



Faeted to Fall

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Category: Fantasy

Description: She spoke into the empty wood, a question meant for no one, but the wood was never empty, and there was never no one listening...

Maewyn's fate is sealed when she is chosen to walk the Harvest Way as a sacrifice to the Autumn Court, but this human doesn't intend to be any fae's bride, and she'll kill if need be. Her attempt to slay her betrothed only creates a far worse predicament, though: a magical tether that bonds her to her target instantly.

How unfortunate the fae she's stuck with is such an obnoxious brat.

Roan, the Autumn Court's prince, never intended to be wed either, never mind tethered, but now that this human has spoiled his grandiose plans, he'll have to find another use for her. But perhaps Maewyn is not worthless. Perhaps Maewyn's brusque perspective and vitriolic name-calling are exactly what the Autumn Prince needs.

But worse than unintended tethers and foul-mouth fiances is a dark presence that lurks the autumn wood. Only together can Maewyn and Roan defeat it, if first they can put their passionate hatred aside and embrace the bond meant to unite them.

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Through The Harvest Way

The scythes were quiet now, but their sweeping was burned into Maewyn's mind.

Memory of the sound echoed back from the field of wheat she stood before, the Harvest Way cut through like a corridor to nowhere.

So like a sun with its tawny glow, the moon hung low and full, but its brilliance didn't touch the path she was to take, a blackened passage running through the field's center that would lead to the Limindhwer.

When this was done, harvests all across the land would be made heartier and last for the long length of a cruel and unforgiving winter, a gift to the humans in return for their sacrifice.

But if it were as easy as it was said, if the fae could gift something so precious as an afterthought, then why did they need a sacrifice at all?

Why did they need her ?

A poke at Maewyn's back was the grim reminder that her questions would, as ever, go unanswered, but then all her inquiries had ever earned her were dread and doom.

She stumbled but stayed upright, glaring over her shoulder with the last of her ire.

The shadowed faces of her village, her kin, her mother, stared back, silent and drawn into unfeeling iron.

Maewyn's fingers clenched around nothing as she struggled to keep from checking her pocket one last time. Don't touch it, they'll know. Gods know how, but they will, and you will be defenseless .

So, what? She was to just...go? They had no words to recite? No instructions to give? Not even a prayer?

No, no more questions—that's why she was in this mess to begin with. She'd always been a nosy girl with a mind sharper than a sickle and a tongue begging to be severed—that was what her mother said anyway. And for all she asked, she never learned, so it wasn't a surprise that the gods chose her.

The gods, of course, had not lowered themselves to pick out the specific woman who would be sent across the Limindhwer.

That was the job of a priest acting on a command from the aristocracy in the country's capital.

The fae king of the Autumn Court demanded a bride, and the search trickled away from anyone of noble birth or social significance and out to a nothing village where it landed on a nothing girl all under the guise of the goddess Cerewin's predilection.

But Maewyn was not stupid—she knew that Cerewin didn't favor her. No one did.

A breeze finally came, unexpectedly cool for the warmth the day had wrought.

Maewyn had approved of the heat burning down on the backs that cut the Harvest Way under the noonday sun, at least one of which belonged to a man who should have been protecting her instead of laying the path to hand her over.

She felt every stalk of wheat that fell while watching, but tears never came.

Dominick wasn't worth it. None of them were.

Maewyn turned away from the hollow stares of people she was always on the outside of anyway. Fine, she would go without a word, not even a whisper. It wasn't how she'd imagined leaving Goulmead, but it was perhaps fitting in the end.

The singing crickets and shivering leaves went all out of her ears as she stepped between the high-walled wheat, and the harvest moon's glow was swallowed away.

Maewyn looked back only once more to see their eyes catching the last of the light, fear for an eternal season if they did not send her—if she did not go—and then that too was gone.

Roan stood beneath the ignus ash just as he was meant to.

Well, leaned against it more like, but he was in the place he was deigned to be by centuries-old, absurd law, and that was probably good enough.

He stared into the Limindhwer, vision going fuzzy with the magic of the threshold.

Waiting was boring work, and he couldn't be expected to remain entirely vigilant the whole time, could he?

He gave the orange he held another disinterested toss.

It fell right back into his hand as expected, but Roan grunted as if it might have stayed up in the fiery leaves overhead, ridding him miraculously of this burden.

The peel was thick, as bright as a setting sun, and once it would have oozed copious syrupy juices, but now?

