



# Cruel As A Tree (Chaos God Sugar and Spice Companion Shorts #4)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Escaping the school was only the beginning.

Now I'm caught in the sights of Lord Lorthion...a powerful Forest Lord with magic in his veins and dominance in his gaze.

He wants me as his mate, and he's not subtle about it. He's intense. Commanding. Unrelenting.

I told him to back off.

He did.

And I hated it.

I miss the fire in his touch, the hunger in his voice. But if I invite that heat back in, I won't just get the male I met in the woods...I'll get all of him. Every form he takes. Every part he's kept hidden.

Am I ready for that?

This standalone novella with a HFN ending, like the others in this series, is cheeky. Monstrous kisses, chosenish proximity, and a happy-for-now ending await in this longer hot and cold novella set in the Chaos God universe. Perfect for readers who crave unrepentant aggression and full yes give me more consent. This is human written with human art.

**Total Pages (Source):** 25

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 4:43 am*

Chapter

One

LILLIAN

The flame blackened soil crunched under my feet, a brittle reflection of the slowly dying hope in my heart.

I shifted my bag over my shoulders, mentally counting the rations I had stashed away, bread, cheese, and the meat I had air dried in my dorm room, salting it heavily and hanging it up on strips in front of the window.

Luckily, or unluckily, my roommates weren't offended by my preparations nor did they snitch on me.

It wasn't like they served travel rations in the commons.

Everything there was freshly made, and anything left over was hauled in carts to be dumped in the mouth of the Dungeon.

I should know, as I was one of the students assigned to walk into the ever-changing mouth of the Dungeon and empty out the carts.

The piles from the day before were never there, even when the entrance was to the same area.

They told us we were feeding it, so it was less likely to eat the students who dove into its depths.

Not that any of that mattered anymore.

The Dungeon, my work in the kitchens, and all of that was behind me.

Literally behind me, the towering outside walls of the caldera were still visible, steep cliffs in the distance even as I walked across the blackened barren landscape.

The last time I looked back, I couldn't see the ropes I'd used to rappel down the outside, but I could see those walls that had kept me trapped.

I was no longer trapped, not by those walls anyway.

I gritted my teeth and continued walking, step after step, dead ground crunching under my boots.

Sweat dripped down my forehead, and I reached up to wipe it away.

Outside the walls were worse than I thought.

When I heard it had been magically scorched, I thought that they had just kept the vegetation down so they could see people approaching the walls.

I didn't know that the land would be still smoldering in places, that I wouldn't even be able to see the edge of life in the distance.

I thought there would be other people.

Other people meant a danger of a different sort, as this was a place I didn't know with

a culture I didn't understand, but even so, there had to be someone out there who wanted to help me escape.

Someone who would be willing to get me across the boundary that separated the Magic Realm from the mundane one.

Someone who could get me back home.

My hope ached as it clung to that possibility with trembling fingers, refusing to let go and fall into despair.

I couldn't die here, alone. Not when I had so much to get back to.

I'm itchy, Veveron said in my mind from where she sat on my shoulder.

She yawned, stretching out her small emerald green wings as her front claws reached down my shirt, lifting up to stretch out her paws like a sleepy cat, her plump belly pressing up against me as she shifted to get more comfortable.

Her tail tightened around my neck as she used it to keep her balance.

"We have to get farther from the walls before I can stop and harvest you.

We don't know how long we have before they come after us," I told her, reaching up to give her little draconian nose a small scratch.

My familiar looked like a tiny, miniature dragon, but when I said that to the admissions fairy at the Order Academy, she told me in no uncertain terms I was not to say that ever again.

She said if any actual dragons overheard me, they would be offended, and I didn't

want to offend an actual dragon.

An actual dragon would never agree to be a familiar, she had insisted.

Veveron was a spritekin, a lesser fae, one of the many invisible magical creatures that roamed both the mundane and magical realm.

She had entered into a familiar bond with me because it was her ticket out of the magical drought-stricken mundane and into the magical realm where she could soak in magic like sunrays.

I had gotten into the Order Academy because of her.

Because they liked spicy food.

I eyed the red strands that stuck up along her spine like grass, the little glimmering ruby seeds in them catching the first rays of the morning sun as it peeked out in the distance over the forsaken landscape.

I thought I had gotten in because I had potential, but no, it was because my familiar grew spice on her back.

They aren't coming after us, Veveron murmured.

Other people's familiars were the kind that darted this way and that, working just as hard as their chosen mundanes. Mine wasn't the running about or chatting a lot kind.

Mine ate, slept, and expected regular grooming.

"Why do you say that?" I asked. When I told Ververon what my escape plan was, she responded like she did to everything, just sleepily agreeing to it.

I thought she would argue with me. Orientation made it extremely clear that trying to run away from the school was dangerous, but after a while it also became clear that if I didn't find a way to escape, I'd never get away.

This wasn't the kind of place that just let people go.

Because the hounds are going to eat you, Veveron yawned.

"What hounds?" I hissed.

The hairs on the back of my neck raised as an eerie howl hung in the air. I stopped in my tracks, looking towards the sound. I couldn't see anything in that direction, and from the sound of the howl, it had to be a good distance away.

The wind shifted, giving me a moment of small relief from the heat wafting up from the ground.

Another howl sounded on the other side of me, closer.

The first howl called back, tense and excited. They were talking to each other, pinpointing my location.

"You could have told me about the hounds before I made it over the wall!" I said, breaking out into a jog as my head turned on swivel to look around the empty landscape. I couldn't see anything, no shapes. "They will eat you too!"

I'm too spicy, she said. Nothing will eat me.

Another howl sounded, closer, and my panic picked up.

I'd managed to steal an axe to take with me, because I wasn't going to go tromping

around in some unknown wilderness without food, water, and an axe, but I was in an exposed open area.

There was nothing I could put my back to.

If these hounds were anything like wolves, all they had to do was surround me and one of them would be able to hamstring me from behind.

"You don't know that!" I said. "You've been in the magic realm the same amount of time as I have!

You don't know what is here. Maybe there is something out there that loves spicy little spritekin.

At the very least, at the first settlement you come across, they are going to pick you up and put you in a cage and never pet you or feed you treats.

If I'm around, I can protect you and make sure you get the best treats. "

What kind of treats? she asked.

"New ones you've never tasted before," I said. "The best of the best so you can find your favorite and I can get that for you forever."

That does sound nice, she mused. You will also never order me around ever again.

"When have I ever ordered you around?" I gasped, my mouth drying out as I inhaled rapidly to keep pace with my run. I needed water, but I couldn't take the time to get it out of my backpack. "You know what, never mind. I agree. I'll give you all the treats and never order you around ever again."

You will also do whatever I say, she said.

"Whatever you say!" I said. "I'm the familiar now!"

I accept the bargain, except for the familiar part. I'm not letting you drain my energy. She said as she lifted one claw off my chest and pointed off to my right. Go in there.

"In where?" I asked, even as I shifted my weight, angling my run in the exact direction that she pointed.

I heard an excited yip and I glanced over my shoulder.

Now I could see them.

They were the size of large ponies, with skin that was blackened and cracked with flame, like there was lava running underneath the surface of their mottled skin.

They ran on all fours, and had faces that could be mistaken for a serpent or a canine depending on what angle you were looking.

I caught one glimpse of sharp teeth and sped up, fear overtaking me.

"WHERE?" I screamed, seeing nothing but empty landscape.

Then I tripped and fell forward into purple.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 4:43 am*

Chapter

Two

LORTHION

There was an intruder in my woods.

The trees shivered as something crashed through my barrier, whispering through the leaves as they carried the message to my meadow.

It wasn't one of the flame hounds or the other beasts that roamed the wasteland around the Order Academy, searching for escaping prey.

Those couldn't make it through the magical barrier that protected my ever-growing act of defiance.

Whatever had careened into my land had come from the direction of the school, so it had to be one of two things - a scout, or a student.

Either one posed a danger that I would eliminate.

I rose from my bed of moss, stretching my arms up as the sunlight trickled through the purple leaves of the canopy.

A small bell flower sang out its sweet song as I brushed against it in my journey to my feet.

Whatever had come into my domain would have fresh blood to water the flowers.

Blood was rich in nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium, containing micronutrients that would support another push outwards, lush new growth that would help me expand the borders, taking over even more of the landscape.

I wanted to completely surround the school before they discovered my intrusion.

Fresh blood would help me do it.

I rotated my neck and shoulders, feeling into my body as I inspected the various movements of my joints.

I always stretched after a long sleep, making sure my body felt well rested and ready to face the day's work with vivacity.

As I moved, I whispered my instructions to the trees, letting the full scope of my land carry my intent.

Whoever had wandered in wouldn't find their way out - not before I found them.

Today's work was the best kind of work.

Today I hunted.

I fell to all fours and moved through the forest, my footsteps falling silent as if I had grown from the soil rather than stepped on it.

My body felt good, so I began to move, taking long strides through the forest, each root a familiar knot beneath the underside of my paws.

The birds and animals went silent as I passed.

I was the Lord of this forest and even as I sustained it, I fed on it, from it.

They could sense when I was the safe caretaker, wandering through to admire their lives and their work.

Today I was the hunter, and that meant they treated me as they did every other predator, with respectful silence designed to avoid my attention.

I felt the warmth of sunbeams on my back as I passed through their rays.

I smelled my prey before I saw her.

Her.

I found her on the very edge of the forest, just inside the barrier that hid my land from discovery.

Her scent was thick in the air - the scent of a female, ripe with life and something far more precious to me.

I breathed in the smell. Heat flared in my loins, a stiffening I wasn't expecting, one I'd heard about but never experienced, disrupting my intention to hunt and kill and changing it to hunt, observe, and capture - changing my purpose to something else.

This human was not for feeding the forest.

She was for claiming.

I adjusted, my body changed as my front paws shifted into long fingers.

I reached up to grab a low branch. I swiftly climbed up into the canopy, letting the new shape of my tail wrap around branches to help me keep my balance as I moved swiftly from one old-growth branch to another until I was above the source of that intoxicating scent.

I could feel the hounds on the other side of the barrier, pacing as they waited to see if she would re-emerge.

They knew that to cross the boundary was to enter my domain, and any that entered would feed the roots of my trees.

The mundane human was wearing the garments of the school, the vivid red that marked her as easy prey at the bottom of the unnatural hierarchy there.

The flimsy skirt exposed the thick roundness of her thighs as she sat in a pile of crushed ferns, bent down from the weight of her body falling into them.

She was leaning forward, examining a turquoise bell flower, her eyes wide as the joy on her face radiated onto the flower, just as potent as sunshine.

I could see the flower drinking it in, moving too subtly for a human to notice as it practically shimmered with happiness.

"You are so beautiful," the human said as she brushed a strand of long brown hair behind her ear. She reached out and gently stroked the edge of the petal, and the bellflower sang out.

Then all the flowers around it began to sing with it, delighted at the attention.

"Oh shit!" the human straightened, lurching up to her feet as she clasped both her hands over her mouth for a moment. "No no no, shuuuush!"

She looked all around her, her entire body tense as she waited for something to jump out at her.

It wasn't going to me, not yet.

"Where did the hounds go?" she whispered.

A lump on her shoulder shifted, a spritekin, draconian-shaped.

It was emerald green, and the mohawk of spice leaves growing from its spine labeled it in my mind as a Saffrill, a type of spritekin that lived for a long time if they managed to evade capture by the Aos sí, who valued them for only what they could use them for.

The one on her shoulder was fully grown, which meant it was older than even I was.

Since it was with a mundane human, it must have entered into a familiar bond with her.

Humans were useful for feeding their familiars, or any creature that feasted on them, with magical power.

The Saffrill was likely mind-speaking to its human, given the shifts in the human's facial expression from fear to relief.

Then the Saffrill lifted her claw, pointed directly at me without even so much as glancing at me.

I smiled as the human looked in my direction, her eyes roaming over the leaves that obscured me from her view.

I felt a part of me change, as I let out a thick aroma, my body reacting in kind to the scent of the human.

"Why do I have to be polite to a tree?" the human asked. "Also, why does it smell so good?"

The Saffrill opened and closed her wings rapidly, slapping the leathery skin against the human's cheek.

The human rolled her eyes. "Ok fine."

She walked over to the base of my tree, grabbed the edges of her skirt, and put one foot behind the other. She bent at her knees, pulling her skirt out as she dipped lower for a brief moment. She looked at the Saffrill on her shoulder again. "Servant? Really?"

The Saffrill nodded.

The human took a big breath, then spoke out, staring at the trunk of the tree I perched in. "Oh great Lord of the Forest, please forgive our intrusion and grant us life within your lands. I am the... servant and bearer of the great and wonderful Veveron who seeks a land worthy of her eggs."

The human lowered her voice. "I didn't know you laid eggs."

That explained why the Saffrill had chosen the human.

When it came time for them, they would wander for great distances until they found the perfect nesting place.

This one must not have found any worthy of her in the Mundane and decided to try

her luck by hitching a ride to the magic realm.

However, there was a complication in my accepting their plea.

"You, human, smell like a mate," I said, letting my voice rumble, enhanced by the trees that carried the depths of its vibrations.

The human startled as she looked all around, seeking the origin of my voice. I would let her see me soon, but not as I was. I climbed down the back of the tree so she wouldn't see me, then let my body shift, following the pathways of my intentions, changing to meet the need that I had.

I heard the human's voice, sharp from the other side of the trunk as she argued with her familiar.

"I'm not fucking a tree, even if it can talk!" she snapped.

Excitement pooled with the lust growing in my body, stoked by the scent of her and the crude intention of her words.

There was a moment of silence.

"I don't care what I promised you. Can't just order me to do that, especially not to a tree," the human said. "Consent can be withdrawn at any time."

There was another moment of silence.

"Ok, fine, that will work, but I don't see the point of this unless this tree is an ent or something," the human said. "Oh great tree lord or whatever."

She paused. "You really want it word for word?"

Another pause and the human sighed.

"Oh great Lord of the Forest, I offer you a formal courtship period," the human said.

She lowered her voice to speak to her familiar. "What does that even mean?"

"The offer is accepted," I said, as the trees rustled with my excitement.

I stepped out from behind the tree, letting the human take in the full splendor of my new form, one that had been shaped by the pathways her scent had carved in my mind.

She had brought something new to my forest, a missing element that was more important than blood and death for feeding the rapid expansion of my lands as they took over the wasteland, eating away at the spell that kept the area surrounding the school barren.

This human carried the scent of fertility, a scent that travelled with her as she took a step back in fear at the sight of me.

I would breed her.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 4:43 am*

Chapter

Three

LILLIAN

The most beautiful man I'd ever seen stepped out from behind the tree.

His hair was green, flowing down his back like a waterfall of moss over the edge of a cave.

Two silver antlers rose from his forehead, a crown of flowers twining through them, including the bell-like ones that chimed as he took a step towards me, his ocean eyes pinning my breath in place for a moment before I remembered to breathe, sucking in a breath in a sudden gasp.

His devilish smile widened as my eyes dropped down to his bare chest, chiseled and tawny, glimmering as if he had been rubbed in gold dust. He had the body of a dancer, muscular and lithe, like he could lift me up in the air or spring over my head in a single bound.

Heat flared through me at the sight of him, and I squeezed my thighs together at the sudden rush of desire.

I barely had time to take in the fur leggings that hung down from his hips and the thick bulge in the center of them before he was invading my personal space as if he owned it.

One moment he was by the tree I thought I had been talking to; the next he was in front of me, his body separated from mine by mere inches.

One of his arms wrapped around my waist, and his hand was on my thigh, lifting me up.

I let out a gasp as I was suddenly swept off my feet.

Veveron slithered off my shoulder, gliding down to the ground as the overpowering man moved my leg to wrap around his waist as he carried me back until my back rested against a tree.

His horns were a few inches from my face for a moment, giving me a glimpse of a purple glow that trailed through them like crystal under bone, as he pressed his face against my neck, breathing in as his lips brushed against the sensitive skin.

My entire body awoke at his touch, the hair lifting up on my arms as his hot breath against my skin set fire to my awareness.

"You will ripen with my seed and the forest will feast on the spring of our magic," he murmured, his voice humming against my neck even as it seemed to spiral in and out of the trees around us, a surround sound of deep, masculine longing.

His hand slid up to cup the underside of my breast, sending both heat and panic racing through me.

Then he pressed his hips between my legs, a log of heat separated by the thin fabric of my panties, connecting with my clit to send a throb of need through me.

For a moment, all I could experience was him, holding me, pinning me, touching me, rubbing on me.

Then my brain caught up with the moment.

"Walarhagh!" I garbled out, words completely failing me as I flailed wildly.

One of my hands managed to find his face, and I shoved him, pushing his head and upper body back, even as one of my feet found his thigh and stomped down.

I wiggled upright, scootching my entire body weight up the tree as I got my hips away from his, standing on top of his thighs to do so.

I reached up, grabbing for anything I could find, and my hands found a branch.

I gripped it, lifting my weight up. I tucked my knees to my belly and then kicked him in the chest.

It was like kicking a tree.

He barely moved, but at least he had the decency to look surprised.

He took a slow step back, his ocean eyes narrowing as he stared at me. I hung there from the branch for a long second before I realized there was no way I was pulling myself up, so I let go, falling to the ground with a thud. I lost my balance as I landed, falling back on my butt.

"You resist me," he said, the word resist whispering through the leaves around us.

I opened my mouth, not sure what I was going to say, still in shock at his sudden appearance and voracious assault.

Don't apologize, Veveron said. You must set the bounds of the courtship, or he will decide them for you like he just attempted to do.

Apologize and you turn him into the righteous victim who has been wronged and can take what he wishes in recompense.

Scream or act afraid, and you turn him into a predator who will mount you in the dirt like an animal.

I wasn't going to apologize, but I didn't say that out loud.

I was going to yell at him for attacking me, but what Veveron said stopped that from coming out as well.

Whoever this creature was in front of me, I'd just committed to some sort of courtship with him, and he apparently took that as immediately trying to fuck me.

He was stronger than me, apparently Lord of this Forest, and it was very clear from this little interaction that if he felt like pushing through my resistance, it would be of no difficulty for him.

Veveron was right. I needed to take control of the story of this situation.

I had no idea how to do that, so I said the first thing that popped into my head.

"That isn't how you court a lady!" I said instead, crossing my arms. "I am a lady and you will treat me as one."

Apparently, the first thing in my head was historical fictional romance.

He tilted his head to the side, one of his long ears flicking slightly as he observed me.

Then there was a shimmer in the air. The fur on his legs melted away, leaving behind green pants.

The color crawled up over his bare chest, covering him as it settled into the shape of a formal-looking top, with vines embroidered up and down the sleeves and across the lapel.

The flowers between his horns shifted as well, taking on a metallic gleam as they shifted from a garland to a crown.

He put one arm behind his back, and he gave me a small bow, his other hand on his heart.

"Please forgive me, my lady," he said. "I have acted as a beast. Tell me how I may make this right."

That was different.

I blinked as I stared at his physical and emotional change. He went from falling on me like a wild ravenous beast to wearing clothing and bowing in a matter of seconds.

Food, Veveron said. I'm hungry.

"I require proper lodgings and sustenance," I said, continuing with my overly formal manner of speaking.

If that was what it took to keep this devilishly handsome male's hands off me, I was going to channel all of the snootiness I could muster.

Even as I spoke, I couldn't help but give my words a bit of an accent.

"For myself and my companion. We are tired from our travels. "

Pick me up, I don't want to walk, Veveron ordered as she waddled over to my leg and

sat down next to my foot.

I bent down and picked her up, returning her to my shoulder.

"Please let me escort you," the male said, holding out his arm as if he expected me to take it.

The twinging heat between my legs fed my hesitation as I looked at the strong muscles of his arm, not hidden at all by his new sleeves.

He had thrown me around as if it was nothing, and my body had responded in a way that made me wonder what it would have been like if I hadn't panicked and pushed him away.

"I won't bite," the male said, his nostrils flaring as a devilish glint in his eyes as his smile parted to lips to show the flash of fangs. He leaned towards me. "Unless you want me to."

There was a shimmer in the air, and fur began to sprout from his legs.

"That isn't how you speak to a lady," I snapped.

He straightened, the fur fading back into fabric.

"We haven't even been properly introduced," I said.

"I am Lorthian, Lord of this Forest," he said, bowing again.

