but still a pleasing outcome.

Perhaps during that time, more peacekeeping efforts could be made.

That's it, sweet human , he tells me. That's the battle.

Please rest assured that the servants will be freed from the dungeon, and they will be treated better going forward.

I have already appointed a new warden who I'm confident won't be as merciless as the previous warden, nor will he tolerate cruelty from the soldiers under his command.

Now, I have a surprise for you. One I think you'll like.

He withdraws from the kiss, and we both struggle to catch our breath.

What kind of a surprise?

I gave King Haratt my resignation as general, and to my surprise, he took it well and appointed his oldest son to take over the leadership of the Summer Court army.

I want to take you somewhere peaceful where we can start a brand-new life together.

His dark eyes glimmer with excitement . I was thinking about a beautiful fae settlement called Giarrla.

Prince Lucas lives there with Yvette. Unless you'd like to stay in Sorsston.

I'll take you anywhere you want to go, sweet human.

All I care about is that we're together.

Oh, Tristan. Tears burn in my eyes, and I'm unable to stop them from falling. I wrap my arms more tightly around my mate and hug him as though I'll never let go. I'm willing to give Giarrla a try , I tell him. I don't want to stay in Sorsston.

Although Sorsston is my home city, it holds too many bad memories. My throat burns as I consider my mother and sisters. Oh, gods. They still don't know what really happened to me.

If you would like, sweet human , Tristan sends down the bond, I will take you to visit your family members before our departure. But not your father. That vile man doesn't deserve to see you.

Thank you, Tristan. I would like to visit my mother and sisters before we leave for Giarrla. And I agree, not my father. I have no wish to see the man ever again.

I will make the arrangements. In fact, I'm confident I can make it happen today. He kisses my forehead, then we collect my bag and the untouched sack of provisions.

I exchange a heartfelt goodbye with Riley, and we promise to write to one another.

Tristan scoops me into his arms with a playful growl and carries me out of the castle.

AMELIA

Freshly bathed and wearing in a brand-new nightdress, I'm seated across from Tristan as we share a meal.

He's also freshly bathed and wearing something other than his usual black, form-fitting uniform—a pair of dark blue pants and a white tunic—and I wonder if I'll ever get used to seeing him dressed so casually.

Darkness has fallen, and fireflies flit by outside the tent. The chorus of nighttime insects swells louder, and so does the trilling of frogs.

It's been a long day, and I am exhausted, but I'm also eager for the night to come, and I can't stop stealing glances at the huge bed. The bed I know we're going to share tonight. Finally.

I take a slow sip of wine as I consider all the events that transpired today.

I discovered Tristan is my fated mate, and I also learned I'm an usshan.

The Summer Court army prevailed over a force of thirty thousand orcs.

I ran into Riley and spent a few hours with her.

I also enjoyed a reunion with my sisters and mother, all of us together at the same time, a reunion that Tristan arranged to take place at my oldest sister's house.

“Amelia?” My mate’s deep voice washes over me like a balm to my soul. “Are you all right? I sense you’re deep in thought, but I must confess, I’m having difficulty reading all your thoughts.”

I glance at him and swallow hard. “I’m okay.

I’m just thinking about today. I can’t believe my father abandoned my mother, but I’m glad Mama is happily living with my oldest sister, Agatha.

” To my great shock, I learned my father recently fled Sorsston with the last of his money, leaving my mother destitute.

Mama suspects he traveled to Trevos to find his former lover, the widow he impregnated over a decade ago.

I hope Mama and my sisters never hear from him again.

“I know that was a surprising revelation for you, sweet human,” he says, “but your mother does seem content living in your oldest sister’s household. I’m glad you had a happy reunion with them today, and I promise we can come back to visit whenever you’d like.”

“Thank you, Tristan.” I take another sip of wine and push my plate aside. I can’t help but sneak one more glance at the bed.

Are you so eager for me to claim you, sweet human? His voice is a teasing rumble in my mind.