After his spell, it would be bitter, stringy, and dry.

His meticulous search for the perfect fruit to be gifted as a welcome had been a waste, but he needed to put on a show of it for his father. Everything was a show with that fae.

The forest was also showing off. It was always awash in passionate reds and brilliant yellows, but this evening it had primped and preened.

Leaves fell in feathery mounds like piles of gold, and the white-barked branches held more, brighter than the fruit he carried.

Even with a darkened sky, the colors were on full display, illuminating themselves with an enchanted, coppery glow, determined to impress.

Rude , he thought with a chuckle: the orange was meant to look like the most delectable thing this side of the Limindhwer—well, after him, of course.

A shift in the shadows drew him upright, the thinning of the barrier between realms pricking at his skin. A figure formed at the end of the Harvest Way, as the humans called it, and he neatened his brocade coat because he just couldn't help himself.

She was dressed in white, but of course she was, a simple linen shift that fell to her knees, belted at the waist with a leather tie, gauzy sleeves the only embellishment.

By gods, that would not do, but, oh, it really shouldn't matter.

Her hair was left loose, which was at least a nice touch, falling to her waist in coils, dark like the husk of the trees she emerged between.

Head down and hands clasped, she hesitated when the Limindhwer thickened behind

her, but there was nowhere to go with the denseness of the forest on either side, and so she proceeded dutifully right up to him and dipped into a wobbly curtsy.

Timid, docile, meek, just like his father foretold.

Standard human woman. Roan's throat tightened on a dissatisfied groan.

He looked down on dark lashes and brows as she straightened, her lips drawn down, and he could see it then, the grief blossoming all over her bronzy skin before tragedy was even seeded.

Roan's insides got up and switched places, but his disgust was aimed elsewhere this time.

Misery was perhaps a good master of compliance, at the very least, but how much worse was he intending to make it?

She slowly lifted her eyes to meet his. They were a bright and angular surprise sown into her soft face, and the brief vision of a fox darting through the wood flashed in his mind. Gold flecks in her irises echoed the enkindled landscape, and something else burned even deeper. Something curious.

Roan cocked his head, squeamishness chased away. He hadn't met many humans. Most were frightened things, boring and beneath him, but he'd been told whispers of their hidden treachery, and this one was—

“Fuck!”

This one was stabbing him.

The color was sucked from the world, plunging Maewyn into darkness just as she

plunged her sliver of iron into the fae's heart.

Aim true and intention truer, she felt the metal sink into flesh as real as her own, heard the sickening squelch of broken skin, and hung on through the fae's howling curse.

And then, nothing. His skin didn't burn away, his bones didn't turn to dust, he didn't even fall.

Well, damn.

In the enchanted dark that had descended upon them, Maewyn stared into a face that should have been twisted in moribund pain.

Fae were purported to be beautiful, and this one was no exception, but he was terrifying too.

Pale skin caught what little light had been left in the fae realm's fury with her deed, and hair as crimson as blood fell into his face.

Eyes green like the scales of a viper burned down on her, and rage flashed over features that had been admittedly pleasant seconds before, no inkling that he was about to keel over.

Double damn.

Iron was meant to reveal the truth of a fae , whatever that meant, and kill them, a much more useful and clear meaning, yet this one stood unchanged.

Her instinct was to flee, but it came a second too late as hands fell onto Maewyn's waist. There again in his stalwart grip was another indication that he was no nearer to

death than before she'd stabbed him.

Damnedest of all the damns!

“What are you doing?”

Her heart faltered at the rasping rumble of his voice and how it vibrated up through the metal she had buried in his chest.

Her own voice shook as it so often didn't. “Uh...killing you?”

“You thought this would kill me?” His jaw ticked, grip tightening. There was regrettably very little blood. “Are you really so stupid?”

Maewyn came back into herself all at once. Of course she wasn't stupid. “Well, it's iron!” She thrust the entirety of her weight behind the sliver then, but it didn't budge. “The books say...this is how...it's done!”

“Awful books you've got then. I'm fae, not one of the old ones,” he droned as if she were truly too dull to understand and worse, as if she weren't struggling with every ounce of strength she had to bury metal into his heart.

“If you want to kill me with iron, it needs to have been blessed with starlight. And you've got to mean it. ”

Maewyn's eyes flicked skyward to the twinkling dots in the velvety blackness above. Starlight? How on this or any other earth would she work starlight into her sharpened bit of castoff iron? “Well, I do mean it,” she growled, but gave up. “Is this the only way you can die?”