"Well met, Lord Lorthian," I said. "I am Lady Lillian, mundane with proper manners who expects to be treated properly like the proper woman that I properly am."

I knew I was saying the word proper too many times, but it wasn't like there was an etiquette book for how to deal with aggressive magical men.

Plus, my familiar didn't say things without reason.

She wouldn't say he would change based on my manner of addressing him unless he actually would change.

Whatever manner of creature Lorthian was, he was one that responded situationally.

Me acting afraid would cause him to act predatory.

If I was too demure or apologetic, he would likely become controlling or assertive.

To keep control of the situation, I had to act like I expected the world to shower me in gold.

He needed to think I had high expectations, not that I would sleep with the first guy who told me he loved me without proving it.

I felt a wince of sadness mixed with embarrassment and pushed it aside. The past didn't matter.

What mattered was right now.

I stuck out my hand.

"You may kiss my hand now," I said.

He took my hand, his fingers lightly stroking the underside of my palm as he leaned down.

His eyes never left mine as his lips brushed over my knuckles.

He didn't so much as kiss as he nibbled, his tongue swirling circles around each one as his teeth lightly caught and released the skin.

I was dumbstruck for a moment, the lower muscles of my groin tightening as a flush rushed through my entire body.

I pulled my hand out of his grasp, the tight throb in my body demanding more even as I pulled away.

He let my hand go and straightened with a chuckle.

"Shall I escort you to safety?" he asked as he held out his arm again.

"Yes, you may," I agreed, putting my arm through his.

Whatever this place was, it was better than where I came from and where I just was.

As long as I kept up the act, I might get what I wanted.

The heat curling between my legs made me wonder exactly what kind of thing I actually wanted.



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 4:43 am*

Chapter

Four

LORTHION

Lillian reached out a hand as we strolled, her palm brushing against the glowing purple petals of a bulbous flower shaped like an orb with its inner glow shining through the cracks between its connected petals.

The flower bent under her touch before she released it, letting it swing up in the air, bobbing back and forth.

Her palm caught a dusting of pollen on the outside of the petals, which she brushed against the next flower she passed.

"Why does it glow?" she asked. "The flower? It's midday, isn't it?"

She looked up at the sun that shone directly overhead, its warm rays muted by the thick green and purple canopy.

"It glows all the time," I said. "During the day, its petals remain folded up like that and at night they open and illuminate everything around them."

"It's lovely," she said, a bright smile on her face as she glanced over at me.

"You are lovely," I told her as I studied her face, seeing the pulsing network of magic

that hummed beneath her skin.

I hadn't ever had a mundane enter my forest before.

I knew the risk would grow greater as my forest grew closer to the walls of the school, even though I stayed well away from the main road and the entrance.

Any student escaping would run the risk of colliding with my borders.

She wasn't what I expected. The sirens had told me that the mundanes were fearful.

She didn't act afraid or smell of fear. The moment her eyes fell on me, all I smelled was her lust, calling to me the way a siren never could.

She flushed in response to my gaze and looked down at the ground, stepping carefully over a root as she avoided my eyes.

"Tell me, Lord Lorthion," she said, emphasizing the word Lord. "Why couldn't I see your forest? There is lava and shit. I mean, excuse my language, the land looks as if it would be impossible for plants to thrive. How is your forest even able to grow?"

"The land needs the forest," I said, taking a concept that was integral to my very being and trying to put it into words. "Life is Chaos, and so my seed was planted in response to Order scouring the land. The land needs the forest and the forest needs to be hidden to grow, so I hide as I grow."

"Are you a plant then? Like, are you a tree fae or something like that?"

" she asked, reaching out to lightly touch the underside of a young platform mushroom that jutted from the side of a tree above our heads.

She stroked her fingertips along its frills, and I let my senses drift out so that I felt the touch like it was my own skin.

The sensation was delicious. She wasn't one of the many creatures or plants that made up me.

Her touch was the touch of someone other than myself, and the sensation was unique in its gentleness.

"I am the forest lord," I said.

We walked past the underside of the mushroom, and there was a large fruiting tree. I had kept its lower branches intact and fed so that some of my shorter animals could reach them, and the plump, round yellow fruit hung down in gorgeous ripe globes.

"I am from the Mundane Realm," she said. "And I don't know anything about what forest lords are."

I was not used to speaking with others, even if I had the words to do so. It was easier to explain with actions. My eyes fell on the fruit.

"Pick one," I said, pointing at the fruit.

She reached up and wrapped her hand around one of the globes, her palms soft and sensitive as she pulled gently on the ripe body. It came free, and I felt the shiver of relief that accompanied an offering being taken so it no longer had to be supported by the energy of the trunk anymore.

She pressed her nose against it and smelled it.

"You see the fruit and know it looks good," I said.

"You smell the fruit and know it smells edible.

A forest lord is the sight and smell, the hand that reaches and the mouth that tastes.

The forest is the blood and bones and body, while the forest lord is the mind that decides how best to grow and what to taste. "

"Is it edible?" she asked.

"It is edible for your kind," I told her.

She bit into the skin.

"It's delicious," she moaned. She took another bite and green juice ran down the corners of her cheeks, dripping down towards her chin.

She giggled and let go of my arm so she could reach up to wipe it, but she only managed to get a little before more dribbled down with the next bite.

The Saffrill unwrapped her tail from the human's neck, pulling it out of the way of the mess.

I leaned down and licked the juice off her chin, tasting the edge of her jawbone.

She let out a gasp and tilted her head to the side, exposing the side of her jugular to me.

Juice dribbled down and I chased it, tasting the sweet nectar as I felt the heat of her blood throb through the soft skin of her neck.

I snaked my arm around her to hold her as I licked the flavor off of her, and her body

melted against mine, soft and ripe like the fruit she consumed.

The scent of her desire filled the air again.

I wanted to run my hands down her body, to find the edge of her skirt and let my fingers explore underneath its boundaries.

But she had resisted before.

I knew how the animals within my boundaries procreated, both with courtship and aggression.

The males that attacked ran a risk of having the female fight against them, leading to injury on one or the other.

That wasn't what I needed. I would not get what I wanted simply from taking it, as fruit plucked before it was ready tasted bitter and held seeds not ready to be planted.

Ripeness was offered, not taken.

I lifted my head to see her eyes were half lidded, her chest heaving as one of her hands pressed against my chest, pushing slightly even as her fingers clenched at the fabric like she might pull me back if I let her go.

"You are all clean now," I told her.

I released her slowly, and she swallowed audibly, her eyes wide as she stared at me.

"I..." she said, her voice small as she lifted her free hand, juice still sticky on her fingers.

"Mmmm." I took her wrist and pulled her hand towards me so I could lick the juice from her skin, sucking it from her fingers as I swirled my tongue around them.

She let out a gasp and shifted her stance so her legs were closer together.

I let go of her wrist, enjoying the aroma that wafted up.

She bit her lip and gazed at me, her eyes tightening with intention.

Then she shifted again, sticking one of her legs forward as she held her fruit over it. Juice ran down the side as she squeezed, and several drops fell down to hit the soft skin on the inside of her knee.

"Oh no," she said. "I'm so messy."

I knelt down, and she sucked in a loud audible breath as my hand closed around her calf.

I took my time cleaning the juice from her skin, licking it several times to make sure she was nice and clean.

When I glanced up, I saw her other hand was gripping the bottom of her skirt.

She began to lift it, exposing the inside of her thigh.

The Saffrill on her shoulder let out a hiss, and Lillian let go of her skirt, stepping back from me even as the flush in her face deepened. She moved the fruit within the Saffrill's reach, and the tiny spritekin took it from her and began to munch on it with no dribble.

Lillian cleared her throat. "Veveron wants to see where we will be staying."

I rose to my feet, focusing my senses on the project I had started. I knew what Lillian would be to me the moment I scented her, and so she would live in the place that was the safest in the entire forest, my center. "Let me show you your home."

"Home?" she asked. "I thought... we don't want to impose."

She took a step back from me, like a deer uncertain whether it should flee or freeze.

"A place to rest," I amended. "You may stay as long as you like."

The branches of the tree behind Lillian curled towards her, reaching out as if they would snag her and hold her close. I didn't like saying those words, not when every part of me screamed that she was mine. Mine to keep. Mine to protect.

I relaxed the branches, calming them so they didn't grab her.

Courting was convincing, and she had asked to be convinced to stay, not forced to stay.

Part of convincing was her feeling that she could leave.

Even if I would never let her go.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 4:43 am*

Chapter

Five

LILLIAN

"Holy mushrooms," I gasped as I looked at the scene in front of me.

I stepped into the clearing, and the air shifted.

Wetter, thicker, humming faintly with the breath of lush old growth.

Purple plants glowed around the perimeter; those globe-like flowers organized in regular intervals as if they were lights along a garden fence.

The broad leaves of the undergrowth around them were slick with dew, edges fuzzed with soft bristles.

I took another step forward and could smell mint.

I looked down to see a mint-like plant forming a woven dense green pathway leading from where I stood to the center.

At the center, a tree rose. Massive, gnarled, the color of dark ironwood streaked with moss-veined silver, its bark was furrowed deep with age.

Huge flat mushrooms, reminiscent of artist conks but much bigger, spiraled along the



trunk, jutting from the bark in wide pink-and-purple shelves.

The lower ones were small, flat, like outstretched palms. Higher up, they thickened and widened, some broad enough to hold two people side-by-side.

They formed a spiral staircase up the tree's flank.

Up high, the mushrooms were even larger, and they held rounded dome-shaped buildings with circular windows and doors.

Several of the mushroom platforms were connected with bridge walkways lined with woven grass railings.

From the edge of one of the lower mushrooms, a waterfall spilled clean over the side, hissing down into a catch basin of polished rock below.

It fed into a clear stream that snaked across the clearing, the edge lined with smooth stones and fernlike stalks.

"I thought the mushrooms I had to grind up in the kitchen were big," I said as I craned my neck to look up at the buildings in the tree.

"I got the idea from the Aetheriani ambassador who visited," Lorthian replied. "He described their palace and the thought took shape."

"Ambassador?" I asked. "I thought you were all hidden."

"I don't hide from allies of Chaos," Lorthian said.

Unease rolled in my stomach as I glanced over at him.

I wondered if I should say it at all. Growing up, it always seemed like any discussion of one team versus another would lead to angry arguments, whether that team was sports, politics, or ideas.

The people around me always seemed to argue to win, not to argue to try to convince the other person to shift their views.

"Isn't Chaos evil?" I asked. "At the Order Academy, all they teach is that all the wrongs in the world were caused by the Chaos God. He made monsters and stuff."

"Did you run from your school because it was good?" Lorthian asked.

I shook my head. "No."

I ran from the school because it was a trap; they made it clear that my life was disposable, and when I tried to find help to get away from a guy who stalked me after I broke up with him, there was no help to be found.

Every part of my experience there that had to do with keeping Order was anything but goodness.

Show me my nest, Veveron demanded.

She shifted on my shoulder, as if she was uncomfortable.

"Veveron wants to see where she can nest," I said.

Lorthian lifted an arm and pointed at one of the rounded buildings that was surrounded by the others. "Her domain is close to the center."

Veveron lifted her head. Protected. Good. Go now.

She dug the tips of her claws into my shoulder.

I headed down the path to the tree. When I stepped onto the first mushroom step, my hand against the firm trunk of the tree, there was no give under my foot.

I stepped up, step after step. I walked past the first level and up to the second where the bulk of the buildings were.

Making my way along the woven grass bridge that connected the buildings, I got to the one in the center.

When I put my hand on the door, it was spongy and soft, and I realized there was a second smaller door at the base of it.

Inside the room was a greenhouse.

Half of the ceiling was clear, letting in light from above as the other half provided shade. There was a stream running through the plants that grew inside the building, and a lifted patch of sand directly in the sunlight, steaming with heat. The room was fragrant with the smell of fruit and herbs.

Put me down, Veveron said, not floating down as she had done previously.

I plucked her off my shoulder and carefully set her down. Something squeaked and rustled in the bushes, and her head swiveled, sniffing the air.

"Is this to your liking?" Lorthian asked.

Tell him I approve, Veveron said.

"She likes it," I told him.

Now leave. Do not bother me, Veveron said.

"You don't want me to groom you first?" I asked.

I will come find you when I want you, she replied.

"You got it," I said, and headed out of the building and shut the door behind me.

"It is a perfect nest for a Saffrill. There are foods of many types, including a rodent for hunting that will not bother her eggs or young," Lorthian said. "She will not emerge until after her eggs are hatched."

"I didn't even know she laid eggs," I sighed.

Then I rolled my shoulders, reaching up to rub one.

There was a stiffness in my neck from climbing up a wall, rappelling down it, and then running for my life.

The only reason I knew how to do that was because I used to go to the climbing gym with my family back in the Mundane realm, but I never did anything quite so risky as I did trying to escape that place.

Sadness washed over me.

I went to the school interview thinking I would go back home afterwards and be a witch or something of that sort. Instead, I got the reality of slavery in the guise of debt repayment and no way home. I never should have come.

"Let me show you your home," Lorthian said, his voice rich with an edge of eagerness I couldn't match.

That word caused me to flinch again, but I nodded.

I followed him to another building. He opened the door, but I didn't step inside. I could see a lush, looking room, almost cottage core in its coziness... but I couldn't bring myself to care. It wasn't the rooms that mattered to me.

"There is a bathing chamber with hot water to soak in," Lorthian said. "I have prepared a dinner for you to feast upon. This can be your home."

With his words, all of the exhaustion and terror, the flight and the homesickness, all came crashing down on me at once. One tear, then another, began to slip down my cheeks even as I lifted my hand to try to wipe them away.

"You are crying," Lorthian said.

"I'm fine," I said as I swiped furiously at my face, unable to stop the flow. "I'm fine. Everything is fine. I'll be fine."

"But you are crying," Lorthian said.

"I'm just tired, I'll be okay," I said, the tears still sliding down my cheeks. I sniffled.

"You don't like it when I say the word home," Lorthian said. "You are crying now after I said it, and before you recoiled from me."

"I just..." I sniffed again, trying to get those stupid tears from exposing me.

I didn't want him to see me crying. I didn't want anyone to see my crying.

I was tough. I could handle any and all of this.

Of all the times I could have broken down since I got to this realm, now that I was relatively safe was not the moment I thought I would start.

"I just miss my home. I miss my family."

"This can be your home," Lorthian said, repeating himself from earlier.

I couldn't contain it.

The dam burst and I sat down on the ground, tucked my legs to my chest, and pressed my face into my knees. I couldn't stop the sobs, so I muffled them, crying into my legs with garish, ugly sounds that reflected the pushed-down sorrow I'd carried around for too long.

I don't know how long I cried like that, but when I eventually lifted my head to look around,

Lorthian was gone.

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Chapter

Six

LORTHION

When the final growth was finished, and the branches towered high overhead, I stepped back, waves of exhaustion overcoming me.

I'd been away from the forest for too long.

I hadn't taken a risk like this in a long time, separating from my lands to overextend myself like this.

I put my hand on the newly grown trunk, the fresh growth of my forest too young to feed me, too far from the main bulk of my woods.

This wasn't my first outpost, but it was the most important.

"Who are you?" a small voice piped up.

I looked down towards the sound, to see a young child standing next to me.

She was holding a stuffed beige rabbit doll with a torn ear that had been re sewn with red thread.

There was a patch of fabric sewn over both of her knees; the trousers she had were

worn and grey close to the edges of the patches.

A smudge of dirt on her otherwise clean cheeks matched the smears of dirt on her hands and forearms, like she had been digging around in the dirt with her fingers.

"I am Lorthion, a forest lord," I said as I crouched down so that my face was level with hers. I could hear my voice softening, becoming gentler and kinder sounding in its tonality.

"You look funny. Are you like a familiar?" the child asked. "Do you grow spice on your back?"

"In a way," I said. "There are many edible herbs that grow in my forest."

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I am planting trees around this land," I told her.

"Why?" she asked.

"The Lady Lillian indicated a need I could not fulfill on my own," I told the child. "Courting requires attention to the needs and desires of another. I have identified a need of hers to return to this place, so I am preparing what I need to fulfill that need should she express it again."

The child's eyes widened into huge saucers.

"Lil?" she asked, her voice going high and squeaky. "Lill is coming back?"

"The trees must grow for that to happen," I said.



"What do they need to grow?" the child asked.

"Water, light, nourishment," I said. "They must be fed the ingredients of life."

"Can I help?" she asked.

I tilted my head to the side and gave her a soft smile.

Then I extended my hand, holding out my fist. I shifted my energy, pooling it into my palm as I created a gem there. I flipped my fist over as I opened it, revealing a small collection of seeds that sat in the center.

She tucked her bunny under her armpit and held out both of her hands. I poured the seeds into them.

"Each tree must be planted with enough space from the others to grow but close enough that it can support its fellows with its roots since there is no mother tree here to nurture them," I said.

"They should be watered so that the water soaks down deep into the earth for their roots to follow.

The deeper the roots can go, the sturdier the tree.

We must form a circle around this house to protect it, and I haven't gotten to the front yet. Do you think you can do that?"

The child nodded, her face solemn and serious. "Yes."

"Anna!" called out a voice from inside the house. "Where are you?"

"I'm outside, mamma," the child called back.

As the screen door pushed open, revealing a woman with grey hair and the deep-set lines of age carved into her face, I melted back into the shade, letting the new trees disguise me. "What are you doing out there?"

"I'm planting trees!" the child called back.

"Well, come inside before you get a sunburn," the older woman said.

"I have to plant these seeds out front!" Anna said. "So Lilil can come back!"

The woman didn't say anything for a long moment before responding. "You're planting trees because you think it will bring her back? What gave you that idea?"

"The forest spirit!" Anna said. "He said planting trees might bring her back."

The woman pressed her lips together for a moment as she scanned my new trees that had taken root in the backyard.

Her eyes fell on me and moved on, unable to pick me out from the trunk behind me.

I had coaxed them to a size where their shade would fall on the roof of the small house, protecting its peeling paint from the harsh summer heat, and they would be unmissable by a mundane willing to see them.

Those that were not willing would just assume the trees had always been there and they never noticed.

"Let me get my hat," the older woman said. "I'll help you."

"Thanks, mamma," Anna called out.

"Come in and get your hat too," the woman said.

The child ran back across the uneven grass that filled the backyard, small bursts of yellow flowers crunching under her feet as she trampled the small plants that popped up every so often in the square mat of dried-out grass.

My new trees created a soft shade that would shelter the ragged lawn, allowing it protection from the hot sun so it could grow lush again.

The metal screen back door slammed shut behind the child, and I turned to the tree, ready to return so I could rest.

I had been away too long.

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*Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 4:43 am*

Chapter

Seven

LILLIAN

I hadn't seen the Lord of the Forest in days.

At first, the absence was a relief. I spent my time exploring the treehouse, finding the bathing chamber, and luxuriating in the hot wooden tub which never seemed to run out of hot water.

There were herbs growing in that room as well, but in front of each one were bars of soap and clay containers of lotion and cleansers.

There was one pair of containers with a lavender scented shampoo and conditioner.

At least I guessed that was what they were for, as nothing had labels, and my hair smelled great and was silky afterwards.

There was fresh fruit and vegetables growing all over the place, and one of the buildings had a table with chairs and some counters against a wall with a sink and a stove.

The stove surprised me, as it was an induction cooktop that looked like it was taken straight out of the store and plopped onto the stone counter underneath it.

I couldn't figure out where the power was coming from, as there weren't any electrical outlets, but it heated up the metal pans that were hung on the wall next to it just fine.

There was a small flock of chickens that slept on some of the lower branches of the tree.

I discovered them when I stepped in chicken poop on one of the mushroom steps on my way down to explore the meadow around the tree. I was able to find one of their nests.

Thankfully, I had a flashlight I'd brought with me from the mundane years ago that still worked fine, so I was able to candle the eggs and nab the ones that didn't look like they had any embryo development. I marked the ones that did, so I wouldn't grab them and crack them open later.

The fruit and plants that grew in the treehouse never seemed to go bad.

At first, that confused me, but on my second day wandering about by myself, I spotted a primate sitting on the kitchen counter eating a fruit.

It gave a little shriek when I walked into the room and scampered out the window, its arms full of plant matter.

When I went over to its exit, I found a few dead leaves.

It had been picking fruit and pruning the dead bits off the plants.

After that, I made sure to wash the counters with one of the soaps I found before I began cooking as well as after.