I smirk at him. You’re just as eager as me. Don’t even try to deny it. We can sense one another’s thoughts, remember?

In that case, perhaps we should retire to the bed. His gaze becomes heated, and his nostrils flare wide. I know he's already detected the slickness that's gathering between my thighs. He knows I'm aching to be claimed.

"I've never done this before," I blurt.

"I'll be gentle, sweet human. I won't hurt you." He sends me a surge of affection through our bond, and his eyes glimmer in the dimness of the tent.

My breath hitches and I find myself pressing my thighs together as I squirm in the chair. The aching in my nether area is almost too much. Through the bond, I sense the depths of his desire for me, and I know his fully erect cock is pressing against his pants.

Tristan rises to his feet and walks around the table. He helps me out of my chair and grasps my hand. He gazes down at me with a look of such profound affection that it causes emotion to tighten in my throat.

Then he leans down and places his lips at my ear. "Before I claim you, sweet human, I'm finally going to feast on your pussy and feel you shatter on my tongue."

I gasp at his words, and the aching in my core deepens. I whimper and as I lean into him, I relish the feel of his hugeness pressing against my stomach. He combs his fingers through my hair, places a brief, tender kiss on my lips, then guides me toward the bed.

My heart commences pounding, and I swear I can feel each individual, rapid pulse of my clit.

This is it, I think as I stare at the bed. I'm about to become Tristan's mate. Well, technically I'm already his fated mate, whether we consummate the union or not, but

once we join our bodies, it's my understanding that the bond we share will deepen.

Yes, sweet human, this is it. His voice echoes in my mind. I hope you're ready.

He lifts me in his arms and carries me the remainder of the way, depositing me in the center of the bed. My nightdress hikes up my legs as I try to get comfortable, and I instinctively reach down to cover myself, only to hear him making a playful tsking noise in my mind.

I'm about to see all of you, Amelia.

I shoot him a challenging look, then pull my nightdress higher, revealing more of my thighs. He growls, removes his tunic, and tosses it to the floor. My pulse skitters at the sight of his perfectly sculpted chest, and my mouth goes dry when he removes his pants next.

He's not wearing any undergarments, and his rigid appendage immediately springs free.

He's massive. So massive that doubts start to creep into my mind.

What if it doesn't fit?

I assure you, sweet human, it will fit. Before I claim you, I will make sure your pussy is soaking wet and swollen with need.

Fully naked, he climbs on the bed and leans over me. He pulls me close for a kiss and delves a hand in my hair, holding my head in place while he thrusts his tongue against mine. I whimper into his mouth, eager for more.

If you become nervous or scared at any time, sweet human, please tell me and I will

stop at once.

His voice is a comforting presence in my head.

I realize our minds are connected in a way, but just in case the connection falters, you must promise you'll speak up.

I want you to enjoy this experience. I want you to feel safe with me as I claim you as my mate.

I promise. Quivers reverberate through my body as I await his next move, and anticipation coils in my center, a steady but rapid throbbing sensation that makes it impossible to remain still. I keep pressing my thighs together and squirming on the bed as I yearn for Tristan's touch.

He withdraws from the kiss and gives me a warm look. Good. Now, shall we get started? I am ravenous to taste the slickness between your thighs.

TRISTAN

Aware of Amelia's lingering sense of modesty, I don't force her to remove her nightdress.

Instead, I kiss my way down her clothed body, teasing her through the thin layer of fabric.

She moans and arches into my touch, and she keeps caressing her hands through my hair.

Every time her fingers momentarily tighten in my locks, my cock hardens further.

Eventually, I reach her thighs, and I push the nightdress higher on her body, until I've uncovered the slick, swollen part of her that I intend to plunder. I push the nightdress to her waist and prompt her to spread wider. She whimpers and her legs tremble, though she complies with my wishes.

I lower my face between her thighs and dart my tongue over her clit. She groans and lifts her center against my mouth.