“Of course not. There are plenty of ways to kill a fae, though you'll forgive me for

not sharing them, considering.” He pushed her backward, and she staggered out of his grip.

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The fae stood under a massive tree, every bit of him exuding ire from his disheveled hair to his polished boots.

He was dressed like the utter essence of royalty, a scarlet coat over a richly decorated vest and crisp white tunic beneath.

He poked at the metal protruding from his chest, gave a disgusted sigh, and plucked it out with only half a wince.

The leaves above brightened into the glittering orange they had been before her murderous attempt at freedom, and the color, the life, the magic, was all too much.

Maewyn touched her own chest, blinking into the surrounding wilds, the unfamiliarity of so many wonders waiting—begging—to be discovered.

“Needless to say, this was not what I was expecting out of my bride.” The fae flicked away Maewyn’s weapon, and it disappeared into a heap of golden leaves beside the fruit he’d dropped. His green eyes caught her again. She could run, they said, but she would not get far.

“I don’t intend to be your bride,” she spat, taking another step back.

“Well, what a relief that is for the both of us.”

Her breath caught on her next words of refusal, unneeded. “Really?” Her shoulders unpinched. “I can just go home?”

The fae snorted. “I don’t give a flying fuck what you do.”

A mass of black feathers burst before her, and then he was gone.

Becoming a bird presented only one problem: the becoming part. Specifically, becoming when Roan was angry.

Blinded by his own showy burst of ebony feathers and misplaced frustration, Roan plummeted from where he had transformed and landed in a mound of leaves much too deep for a creature of his new size.

I don’t need to practice , he always insisted, but elegance and forethought took skill that required cultivation.

Giving his wings a first flap was fruitless, unless the orange was to be counted—he knocked right into the cursed fruit and buried it deeper. He managed to free his beak from the golden hoard of leaves, and another frantic flap freed him as he tumbled out onto flatter earth.

“My goodness,” the human breathed. “You turned into a raven.”

At least she could properly identify her birds. Her foxlike eyes were wide as they took him in. She was also apparently smitten by magic which helped to quell his annoyance.

“Not a very good raven,” she mumbled. “But still.”

Without eyebrows, it would be difficult to express his irritation, but Roan certainly tried, calling on a spell he learned from a shadow fae as he glared upward. Darkness crawled away from his wings as he spread them there on the ground, and the shadows blanketed down the path in either direction.

She continued to stare, and perhaps a raven wasn't terribly menacing all on its own when it only dusted the earth with a gloomy haze, but the lack of alarm on her face was altogether offensive. Almost as offensive as not wanting him for a husband.

Never mind that he wanted to be no one's husband to begin with.

Roan gave one brazen flap and lifted himself from the forest floor on a flourish of fiery leaves. Wings outstretched, he sailed upward on enchantments alone and broke through the canopy of the ignus ash.

"Wait!" The human's voice crashed into the messiness of his vexed thoughts.

She was fast, he would give her that, a shock of white linen tearing through the blazing colors below.

But Roan would not wait. This wasn't at all what he was supposed to be doing. It wasn't what his father wanted nor fell in with his own plans. But he had tried, and by all the gods, wasn't that enough?

"What am I to do?" she shouted as she streaked around a bend in the trees he too found himself following.

"I don't care," Roan called back through the magic of being a raven only in appearance. He dipped lower, gliding between the treetops. "Perhaps find another fae and try to not stab that one."

"But I don't want another fae! I want to—"

Just as quickly as she'd chased after him, the woman came to an abrupt halt.

Roan soared on, abandoning the crunching leaves and human huffing.

He should have been pleased to lose her, but there was a pull at his wings—curiosity, most likely.

Roan found himself pitching hard to one side and swooped back over where he had lost her.

The human stood in the middle of the path, face no longer turned up. She was still and unhidden in the broad break in the trees. If he were a predator, she would be an easy catch, but as meals went, she wasn't very appetizing.

Interesting, perhaps, but a human would never satisfy.

Roan touched down on a high branch, silencing the leaves so his landing would remain hidden, and watched.

“He doesn't want me,” she said, and the words cut into Roan's chest deeper than the iron.

Panic and wonder flooded his veins, magic he was not expecting twisting into his core, and he would have fled from it if her voice hadn't cut through the enchanted scratching beneath his skin.

“Why am I here if he doesn't even want me? ”

She spoke into the empty wood, a question meant for no one, but the wood was never empty, and there was never no one listening.