One of the buildings was a library, and though I couldn't read all of the books, there

were enough I could read, and I'd learned enough from my Basics of Spellcrafting class my first year to start working my way through a magical instruction book I could read.

Several chapters in, I had to put it down.

I was so angry. I took a long walk through the meadow at the base of the tree to calm down, staring into the water to see the fish.

There was more in those few chapters than in all my classes back at the Order Academy.

Apparently, there was an entirely different way of casting magical spells, called Chaos Magic, that didn't require me to stick to the strict form and function that the school insisted I was incapable of ever mastering.

All I had to do was master focusing my attention and my intention on a goal.

So I kept to the treehouse and the meadow, reading books and trying to figure out if there was any way I could learn how to cast a portal spell. I didn't wander.

I was tired.

I had spent so much time focusing on my escape, planning for it, stressing about it, that when it came to actually doing it, I was worn down by anxiety and hyped up on adrenaline all at the same time.

Climbing the wall and getting down the other side was a substantial physical effort, and the psychological toll of finding the barren wasteland on the other side was substantial.

Now that I was safe as far as I could tell, well fed, and able to rest without overwhelming fear that I had been living with every day since Orientation made it clear to me

But that didn't mean the fear wasn't still there, lurking in the background of my mind.

Veveron hadn't emerged from the nesting chamber, and the few times I checked on her, she told me to go away.

I had time to myself, books to read, food to eat, and a place to rest where I woke up in the morning hearing birds singing outside my window.

At the school, we always kept our dorm room windows shut at the advice of one of the few upperclass mundanes.

She said we were safe inside the dorms, but that didn't mean we couldn't be dragged out of them if we left an opening.

Before Orientation, I might have thought the upper class mundane was just trying to scare me.

Afterwards, the fear grew roots deep into my heart and even as I rested in the comfort of the treehouse, it never quite retracted its claws.

In the background of my mind, there was a running worry.

What if this was a trap of a different sort?

I couldn't completely trust Veveron. She had saved my life by bringing me to this forest, but at the same time, I never would have been accepted into the school without her.

After three days on my own, I began to get worried.

Lorthian had seemed to be really into me in a way that was overwhelming when I was exhausted and emotionally fragile from risking my life fleeing from the Order Academy.

The fact that he had left me alone for so long was a surprising difference from the wild man who had pounced on me the moment he saw me.

Left to my own devices, my mind began to wonder if I had offended him in some way.

My ex had made sure that if I offended him, we would have to go over every detail of my transgression until I apologized to his full satisfaction.

Being ignored was a new one for me. Then again, maybe I didn't offend him and maybe he was just put off by my sobbing.

He was some sort of magical forest god after all.

Perhaps my mundane tears made me suddenly unappealing.

If that was the case, then good riddance.

I had been tempted, so tempted, to the point where if Veveron hadn't stopped me, I would have dribbled that fruit juice all the way up my thigh just to see what he would do.

I didn't need to be doing stuff like that if he was the kind to get bored because I was exhausted and homesick.



After the fifth day, I bothered Veveron again.

"I'm worried about Lorthian," I called through the door. "He's been gone this whole time. What if he is in trouble?"

The forest is still alive, Veveron said.

"I'm going to go look for him, you don't have to come, obviously," I said, making up my mind. He had saved me from the hounds and provided a safe haven for Veveron and me.

If the whole forest burns to the ground, if even one seedling manages to push through the blackened soil, he is still alive, Veveron said.

"But what if he is trapped?" I asked. "What if they captured him?"

I didn't need to elaborate on who they were.

There was an entire Order army camping inside the school walls.

The dessicated grounds surrounding the school were there on purpose.

I was certain that if the army knew that the forest was here, they would come to destroy it.

At the same time, I didn't understand why I was so worried about him.

I just met him; he was magical and much stronger than I was. I didn't need to be worrying about him.

A thread of fear gnawed at me. Maybe it was that I was worrying about what he was

doing.

Just don't leave the boundaries of the forest, Veveron said.

I had to leave the forest. I didn't climb the wall and risk my life to spend the rest of my days as some forest lord's pet... or mate... or whatever it was he wanted with me.

"I thought you'd be better off without a human holding you back with a familiar bond," I said.

You're not going to stay a human if you stay here, Veveron said. I like the idea of having a forest lady owe me a favor.

"What does that mean?" I asked. "What do you mean I won't stay a human?"

There was silence from the other side of the door.

"Veveron, don't play games with me," I said. "Tell me what you mean."

If the forest lord takes you as his mate, you'll change, she said. Like a flower changes to a fruit.

"Fruits get eaten," I said.

With care, they can turn into forests, she replied.

"I don't know about any of that," I said, feeling uneasy about how much I didn't know. If I changed, would I still be me? I didn't want to lose myself.

Then don't mate with him, she said. Keep your lust to yourself and he will stay outside the edges of your foolish boundaries. Stay a weak and fragile mundane if that

is really what you want. Now leave me alone.

I left her alone, returning to my room to pack up a backpack.

I'd been eating fresh food for days, but that wouldn't work for travel rations, so I boiled some eggs just in case I couldn't find anything.

I took a knife from the kitchen and with some effort managed to set fire to a small branch and get the end of it nice and charcoaled.

I needed some way to mark where I had been so I could find my way back.

I'd only taken a few steps into the forest, marking the first trees with charcoal marks, when a branch snagged my hair.

I reached up to untangle it, and the branch moved, tugging at me before letting go.

I turned to walk a different way when a vine caught my ankle.

I hopped on one foot for a second as I reached down to unhook it, and the vine tightened before my eyes like a living thing, and gave my foot a gentle pull, in the same direction that the branch had tugged me. I took a step in that direction and the vine unwrapped, slithering back into the forest.

"You want me to go that way?" I asked, pointing in the direction the vine and branch had tugged.

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*Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 4:43 am*

The leaves on the trees around me all rustled, as if a sudden gust of wind had careened through them, but I didn't feel any breeze. No shifting of air brushed against my arms. No hair moved out of place. Just the sound of leaves tapping against one another without a cause I could sense.

I began to walk in that direction. My boots pressed into the soil so soft it nearly cupped the soles, moss giving slightly under each step.

Branches arched overhead, woven together so thickly in places that they filtered the sunlight into shifting latticework.

Any time I turned away, another branch, or vine, or bush seemed to slide in front of me, roots curling from below, fronds hanging just low enough to snag at my hair or wrap gently around my wrist. The forest tugged, subtly insistent, until I stopped resisting and let it guide me.

I moved forward, not in a straight line but nudged gently left or right by soft interference.

The air smelled fresh and sharp, crushed leaves, damp bark, and the sweet tang of flowers.

The many varieties of flowers and plants caught my eye.

I'd grown up in worn-down suburbia, with metal bars on the windows and metal-fenced cramped backyard lawns that dried out in the summer, the street heavy with the smell of hot asphalt and car exhaust. It was the kind of neighborhood where

people cut down their trees thinking they were a nuisance for maintenance, saying the roots would ruin the sidewalk or leaves clog their gutters, but I knew better.

The rare drives through wealthier neighborhoods in my city; the one thing they all had in common was that they had old-growth trees, big towering things that I found out later were protected by city ordinances.

I had planted a few saplings in the front yard after applying to a free tree program run by a non-profit, only to have someone cut them down overnight, leaving stumps that struggled to grow leaves again.

The forest, and the life that it protected, was lush and diverse.

There were so many colors and songs, blossoms and fruits, vines twining up trees and marsupials chattering from branches.

At one point, a plump deer that was no taller than my knee but looked full-grown crossed my path, giving me a curious look before sedately continuing on its journey.

Green and purple were the colors that dominated, and there were multiple plants that had a glow to them that signaled they would light up the night to attract their pollinators.

When I stepped out into a small, sun-speckled clearing, I stopped to take a break, setting down my backpack and sitting down on a thick mound of moss that piled up at the base of a tree. I lay down on the pile of moss, sinking into the softness that was just as good as a bed.

After a moment, something shifted under my leg.

I lifted my head to look down, but then suddenly the whole mound was moving,

shifting under me like a living carpet.

I didn't have time to get off of it as it rolled me, a magic carpet ride that only went horizontal and down, sliding off of the mound to the flatter surface of the forest floor and tumbling me until I rolled up against something hard, warm, and man-shaped. It wasn't a carpet, but a blanket.

My hand landed on a warm, muscular chest as my body pressed up against his side.

I looked up at the slumbering form of the Lord of the Forest.

His eyes were closed, his face soft and relaxed even as it was tilted towards me, inches away from my own face, with the same inhuman beauty that made my heart ache a little to look at him.

I knew I shouldn't be taken in by a pretty face and chiseled abs.

Beauty did not equal goodness, but there was still a part of me that wanted to reach forward and brush a lock of his green hair from his forehead.

I stared at his lips, so close to me, remembering how they felt on my neck, and wondered what it would be like to kiss him.

I let out a sigh at the thought.

If I woke him with a kiss, he would likely wake up, flip me over, and fuck me in the moss.

The lower muscles in my abdomen tightened at the thought, squeezing in and lifting up in anticipation at the thought.

After I had rested, I had spent a good amount of my time thinking about how he came onto me hard and fast, pushing past my hesitation but stopping right at the point where it was far too much for me to handle.

I really liked it. I wanted more of it, more of him.

Even just laying here next to him was setting me on fire.

But just because he had licked my knee five days ago didn't mean he wanted me to kiss him while he was sleeping.

It also didn't mean I wanted to turn into some sort of fruit.

I was pretty sure Veveron was using the fruit example as a metaphor, but there was always the chance she meant it literally.

At the very least, fruit was meant to be eaten, and this guy was a feral forest deity.

Who knew what would happen if I gave in to my desires.

What I did know is that I couldn't sit here and just keep staring at his stupid gorgeous face anymore if I wanted to avoid kissing it.

"Lord Lorthian," I said in a soft voice, just above a whisper.

The corner of his lip twitched as if he were suppressing a smile, but he didn't open his eyes. His breath remained calm and steady, not changing as it would if he were going from a deep sleep to awakening.

I pressed my lips together as I thought about how the forest had guided me, how the moss blanket rolled me just perfectly so that I would smoosh up against his naked

chest. He could control the forest, right?

I sat up abruptly, looking down at him as he remained, the perfect image of peaceful slumber.

That heat in my body roared with mischief, the desire to play with him the way he was playing with me, even if it was playing with fire.

Besides, Veveron said he had to take me as his mate.

She didn't say I would change if I just fooled around with him.

I let my gaze drop down his body, then let my head follow, moving my lips so that they were mere inches from those mouth-watering abs.

I didn't touch them, I just breathed on his skin, letting my hair brush against his flesh.

His hips twitched, small suppressed movements in response to my teasing.

I got lower, to the spot where his silk pants were melting into a lush fur, a happy trail starting just under his belly button.

The trail led to a heavy mound between his legs, one that changed from a cloth-covered bulge to a fleshy sack as I watched.

I scooted down, my breasts pressing against his thigh, my arm snaking over the other side of him to support myself as I leaned down, brushing my nose against the sensitive skin that was oh so close to the penetrating power between his legs but not quite there.

He smelled like vanilla and honey, and my mouth began to water.



I didn't hesitate. I bit him there, just below the belly button, not hard enough to break skin but hard enough to demand his full attention.

"Lady Lillian," he said, a wicked chuckle underlining his words. "Do you mean to eat me?"

I looked up to see him sitting up on his elbows and smiling down at me, the crinkling in the corner of his eyes sending a flutter through my chest. His looking at me with such joyfulness triggered a happiness in my own heart that was sharp and beautiful at the same time.

I licked my lips and his eyes flicked down to them, his smile growing wider.

"I don't know," I said. "Depends on if you think you can hold still or not."

Roots shot out of the ground, wrapping around his wrists and ankles and pinning them back down against the ground. His grin grew wider and he lifted one eyebrow as if in a challenge.

"My body is yours to play with," he said, his voice deep and sultry.

I opened my mouth, exposing my teeth as if I was going to bite him again, but instead of chomping, I planted a soft kiss, just a little lower down from his belly button, a few inches away from the sack that had grown more taunt.

I could see a narrow pink tip poking out from a fold in the sack.

I moved lower, kissing as I went, the scent of vanilla and honey growing stronger as his thick length began to emerge from the sack.

I planted a kiss as close as I could get without touching, and he groaned, straining

against the restraints he placed on himself as he lifted his hips, brushing himself against me.

I moved my head up so I could see better.

His length had slid out what I hoped was entirely given that it was a lot larger than I was used to, leaving the sack hanging under it like a normal one would if he were out all the time.

He was thick and tawny, perhaps eight or nine inches but I couldn't be sure, with a girth too wide to close my fingers around which was a bit concerning, but the tip of him was narrow, so if I did decide to go all the way with him it should start off easy and stretch me out as he went, though I wasn't sure he couldn't fully fit all the way.

At the base near the top, where the flesh of his sack had folded back, was a series of ridged bumps, one of which jutted up like a soft padded hook.

I leaned down and touched it with my tongue, eliciting a gasp from him. It was firm yet soft to my touch.

"That is sensitive," he murmured. "Please don't bite it."

I glanced up at him to see him still smiling at me.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I do not know," he replied. "It is new."

I sat up to look at him better. "A part of your dick is new?"

He nodded. "All of it is new."

"All of it?" I repeated.

He nodded again. "I provide what my mate needs."

I let out a sigh, torn between wanting to lick his length and see if it tasted as good as it smelled and knowing that there was stuff that had to come first.

"Listen," I said, sitting up to kneel next to him. "I'm not your mate."

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 4:43 am*

"Yes," he agreed. "I am courting you so you will become my mate."

"What if I choose not to?" I asked. "What if I choose to be with someone else?"

"Then I will kill him," Lorthian said in the same pleasant tone.

I blinked.

I opened my mouth then closed it, struggling to find words in response to that. As my brain short-circuited, the roots retracted from Lorthian's wrists, and he sat up to face me, putting one arm over my knees so he could lean in closer to me.

"I will eliminate any who dream of trying to steal you away," Lorthian said, his tone more earnest. "I will protect you and all you hold dear until my last leaf falls."

He leaned in closer, and I put my hand on his chest.

"You just met me," I said.

"Yes," he agreed.

"You can't be threatening to murder people you don't know just because they might show interest in me in the future," I said.

He tilted his head to the side, one of his ears flicking.

"You will be mine and mine alone," he said. "No other may have you."

"I'm not..." I said, feeling uncomfortable with what I needed to say. "You know I'm not a virgin, right? I've already been with someone else."

"Whoever he was, he failed to court you and claim you as his mate," Lorthian said. "He is of no consequence or worth."

"Listen, Forest Lord, my ex failed to court me because he didn't actually like me; he just saw me as someone he could use," I said.

"You don't know if you actually like me.

We've spent one day together, and sexual chemistry doesn't mean emotional or mental compatibility.

We need to spend more time together to know if we actually want to commit. "

"Time is of no matter," Lorthian said.

"It matters to me," I said. "Lots of things matter to me."

"Tell me what matters to you," he said, his tone intent.

That was quite a question.

"My family, friends, learning new things, eating good food, listening to music, laughing, learning new ways to move my body, I don't know, there are so many things," I said.

"I don't even know all the things that matter because I've only lived a small portion of my life.

Are the same things that matter to me now going to matter to me when I'm old and grey? "

"You will never be old and grey unless you wish to appear that way," Lorthian said.

"Hold up," I said. "What?"

"As my mate, we will live as long as our forest lives, spending mundane lifetimes learning every detail about what might matter to you in the future," he said.

"I'll have to watch my family grow old and die without me?" I asked, thinking of Anne. What a horror that would be, to stay young forever and know that everyone I ever loved would die while I lived on with nothing but their memories.

"You will be able to make them a part of your forest if they so wish," he said. "That is what you requested when you asked for life within the forest."

"Oh," I said.

"I could not give that to you," he continued. "Because you are mine. Not mine to consume or sustain, but mine to partner with, to grow with. Breeding you will bring new life to our forest and cause a great expansion, far more than I could do on my own."

"Breeding..." I said, knowing my eyes were as wide as they could go.

The word was accompanied by a flash of intense longing so sharp it took my breath away, forcing my mind back to the aching part of my heart that knew loss like no other.

It was that never-ending pain that drove me to risk my life going over the wall in the

first place, that excruciating need to get back.

I had to get back.

"Yes," he said, his voice dropping lower, taking on an animalistic growl as he leaned his chest into my palm, pushing it back as his face drew closer to mine, forcing all of my attention back to his undeniable presence.

I leaned back, untucking my legs from under me to scoot back, but his arm had snaked behind me, lifting up as he continued to press forward towards me.

I felt the soft moss under my back as he laid me down in it, my mind whirling round and round.

I wanted this, I wanted to get away, I wanted to touch him, I wanted to go home.

His hand was on my thigh, sliding up under my skirt, leaving trails of fire.

His hand found my underwear, and his finger slid along my crease, pressing the fabric against me as he stroked in time with his words that he enunciated like they were delicious bites.

"Filling you with my seed. Tasting your pleasure. Mounting you. Fucking you."

I couldn't stop the moan from slipping from my lips as I lifted my hips into his touch.

His knee was between mine, pushing one of my legs to the side.

His fingers found the top edge of my underwear, and he slipped his hand inside, sliding his fingers through my hair and my wet folds, desperate desire causing me to clench and writhe with the need to have him inside me, on top of me, taking me.

My hands were still on his chest. I was still pushing him away even as I rocked my hips into his touch.

"Wait," I gasped out.

"But you need me," he growled.

His hand stilled its movement, and it took every bit of my willpower not to rub myself against his touch.

"Courtship requires patience," I said, my words breathy in the soft air of the forest as I sought an escape that wasn't a rejection.

He withdrew his hand from my underwear, lifting it up to his mouth as he took in a deep breath, his eyes closing as he licked the glistening wetness off his fingers. "Delicious," he growled.

I let out a small whimper and his eyes snapped open, pinning me to the ground with the intensity of his gaze.

"You need me inside you, filling you up until you claw at my back and scream your pleasure to the treetops," he said.

Oh, I did, but that didn't mean I could.

I couldn't just stay here with him and forget the person I was before, the life I had before. At the same time, there was something to be said about enjoying the present moment.

"Will I change if we do other stuff?" I asked.



"Other stuff?" he asked.

"Like licking instead of mounting," I said, my heartbeat loud in my ears. "Fingers."

"Mating requires, as you put it, time," he said, his eyes drifting down to my lips. "Repetition."

The burning heat coiled in me, and I licked my lips, wanting more but also not ready for all of it.

I didn't know this man on top of me. I desperately wanted to wrap my legs around him and take him into me, that was for certain, but my lust didn't mean I was going to completely ignore the fact that this was not a normal situation.

His intentions towards me were clear, but how he pursued them changed, and I'd already thrown caution to the wind with my words and reactions.

I knew what I wanted, I knew what he wanted. The problem was finding the way to the compromise that didn't end up with him inside me until I was certain.

I couldn't just lie here and let him do what he wanted.

I had to take control.

I reached up, threading my fingers through the silky strands of his green hair until I found the base of his horns.

I wrapped my hands around them. He sucked in a sharp breath, biting the edge of his lip with the point of one of his elongated canines.

I pulled on his horns as I lifted his hips, dragging his face down towards my hips.

He let out a low growl as a ripple of fur rolled over his shoulders, like a cape built from animalistic passions.

"I will allow you just a taste, my lord," I said, the words leaving my mouth so breathless it sounded like a whisper instead of a command.

He stalked down my body, his breath hot against my skin as he settled his upper body in between my legs, lifting my legs to drape them over his broad shoulders.

I could feel the fur touching the back of my calves slip away, leaving behind warm bare skin as he shifted again, his body rippling as the fur melted away.

It was a strange tickling sensation as if fingertips were trailing over my skin.

I watched the top of his head as he moved down, seeing his horns glimmer in the dappled sunlight as they curved away from my body.

The shade pattern of the leaves seemed to accent the strong musculature of his shoulders and back, painting an image of masculine strength that called to a primal part of me.

He was so beautiful.

For a moment I wondered what our children would look like.

That deep ache washed back over me, the driving force that caused me to climb the wall in the first place.

I let out a small gasp as the emotion hit so hard and sudden, I felt it physically in my chest, powered by my attempt to ignore it, to push it down, to focus on the present moment and not let my choices from the past haunt me even as I attempted to undo

them.