Gods, the sweet taste of her. I doubt I'll ever get enough.

I grasp her thighs and hold her in place while exploring her nether area, licking her from top to bottom, teasing her slit with feather light caresses of my tongue followed by much firmer strokes.

The mewling sound she keeps making encourages me to continue, and I place one hand between her thighs and insert two fingers in her slick orifice.

Fuck, yes. She's soaking wet. I sense the level of her excitement through the bond.

Despite her apprehensions about my size, she's aching to be claimed, aching to be filled up with my cock.

I refocus my attention on her clit, swirling my tongue over the pulsating button, then start driving two fingers into her core, though I'm careful not to breach her virginal barrier.

I commence a slow rhythm of pushing in and out, thrusting my digits into her tightness as I continue lapping at her clit.

She fists my hair and emits a loud whimper, and I increase the plunges into her core as I press my tongue more firmly to her clit.

With an echoing cry, she shatters on my tongue, her entire body quivering under the waves of her release. I sense the intensity of her orgasm through the bond, and I also sense her deep satisfaction.

After her final pulsing wave of pleasure dissipates, I remove my fingers from her core and climb atop her. She opens her eyes as she pants for air, and I make a show of licking my lips, wanting her to know just how much I relish the taste of her.

She flushes, and her gaze soon drops to my hard length. Her eyes hold a shocked gleam, but I'm thrilled when she parts her thighs even wider.

Need sweeps through her, and it becomes difficult to decipher which desires belong to her and which belong to me. Suffice it to say, we're of the same mind.

We're both eager to consummate our mating union.

Hovering over her, careful not to put my full weight on her, I lean down and press my lips to hers. I feel her melting into the kiss, and I also sense her surprise when she tastes her essence for the first time.

See how delicious you are? I send down the bond.

I break the kiss and settle myself between her legs, guiding my rigidness to her slick center. She whimpers and arches her pussy against my length, inviting my entrance.

I send her a wave of affection, and she sends me one in return. Our eyes meet, and I start to push inside her. She's so slick with arousal that despite her small size, she stretches around my girth, and I don't sense any pain coming from her through the bond.

But when I reach the barrier of her innocence, she tenses and gives me a wary look. I gather golden light in my palm, summoning a type of magic I haven't used in ages. Magic that will block out the pain of an injury. I send her a quick explanation of my intent, and she instantly relaxes.

Thank you, Tristan. She sends me a flash of gratitude.

It's my pleasure. I promised I wouldn't hurt you, sweet human, and I meant it.

I aim the light at her center. Once I'm certain the magic has taken hold, I give a rapid thrust forward, pushing past her resistance until I'm fully seated in her tight depths.

Pleasure quakes through me. Gods, she's deliciously tight.

I lean down to place a quick kiss to her cheek, then I nuzzle my nose to hers.

I'm going to begin moving now, Amelia. You should be able to feel all the pleasure but none of the pain.

Okay. I'm ready. Please. She whimpers and her hips undulate as she tries to encourage me to get started.

I withdraw from her core nearly the entire way, then I thrust back inside. I grip her hips and steadily drive in and out, building speed with each plunge into her warm, slick pussy.

As I claim her, we keep sending each other waves of affection. The pleasure between us quickly mounts, but I try to hold back my release, desperate to prolong the experience. It's our first time together, and I want to savor it.

But it soon becomes difficult to hold back. Amelia tenses and then cries out as another release sweeps through her, and the feel of her insides clamping down on my cock sends me over the edge.

I growl as I erupt inside her, filling her with my seed.

After the final spurt, I withdraw from her center, and we collapse in one another's arms. I hold her close as we both strive to catch our breath. I cup her face in one hand, and she leans into my touch with a contented sigh.

My heart brims with adoration for the sweet human who happens to be my fated mate. I love her. I never allowed myself to harbor the specific thought until now. But it's true.

I love her to the point of madness.