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Advice is Like A Mushroom

Do I even want to go home?

Maewyn swallowed back that question as others burst in her mind.

What was left for her in Goulmead? A mother who eagerly handed her over for sacrifice, a lover who had never meant the words he whispered up against her skin in the dark, a single shelf of well-loved books that didn't even contain proper instructions to kill a fae?

There was a crack in her chest, but it was not the familiar sensation of deferred tears. This was like the crackling she'd felt in the air at the fae's transformation. This was... magic .

A gust blew through the branches above, the sound startling.

When the Limindhwer had closed to the Harvest Way behind her, something had sparked inside her as well.

Magic was exceedingly rare in the human realm, and it wasn't meant to be trusted, a thing she'd learned all too well in childhood.

Yet this feeling inside her now was warm and welcoming—everything the stories professed the fae realm was not.

Maewyn shook her head. What was a pang in her innards compared to a lifetime of

choice ripped away?

Her intent had been to kill the monster who had no objections to being given her, and then she would flee.

She might have failed, but the monster was gone, and now there was only the fleeing part left.

But Maewyn's plan hadn't really gotten much more sorting than that. In all fairness, squirreling away a spare bit of iron with the prospect of royal assassination was a lot .

Night had fully descended, but the fae wood was alight with its own magic.

She scrutinized the depth of the trees around her as a critter snuffled through the fallen leaves.

The fae realm was divided into four corners as far as she understood, and from the looks of things, she was squarely in the center of autumn's heart.

Croaking creatures sang and branches creaked in unfelt wind, but then that all fell away when she saw the eyes.

Blue in the blackness buried deep in the wood, the eyes watched her.

The outline of something large and looming filled in around those eyes, a head with elongated jaws and a back that lifted with silent breaths.

It didn't approach, at least fifty paces away, but it tracked her, a hulking mass of a canine beast covered in fur.

Maewyn wished her sight would fail her, that the beast would slink back into the

wood and be gone, but all she could do was remain caught in its gaze and step slowly backward. One step, and then another as a hollowness drove itself into her mind.

Hunger, fear, desolation...

“Is a human lost?”

Maewyn gasped, gaze darting down to her feet from where the voice had come. A mushroom stood there—a talking mushroom, apparently, but still red-capped and white-stalked and generally mushroomy.

The forest’s sounds all came back at once as Maewyn lifted her gaze again to the place she had seen the eyes, but there was no large, lumbering shadow still watching. The strange bleakness that had gouged at her heart was gone as well.

“Very lost, it seems,” said the mushroom, who didn’t appear to know there had been a blue-eyed beast so close. Had there been? Or had she imagined it?

The mushroom cap tipped back to reveal two black, bulbous eyes hiding beneath its gills.

Tiny arms and legs were hiding under there too, and an even tinier sack was slung over its shoulder.

Maewyn hadn’t met a talking mushroom before, but it was much better than something that could tear her to bits.

“Are you a faeling?” she asked. She’d read that the fae realm’s beings were varied and distinct, but that the small speaking critters were kind and harmless.

Perhaps she should have had her doubts, but she’d once saved a rabbit-like one from

a hunter's trap and watched it disappear through a tear in the veil.

If only she'd known then she would eventually be ushered through the Limindhwer herself.

"Is a mykiis a faeling?"

Maewyn shrugged.

The mushroom shrugged back.

"My village sent me here as a sacrifice to the fae king," she said with a spiritless sigh because it was dull news now that it was over. "You know, that ginger-haired asshole who makes himself into a bird?"

"You must mean Prince Roan." The mushroom tapped a hand-like protrusion against a chin-like bulge on its stalk. "And that would make you a prince's human bride."

"Oh, no, I'm not anyone's bride."

The mushroom bent itself to either side, then made a little gesture with its cap. "I don't see how a prince intends to circumvent the law, but a human should come with me anyway so as not to get eaten by an umbrabrute."

Her eyes flicked once more to where the wolf had been. "What's an umbrabrute?"

"Old thing," he said with a gesture as he started off into the wood. "Shadow thing. Devours all."

"Oh, yes, well"—she swallowed, following after and attempting to remain composed—"with the way the evening's going, I might just welcome being eaten."

The mushroom, who called himself Agar, carried a twig with a buzzing glow on its end.

He led them into the darkened depth of the forest, his staff's speck of light enough to illuminate the way.