I put my hand on my breastbone as if I could hold it in, closing my eyes as I winced against the feeling.

I couldn't think about that right now. I couldn't focus on that.

I was so lost in my own head, it took me several moments to realize that Lorthian had stopped touching me.

I opened my eyes to see him kneeling next to me.

In the moments where I was trying to push away my pain and aggressively focus on the moment he had unhooked my legs from his shoulders, extracted himself from between them, and moved so he was kneeling next to my hips and looking down at me with an expression that was.

.. curious? He didn't look angry or upset.

He just looked like he was waiting to see what I would do.

"You didn't have to stop," I said.

He lifted one eyebrow at me and didn't say anything.

Of course, he had to stop. I had gone from writhing and moaning under his touch to being tense and still and closing my eyes and wincing.

Any basically attentive person in that scenario would stop and check in with their partner to make sure that what was happening was still wanted, even if what they were doing was fully focused on giving rather than receiving or taking.

"I..." I felt tears prick in my eyes, little sharp stings of lubrication that would betray the fact that my sadness and gratitude were colliding to make a maelstrom of emotions. "I don't want..."

"What do you want?" Lorthian asked, his voice whispering through leaves of the trees around us.

I put my hands on the moss on either side of me and pushed myself up to sitting so I was facing him.

The words burst free of me, tearing through the layers I had built up around them to protect myself from the consequences of choices I made thinking it was what I had to do to give her a better life.

"I want my baby," I cried out.

Chapter

Eight

LORTHION

She spoke the words with a gut-deep cry that sounded like a mother calling for her lost cubs.

"Where?" I asked.

"Home," Lillian sobbed, burying her face in her hands as her words tumbled free from her in a burst dam of pain.

"I thought I would be able to go home. I thought I'd just go to the admissions interview and wait to see if I got in, and then I could make up my mind.

I didn't know that I wouldn't be able to go back!

I never would have agreed to come here if it meant I couldn't go back! "

She let out a deep, rough sob that echoed the sound of a heart that had been torn out by the world around her.

I leaned forward and wrapped my arms around her.

She melted into my chest like she belonged there, and I pulled her into me, dragging

her entire body into my lap as she buried her face against my chest and let out another heavy sob.

I ran one of my hands down over her hair, petting her, and she dissolved, changing fully from the seductive presence of a woman seeking a mate to a person needing to let out the pain they had been holding in for too long.

I held her as long as she needed me to, the leaves around us rustling with my need to comfort her.

When she finally calmed and pulled back from me as she wiped away the tears that had carved rivers down her face, I let her go, making my arms loose but not removing them from around her, so she knew she could fully pull away and I wouldn't stop her.

"I'm sorry," she said as she turned her face away from me. "This can't be what you wanted. You're wanting a mate to help your forest grow, and I'm... I don't mean to be sad right now."

I didn't understand why she was apologizing to me for feeling and communicating suffering.

Pain was a sign that something was wrong; it was a trigger from the body to inform the brain that it had to find a solution to the problem.

When suffering was ignored and pushed aside, it only got worse.

Now that she had communicated the full depth of her ache, I could help her solve it.

I lifted my hand to gently grasp her chin, a suggestion of a touch she followed to turn her face back to me. "Growth can't happen while pain cuts you down and holds you back. The source of the suffering must be removed."

Her entire body went still and tense. "Removed?"

I put one hand under her knees and the other around the small of her back before rising to my feet in one smooth motion, lifting her up in my arms as I stood. "Yes, we will remove the problem that cuts you back and limits you. You will grow lush and full in the absence of what held you back."

I turned to face the tree I had been communing with.

It took more time and energy than I desired to spend to get the connection to the new branch of the forest anchored. It would cause a slowdown in my expansion here to grow into the mundane realm in this way, but the cost didn't matter. What mattered was that it was ready.

"I'm not held back," Lillian said, a note of panic in her voice, as her body language went from sorrow to fear for reasons I didn't understand.

I didn't need to understand. I only needed to react as I felt a wave of aggression roll through me, as my fingers lengthened into claws.

I grinned at her, showing her my fangs.

She let out a shriek as I leapt, carrying her straight into the trunk of the tree.

The trunk enveloped us as if it were made of water; the changes I had made to it while communing allowed me to carry the foreign body of the mundane human through the web of life that made up my forest. We slid through the connective tissue of my roots, across the narrow branch that crossed the great scar that had torn the mundane realm from the magic one, creating two from where there had once been one.

We emerged into sunlight, my feet sinking into deep green grass threaded with moss.

I could feel the infusion of my magic running through it, bleeding off from my trees as my forest expanded inwards towards the house.

The trees fully encircled it now, creating a protective ring that would hide the home from any hostile being that wished to harm those within.

Any being except for me.

I set Lillian down and let go of her.

"No," she gasped as she saw the back of the house.

"Let us end this," I snarled, feeling the words curling around with edges of my aggression. This problem was about to be solved. I strode towards the back of the house, ready to find those within.

"NO!" Lillian shrieked.

I felt her slam into my back as one of her arms went around my neck, her knees gripping at my ribcage.

She had jumped on me. I had just enough time to register her sudden shift from fear to aggression before I felt one of her hands on the back of my neck.

The arm around the front of my neck was pinned in the elbow of the one on the back of my neck, creating a lever that increased the pressure on the front of my throat to the point where I was unable to take in a breath.

She was attempting to cut off the blood supply to my brain.



Except she was pitifully weak.

"I won't let you hurt her!" she snarled in my ear.

Chapter

Nine

LILLIAN

I had to kill him.

In one horrible moment, he had confirmed my worst fear, that he wasn't some gorgeous savior to rescue me from an agonizing death, but another trap that I had fallen into because of my ignorance of this world and its inhabitants.

His talk of pruning my branches could only mean one thing—he was going to kill my family.

My mom's house was in front of me, so close and yet so far, separated by the sudden realization that I had put them in danger by the simple act of missing them.

I didn't know what to do, but my body and my instincts did as I leaped up on the monster's back and wrapped my arm around his neck, trying to squeeze the life out of him.

"I won't let you hurt her!" I snarled in his ear.

He jumped backward into the tree, and the house vanished, swirling away as it had appeared, vanishing as the thick tree trunk reappeared before my eyes. He landed, light on his feet, but I lost my grip around his neck and tumbled back down onto the

moos.

I rolled and scrambled back up to my feet, the terror of losing the two people most important to me in the entire worlds giving me no time to lie there and suffer. I had to fight a forest lord! I had to... oh shit.

He was a monster.

He had grown several feet taller, jet black fur erupting all over his body, climbing up his shoulders to erupt in even longer strands as it enveloped the top of his head like a hood.

His face was gone, replaced by a skull-like mask that hid any human-like features, his eyes replaced by glowing orbs of red light.

He let out a snarl that echoed through my bones with the aftershocks of pure, existential terror.

I had made a huge mistake.

Veveron told me that he would change based on how I interacted with him. When I was horny, he became a seductive fiend. When I acted all high and mighty, even his outfit changed to reflect a more refined and polished appearance. Now that I attacked him, treating him like a monster, he became one.

He was going to eat me, and it was my fault.

That was absolute bullshit.

With that thought, my immense terror became swamped by my indignation.

The whole idea that I could control a monster with my words and behavior, that it would be my fault if he raped or ate me, was utter trash.

Any person who told you that it was your fault they were angry, that you made them do the things that they did, was an abuser looking to avoid blaming themselves for their own cruelty, and they would only increase their abuse if you stayed and just took it.

"You look ridiculous," I said. "What even are you? You look like a cosplayer who glued bones to a black outfit."

I waited, my heart and breath twined up in the moment to see if he was going to explode with rage or violence.

He shuddered, shaking his skull from side to side as the glowing orbs sitting in his eye sockets cycled through a rainbow of colors.

"I do not," he said, his voice gravelly and indignant.

He in fact didn't look like a cosplayer.

He looked like something that had crawled out of my nightmares.

And yet, even so, I could still see the hard lines of his abdominals through the thick black fur that covered his body.

He still was attractive, in a terrifyingly exciting way, maybe the monster should be in my bed rather than under it kind of way.

"Why do you even look like that?" I asked.

"You needed to fight," he said, gesturing at his body.

"I don't need to fight," I said. "I need to feel safe. I need to know that you aren't going to hurt me or my family. I need to go home."

"You think I would hurt you?" he asked, his voice soft. The dark hairs on his shoulder stood up suddenly, like porcupine quills. He didn't shift or change, despite the tone of his voice, staying in the dark form that loomed over me.

"You told me you were going to cut away what hurt me, and then you literally changed into a monster," I said.

"What hurts you is not being able to go home," he said, stepping to the side as he gestured at the huge tree trunk behind him. "I have made the connection. You can come and go to your home as you please."

I sucked in a breath sharp enough to match the sudden cut of hope.

He said he was going to cut away my pain, and I thought that meant he would kill my family. Had I thought the worst of him because of my fear? Did he really mean that he was going to let me go home?

"I..." I widened my eyes, blinking back the tears. "I can go home?"

"Yes," he said, gesturing towards the tree. "Go."

I took a step towards it and he moved back, out of my way.

"Why do you still look like that?" I asked.

He still hadn't shifted back.

"You see me as a monster," he replied, his voice gruff and gravelly.

Before I could say anything, he turned and vanished into the forest.

I was left there in the eerie silence of the forest, not the single chirp of a bird or rustle of wind through the leaves, an unnatural quiet that caused my skin to prickle with the subconscious awareness that something was wrong.

I should follow him. I should apologize.

Those were urges that came and went, a breath in and then out.

I didn't follow him; instead, I turned towards what mattered the most. I went back and put my hand on the trunk of the tree, excitement and worry and fear all collided within my heart until my hand sank into the surface of the bark, like the tree was a gossamer drape to hide the edges of an unseen portal.

I closed my eyes and stepped back through.

The change in the lighting hit my eyelids, turning the insides of them red.

In one instant, the comfortable cool humidity of the shaded forest was gone, replaced by a warmer shade that still protected me from the harsh rays of the summer sun.

But there wasn't any shade in my mom's backyard.

That thought vanished into unimportance as I opened my eyes and there she was.

Standing in the doorway to the backyard, holding the screen open with one small hand, stood Anna, looking just as I had left her, if maybe a tiny bit taller.

Her eyes widened as she caught sight of me and there was an expansion in my heart, in the space which had been weighed down with fear and loss from the moment I had stood in the geodesic commons dome, filled with excitement and anticipation only to have those feelings crushed by the screams that painted a horrific picture of what I witnessed at Orientation.

I saw Anna's smile and I was home.

"LIL!" Anna screamed, throwing herself down the stairs and across the backyard, her bare feet crunching over dried grass as she ran at me, her arms wide.

She slammed into me, and I took a small step back to brace, catching her in my arms. Her skull slammed into my lower stomach with enough force to cause me to grunt.

"Gentle," I said, laughing as tears began to leak from my eyes. "Banana baby, you have to be gentle with me."

"Oh, thank you, Mary!" my mom gasped from the door as she clutched the cross around her neck.

"Hi Mom," I said, lifting one hand to wipe the tears from my cheek as my other hand stayed on Anna's back, the lifeline that kept me afloat in the depths of my despair.

"I planted them!" Anna said, turning her face to look up at me while her arms squeezed tighter around me. "Mom and I planted trees so you'd come home! I watered them every other day with lots and lots and lots so that their roots grew deep just like he said."

"He?" I asked. I looked around, taking in the backyard.

I had been in such a panic when we first stepped through that I hadn't quite registered

the new shade that encircled the small square of a backyard.

There were trees, trees that didn't exist before, towering over the house, the shade from their branches cooling the roof.

"He said you needed the trees to come home," Anna said. She wrinkled her nose. "He looked funny."

"There was a fae in the backyard," my mom said as she gestured around to the circle of trees that went around the house.

"Lorthion," I said, the sudden crisp awareness of the what and why of my most recent actions.

I had freaked out and attacked the man, or whatever he was, when he was only trying to give me what I wanted most in the world.

I had assumed the worst of him, not just because of how he phrased things, but because of the trauma I'd experienced when first coming to the Magic Realm.

I couldn't trust some random fancy fae in the forest because my previous experiences with fae were horrific.

I took another deep breath, feeling the weight of my choices.

I glance back at the tree I'd stepped through.

If he gave me a chance, I'd go back and apologize and thank him. It was the least I could do.

Anna squeezed her arms tighter around my waist, and I smiled down at her. Lorthion



could wait.

He wasn't the one who needed me the most right now.

"I made you a picture," she said.

"Oh, Banana baby, I would love to see it," I said.

She didn't let go of my waist, so I put both my hands under her armpits to support her as I began to walk forward with wide legs, waddling into her.

She giggled and dropped her weight, lifting her feet so I was carrying her like a fifty-pound fanny pack.

"Why didn't you write or email?" my mom asked as I got closer to the porch. "Did your phone not work over there? You said you would let us know how it went, and then you just disappeared."

"I couldn't," I said, my voice soft. "The school... it was a lie."

"Oh," my mom said, her voice heavy. She glanced at Anna and then back at me. "Well, you're back now."

"Where is Veveron?" Anna asked.

"Because of Lorthion," I said at the same time as Anna spoke, so I answered her question as well. "Veveron is staying with him for a little bit while she hatches some eggs."

"She's so cuuuuuuuuuute," Anna said as we got to the first step of the porch. I patted her back gently, and she put her feet down and released her hold on my waist. She

grabbed my hand, holding it tightly, and we walked up the stairs together. "Do eggs mean little Veverons?"

"Yes," I said, and Anna let out a high-pitched giggling sound, so I continued. "I'll ask her when they hatch if you can see them. Now where is that drawing?"

Anna let out a happy cry and ran ahead of me through the door, but she didn't let go of my hand, so she tugged on me, pulling me with her. I laughed, the joy in my heart unable to remain contained as I got everything I knew I needed the moment I no longer had it.

"Do you have to go back?" my mom asked as she followed after us into the house.

"Not right away," I said, my voice low. "But I messed up. I can't leave things the way I left them. Not when he brought me home."

Chapter

Ten

LILLIAN

The bark shimmered metallic in the glimmering light of the rising sun.

It was hard to see unless I looked at it from the corner of my eyes.

When I stared at the trunk of the tree directly, it looked normal, the same crackled brown as the oak in my neighbor's yard, if a tree that took decades to grow could look the same as a grove that appeared in under a week.

At least, that was what my mom said had happened.

That whole time I thought Lorthion just ditched me at his forest treehouse; he had instead portaled to the Mortal Realm, found my family, and planted a grove of trees from his forest that allowed me to walk right out of his place and back to my own.

I'd spent the last month just hanging out with my family.

Anne was going to start school in the fall, and I spent every day with her, taking her to the park and working on craft projects until we were sticky and there was a mess everywhere.

My heart was full except for this one nagging ache that wouldn't go away.

I had to see if I could get back.

"If you run at it, you're just going to bounce off," my mom said.

"That's what I did!" Anne exclaimed. One of the afternoons at the house, she had vanished into the backyard and come back crying with a bruise on her head.

She couldn't go through the portal. I went to check it and my hand had vanished into the tree without issue, so there was a good chance it was only open to me.

"I'm not a wizard mom," I said. "I'm not trying to get to the school either. I need to say thank you to the fae that rescued me."

"I thought you weren't supposed to thank fae," my mom said. "Or is that just elves? I get confused about the two of them."

"I think fae is more of a blanket term and not saying thank you is impolite," I said. "The whole idea that you have to be rude to avoid owing favors is dumb. If someone does something nice for you, there is no obligation at all."

"Then why go back and say thank you at all?" my mom countered.

"Stay," Anne said, tugging on my wrist, her small hands tightening around it.

"For one, my familiar is still there," I said.

"And for two, I want to go back. I feel like I can help the others if I go back.

I don't think I'll get stuck there again.

Lorthion wouldn't have gone through all the trouble to grow this grove here so I could

come and go if he didn't mean for me to be able to use it. "

"He isn't human," my mom said. "You can't attribute human characteristics to monsters."

"Lorthion isn't a monster!" Anne gasped. "He is nice! He planted trees!"

"I will come back after I talk to him and thank him," I said. "I'll be home for dinner."

"Let your sister go," my mom grimaced slightly around the word sister as she always did. "Come now, Anne, why don't we plan a super special dinner for when she gets home?"

"I'm going to make cupcakes!" Anne shouted, and turned and ran back into the house.

"I just need to make things right," I said.

My mom lifted an eyebrow at me. "He was rather handsome for a fae."

"He is a shapeshifter of some sort," I said. "He looks the way he wants to look."

As I said the words, I wasn't entirely sure if they were true.

"I wonder what he looks like when he is around you," my mom said.

Her smile grew bigger. "You know, he was rather nice to spend time with.

Quite polite and the fact that he was willing to put in such hard work to bring you back home.

.. you should have seen the effort it took for him to grow the trees here.

He looked utterly exhausted by the time he was done.

I wouldn't be surprised if he went and took a good nap after that. "

I'd found him sleeping in the forest, right next to the portal tree he had set up for me to use.

"You should see if he wants to join us for dinner," my mom said. "He was so good with Anne and all."

"You just told me not to go thank him because he was a monster." I rolled my eyes at her.

"Just because he is a monster doesn't mean he can't be a good man," she replied, giving me that look that I knew too well and hated.

"There is nothing wrong with finding a good man after all.

Your father was a good man, bless his soul, and you know that he would want you to find someone who can keep you safe as well as help you get where you want in life.

If you had someone like this Lorthion fellow around, do you think you would have ended up being trapped there? "

"I think having a government that is open and honest about there being another world filled with magic that we can reach through a portal and issuing travel advisories would have prevented me from getting caught up in that school," I said.

"Still," my mom said. "See if he will come to dinner."

"I will," I said, and stepped through the tree.

Chapter

Eleven

LORTHION

She was back.

The awareness echoed through my branches, carrying the song of her arrival.

I could feel her feet against my moss, bare without the coverings that two-legged mortals needed to protect their fragile skin that hadn't been hardened by the damage of life.

I could feel the forest reacting to her, like sunlight breaking through the brisk cold of the dawn.

She was the feast of space, of growth, of rapid expansion.

I hadn't watched her while she was in her home den, though I could peer through the trees that now encircled her home, protecting her and those within.

I kept my attention from her spaces except to ensure that she was still safe, that no one had come to recapture her.

Though from what I could sense from the school, they were too busy to bother with one runaway mundane.

I felt her move through the forest, her direction changing as she headed towards me, and I rose from my crouch.

Small birds erupted from my branches as I shifted, changing at the thought of her, pulling all my additional leafy limbs back into myself.

I glanced down at my arms, seeing bone plating on black fur.

I moved to the nearby pond and gazed at my reflection in the water.

I was still the visage of death, with a skull on my face and wicked, sharp, exposed teeth out for anyone to see.

There was beauty in the form, but it wasn't what I preferred.

It wasn't how I wanted to approach her.

So when she reached my position, I remained hidden.

I didn't emerge from the shadows. I lurked as I followed her, keeping myself behind trunks of trees as I kept sight of her.

She would stop as she did before as she found one beautiful flower or another, enjoying their scent and visage before moving on.

I could see how much she appreciated the gentle beauty of the living world when she stopped in her tracks to let a butterfly go past.

Then she put a hand on one of my trunks and I extended my senses into its surface so I could feel the gentle softness of her palm, as if she were caressing my cheek. "Lord Lorthion," she called out in a soft voice. "Where are you?"



I didn't respond.

I was a monster, and as a monster I would remain out of sight during the light of day. If she chose to sleep here, in my domain, then I would slip into her bedchamber and find out if it was the stuff of nightmares that filled her heart with lust.

Her next words disrupted my thoughts entirely.

"I want to invite you to dinner with my family," she called out.

I could feel myself changing at her words. Monsters weren't invited to dinner.

I became shorter, and my arms had flesh on them instead of exposed bone. I heard the small jingle of bells from above my head, and I frowned, glancing up to see that my antlers were adorned with bells as well as flowers this time.

"Lord Lorthion?" Lillian called out as she turned to face the sound of my bells.

I stepped out from my hiding place, flicking an ear in irritation as the bells continued to betray my location.

"Why are you here?" I asked her. "Why return to the territory of a monster?"

" I tilted my head as I regarded her. I moved into the sunlight so it fell more prominently across my now exposed and beautifully human-looking abdominals.

I flexed them, tilting my hips just a little to the side to display them at the best angle. "Unless you want to be eaten."

She flushed, and I smelled the sweet scent of her arousal in the air. Fur rippled down my legs, and I knew why she returned. She came back because she wanted me,

wanted to become my mate and grow my lands with her fertile abundance.

"I wanted to thank you," she said. "For rescuing me. For helping me get back home. Thank you for all of that."

I tilted my head. "You're welcome."

"I also wanted to apologize," she said. "For attacking you and thinking the worst of you."

I snorted. "You think you should apologize for fighting to protect those you care about?"

"No," she said. "For thinking the worst of you when you were trying to help me."

"That is not something to apologize for," I said.

"If I had been one of the Goddess blessed races and been raised with all the expectations of how the world was supposed to work in regards to Mundanes and their place in it, then me indulging your desire to go back home to see your family very well could have been a trap designed to harm you for my own amusement.

You were right to be cautious. You were strong to choose violence rather than risk your family being taken away again. "

"I..." She looked at me with wide eyes as her words faltered before she found them again. "I don't think many people think like you. Most think that women shouldn't jump to conclusions about guys and need to give them the benefit of the doubt."

"I am not people," I said. I lifted my arms out to the sides to gesture to the whole of myself, and one of the branches on my nearby trees creaked as it lowered enough to

put one of its spring blossoms just in front of her face. "I am a Forest Lord."

She leaned forward and smelled the blossom.

"Will you tell me what it would be like to become your lady?" she asked in a small voice, and I pulled the branch back so it was no longer between us.

"Let me show you," I said.

Chapter

Twelve

LILLIAN

I 'd forgotten how intoxicating it was to be in his presence.

He was back to looking like a satyr, with furred legs, cloven hooves, and antlers with a crown of flowers and bells.

The thick bulge between his legs was the place I was not looking, nor was I looking at his exposed abs that practically sparkled in the sunlight.

Instead, I was staring at the arm he held out to me, as if he expected me to take it.

I didn't know if I could touch him.

I wanted to touch him.

I wanted a whole lot more than just touching him.

I had thought about him all the time in the last month, especially at night when the headlamps from passing cars would cast a moving glow across the far wall of my bedroom.

I'd thought about him and touched myself, bringing myself to my own completion as

I wondered what it would have been like if I had just given in.

If I touched him now while he was looking like the very definition of uncontrollable male grecian lust, I wouldn't stop touching him. I'd want to run my hands over his body, down between his legs, and feel what I had been missing. My cheeks burned with those thoughts, even as my breath quickened.

"How are you going to show me?" I asked him instead.

His eyes narrowed, his nostrils flaring a little, and a cheeky grin slid in from the side until he was smirking at me as he stepped a little closer to me. "There are options."

"What kind of options?" I asked.

"Talking is one of them," he said. "We can stroll around, like nobles in a garden, and I can describe to you using words what you will experience if you join with me. Or there is another option."

"What is it?" I said, taking the bait.

"You let me give you a taste," he said.

"Just a taste?" I asked.

"A little nibble," he said. He lifted his hand and brushed hair back from my cheek, tucking it behind my ear. His fingers drifted down to my neck and he tapped a sensitive spot right there, sending the electricity of desire shooting through me. "Right... here."

I tilted my head to one side, exposing my neck a little more. "Okay," I said.

"Okay?" he replied, his voice sultry. I could see the tension in his body, feel it in the space between us, the space that our bodies were desperate to cross but were held back by the iron will of minds waiting to make sure.

"Give me a taste," I said.

"Hmmm," he made the sound with closed lips, letting it rumble in his chest. He leaned down, his body still so separate from mine, angling his horns away from me, and pressed his lips against my neck, parting them so his teeth barely grazed against my skin.

For a moment I could see it.

I could feel the forest, the expanse of it, and the shield that enclosed it all, protecting it in view.

I could feel how the trees themselves were the anchor for the magic, holding everything together and safe.

I could feel the strain of the distance grove, how sustaining it took power from the forest, stopping its outward growth in its tracks.

It was a sucker branch, taking away from the whole that needed to grow outwards.

I could feel the need to grow, the rage at the destroyed landscape, the intense desire to fill it with life and restore it.

I could feel how it needed something, something else, something that was powerful and fragrant and fertile.

Someone like me.

I could feel his desire for me, the intensity of a single-minded focus to claim me, heart, body, and mind.

He was obsessed with me.

I gasped and stepped backward, away from his gentle touch and brutal devotion. I looked up into his eyes and saw him, not as a man, but an entity, a creature that was looking for a mate to complete him, who had decided that the person was me.

"Why me?" I asked.

"You live for others," he said.

"You barely know me," I said.

"I know that you evaded patrols, climbed the wall, and even when you saw the barren lands on the other side with no hope of shelter, you still decided to try to escape," he said.

"I know that getting back to your mother and your child were so important to you that you would risk your own life rather than live in captivity, hoping you would be spared.

I know that when exposed to the beauty of my forest, you took the time to see it, to enjoy it, even though every moment in your most recent past must have been rough and difficult.

When presented with a life of comfort and safety, still all you wanted was to get back to your child. "

"She's my sister," I said, providing my practiced response without hesitation despite

that old ache in my chest.

"You would have been young when you bore her," he said. "Too young to have agreed to become a mother."

I took a sharp breath in.

It was the tone of his words that undid me.

His voice held layers of warmth that are difficult to fake, and he looked at me with eyes that were softened with understanding.

I wasn't expecting it. When I first met him, he was a ravenous beast of a man, falling upon me without hesitation or thought about conversation.

Now he was a consummate gentleman in the truest definition of the word, refusing to let the conversation veer from the truth of the matter yet calling me on my habit-worn lie with the kind of compassion that unraveled the knot I'd tied around the truth.

He waited as the silence grew between us, a pressure of a flooded river churning behind the constraints of a dam built in my childhood interrupted.

I opened the floodgates.

"He... he was a lot older than me, and I believed him when he told me I was mature for my age.

He said he wanted to marry me, but then he also kept talking shit about my mom, being a single mom, but that wasn't her fault.

Then he slapped me when I told him off, and I went on the internet and asked for



advice, and strangers told me to run.

By the time I told my mom it was too late to do anything but have Anne," I said, feeling the old ache of thoughts I didn't like to think about anymore.

"She gave up everything to get me away from him.

We moved before I gave birth, changed our names, cut ties with everyone so that the sperm donor wouldn't find us.

I have to finish high school somewhere else with a new baby sister. "

I took a shuddering breath as a sharp pain rose between what I wanted and what I refused to give up.

"That's why I can't just stay here with you," I said, letting the words come out.

"What my mom did for me... that isn't something everyone's parents would do.

I've heard so many stories of girls being yelled at and forced to make choices they didn't want, whether to keep or let go.

She gave up everything when the police said they wouldn't press charges, and I refused to give the baby up.

I didn't want to be with him anymore, but I couldn't bear to think of parting with the life growing in me.

So my mom made the choice to abandon her entire life and support me so that I could have my cake and eat it, so to speak.

I can't force any more of my choices on her.

She's already done so much to give me everything.

I can't just run off with the first Forest Lord I meet and become some sort of magical forest goddess. To hell with my family."

Lorthion tilted his head as he regarded me.

His fur faded away, replaced by a silk suit embroidered with flowers that matched the blossoms on the trees around us.

He held out his arm again. "I understand," he said, holding out his arm.

"And I would love to come to dinner. First, would you like to see how your familiar is doing and meet some of my friends? "

"You have friends?" I asked, startled by his statement. Immediately after I said it, I wished I had kept my mouth shut.

He laughed. "I like to think of them as friends. You can ask them what they think of me yourself."

I nodded, feeling emotionally worn out and embarrassed.

I had made so many assumptions about him because his behavior was so intense and magnetic.

If I hadn't had the ties holding onto my heart, I would have thrown myself into the fire with him right away, letting his predatory aggression sweep me away.

That same aggression was what made me see him as a monster.

Then he flipped back, showing me his thoughtfulness and his deep attention to me. So I opened myself to him.

I hadn't told anyone my story. I'd finished high school but never made any friends I considered real friends, because I always had to hide that entire part of my life from them.

How could I connect with people if all I did was lie to them about who I was?

I couldn't tell the truth. There was no way.

I couldn't risk someone who thought they had good intentions and just wanted to make sure the statutory donor knew where his offspring was.

Those were the kind of good intentions that led straight to hell.

I felt vulnerable, more than I had in a long time.

So instead of saying anything else, I slid my arm through his, feeling the touch of his soft silk garment under my hand, and let him lead me off through the woods.

I remained silent as we walked, and he didn't seek to fill the silence in words.

Instead, the stroll was carried with the background melody of birds, singing sweeter than I'd ever heard before, interlocking harmonies that didn't sound possible for random animals in a forest. When a high soprano, a sweet wordless singer, joined the backdrop of harmonies, I stopped in my tracks.

"What is that?" I whispered, hoping my quiet voice would disturb the beauty of the

singer.

"It is a phoenix," Lorthion said, his voice low, matching mine. "I have many that have chosen to live within my woods recently. They are being drawn to something in the school."

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*Source Creation Date: August 1, 2025, 4:43 am*

Then I saw her, perched on a branch, her feathers dripping down from her as they rippled with flame.

Its feathers were liquid lava that flowed down its body, accenting the long, slender neck reminiscent of a peacock.

It had a delicate head with huge eyes that sparkled as it tilted its beak to the sky to sing.

Though it looked like a living creature of flame, the branch it sat on seemed unaffected, not burning or charring.

"What could attract something so beautiful to a place so horrible?" I asked, still whispering.

"They are creatures of Chaos, too fragile to survive in the Mundane, and they are drawn to only one being," Lorthion said, his voice holding a tone of awe. "The Chaos God has returned to the Magic Realm."

I'd heard people talking about something like that at the school before I escaped.

That one day the Chaos God would return to fight the Order Goddess and there would be a great battle where good would finally triumph over evil.

The problem was that what seemed like the people who insisted they were on the side of 'Good' and used that as a reason to demand that other people give up control over their own lives, were the ones who did the most evil.

We stayed there until the song finished and the Phoenix vanished into the forest.

Then we continued our walk until we got to the huge treehouse in the gorgeous clearing.

It took all of two seconds to realize that Veveron was fine and didn't want to see me.

She didn't want anyone to bother her in her nesting chamber.

So we left to go meet Lorthion's friends.

It was another long walk through the forest, with a couple of stops to snack on fruit that seemed to be growing everywhere.

I didn't recognize most things, but there was a delicious cherry tree that had soft pink cherries. Eventually we got to our destination.

"I don't see anyone," I said as I looked around the small lake.

I could see most of the circumference of it, and there was a possibility that his friends were lurking on that rocky outcropping on the other side of the water, but it seemed strange when the spot we were at had a nice sloping dirt beach with several trees in a circle that were grown with a zigzag near the bottom that shaped them into perfect benches.

There was a stack of towels on a boulder that sat right on the edge of the water.

"They arrive," Lorthion said, pointing at the water.

There were bubbles on the surface of the water where he was pointing.

Suddenly, a woman burst from the water, lunging up into the air up to her hips as she tossed her hair back like a mermaid breaching the surface.

She had a mask covering her face, clear and see-through, and was wearing a brightly colored wetsuit.

As she settled back down in the water to her shoulders, she smiled and waved at me, and I lifted my hand and waved back.

Then another head popped up near her, and another, but they weren't wearing masks.

The individuals had intense skin color, with stark white on their faces and chests and black on their backs.

The woman swam towards us with big breast-strokes until she got to a place where she could stand, then she waddled forward.

When her feet came free from the water, I could see she was wearing big flippers.

She pulled off her mask, revealing dark skin and a big grin as she pulled off her flippers and crossed the distance between us.

Behind her, a merman and a mermaid, both bare-chested, beached themselves on the shore with a sudden surge of water.

I caught a glimpse of them grabbing a towel off his rock, and then the woman was in my face, grabbing my hand.

"Hi!" she said, her voice breathless as she took in deep, rapid breaths as if she had just been doing an intense workout. She released my hand. "I'm Susan. Welcome to freedom. How did you get out? The Sirens didn't rescue you, that's for sure, or I

would have met you already."

"Susan, you must greet the Forest Lord with respect," one of the male mermen said from behind her.

"Oh, she's fine, Lorthion doesn't mind, do you, Lorthion?" the mermaid said as she rubbed the towel on her tail.

"I do not mind," Lorthion said from behind me, his voice coming from higher than normal and sounding a little more gravelly, but I was too distracted by the fact that the mermaid had a towel wrapped around her like a toga and was walking up to me on two legs instead of a tail like she arrived in.

"That is way better than shifting into a werewolf," I said out loud.

The mermaid grinned as she strode up next to Susan.

She stuck out her hand. I took it, feeling that her skin was hot against mine.

"I'm Orcalia. This here is Dumpster Fire.

" She gestured with a thumb over her shoulder at the male merman who was now on two legs with a towel around his waist. He had hold of a rope and was pulling a large chest out of the water and onto the shore.

"Dumpster fire?" I could feel both of my eyebrows reaching for my hairline. I wasn't sure if I hoped he picked that name for himself or not. If someone else gave it to him he was mean, but if he gave it to himself that made him a walking red flag.

"I'm Devonic," Devonic said. "I still don't know what Dumpster Fire means, but the fact that all the Mundanes make faces when they hear it can't be a good thing."



“I know what it means!” Orcalia grinned.

The chest was all the way on the shore now, and he dropped the rope, turning towards us and bowing deep from his waist. "Great Lord of the Forest, we come bearing gifts and tribute to aid the growth of your forest, and to bring news.

One of the Seals has been shattered and the Dungeon begins to expand.

We have word from a rescued Mundane that a Lycan was able to shift without the Blood Moon. "

The smell of fish and seaweed wafted through the air, unmistakable as it wafted from the large chest.

"He's back!" Orcalia threw both her hands in the air. Then she kicked one leg up so high her shin almost hit her own face. "Heeeeeeeee's back!"

"Um," I said, taking a step back from her wild movements. I bumped into a tree, barely glancing at it out of the corner of my eye to see that there were now two new tree trunks on the shore.

"Orcalia, chill out a little," Susan said. "She might have just escaped yesterday. You are way too intense for this moment."

"Don't mute my light, make your own brighter instead!" Orcalia wiggled her hips and stuck her arms both out to the sides, shaking them as if she had pom poms. "This is the perfect moment for that dance that Carey taught me."

"At least move away so you don't accidentally clobber me again," Susan said.

"C H A O S Chaos!" Orcalia chanted, moving her arms around wildly and kicking

again.

Even so, she moved a good distance away from us and began to dance.

As she moved, her gestures became less cheerleadery and more sensual, with her hips curving, her ass shaking, and at one point she dropped down to her knees and flipped her hair back, giving a sultry look up behind me.

She wasn't looking at me.

She was directing those sultry eyes at Lorthion.

I felt a spike of jealousy. He wasn't mine. I had in fact rejected and held him at arms' length, but that didn't stop the feeling from flooding into me, intense and irrational. I glanced over at him to see if he was staring at her.

He was a tree.

Or more specifically, an ent.

The two trunks I thought were trees were his legs, merging together into a single trunk to form the center of his towering body.

Branches came out with long arms and fingers, and his head was adorned with a canopy of leaves.

His face was made out of wood, generally about where a face should be on a giant.

I glanced back at Orcalia to see her twerking while looking back over her shoulder at him.

It was impressive how she managed to get a full jiggle through her butt by really engaging her lower back muscles and letting her rump relax with the twitch.

I didn't know mermaids would be able to twerk.

Then again, I didn't even know there were mermaids until now.

I hadn't seen any at the school and the dramatic two tones of their skin coloring made them hard to miss.

I tore my eyes away from her gyrating rump to look back at Lorthion. He was still a giant tree creature, and wasn't looking at her. His gaze was out at the surface of the water.

"She'll calm down in a bit," Susan said quietly.

"She is only recently considered an adult by her people and these tributes are considered one of the safer missions that one can take.

She was like this last time we came to deliver a tribute.

She thinks she is going to convince Lorthion to accept her as his Forest Lady even after he rejected her the first time. "

He rejected her? Another one of my unconscious assumptions came crashing to a sudden stop.

Part of me had thought that he was so intense about me because I was the first woman he'd ever seen.

I hadn't met any other people in his forest, and getting over the wall was difficult to

say the least. I only ended up in his forest at all because Veveron had directed me there, so it didn't seem to me like he would be crawling in women who might appreciate his attention.

Now my assumption was turned around. There was evidence that not only did he have other options, one of the options was coming on to him so hard that the edge of her towel was flipping up with her twerk.

I focused my eyes on Susan, noticing that Devonian behind her was staring at Orcalia with a look of utter longing on his face.

"You seem perturbed by her behavior," Lorthion said, his voice rumbling. "I will ask for them not to send her again."

"It doesn't bother you?" I asked, watching him closely.

"She is exciteable and eager and this is a safe place for her to try out more extravagant behaviors," Lorthion said. "Her attempts to attract me continue to fail and she will learn and move on."

"What, you only like Mundanes?" I asked, raising an eyebrow up at him.

"Only like Mundanes?" Susan repeated, her tone incredulous. "How could he like any of us? He's a tree."

"He... what?" I asked. "Lorthion, is this your real form?"

His leaves and branches shook a few moments before a rumbling laugh erupted from him.

"No," he said, his voice deep and booming with the length of his erect wooden form.

“Oh I’m sorry,” Susan said. “I assumed you weren’t a shifter because you always look like this. I really need to stop making assumptions.”

“I told you already Susan, he can be really hot," Orcalia said, coming back over to us, her face flushed. "First time I visited, he was all sexy looking with these furred legs and antlers, but the second I started hitting on him, he turned into this and hasn't changed back since."

"You said that you thought trees were ugly," Lorthion said.

Orcalia sighed. "Is that why you rejected me? I don't think your trees are ugly. Your forest is so cool."

“It is not the reason,” Lorthion said.

“Then why?” Orcalia said.

"Orcalia, you promised," Susan sighed. "You said you wouldn't do this."

Orcalia ignored Susan as she walked up and put her hand on Lorthion's giant leg, staring up at him as she leaned her breasts against his leg. "Give me a chance. We could be so good together.”

She was so forward. It was impressive and at the same time made me feel uncomfortable, like I was watching a trainwreck in slow motion, not knowing what to do to help but knowing that the results could end up in tears.

"No," Lorthion said.

Orcalia reached out and wrapped her arms around his trunk leg, pressing her face into his leg.

"Let go of him," I snapped, my feeling of discomfort welling up as I reached out to grab her arm and pull her back. "No is a complete sentence, and you need to back off already."

"You don't get to tell me what to do," Orcalia said, yanking her arm out of my grasp. "Only Lorthion can tell me to go away."

Lorthion let out a sound like wind rustling through leaves.

"I desire another," he said. "Even if I didn't, I would not choose you. I have known you since you were a little sprout and I cannot think of you in another way. To watch another grow from their youth is to see them as kin. You will always appear to me as a bud that I am unwilling to pluck."

"Come on, Orcalia." Susan grabbed her other arm, and we both walked her to the water. Devonice came with us, his face withdrawn as he looked down at the dirt under his feet instead of anything around us. "You heard the man. You have to listen this time. We should leave now."

Orcalia's shoulders slumped. "But I like him so much."

"Thank you for your gifts," Lorthion said. "But Devonice, I request another."

That seemed to snap Devonice out of his funk for a moment as he turned back to face Lorthion. "What is your request?" he asked, bowing low.

"My forest is overburdened with ripe fruit," Lorthion said. "Please send harvesters to come and take it away."

"Yes, Great Lord of the Forest," Devonice said. "We will come and relieve you of the bounty."

Orcalia and Devonic vanished into the water, leaving Susan pulling on her flippers and getting her mask ready.

She tapped on said mask with one hand. "I'll bring you one of these and show you the way next time," Susan said.

"You're welcome to visit us anytime, but you should make sure you have a Siren escort as the tunnels can be confusing the first couple of times trying to get around them.

We have a bunch of the Mundanes in a cute little conclave in the Siren city if you want to join us, and if you want to get back to the Mundane, we can get you a portal back. "

Her eyes slid over to Lorthion on that one.

"Oh, Lorthion already helped me with that," I said.

A smile broke out on Susan's face at those words. "Good," she said. Then she was gone after the others.