The journey was short for Maewyn, though likely much longer for her companion.

They came to a stop at a fallen log, the trunk as thick as Maewyn's hip was tall and covered in dark knots and patches of moss.

"Suppose a human won't fit," said Agar. "Have a careful seat here."

Maewyn perched herself on a rock and watched Agar tromp up to one of the knots to swing it open and disappear within.

The sounds of the forest were louder when she found herself again alone, and she tried very hard not to think of what an umbrabrute could possibly do, focusing instead on a cluster of purplish orbs just near her feet.

She reached down to the soft-looking spheres and gave one a poke.

There was a squeal, and the orbs scattered, some finding their way to the log and disappearing into other knots, but one ran right into her rock and bounced off to land on its back. She could see its face and limbs then, just like Agar, albeit with a very thin stem body.

"Oh, look at you!" Maewyn immediately scooped it up, overcome with curiosity, and the underside of its rounded, purple cap glowed with all the colors of a setting sun.

"A mykiis is not for eating!" it shouted, and its cap bubbled with something frothy.

Maewyn gasped and gently placed it back on the earthen floor—maybe she was the umbrabrute. “No, no, I wouldn’t. You look rather poisonous, to be honest, but beautiful too. Apologies.”

The mushroom stood so still she wondered if she’d imagined the enchantment entirely, but then its cheek-like area went bright orange.

“It’s all right,” called Agar’s voice as a knot on the log swung open. “This is the human bride and future queen.”

Maewyn blinked, more mushrooms she had thought were only spots of color shaking off leaves and moss to gather about. “Uh, human? Yes. Future queen? No. And I thought you said he was a prince.”

Agar made a shrugging movement as he gathered things unseen from inside the log where a bright light glowed behind him. “Titles come with the inevitability of time.”

“Not for this human.”

The homes of the mushroom critters inside the log glowed, and Maewyn’s gaze darted from window to window where there were tiny chairs crafted out of twigs and pebble hearths.

They had to be faelings, the small enchanted creatures who often slipped into the human world and then back, their magic unlike the true fae who were almost entirely relegated to this realm, power too great to cross the veil.

“And kingship isn’t inevitable for this Prince Roan either,” she said with a snort. “Immortality being what it is.”

Agar chuckled, and many of the others followed suit. “A prince told a human he is

immortal?”

“Sounds like Prince Roan,” said a blue mushroom.

“A prince probably thinks he is,” snickered another.

“He isn’t? Really, he didn’t say , it’s just what we believe on the other side of the Limindhwer.

” Maewyn pursed her lips, trying to look into as many faces as possible for the truth.

“Humans are sent a demand for a new bride when the whim strikes your king, and in trade, the Autumn Court blesses our crops until the whim for another wife strikes him again. Fae think of it as a fair bargain, but we either do as they say or starve. The last demand came over one hundred and fifty years ago, and none of us live that long.”

In Agar’s window, a wispy line of smoke rose from a bubbling pot. “Nor do fae. Not anymore anyway. Not since the old ones.”

Maewyn scooted right to the edge of the rock. “Explain.”

“There were too many, their needs and hunger too great, and the umbrabrutes ate too much,” said Agar as he dropped chopped up herbs into his pot. “So the old fae are mostly gone, and the new fae are only as long lived as humans.”

“So there isn’t just one immortal king of the Autumn Court, and he doesn’t keep replacing his human wife over and over?”

Agar shook his head. “There are new kings and queens, some better and some worse, but every seventh generation, the heir to each throne must wed a human.”

“This is the agreement the courts have come to,” another mushroom added. “And the courts don’t agree on much.”

“A human says the last demand came one hundred and fifty years ago. Seven generations.” Agar nodded with finality.

“But it’s no surprise Prince Roan would not wed this one.”

Murmured agreement spread amongst the gathered.

“Wow, okay, rude,” she groused.

“This is not an insult, not to a human.” Agar collected a bowl the size of an acorn top and ladled in some of his stew before disappearing from his window.

The voice of another mushroom stole her attention. “Prince Roan has plans.”

“Romantic entanglements with the Spring Court, I hear.”

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Maewyn sat back as the mushrooms devolved into whispered rumors, lifting her chin to glance up at the darkness in the branches above. “I didn’t think of it like that,” she said, touching her chest lightly. “Maybe he’s only a prick because he’s as angry as I am.”

At her feet, there came a doubtful sound, and there Agar stood, tiny bowl lifted up and cap tipped back. “Perhaps there is an answer to be found, but first a human should eat.”