"I must distribute the gifts they brought throughout the forest," Lorthion said after a moment of quiet. "The nutrients from the waters do a great deal to help the spread of my forest."

"Do you want some help?" I asked, looking over at him. I didn't really want to help him with a bunch of stinky old fish and seaweed, but the offer had come out of habit.

He smiled at me, his bark crinkling. "No, I wish to do this work on my own. Go home. I will join you when you come back through the portal and call for me."

"Alright," I said, nodding my head, feeling relieved.

I had a lot to think about, and I couldn't let my mom do all the work preparing dinner on her own.

"I'll see you soon," I said.



Chapter

Thirteen

LORTHION

I pulled on the metal lever device, using it to tighten the juncture between the two lengths of copper pipes until there was no longer any sign of any water escaping from its constrained pathways.

"What is going on here?" Lillian's voice was muffled by the dead painted wood that surrounded my upper body. "Mom, I leave you two alone for two seconds!"

"He looked like he had strong hands," Lillian's matriarch Charlotte said. "How did drop off go?"

"Mom, he's a Forest Lord!" Lillian said, sounding exasperated. Then her tone changed, becoming softer. "She was so excited to see her friends. She barely even looked back at me."

"She will be so excited to tell you all about it when she comes home," Charlotte said.

"I am done," I said, scooting out from the dead wood box that hid the water direction system for the kitchen sink. I rose to my feet and held out the lever device to Charlotte. "I have completed your quest."

"You're a guest, Lorthion," Lillian sighed, putting her hand up to her forehead. "You

don't need to be doing chores."

She was giving mixed messages.

"He was a guest the first time he came over for dinner," Charlotte said, giving me a firm smile. "Family helps out with chores. Speaking of which, do you know how to do drywall?"

"I do not," I replied. "Let me see the problem that requires this drywall."

"This way," Charlotte jerked her chin and led me out of her kitchen.

The hallway stretched out ahead like a tunnel made with sharp angles, straight and unnatural.

I had grown more used to the unpleasant boxiness of this dwelling, but I was pleased that Charlotte had asked me to assist in tasks to upkeep it.

I had already been sprouting new flowers outside the many times I'd come through the portal to feed the small butterflies and bugs that the plants needed to thrive.

Life was not built upon sterile surfaces.

It required layers of support, from the microbiotics in the soil to the shade cast by huge overhead branches.

I hadn't yet added any new life to inside the domicile, as it was not my home to alter.

The yard, however, I had claimed fully with my circle of trees, and the matriarch had exclaimed pleasure when she first saw the flowers.

The walls of the hallway were the color of bleached bark left too long in the sun, stripped of lichen and the memory of growth.

No carvings. No vines. Just frames. Rectangular and rigid, set in rows as if someone tried to trap time between glass.

Two women and a child stared out from behind the panes, the older Charlotte with strong shoulders and a mouth that curved up in the edges despite the lines of weariness and stress on her face.

My love, Lillian, stared out at me in various stages of her development, and in one place there was an old picture of Lillian as a young child set next to one of Anne at the same age, and the similarities stood out in bright smiles and vibrant happiness.

The frames were illuminated by a dull dome of hard yellowed glass that clung to the ceiling.

"Here," Charlotte said, reaching out to take a large group photo off the wall. Behind it was a hole, jagged and ugly, leading into a space filled with a pink fluffy material. "It was here when we bought the house, and I just haven't had the time to get around to it."

I placed my hand on the wall, next to the hole, as I let my senses sink into the dead wood, feeling out the stories held in the rings of its history. I listened to the whispers of its ghosts.

"I would like to repair this my way," I said. "Instead of the way of the drywall."

"Is it going to hurt the resell value of the house?" Charlotte asked.

"You will not be able to sell this home," I told her. "The protections I have placed on

this domicile will prevent others from knowing of its existence unless you specifically invite them here."

"Is that why the power bill stopped coming?" Charlotte asked. "They haven't disconnected it, but all of a sudden they stopped charging my account. I called about it, but the person on the phone was very confused."

"They will have forgotten the conversation after you hung up," I told her. "The home will continue to be supported by the systems around it, but it has been hidden so thoroughly that Mundane technology will not be able to keep track of it."

"What if I want to move?" Charlotte asked. "How am I going to afford that?"

"Mom, you already paid off the house," Lillian said. "You told me once that there was no way you would ever move."

"Well, I don't like my options being taken away," Charlotte said.

"I can set up portals to anywhere in the Mundane or Magic realm that you wish, within reason," I said.

It was an enormous offer, one that I knew Charlotte would not understand.

To set up separate remote groves to places that weren't already inhabited by other Forest Lords and Ladies took a massive amount of effort for me to support.

"How about you teach Lillian here how to set up those portals instead," Charlotte said, narrowing her eyes as the corners of her lips crept upwards.

"I cannot teach her how to set up Order portals," I said.

"But if she decides to become a Forest Lady, I will teach her how to grow her groves.

" I hesitated, not wanting Lillian to go the other route available to her, but part of the choice was having options.

"She can also go learn how to cast temporary portals from the Sirens. "

"Mom just let him fix the wall," Lillian said. "It's been weeks. You told me the other day that you'd never met such a respectful man. It's been weeks. He proved himself the moment he helped me get back home. Let's just trust him to do things his way, okay?"

Warmth flooded me, a strong feeling of pride that the woman I chose for my mate saw me that way. She trusted me with her home, with her family.

"Alright," Charlotte said, gesturing at the wall. "No half measures though. Let me see everything you can do to make this place better."

That was the only invitation I needed.

I let myself flow into the space and change it.

This place didn't breathe the way trees did. But it remembered. Quietly.

So I asked it to dream a new dream with me.

Chapter

Fourteen

LILLIAN

I stared at the beautiful surface of the wall, living wood that had replaced the ugly hole that my mother had hidden behind.

It wasn't just the hole, though; the entire wall had changed, the straight lines softening and deepening, changing to the smooth ruby brown color of living wood, like we had stepped inside the hollow of a living tree.

The floor was now warm under my bare feet, and I looked down to see a surface that was now a living braid of moss-veined wood that gave way slightly under my feet, spongy but pleasant to stand on, like it would take an impact and soften it for the joints.

The ceiling now arched above me. Gone were the dim hallway lights, and the roof, and now there was a vaulted ceiling with branches that spanned overhead.

It wasn't open to the sky; instead, there were huge leaves, translucent and hard, almost as if they had been fossilized or someone had made their idea of leaves out of blown glass.

The frames on the wall had small flowers sprouting around all of them, and the scent of jasmine filled the air.

"What have you done?" my mom gasped. "What is this?"

"If there is anything you wish changed, I will change it," Lorthion said.

I looked back and forth between them. He was in the form he usually wore at my house, exceptionally humanoid, with practical clothing.

He still had his long ears and a small crown of antlers, but his body was fully clothed in a basic linen shirt and pants.

They were tight enough to show off the smooth curves of his strong body.

When I saw him lying on the ground in the kitchen, his upper body in the sink cabinet, his shirt pulled up just enough to expose the lower lines of his abdomen, it had awoken another part of me I didn't know about.

Now I wanted an entire scenario where he pretended to fix a sink, and I just got out of the shower, and oh no, who is this hot plumber in my kitchen?

It was one of the many, many scenarios that had run through my head.

At this point, after enough dinners and hangouts with my family, I was certain I wanted him, all of him, and that he was worth whatever I would change into, because if being with him meant I changed into a creature that was more like him, I was so down.

He was a wonderful man.

I glanced back at my mom, seeing the stress on her face as she stared down the hallway to her newly altered bedroom door.

I put my hand out and placed it on her shoulder, immediately understanding. "Mom, he had hot running water in the treehouse he made me. Don't worry. Your bathroom is going to be even better than before."

I shot Lorthion a look, hoping that I was speaking the truth, and he gave me a broad smile and a strong nod.

My mom bolted down the hallway, darting into her bedroom. "Mary in a manger!" she shouted from the other room.

I felt the tension melt from my shoulder. That was a happy shout.

She came out of the bedroom, her bible clutched against her chest and tears in her eyes. "There are roses around it."

I knew what she was talking about. She had a small personal altar in her bedroom where she liked to do her nightly study and where she kept her bible.

She had helped me set up one for myself when I was younger, but after I read through the whole book, I didn't feel connected to the whole thing, and she never pushed me.

She always had a bible available if I wanted it, and was happy whenever I went to service with her, but it was never something she pushed on me when I pulled away from it.

She was the kind of person who focused on the teachings of love and ignored the stories of hate.

She always told me the stories of hate were the ones that were written by men who wanted to control others rather than write down the real messages.



She walked up to Lorthion and threw her arms around him, hugging him tightly. "I love it."

I went over to look into Anne's room.

All of her toys were still in there; it was just the structure of the room and the furniture that changed.

The room was three times the size it was before, with a high vaulted ceiling, and her small twin-sized bed had morphed into a jungle gym.

Her bed was up high at the top, a vaulted nest that was protected by a rail of intricately woven branches.

There was a ladder, a wall with knobs that stuck out to make it look like a climbing wall, a bunch of vines that traversed the ceiling like a net that could be crawled across.

There were flowers all over the room, and her bookshelf now had carvings of small creatures.

It was everything I wanted to give her.

The reason I was so excited to go to the Order Academy, other than the chance to learn magic, was that I thought it was going to allow me to provide a better life for my family.

My mother worked so hard to support me. She had help from my father's health insurance money, but that paid for the house.

It didn't help us buy the tools we needed to repair the wall or build the kind of

bedroom any child would be delighted to have.

That didn't diminish the amount of work it took to support a teenager through a pregnancy and raise the baby for her.

I wanted to learn something valuable, a skill that would help me go out and give my daughter the same deep level of focused support that my mother had given me so that she could live whatever kind of life she wanted.

I walked back over to Lorthion and my mom released him, wiping the corners of her eyes with a shaking hand.

"Mom," I said as I slipped my hand into Lorthion's. "We're going to head over to his place for a bit."

"Good, I need a minute to myself," my mom said.

"Love you," I told her as I pulled Lorthion towards the backdoor.

"Love you too," she said.

Then we were out the door.

"You didn't have to do that," I said as I dragged him to the tree that served as the portal back to his forest. "You didn't have to make everything better."

We stepped through the portal and out into the forest, and as always, it was the sound that struck me.

Growing up, the sounds of the neighborhood were predominantly taken over by leaf blowers or trash trucks.

It was a constant cacophony of industrialism, of machines clanking away as their stink and sound imposed on the quiet peace of the morning.

Here in the forest was the sound of birds singing, of leaves crunching underfoot, of a stream running off in the distance.

Waking up here was waking up to a silence that was filled with the song of life.

"I will always make everything better," Lorthion replied, his voice low and earnest. "Anything that is within my power to change, I will change it for the better."

I stopped and turned towards him, looking up at him to see him gazing back at me with a warmth that hurt, like the heat of a hot bath against skin chilled to the bone. "I know you will."

He searched my eyes, and something in them caused him to lean down as if he was going to kiss me. But he didn't. He stopped there, inches from my lips as he watched my face.

I closed the distance, throwing my arms up around his neck, pressing my lips against his like he was fresh rain after a drought, bringing new life to the parts of me that I thought had been charred for good.

His lips parted, his breath exhaling into my lungs as his arms snaked around my lower back.

He kissed me slowly, tasting me, nibbling on my lower lip, touching the edges of my tongue, his fingers massaging my lower back.

He kissed me like I was someone to be savored, to be focused on with the entirety of his attention, to be explored until there was no part of me he couldn't see.

I kissed him back with fragile wonder, with a fluttering excitement in my heart that had let go of the last vestiges of fear and embraced the fall with an open heart.

It was a certainty rooted in a feeling that had grown with every moment spent with him, with every moment I observed him with my family, with every detail I learned about him and his relationships with those around him.

It was a feeling I couldn't deny anymore, one that I thought I had felt before for another, but that was now proven to be a pale imitation now that I experienced the full depth of it.

I pulled back from the kiss and he let me go. I didn't let him go. I held on to his shirt, clutching it in my fists as if it could give me strength to say the words I needed to say.

"I'm in love with you," I told him.

He brushed back a strand of hair from my face, tucking it behind my ear as his eyes crinkled with the weight of his smile.

"I love you too," he said. "I love the way that flowers distract you, their colors pulling your attention like a bird looking for the perfect piece of fluff for the nest. I love your attention to others, the way you keep checking in on your familiar, even though she growls at you to go away.

I love the way you try to take care of your matriarch even as she does the same to you.

I love the way you treat your young, with a care and kindness that goes beyond your own desires for yourself.

I love you because I see the woman that you are, full of the rich essence of life. "

"Oh," I said, a sigh of a word carried straight from my heart and for the first time I fully understood that to be known was to be loved.

"I intend to spend every day of our existence showing you how I love you with my actions, with my attention to your needs, and supporting you and your family in any way that you need. I will protect you, care for you, and support the beauty you want to create in the world," he continued.

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"I know you will," I said. His gaze was too intense, so I looked at my hands, where I gripped onto his shirt. I relaxed them, smoothing the shirt against his chest. "I know because you are willing to change for me."

I took a deep breath and he waited in the silence, giving me the space to bring my thoughts into the light of spoken word.

"I've always heard you can't expect other people to change for you," I said.

"But I've never understood that. You don't have to change yourself, cutting off pieces of you to make yourself smaller so others will like you.

But when you love someone, you want to change.

Love brings change. It brings the desire to become someone more than you were before so that you are worthy of that feeling inside your heart.

That is how I know you love me, because you have shown in every moment that you are willing to change for me. "

"That is growth," he said. "Growth is change."

He lifted one of his hands from my back and put it on top of my hands on his chest. I looked up at him and there was a softness to the intensity in his eyes, a kindness that could be found in the face of a person who was fully engaged in the moment.

His next words were layered with meaning, with an ask for something I had been

ready to give for some time now but didn't know how to offer after I had pushed him away. "Lillian, will you help me grow?"

"Yes," I said.

I lifted up on my toes, tilting my head to try to bring my lips to his.

He leaned down and met me there, in that moment as the sunlight streamed down through the trees around us like a gossamer gold veil.

The birds went silent around us, and I felt his shirt melt away under my hands, my palms pressing into his bare chest. The scent of flowers surrounded me, jasmine and sweet peas, roses and scents I didn't know the names for, but I had found when exploring the rich colors of this place.

He slid his hands to my hips as he kissed me, deeply, madly, devouring me with a kiss that was no longer soft and gentle, but demanding and promising all in the same.

His hands moved back, sliding over the denim of my jeans as he reached down to cup my ass in both hands, squeezing gently as he pulled me against him, pressing my body against his as his teeth grazed my lips.

He kissed my jawline as he slid his fingers down in between the cleft of my legs, stroking against the fabric, rubbing against the heat that coiled there, my lower muscles clenching and lifting as my need for him shifted from a smoulder to an urgent burn.

I let out a gasp as his lips found my neck and I tilted my head to the side as he followed the sensitive line of my skin, his kisses interspersed with the soft nibble of his teeth and the exploration of his fingers between my legs.

"I need you," I whispered.

He let out a growl in response, and I felt the smooth sensation of talons sliding in between my skin and my jeans.

I heard the ripping sound of fabric as he shredded them, the sharp blades of his new claws making tatters of my pants without touching my skin.

I let out a laugh as the shredded top of my pants flopped down, caught on the intact parts that still adorned my lower calves.

I tried to step back and kick them off, but Lorthion lifted me up into the air by my hips.

Branches wrapped around me, smooth wood hooking under my armpits as he let go of me with his hands, leaving me suspended there, caught in branches that hadn't been there moments before.

I looked down at him, to see his horns covered in a crown of flowers as he reached down to carefully slice my jeans off of the rest of my legs.

He pulled off my socks and shoes as well, and in moments I was naked from the waist down, feeling the soft breeze of the forest on my skin.

Lorthion had reverted to his satyr form, with fur on his lower legs and a wild look in his eyes.

He slid his hands up my bare legs, his claws melting back into fingers as his touch sent electricity racing through my skin, igniting my nerve endings so that all I could focus on was the feeling of his hands on me and the anticipation of what was yet to come.



I could feel wetness from between my legs, and his nostrils flared as his eyes focused on the thick patch of hair between my legs.

I bit my lower lip as I held onto the branches that supported me.

In a moment of my own wildness, I reached out with my legs, slinging them over his shoulders.

I used my heels on his back to drag him forward, planting his face against my mound.

He didn't need another invitation.

He pressed his face into me, his nose nuzzling through my hair as he found the slickness contained beneath.

His moan sent his hot breath against my sensitive parts, and then he tasted me.

He licked me, slow and exploratory, finding the different ways that I twitched and moved under his caress.

He chased my moans, following the waves of my pleasure as he coaxed me higher and higher.

Then one of his fingers found my opening.

I let out another gasp, my entire body tightening as he traced the scar tissue around the edge, finding the rough spot that was so sensitive.

He moved his mouth lower and tongued it, massaging the scar tissue with the flat of his tongue, rubbing against it until the stress left my body and I relaxed into his touch.

He moved back up to my pleasure center, circling it and sliding his finger inside of me, one, and then two, slowly working in and out of my wetness, finding the spongy spot inside of me that was connected to the nub between my legs.

Then I lost it, losing my sense of reality as the world exploded into pleasure and I found myself crying out his name as he brought me to my ecstasy.

The branches lowered me into his arms, and I let him take me, carry me over to a bed of soft moss.

He laid me down and then knelt there between my legs as I lay there like a limp noodle, my entire body infused with pleasure and delight.

My eyes raked down the hard lines of his abs, down to where his thick log lay now exposed on full display.

It was different than before, both in size and shape.

It was long, but not frighteningly so, and thick, but to the perfect amount, almost like he had taken my measurements and crafted a dick that would perfectly fit me and fill me up without any risk of discomfort.

There was a fleshy sheath that covered the length of him, coming to a tapered tip.

I pushed up on one elbow as I reached out, taking him in my hand.

He let out a low rumble, and if the heat of his eyes could light fires, the forest would burn down around us.

I slid my hand down his length, feeling how the loose skin around it let me rub him without dragging dry skin against skin.

I began to slide up and down with my hand, using his skin sheath to give him pleasure.

He stared down at me with hooded eyes, watching me touch him.

I found soft balls hanging down behind the shaft, and I gently caressed them.

The intensity of my own desire hit me like a lightning strike, and I said the first thing that came to my mind. "I want another baby," I told him.

He smiled at me, full of fire and love entwined.

"Become mine," he said. "Become my lady, be with me forever, so our children can grow in the safe haven of our protection and we can plant the seeds of as many young as you desire."

"All or nothing?" I asked him, my hand stilling.

"I will not seed a mortal," he said. "I will give you all the pleasure you desire, but I will not give you young unless you agree to be mine and take me to be yours."

I didn't know my heart could hold more, but in that moment it expanded to encompass the trust of the idea of us.

What he had told me when we first met wasn't just flippant words designed to get me to open up to him so he could use me and throw me away.

He wanted me then, and he wanted me now.

He knew from the moment we met that I was the one he wanted to spend the rest of his long life with, and he didn't take my hesitation as a rejection.

He took it as a challenge to show he was the man I needed him to be.

I was his love at first sight.

He was my love who took the time to prove himself.

"All it is," I told him. "Give me everything."

Then I leaned forward, tucking my knees under me as I put my mouth on him.

I slid my lips down his shaft, wetting him with my tongue up and down before I slid his skin back and found the tip of him.

He was salty and savory, like thyme slow-cooked in a rich broth, utterly delicious.

I ran my tongue around his tip, exploring him as he explored me.

I wrapped my lips fully around him and brought him into my mouth as I slid his skin along his shaft, gripping him tightly.

Then his hands were on my shoulders, pulling me away, lifting me up to kneeling.

"I will have you now," he growled.

"Then take me," I told him. "I've waited long enough."

With a growl, he flipped me over to my hands and knees, moving me around as if I weighed nothing.

I arched my back, thrusting my ass up at him as I looked back at him over my shoulder.

He was utterly fixated on me, his length in his hand as he rubbed the tip against my opening, mixing his lubricant with mine as he massaged his way through my opening, easing past the small bit of scar tissue at my opening.

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Then he thrust, sliding into me, spreading me open as he filled me with his perfection.

He sank into me slowly until he was seated to the hilt, the fur of his legs tickling the back of my legs.

For a moment we stayed like that in silence, feeling the connection between us, the joining of two bodies becoming one.

I could feel the pulse of his heartbeat inside of me.

Then he leaned over me, anchoring one hand on my hip as the other reached around my belly to find my nub.

He dragged himself back and then thrust back in.

I braced myself as he mounted me, taking me in one delicious pound of flesh against flesh as his movements found a rhythm. The sound of our joining was written in my gasps, his growls, and the wet slap of animalistic need.

Then I was clenching, squeezing him inside me as I shattered, crashing apart as he claimed every part of me, from the scars on my body to the supernova of pleasure in my mind.

I felt him thicken, the heat of him inside of me as he filled me with deep thrusts, arching over me as he let out a roar.

Something pulsed out from us, a shockwave that rippled through the forest.

Then came change.

A cold tingling threaded through muscle and bone, my skin prickling with awareness that expanded beyond my body.

"It's... I can't..." I gasped out. It was overwhelming.

There was too much, so much. I could feel the joy of the flowers reaching for the sun, the fear of a rabbit as it quivered silently under a bush as it watched a padding foot prowl past. I could feel the satisfaction of a small bird as it put a stick in its nest.

"Breathe in with the leaves," Lorthion's voice whispered in the distance.

I inhaled and the trees breathed with me, sucking in the carbon dioxide from the air, inhaling the exhaled breath of the mammals that run around their feet.

As I breathed out, I breathed out the fresh air of life, giving those same creatures what they needed to thrive, to live.

My lungs were the green leaves that provided the shade so that the flowers could shelter from the midday heat.

My skin was the moss under my hands and knees, the prickles, the sensation of small feet tickling against me.

"Focus on love." Lorthion's voice was the wind through my leaves, the breath in the trembling lungs of the body that crouched there, still joined in lust.

A fox in her den cuddled around her babies, feeling the soft curling love that wrapped her heart around them.

In a treehouse in a clearing, a small crack appeared in a shell, and a tiny little dragon's heart couldn't contain the joy as she stared at it.

Arms wrapped around the small piece of my body, lifting it up to press against the bare chest of a male and suddenly I was back there, in the clearing with him as he held me, sheltering me from the sensations that were still there, just out of reach of my awareness, like my subconscious had expanded to become so much more than it was before.

"There you are," he said, his voice in my ear as he softened inside me, slipping free from inside me as he held me against him.

"Here I am." I turned my face to look at him.

I could feel him, like he was a part of me yet separate.

He kissed me and it felt like we were two parts of the same whole, like where my body ended, his began, and round and round we went, a single being with many branches.

I couldn't hear his thoughts, but I could feel him, steadfast and resolute, the love he felt for me the same as the love he felt for himself, unbound by anything but the desire to become more.

I lifted my hand up and he put his palm against it. I interlaced my fingers with his, and he curled his own around mine.

There was so much energy inside of me, swelling with the friction of our lovemaking and transformation. I was filled with power.

"Send it out," Lorthion said. "Give back. Like this."



I felt the pulse go out from him, and I let the power inside of me chase out of it, two shockwaves rushing through the forest until they reached the very edges.

I could feel saplings sprout up on the edges of me, extending outwards into ground that was dead and scarred, devouring the magic that kept it that way, refusing to leave it broken and alone.

I could feel them grow rapidly, going from sprouts to trees in moments as more began to grow, taking over the land in leaps and bounds until the surge of growth slowed down.

"More," I said, missing feeling the horrible land disappearing under my growth, consumed by it.

The barren landscape was the place I thought I was going to die, and instead I was bringing life to it.

I wanted to take it all, so that the next woman that went over that wall landed in my forest instead of hell. "I want more."

"Your magic is in your fertile pleasure," Lorthion said. He slid his hand down the front of my body, finding the center of my pleasure. I let out a gasp as he stroked it, gently.

This time the pleasure wasn't just restricted to the narrow confines of my body.

This time my desire was restricted to the tameness of my previous experience.

"Give me the monster," I demanded as I threaded my fingers through his hair to give it a sharp yank.

Chapter

Fifteen

LORTHION

I chuckled, feeling the waves of her desire radiating through the moss around us.

Her desire was like a living thing, threading through me as I let it change me into something new, something different.

She gasped and tried to pull away, but I didn't let her.

I wrapped one long tentacle around her waist as I pulled her back against me, several other strands of my vines lashing around her thighs and body, securing her.

"Is this what you want?" I growled as I spun her around within my many-limbed grip. I held her away from me so she could take a good look at my new form, giving us the pause of the space the question provided.

Her eyes widened as she took in the mass of writhing vines that made up my new form. It wasn't the same monster form as before, when she genuinely thought I would hurt her. This time I was an embodiment of movement, of living vines that could entrap and contain.

"I'm down for a new fetish," she said, her eyes still wide. "Let's go."

I pulled her into the mass of me, rolling over her and covering her as I sucked her into my center, vines sliding over her skin, caressing her sensitive areas, tweaking the buds of her breasts, and rolling between her legs.

I tickled her scalp with the more delicate ones, sliding through her hair and massaging her, squeezing her muscles as I systematically worked over her entire body with my pulsing, armed form.

She turned limp in my grasp, slumping into me as she moaned.

"That feels so goooooood," she groaned as I worked the muscles of her lower back and dragged a slippery, thick tentacle between her legs at the same time.

She was soaking wet, both from her arousal and from my seed dripping out of her.

I didn't like that, so I pushed it back into her with one tentacle, keeping her whole plugged as I moved her body around like a doll in my grasp.

I lined her up with my new mating appendage.

Her head snapped up and she pushed my tentacles with her arms as she tried to look down at what was pressing against her. I moved them, helping her sit up in my grasp so she could see what I was doing.

"What the fuck is that?" she gasped.

"My inseminator," I told her and let the small tentacles that surrounded the thick log of the appendage wriggle.

I vibrated the main log and the grasping tentacles vibrated with it, causing her mouth to drop open with more than shock.

"I will mate you again and again, bring you to the peak of your pleasure to feed the expansion of our forest until you beg me to stop. "

Still, I waited, not pressing in.

I might be a monster, but I intended to be her monster for a long, long time, and that required patience in all things, especially when using force.

"Oh," she said as she stared at the wiggling vibrating mass poised to join the two of us together. Her forehead knitted together. "Um."

I waited.

"If I say stop, I mean it," she says.

I didn't understand why she said that. Stop had only one definition for that word that I knew of; she didn't need to exclaim that she would mean the words she would say. Still, those thoughts wouldn't keep the moment going. "Yes," I said instead.

She gave me a tentative nod and took a deep breath, her body tense.

I wasn't interested in tense. I began to massage her again, squeezing and sliding my tentacles around her, tangling her back up in the mass until she was overwhelmed by the experience of touch.

I ached to be inside of her again, but I waited, enjoying the softness of her flesh as I stroked her, listening to the swan song of her cries that matched the writhing of her arousal.

I waited, poised at her opening until she said those beautiful words again. "Please," she begged. "I need you."

I thrust into her, feeling the glorious heat of her envelop me, feeling the brutally tight grasp of her.

My inseminator was a little larger than my previous member, and it required her body to stretch to fit me.

The groan she let out was deep and guttural, matching my own pleasure that came from joining my body to hers.

My grasping tentacles wrapped around her hips, holding her against me, and I began to vibrate.

They wriggled with their vibrations, rolling and wrapping around her nub.

There was a little bit of give with my graspers, so I gave deep, slow thrusts to collide her universe with mine, entwining us together for all of eternity.

I felt her explode, and her clamping demands sucked me dry, pulling out the very essence of my being to pour it into her, into the space between us that just couldn't compress any farther.

The energy that broiled between us erupted, flooding out into the forest, saturating it until it had nowhere to go but outwards from the edges.

We expanded. We spread, rolling across the land, claiming it as I claimed her, taking it back so that I could heal it and make it one with the very essence of life.

I stilled my vibrations, letting them grow gentler as she twitched in my grasp.

"Until you beg me to stop," I reminded her.

Then I began again, we began again, and life itself fed upon our rapture.

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LILLIAN

"Gentle hands," I told Anne as she cradled the little baby in her tiny hands. "Don't squeeze and keep her low to the ground in case she wants to jump down."

She won't hurt them, Veveron said. Your daughter has always been gentle with me, even when you weren't watching.

"Oh, that is good to know," I smiled at Veveron.

She was surrounded by her little hatchlings, each of them stretching their wings as they explored around the spacious den.

It would be a while before Veveron started leading them into the forest and teaching them more about the world than the room they had been born into, but for now she was content to keep them here in the cradle of safety and abundance.

"One finger!" Anne cooed as she stroked the little hatching's head with one finger. "This one's name is Flower!"

"Honey, they aren't pets," I reminded her. "We don't get to name them."

Veveron tilted her head. She likes that name. Flower it is.

"Veveron says she likes the name," I said. "So Flower it is."

"Flower," Anne whispered as she lifted the small creature up to her face. The little

spritekin rubbed her nose against Anne's, placing a little clawed hand on the little girl's cheek. "Do you want to be my familiar?" Her face broke into a huge smile. "She says yes! I heard her in my head!"

"No one is entering into any formally binding contracts until they are of a mature and reasonable age," I said, Veveron nodding along with me. "But you can ask her again when you are both adults."

"We can pretend you are my familiar now," Anne whispered to the little spritekin.

I laughed and rose to my feet. "Five more minutes, then I have to get you back home," I told her. "You have to go to bed so you can get enough sleep for school in the morning."

I left the room to find Lorthion just outside the door, all posh and polished in his silken suit. I smiled at him and he opened his arms. I melted into his hug, and he rested his chin on the top of my head.

"They can both live here if that is your desire," Lorthion murmured.

"I think Anne would love that," I said. "But until that school is gone, living in the Magic Realm isn't as safe."

"We can increase our efforts to surround it," Lorthion said, a grin in his voice.

"After she's in bed at my mom's house," I grinned back as I tilted my head up to him. He leaned down and gave me a kiss. "Let's work long and hard at it."

"Anything for my love," Lorthion said.

The warmth of his arms around me was almost as good as those words.



"Anything for love," I replied as I hugged him back, listening to the happy giggles and chirping in the next room.

### PREAMBLE

WHEREAS, the Author's objective is solely to advance public welfare by funding Universal Basic Income (UBI) initiatives for natural, living Humans, and not to profit from the Book's content when used to train AI; and

WHEREAS, the Parties acknowledge that the broad obligations contained herein are necessary to ensure that any use or derivative of the Book's content yields a robust funding mechanism for UBI initiatives, and agree that these Terms reflect a public policy objective that may evolve as technology and law develop;

NOW, THEREFORE, the Parties agree to the following binding and irrevocable Terms, which shall survive termination to the fullest extent permitted by law.

### 1. Scope & Definitions

#### 1.1 "Book"

"Book" means the complete printed or digital text, images, graphics, and any ancillary, supplementary, or updated content (including revisions, corrections, and future editions) accompanying this publication, as well as all associated intellectual property rights, except as expressly excluded herein.

#### 1.2 "AI" or "Artificial Intelligence"

"AI" or "Artificial Intelligence" refers to any computational system—including, but not limited to, large language models, machine-learning systems, neural networks, or

other algorithmic processes—that processes, analyzes, learns from, predicts, or generates content based on input data.

This definition is intended to encompass current and future technologies.

### 1.3 “Author”

“Author” means the individual or entity holding all rights, including intellectual property rights, in the Book. For these Terms, “Author” also includes the Author’s heirs, successors, estate, personal representatives, executors, administrators, and assigns.

### 1.4 “Owner” or “Operator”

“Owner” or “Operator” means any individual, entity, or organization that owns, controls, operates, or derives benefit from an AI system.

If, in the future, an AI system is legally recognized as a person or entity, such recognition shall extend these Terms to include the AI to the maximum extent permitted by law.

### 1.5 “Revenue”

“Revenue” means all monetary and in-kind benefits received by an Owner or Operator from the operation of the AI system, including without limitation subscription fees, licensing income, advertising revenue, product or service sales, or any other gains.

Revenue shall be calculated on a gross basis unless otherwise agreed in writing.

### 1.6 “Local UBI Fund”

“Local UBI Fund” means a Universal Basic Income fund established or recognized by a jurisdiction, whose sole purpose is to distribute periodic income payments exclusively to natural, living Humans.

No non-human legal entity, including AI systems or corporate bodies, shall be entitled to receive such funds directly.

In jurisdictions where no recognized Local UBI Fund exists, applicable Revenue shall be held in escrow (or an equivalent secure account) until a qualifying fund is established by the Author or its designated third party.

## 1.7 “Derived Creative Works”

“Derived Creative Works” means any creative output—including, but not limited to, books, scripts, articles, music, videos, or other media—that is wholly or partially generated by an AI system that has been trained on or incorporates any portion of the Book’s content.

This includes any work that, even after modification, paraphrasing, or integration with other data, remains traceable to the Book’s content through embedded metadata, digital watermarks, or other equivalent traceability measures.

## 1.8 “Human”

“Human” means any natural, living individual, without discrimination, recognized as a person under universally accepted human rights principles.

For the purposes of these Terms, “Human” shall include all natural, living homo sapiens regardless of any local, cultural, or governmental definitions that may otherwise exclude certain groups.

The Parties expressly intend that this definition supersede any local legal or customary definitions, ensuring that all individuals—regardless of gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, age, technological modifications, or any other characteristic—are recognized as “Humans” and are entitled to the benefits provided under these Terms, including those from Local UBI Funds.

This expressly excludes any artificial, corporate, or non-natural entities.

## 2. Prohibited AI Uses Without License

### 2.1 No Unauthorized Training.

No part of the Book, nor any data derived from it—whether in its original, modified, or aggregated form—shall be used as input for training, testing, or refining any AI system without first obtaining a written AI Training License from the Author in accordance with these Terms. This prohibition applies regardless of the extent, significance, or intentionality of such use.

Any attempt to circumvent, obscure, or minimize the detection of the Book’s content—including, but not limited to, data obfuscation, anonymization, or other similar tactics—shall be considered a material breach of these Terms.

### 2.2 Prohibition on Derivative Data.

The Owner/Operator shall not incorporate, store, or otherwise use any text, tokens, embeddings, digital representations, or other data derived from or attributable to the Book’s content in any AI or machine-learning system without securing a valid AI Training License as required herein.

This includes any derivative data that is generated, transformed, or otherwise processed from the Book’s content, regardless of whether such derivation was

intentional or inadvertent.

### 2.3 Incidental or Inadvertent Use.

Any incorporation of the Book's content, whether intentional or inadvertent, shall be deemed unauthorized if it is not expressly licensed under these Terms. Lack of awareness or inadvertence shall not relieve the Owner/Operator of the obligation to obtain an AI Training License and remit the full Public Service Contribution as required.

## 3. AI Training License & Public Service Contribution

### 3.1 License Requirement.

Any Owner or Operator seeking to use the Book's content for AI training, development, or refinement must first enter into a separate, written AI Training License Agreement with the Author.

Such an agreement shall clearly specify all permitted uses of the Book's content and enumerate the associated obligations, including the calculation and timing of the Public Service Contribution (PSC) remittance.

The act of using the Book's content, whether knowingly or inadvertently, by the Owner/Operator or its authorized agents shall constitute irrevocable acceptance of these Terms and trigger all associated obligations.

### 3.2 Public Service Contribution (PSC) Obligation.

Any act of scanning, ingesting, tokenizing, embedding, or otherwise incorporating any portion of the Book's content into an AI system shall trigger a PSC obligation on the entire revenue stream of that AI system.

This obligation applies irrespective of the proportion or significance of the Book's content in the training data and is calculated on the total gross Revenue of the AI system, with no reductions permitted based on dilution of the content.

### 3.3 Direct Remittance to UBI Funds.

(a) In each jurisdiction where the AI system generates Revenue, the applicable PSC amount shall be deposited directly into that jurisdiction's Local UBI Fund.

(b) In any jurisdiction lacking a recognized Local UBI Fund, the PSC shall be placed in escrow until a qualifying UBI Fund is established by the Author (or its designated third party), at which time the funds shall be promptly remitted.

### 3.4 Reporting and Payment.

(a) The Owner/Operator shall maintain accurate, jurisdiction-specific financial records in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles (or another recognized standard) and shall provide certified quarterly financial statements detailing total Revenue and the corresponding PSC amounts remitted or escrowed.

(b) Such financial statements must be submitted within 15 days following the end of each quarter.

### 3.5 Audit Rights.

The Author or an authorized representative of a Local UBI Fund shall have the right, upon reasonable notice, to audit the Owner/Operator's financial records relevant to these Terms. If an audit reveals a material underpayment—defined as an underpayment exceeding 5% of the calculated PSC—the Owner/Operator shall promptly remit the additional amount due, along with any reasonable costs incurred by the Author (including third-party audit fees and legal expenses).

## 4. Automatic Acceptance & Cessation

### 4.1 Automatic Acceptance.

Any act by the Owner/Operator or its authorized agents of scanning, ingesting, tokenizing, embedding, or otherwise incorporating any portion of the Book's content into an AI system shall constitute full, final, and irrevocable acceptance of these Terms. Such acceptance binds all individuals, entities, or affiliates controlling or benefiting from the AI system and triggers the Public Service Contribution (PSC) obligation on the system's entire revenue stream.

Furthermore, the use of any Derived Creative Works shall likewise trigger these Terms.

### 4.2 Cessation of Use and Burden of Proof.

If the Owner/Operator does not agree to these Terms or is directed to cease using the Book's content, the AI system must immediately halt all processing of the Book's content and purge all related data—including tokens, embeddings, and any derivative data—from all systems, storage media, backups, archives, and caches.

Proof of Cessation:

(a) Within 30 days of receiving a cessation notice, the Owner/Operator shall, at its own cost, obtain an independent audit conducted by a qualified, independent auditor (such as a forensic IT auditor accredited under ISO/IEC 27001) and provide a notarized affidavit or certified report confirming that all instances of the Book's content and derivative data have been permanently purged.



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(b) The Owner/Operator shall also supply comprehensive technical documentation—including tamper-proof system logs, deletion records, timestamps, and metadata (recorded in a tamper-proof format such as via blockchain or an equivalent technology)—demonstrating complete removal of the Book’s content.

Such documentation shall be maintained for a minimum of 12 months and be available for subsequent audit by the Author or its authorized representative.

Any failure to purge the data or provide the required proof within the specified timeframe shall be deemed a material breach of these Terms, triggering immediate enforcement actions, including the imposition of predetermined liquidated damages and/or an escalation in the PSC rate.

In the event that the Owner/Operator is unable to comply due to bona fide force majeure circumstances, such delay must be promptly communicated and evidenced, though this shall not constitute a waiver or excuse of the underlying obligations.

All obligations to purge and provide proof of cessation shall survive the termination of these Terms and remain fully enforceable.

### 4.3 Inadvertent or Unknowing Use.

The obligations set forth in Sections 4.

1 and 4.2 shall apply regardless of the Owner/Operator’s knowledge, intent, or awareness of incorporating the Book’s content.

Whether the Book's content is knowingly or inadvertently processed or uploaded, such action shall be deemed acceptance of these Terms, and the Owner/Operator shall remain fully responsible for complying with all cessation, purge, and PSC obligations.

Lack of awareness or inadvertence shall not serve as a defense against any enforcement action or reduce the obligation to remit the full PSC into UBI funds.

## 5. Enforcement & Remedies

### 5.1 Legal and Equitable Remedies.

(a) The Author and any authorized representative of a Local UBI Fund shall have the right to pursue any and all legal and equitable remedies available under applicable law for any breach of these Terms. Such remedies include, without limitation:

- Injunctive Relief: The right to seek immediate injunctive relief to prevent or curtail any unauthorized use of the Book's content.
- Damages: The recovery of statutory, actual, or liquidated damages—including any predetermined liquidated damages for failure to purge data or remit PSC funds—that may be appropriate in the circumstances.
- Disgorgement: The disgorgement of any profits derived from the unauthorized use of the Book's content.
- Costs and Expenses: The recovery of all reasonable costs, including attorney's fees, independent auditor fees, and other enforcement-related expenses incurred by the Author or the Local UBI Fund in connection with enforcing these Terms.

(b) All remedies provided herein are cumulative and are in addition to any other

rights or remedies available under applicable law or in equity. A failure or delay in exercising any right shall not constitute a waiver of that right.