“Don’t eat that.”

The tiny bowl halted just before it reached the human’s lips, and her foxlike eyes snapped to him, immediately sharp and angry. Perhaps he should have expected that, but it sent a shiver down his spine regardless.

Roan rolled his shoulders—he wasn’t used to shivers—and then he grimaced. Oh, gods, is this what it’s going to be like? “You’ll be stuck here if you consume that, and don’t you want to go home?”

The human studied what she’d been given, face lighting up but not with more of that frosty anger she’d just blasted at him.

“Enchanted faeling food, like in the stories,” she whispered, and then a frown creased her lips as she addressed the lone mushroom who had remained when Roan arrived.

“We were just discussing why my being here is a problem, so why would you trick me into staying?”

The mykiis's cap swiveled from one of them to the other, and he took a step back.

Roan snorted. "He said your presence is a problem ?"

"They told me you have...plans. Ones I have no intention of disrupting," she said carefully, and then, more graciously than Roan would have, she stood and gave the mykiis a disappointed look. "But it was a ruse. Now who am I to trust?"

Roan clicked his tongue, assessing her—perhaps she would make a better co-conspirator than he thought. "Me, obviously." He turned on his heel and left the mykiis's estate for the depth of the forest.

The sounds of crunching leaves told him she was following behind. Humans were loud, that he was learning, and then she spoke even louder. "Why did you come back?"

He rubbed the center of his chest. "Would you rather I hadn't?"

"A little."

He glanced furtively over his shoulder, though he didn't need to—he could feel her gaze boring into the back of his head.

"All right, a lot ," she admitted, and he had to suppress a chuckle. "But I suppose if we want the same thing, you're a better alternative to giant wolves or deceitful mushrooms. Why would they do that anyway?"

Roan hadn't even answered her first question and yet she was asking a second, but he wasn't going to complain. "The mykiis are old and peaceful—disturbingly so. I imagine they believe trapping you here will avoid a rather bloody war."

“War?” And there she went, shrieking again. She’d been so much more pleasant speaking with the fungi, though that would have been a fair bit more boring if they hadn’t been discussing him.

He tugged on one of his curved ears. “You heard him, yes? Or were you too busy asking questions to listen to any of the answers? Marrying you is a law I intend to break, which will undoubtedly upset a number of powerful fae.”

“There’s quite a difference between being upset and declaring war!” The human hurried on her short legs to cut him off, hands in tight fists and her hair wild as she whipped around to glower at him.

“Well, the other courts will be angry that I do it first. Winter will be most upset, though.” He grinned deeply just imagining the look on stodgy, honorable Prince Warrin’s face.

Her eyes flared with frustrated confusion—yes, that was the look right there. “It?”

“Bring forth a child into this world more powerful than any being that has ever existed.”

The forest was quiet in the moment it took the human to grasp his words, and then she threw her empty hands upward, proving no grasping had been accomplished at all. “By Cerewin’s Horn, explain better, you imbecile!”

Roan snarled, but the corner of his mouth ticked up.

He shouldn’t like being called an imbecile—and for the record, he did not—but it was a little like how he also thought he should hate being questioned.

It wasn’t quite so bad when this human was doing it because, well...

she was just so prickly . Nothing at all like the tame thing that was meant to please him.

This human didn't please him at all, but she was amusing.

Though she was also standing in his way.

Then, he supposed, explain he must.

Roan cleared his throat and put on his best impression of his father. "Every seventh generation, the heir to each court must wed a mortal to dilute our familial powers so that no one court will produce an archfae."

Those fox eyes went as round as a doe's. "The being destined to destroy the realms," she said with a breathiness he was sure he'd never hear again.

"And so you spew yet another rumor. How quaint." He pushed past her, deeper into the wood where the tree trunks thickened as he sought out the nearest eingress.

"There is no guarantee that an archfae will destroy the realms, but if you or any other human bears me a child, the opportunity of whatever my lineage could be will be wiped out for another seven generations. Sure, the courts will continue on in harmony with one another, but the loss seems totally irresponsible."

She caught up again to give him a pointed scowl. "You think it's irresponsible to not bring an archfae into existence?"

"There's only the one opportunity with my firstborn, and even that isn't absolute." Roan laughed, turning on her fully. "My seed is rather spectacular, and I'm not wasting it on you."

At that, her face bunched up into utter disgust. “Oh, gods, I don’t want one drop of your seed, if you can even manage to produce it.”

Shock caught in Roan’s throat like an errant bit of stew. “Excuse me,” he finally spat. “I can produce cauldrons of—”

She scoffed, shoving him out of the way and continuing on into the wood.

He glanced down at the place on his chest her hands had touched with such vitriol, and there was an unfortunate swirling of magic there, confirming the fear he’d been trying to push away. Fuck. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Home, I guess! Now, hurry up and help me so I can be as far from here as possible when you start your asinine war.”

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False Spring

Finding the eingress proved quite annoying.

Enchanted doorways tended to move around, and also the human Roan needed to take to said doorway wasn't allowing him to lead her there.

She was, however, speaking nonstop, mostly to herself about how irresponsible he was.

She wouldn't be the first to say such things, nor would she be the last, he reckoned, but soon enough her specific complaints would be silenced with her departure.

And that was good. Definitely good.

"Here," Roan snapped, and the human scowled, but she did stop her incorrectly directioned march into the dark.

"What? A doorway back?"

"A doorway, yes, but not yet back." When he had been a raven perched in the trees to watch her, it had become clear that things would not be so simple.

Roan ran fingers up the eingress that disguised itself as a tree.

The bark got up and moved around, cracks and crags rearranging themselves into the old symbols.

He traced over the ones that correlated with the garden's location he'd been given in confidence, and the moment his finger left the trunk, a gale of magic swept around them.

The human stepped nearer, scowling at the ground instead of at him for once. She could sense magic, he'd noted, but she was picky about what she decided she enjoyed. As the fallen leaves lifted into the air and encircled them, her eyes darted about with deep suspicion. "What is this?"

Roan didn't answer. She would see soon enough, and he took a certain delight in her apprehension.

As the warm colors about them shifted to a garish green, her wariness too shifted.

He watched how the glow of the magic dappled over her bronzy skin as she took a measured step closer, calculations no doubt racing in her mind.

The human reached out hesitantly, but before she could touch the nearest leaf, the whole of them halted in their spinning and then fell, leaving the two to stand in Jynquil's private garden.

"Gods," she breathed beside him, and Roan frowned at the wonder she cast out on the pinks and purples and greens that had replaced his realm.

Not the rich green of the spongy mosses that carpeted his forest floors or the hearty green of the unripened gourds that would eventually feed the great antlered beasts of his court, but a pale, dewy, fresh green that smelt too sweet to be real.

She wasted no time in barreling forward again, and Roan thought to snatch her back to his side, but if she wanted to inspect the pair of rabbits hopping by or follow after some garish butterfly, then fine, she was free to do as she pleased.

“You’re early.” Jynquil’s preening lilt came from behind him. The fae woman sat on a swing of vines, a gauzy pastel dress trailing the delicate grasses beneath her.

The human was quick to find the voice’s owner as well, caught in Jynquil’s green gaze when she spun away from the ridiculous spray of flowers she’d been sniffing.

“Princess Jynquil.” Roan briefly acknowledged her in the respectable way with a curt bow. “This is—”

“I know who she is. Or who she’s supposed to be.” She planted bare feet on the earth and strolled toward the human, flowers blooming in the wake of her steps.

Roan rolled his eyes. Show off.

The women met, Jynquil’s fae form shorter than the human’s. She raised a dainty wisp of a finger to pink lips and set to circling the stranger like a chipmunk. “Well, if you brought her here, something must’ve gone wrong already.”

“Something... may have happened.” Roan poked at his chest again.

Jynquil picked at the human’s plain dress, startling her. “In less than an evening?”

He huffed out a long breath and with it mumbled, “We may have already been tethered.”

The length of Jynquil’s long braid snapped at her side as she straightened, voice going taut, “I thought you weren’t going to—”

“I didn’t.”

“Well, Jasp yr’s human didn’t bond to him until they consummated—”

“Sometimes it just happens, Jyny,” he hissed, and Jynquil glared at him until he relented. “Well, she did stab me. But only a little.”

“Oh, Roan, we had a plan !” Jynquil stomped in that way she always did that made Roan want to stomp right back and start the kind of shouting match they’d been getting into since childhood, but just as quickly her mood changed, eyes flashing.

“Good thing one of us was competent enough to prepare for something like this.” She plucked a pink rose from her braid, and with a flourish, the illusion on its stem fell away to reveal a blade.

Maewyn darted behind Roan, heart beating too madly to think straight.