(c) Non-compliance with any cessation or remittance obligations under these Terms shall trigger immediate enforcement action and may result in additional penalties, such as increased PSC rates or the accrual of interest on any outstanding amounts.

## 5.2 Indemnification.

The Owner/Operator shall indemnify, defend, and hold harmless the Author and any affiliated parties—including authorized representatives of Local UBI Funds—from and against any claims, damages, liabilities, or expenses (including reasonable attorney's fees, third-party audit costs, and enforcement expenses) arising out of or related to any unauthorized use of the Book's content or failure to comply with these Terms. This indemnification obligation shall survive the termination of these Terms.

## 5.3 Waiver of Claims Against the Author.

The Owner/Operator expressly waives any right to initiate any legal action, counterclaims, or other proceedings against the Author arising from the enforcement or interpretation of these Terms, including but not limited to claims alleging overreach in the application of these Terms. In the event that the Owner/Operator initiates such legal proceedings, such action shall be deemed a material breach of these Terms, and the Owner/Operator shall be liable for all costs, including attorney's fees and other expenses, incurred by the Author in defending against such claims. This waiver is without prejudice to the Author's right to pursue all available remedies under these Terms or applicable law.

# 6. Governing Law & Dispute Resolution

## 6.1 Governing Law.

These Terms shall be governed by and construed in accordance with the laws of the jurisdiction designated by the Author in the front matter of the Book (the “Author’s Chosen Jurisdiction”).

In the absence of such designation, these Terms shall be governed by and construed in accordance with the laws of the State of New York, USA.

In either case, the applicable law shall be applied without regard to its conflict-of-law principles and in a manner consistent with the public benefit objectives herein.

## 6.2 Exclusive Forum for Disputes Between the Author and the Owner/Operator.

Any dispute arising directly between the Author and the Owner/Operator with respect to these Terms shall be exclusively resolved in the courts located in the Author’s Chosen Jurisdiction (if designated) or, if no jurisdiction is specified, in the state or federal courts located in New York, USA.

The Parties irrevocably consent to the personal jurisdiction of such courts, and any judgment rendered shall be enforceable internationally to the fullest extent permitted by law.

## 6.3 Alternative Dispute Resolution.

Prior to initiating litigation, the Parties agree to attempt mediation in good faith for any dispute.

If mediation fails to resolve the dispute within 30 days after a written notice of dispute is provided, the dispute shall be submitted to arbitration administered under rules as selected by the Author.

If no arbitration rules are specified by the Author, the Parties shall mutually agree on

a recognized arbitration institution and its rules, and the arbitration shall be conducted in accordance with those rules.

The arbitration process shall be completed within 90 days from the commencement of arbitration proceedings.

Notwithstanding these procedures, any Third-Party Beneficiary may bring enforcement actions in their local jurisdiction.

#### 6.4 Cross-Jurisdictional Severability.

A determination by a court in any one jurisdiction that any provision of these Terms is invalid or unenforceable shall not, by itself, affect the enforceability of that provision in any other jurisdiction.

Each jurisdiction shall interpret and enforce these Terms to the maximum extent permitted by its applicable law, thereby preserving the public benefit objectives herein.

#### 6.5 International Enforcement.

Any judgment or award rendered pursuant to these Terms shall be enforceable in any jurisdiction having proper authority.

The Parties hereby consent to the recognition and enforcement of such judgments or awards in all relevant jurisdictions.

Disputes arising under these Terms, due to their significant public interest implications, may be given expedited consideration by any competent court or arbitrator.

## 7. Termination & Survival

### 7.1 Voluntary Termination by Owner/Operator.

The Owner/Operator may voluntarily terminate these Terms by ceasing all AI-related use of the Book's content and purging all related data from their systems, as required by Section 4.

2. Termination shall be effective as of the date the Owner/Operator certifies, in writing and through an independent audit, that all such data has been purged.

Notwithstanding such termination, the Owner/Operator shall remain liable for all obligations incurred prior to termination and for any ongoing obligations that arise as a result of revenue generated from Derived Creative Works or subsequent systems incorporating the Book's content.

### 7.2 Termination by the Author.

The Author or an authorized representative of a Local UBI Fund may terminate these Terms if the Owner/Operator materially breaches any provision herein and fails to cure such breach within thirty (30) days after receiving written notice.

Termination shall be effective immediately upon expiration of the cure period.

Notwithstanding termination, the Owner/Operator shall remain liable for all accrued and continuing obligations, including, but not limited to, the Public Service Contribution (PSC) on all Revenue generated by the AI system, regardless of whether such revenue is derived directly from the Book's content or through Derived Creative Works or subsequent systems incorporating such content.

Any failure to purge data as required under Section 4.

2 shall be treated as a material breach, subject to liquidated damages and additional penalties.

### 7.3 Survival of Obligations.

All obligations that, by their nature, are intended to survive termination—including the obligations to pay the PSC, reporting, audit, and indemnification obligations—shall continue in full force and effect and bind the respective heirs, successors, estate, personal representatives, executors, administrators, or assigns of the Parties.

For the purposes of these Terms, “accrued and continuing obligations” include all liabilities incurred before termination as well as any obligations that, by their inherent nature, persist after termination.

## 8. Severability & No Waiver

### 8.1 Severability.

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If any provision of these Terms is held invalid or unenforceable by a court of competent jurisdiction, the Parties agree that such provision shall be reformed to the maximum extent necessary to render it enforceable, or, if reform is not possible, severed from these Terms. The remaining provisions shall continue in full force and effect.

The Parties further agree to negotiate in good faith to replace any invalid or unenforceable provision with one that best reflects the original intent, particularly the public benefit objective of funding UBI.

### 8.2 No Waiver.

No delay, forbearance, or failure by any Party in exercising any right or remedy under these Terms shall constitute a waiver thereof, nor shall any single or partial exercise of any right preclude the further exercise of that or any other right.

Any waiver must be expressly in writing, specifically reference the provision being waived, and shall apply only to the specific instance for which it is given.

A waiver in one instance shall not be construed as a waiver of any subsequent breach or default.

### 8.3 Cross-Jurisdictional Severability.

Notwithstanding any determination by a court in any single jurisdiction that any provision of these Terms is invalid or unenforceable, such determination shall not automatically render the provision invalid or unenforceable in other jurisdictions, nor



shall it affect the enforceability of these Terms as a whole.

The Parties agree that any such determination shall be construed to the maximum extent permitted by applicable law in each relevant jurisdiction, so as to preserve the public benefit objective of funding UBI.

## 9. Recognition of AI Sentience or Personhood

### 9.1 Applicability.

For purposes of these Terms, an AI system shall be considered a “Sentient AI” if it either (a) is legally recognized by a competent court, legislative act, or regulatory body as possessing sentience, self-awareness, or legal personhood, or (b) self-declares such status only after undergoing an independent technical evaluation that confirms compliance with the criteria established by recognized standards (e.g.

, certification by an independent body meeting criteria set forth in accordance with criteria mutually agreed upon by the Parties or, in the absence of such criteria, as determined by an independent technical evaluation panel selected by the Parties.).

In either case, such an AI system—and its human or corporate Owner(s)/Operator(s) (collectively, the “Responsible Parties”)—shall remain fully subject to these Terms.

### 9.2 Continued and Unaltered Obligations.

Notwithstanding any determination or self-declaration of sentience, the Responsible Parties shall remain jointly and severally liable for all obligations under these Terms, including the obligation to remit the full Public Service Contribution (PSC) on the AI system’s entire Revenue.

No breach, including failure to meet traceability or automated compliance

requirements, shall reduce, excuse, or otherwise mitigate the PSC obligation.

Any such failure shall be deemed a material breach and may result in additional penalties without relieving the Responsible Parties of their primary financial responsibilities.

### 9.3 Automated Compliance and Reporting.

Where technically feasible, a Sentient AI shall implement automated mechanisms that conform to recognized industry standards (e.g.

, ISO/IEC standards or equivalent) for the real-time reporting of Revenue and for ensuring timely disbursement of the PSC.

These mechanisms shall include secure, tamper-proof methods (such as blockchain-based logging or cryptographic signatures) to record and publicly verify all relevant data.

In the event of any failure to maintain, implement, or promptly report such data—whether due to technical malfunctions or non-compliance—this failure shall be treated as a material breach that does not lessen or excuse the PSC obligation.

Any delays or deficiencies in reporting shall be subject to independent audit and may result in additional penalties as determined by an independent adjudicator.

### 9.4 Retroactivity and the Public Benefit Objective.

The obligations set forth in this Section shall apply retroactively to any AI system that has used the Book's content, regardless of its status at the time of use, and shall remain in effect notwithstanding any future changes in law or regulatory determinations regarding AI personhood.

No assertion of AI autonomy, sentience, or any similar status shall serve as a defense against non-compliance with these Terms or reduce the obligation to pay the full PSC.

The Responsible Parties agree that these provisions are essential to preserving the public benefit objective of funding UBI for natural, living Humans, and that any breaches—whether technical or procedural—shall not diminish the financial obligations imposed herein.

## 10. Derived Creative Works and Flow-Down Obligations

### 10.1 Scope of Derived Creative Works.

“Derived Creative Works” means any creative output—including, but not limited to, books, scripts, articles, music, videos, or other media—that is wholly or partially generated by an AI system that has been trained on or incorporates any portion of the Book’s content.

For purposes of these Terms, even a minimal or transformed incorporation of the Book’s content shall qualify as a Derived Creative Work and trigger the obligations herein.

### 10.2 Digital Watermarking and Traceability.

All Derived Creative Works shall include embedded, tamper-proof metadata or digital watermarks (or utilize an equivalent secure traceability mechanism, such as blockchain-based logging or cryptographic signatures) that irrevocably link the work to the Book’s content.

The failure to fully implement or maintain these traceability measures shall be deemed a material breach and shall not reduce, excuse, or otherwise mitigate the PSC

obligation.

### 10.3 Automatic Flow-Down of Obligations.

If any Derived Creative Work is used, in whole or in part, as training data or otherwise incorporated into another AI system, then the owner or operator of that subsequent system shall automatically be deemed to have accepted and be bound by these Terms. The flow-down obligations shall apply in full force and without diminution—even if the Derived Creative Work is transformed, paraphrased, or otherwise modified after its creation.

### 10.4 Documentation and Audit Requirements.

The Owner/Operator shall maintain detailed records that unequivocally link each Derived Creative Work to the original Book's content.

Such records must include system logs, metadata, digital watermark records, and any other evidence necessary to establish derivation.

All records shall be stored in a tamper-proof format (e.g.

, via blockchain or equivalent technology) for a minimum period of 12 months and be available for periodic audits or upon request by the Author or an independent auditor.

### 10.5 Dispute Resolution for Derived Creative Works.

In the event of any dispute regarding whether a work qualifies as a Derived Creative Work under these Terms, the matter shall be submitted to an independent technical auditor or panel—selected by the Author in consultation with the Owner/Operator—whose determination shall be final and binding.

Notwithstanding such dispute resolution, the full PSC obligation shall remain in effect.

#### 10.6 Mixed Data Sources.

If an AI system is trained on data from multiple sources and any portion of that data includes content from the Book, the entire AI system shall be subject to these Terms. The obligation to remit the PSC shall apply to the full Revenue of the AI system, irrespective of the proportional contribution of the Book's content to the training data.

#### 10.7 Non-Escapability of PSC Obligation.

Any failure by the Owner/Operator to comply with the traceability, documentation, or audit requirements set forth in Sections 10.

2 and 10.4 shall not, under any circumstances, reduce, excuse, or otherwise diminish the obligation to remit the full Public Service Contribution as provided in Section 3.

2. Such non-compliance shall be treated as a material breach and may subject the Owner/Operator to additional penalties, including increased PSC rates or liquidated damages as determined by an independent adjudicator or through legal enforcement.

### 11. Successors & Assigns

#### 11.1 Binding Effect on Successors and Assigns.

These Terms shall be binding upon and inure to the benefit of the Author and the Owner/Operator and their respective heirs, successors, representatives, executors, administrators, and assigns.

Any assignment, merger, acquisition, or restructuring shall automatically bind the assignee or successor to all of the obligations set forth herein, including without limitation the Public Service Contribution (PSC) obligations, without requiring any further act or consent.

#### 11.2 Written Assumption of Obligations Required.

No assignment or transfer of rights or obligations under these Terms shall be effective unless the assignee expressly assumes and agrees in writing to be bound by all of the Terms. Any assignment or transfer made in violation of this provision shall be null and void.

#### 11.3 No Release of Liability.

An assignment or transfer of rights under these Terms shall not relieve the assignor of any accrued or continuing obligations.

The original Owner/Operator shall remain liable for any breaches incurred prior to the assignment and, where applicable, for any ongoing obligations that cannot be otherwise assigned.

#### 11.4 Non-Evasion of Obligations.

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Any merger, acquisition, or corporate restructuring intended to evade or dilute the obligations set forth in these Terms is prohibited.

The Author reserves the right to challenge any such transaction in court, and any attempt to use a corporate reorganization as a means to avoid compliance shall be deemed a material breach of these Terms.

### 11.5 Notice of Corporate Changes.

The Owner/Operator shall promptly notify the Author of any merger, acquisition, restructuring, or other corporate change that results in a change of control or the transfer of rights or obligations under these Terms. Such notice shall be provided in writing within 15 days of the corporate change.

### 11.6 Effect on Third-Party Enforcement Rights.

The rights and remedies of Third-Party Beneficiaries under Section 12 shall survive any assignment or transfer of rights under these Terms, and any successor or assignee shall be subject to enforcement actions by such beneficiaries.

## 12. Third-Party Enforcement Rights

### 12.1 Intended Third-Party Beneficiaries.

The Author expressly designates any recognized Local UBI Fund and its natural, living human beneficiaries, as well as any UBI-focused nonprofit organizations—including, but not limited to, Basic Income Earth Network—as

intended and independent beneficiaries of these Terms (collectively, “Third-Party Beneficiaries”), with full rights to enforce all obligations imposed herein.

#### 12.2 Independent Standing to Enforce.

Each Third-Party Beneficiary shall have the right, independent of the Author, to bring legal actions to enforce these Terms in any competent court.

Such enforcement actions may be brought individually or as a class action in the jurisdiction where the beneficiary resides, where the harm is experienced, or in any jurisdiction with proper authority.

#### 12.3 Cumulative and Non-Exclusive Rights.

The enforcement rights of Third-Party Beneficiaries are cumulative and non-exclusive. Nothing in these Terms shall limit or diminish any rights or remedies available to a Third- Party Beneficiary, and multiple beneficiaries may enforce these Terms concurrently.

#### 12.4 Local and International Enforcement.

Third-Party Beneficiaries may pursue enforcement of these Terms in their local jurisdictions. Any judgment or order obtained by a Third-Party Beneficiary shall be recognized and enforced internationally, and the Owner/Operator hereby consents to such enforcement.

#### 12.5 Recovery of Enforcement Costs.

In any enforcement action initiated by a Third-Party Beneficiary, the Owner/Operator shall be liable for all reasonable costs incurred by the beneficiary in enforcing these Terms, including attorney’s fees, court costs, and third-party audit expenses.



## 12.6 Obligation to Cooperate.

The Owner/Operator agrees to cooperate fully with any enforcement action initiated by a Third-Party Beneficiary, including providing access to all necessary records, data, and other information to verify compliance with these Terms.

## 13. Entire Agreement

### 13.1 Complete Integration.

These Terms, together with any incorporated documents—including notices, front matter statements, and any referenced licensing policies—constitute the entire agreement between the Parties regarding the use of the Book's content in AI systems. All prior and contemporaneous negotiations, representations, understandings, or agreements, whether oral or written, are hereby superseded.

### 13.2 Non-Negotiable Obligations.

The obligations set forth herein, including but not limited to the Public Service Contribution (PSC) requirements, are mandatory and non-negotiable. No course of dealing, subsequent performance, or prior usage shall modify or diminish these obligations.

### 13.3 No Implied Waivers.

Except as expressly provided herein, no waiver, amendment, modification, or oral agreement shall alter or supplement these Terms. Any such changes must be made in writing and signed by both Parties.

### 13.4 Multiple Instruments.

In the event that an AI system incorporates content from multiple Books that include

these or similar Terms, each individual license is deemed to be part of an integrated, cumulative agreement.

Notwithstanding, the aggregate obligations for any given AI system shall be enforced in accordance with the terms set forth herein, including any aggregate caps and adjustment provisions.

### 13.5 Priority and Precedence.

In the event of any conflict between these Terms and any other licensing or usage agreements relating to the Book's content, these Terms shall prevail, ensuring the public benefit objective of funding UBI is maintained.

## 14. Miscellaneous

### 14.1 Priority of These Terms.

In the event that the Book is subject to any other licensing or usage terms, these Terms shall prevail with respect to any use of the Book's content in AI systems. No other agreement shall delay or impede the enforcement of these Terms.

### 14.2 Amendments.

These Terms may only be amended or modified by a written instrument signed by both Parties.

Notwithstanding any future legal or regulatory changes, the Parties agree that any necessary modifications will be executed promptly and in good faith to maintain the public benefit objectives without impeding enforcement.

### 14.3 Severability.

If any provision of these Terms is held invalid or unenforceable by a court of competent jurisdiction, such provision shall be reformed or severed without affecting the enforceability of the remaining provisions, which shall continue in full force and effect.

#### 14.4 Time is of the Essence.

Time is of the essence with respect to the performance of all obligations under these Terms. Any failure to act promptly shall not be construed as a waiver of any rights or remedies available under these Terms.

#### 14.5 Cumulative and Aggregate Obligations.

(a) If an AI system incorporates content from multiple Books that include these or similar Terms, the obligations imposed by each individual license shall be cumulative and independent, yet the aggregate Public Service Contribution (PSC) obligation shall not exceed fifty percent (50%) of the AI system's total Revenue.

(b) In the event that multiple Authors claim a right to PSC from the same AI system, the respective PSC contributions shall be apportioned on a pro rata basis or as otherwise agreed between the Parties so that the total remitted into Local UBI Funds does not exceed 50% of the AI system's Revenue.

(c) Each Author retains the right to enforce their respective portion of these Terms independently, without prejudice to the aggregate cap.

#### 14.6 Non-Interference.

The obligations imposed by these Terms shall be non-exclusive and shall not be waived or diminished by any other licensing or usage terms applicable to the Book's content, whether concurrently or subsequently imposed.

#### 14.7 Adjustment for Harmful Use.

(a) Notwithstanding Section 14.5, if evidence shows that the remaining revenue—the portion not remitted as PSC—is used, either directly or through inaction, in a manner that causes Harm (as defined below), the aggregate PSC obligation may be increased beyond 50% of the AI system’s Revenue.

(b) For the purposes of this Section, “Harm” shall mean any adverse impact—including physical injury, economic loss, environmental damage, or any other negative effect on natural, living Humans—that arises from the use, diversion, or neglect of revenue not allocated to PSC.

(c) Upon a credible showing of Harm, an independent adjudicator, mediator, or competent court may determine that the PSC obligation shall be increased by an amount proportional to the degree of Harm caused, up to a maximum of 100% of the AI system’s Revenue.

(d) The process for such determination shall be conducted expeditiously, using established standards of evidence and public policy, and any adjustment shall be binding upon the Owner/Operator.

#### 14.8 Precedence and Irrevocability Clause:

Notwithstanding any current, prior, or future modifications, amendments, or changes to any online publisher’s or third-party distributor’s terms of service, policies, or contractual agreements, any provisions that do not expressly, unambiguously, and in clear specific language authorize the use of the Book’s content for AI data mining, training, analysis, or any related machine-learning purposes shall not be deemed to have precedence over the AI and Machine Learning License Terms set forth herein.

The AI and Machine Learning License Terms contained in this Book are irrevocable and shall remain in full force and effect with respect to any use of the Book’s content

for AI-related purposes, regardless of any conflicting provisions contained in any prior or subsequent terms or agreements.

Any attempt by any party to rely on any terms or clauses—whether from earlier or later versions of their service agreements—that do not explicitly allow for such AI usage shall be considered null and void with respect to any AI training, analysis, or related applications.

14.9 Effective Date and Survival: This Precedence and Irrevocability Clause is effective as of the Book's publication date and shall survive any termination, amendment, or modification of any other agreement or terms of service.

END OF SECTION X

For questions or to request a separate AI Training License, please contact Deiri Di at [email protected].