The radiance from a sun that hadn’t existed in the autumnal forest caught on the fae woman’s dagger, frightening enough to keep Maewyn half hidden behind the prince’s shoulder, as if she should expect protection from him.

Gods, if only she still had her bit of iron—as useless as he’d said it was, it made her feel the least bit powerful when it drew blood.

The shoulder Maewyn sheltered behind lifted coolly. “I don’t think we should, Jyny. Killing her would probably mean violating yet some other law.”

Oh, my hero .

The woman he’d called Princess Jynquil, yet another fae royal now entangled in her fate, flopped the blade around in hand, barely missing one of the butterflies that continuously fluttered around her head. “You know I’m not going to kill her, and especially not with an avewil dagger.”

“You’re just stashing a ceremonial blade in your hair?”

Maewyn straightened, noting the iridescence of the blade. It was beautiful when she didn't feel so threatened by it.

“Stole it off Father, the idiot.” She held the blade up, pressing the tip into her finger but drawing no blood.

When she smiled, her pointed teeth glinted in the sunshine until she just as quickly twisted her lips into a pout.

“Now, listen, I'm only proposing a severing ceremony, of course , and then we can salvage the rest of our plan. ”

Roan's posture straightened, fists clenching at his sides. Maewyn felt him go tense as if he were truly being protective. Where had all that been moments before?

“Someone tell me what's going on,” she finally demanded.

Roan groaned as he swept a hand through his ruddy hair.

“You and I have been connected thanks to your aggressive introduction, so even if you do find a way back to whatever nasty little village you came from, it won't mean much—the Limindhwer will keep placing itself at your feet, and you'll end up back here over and over. ”

“With you?” She wrinkled her nose and gagged.

Jynquil sputtered out a high-pitched giggle. “I suppose that settles it. I'll prepare a spot.” She turned from them and flounced deeper into the garden where a patch of grass began to sparkle under the movement of her hands.

Maewyn rubbed her teeth with her tongue, nerves buzzing. “What is a severing

ceremony?”

Roan was staring out at the garden, but not at the fae, those green eyes of his no longer so much like venom as they watched something she couldn't see.

“When two fae no longer wish to be wed, they sever their bonded connection to each other. We often call it a tether—a magical link that ties two together.” He heaved a sigh as if the burden of explaining was so great he might just up and die, not that Maewyn could get so lucky. “Do humans not have this?”

“Magical marriage tethers? No, but divorce?” She clicked her tongue. “Yes, in most places. It's not terribly common though.”

“Nor is it here.” His jaw hardened, annoyance flaring, but she had no idea why—she'd done nothing but essentially agree with him. More proof he could never be pleased .

“Come, stand here.” Jynquil waved them over to a ring of foxgloves that hadn't been there moments before.

The pink cones danced in the breeze, and one of her butterflies drifted over to land on the open mouth of a flower.

Its wings came together, spasmed, and then it fluttered lifelessly to the ground.

“Poison,” Maewyn breathed.

“But very little.”

A shove at Maewyn's back thrust her inside the circle. Pollen fluffed up from the flowers and filled her nostrils with an intense itch. Her throat was squeezed, her

breath stolen, and just when she thought she would pass out, she sneezed.

Roan stood before her, more than a little disgusted. “May Aysclewin bless you,” he mumbled, the god of health’s name bereft of sincerity on his tongue.

Still, he had come very close, the circle of flowers quite small, and Maewyn found there was nowhere to go with the foxgloves leaving trails of pink all over the back of her skirt.

She became suddenly aware of how warm the sun was—such a strange thing, a sun, when it had just been night, but there might as well be daylight along with the blooming crocuses and the chirping birds and a fae prince standing just inches away from her.

“Now,” said the fae woman, “you must recreate the first time you touched.”

Maewyn perked up at that. “I get to stab him again?”

“Oh, I like her.” Jynquil laughed. “Are you sure you don’t want to keep her, Roan?”

“No,” they answered in unison.

“Well, you have to touch regardless. Avewil daggers work best with the magic of repetition, and since I’m not officially a priestess and I’ve only read about this kind of ceremony, we’ll need all the help we can get.”

Maewyn slowly closed her fingers into a fist around nothing, imagining the iron there, and then jolted when hands fell on her hips. But Roan didn’t squeeze her like he had before, nor did he fling her away.

Carefully, Maewyn raised both hands and placed them on Roan’s chest where she had

tried to get leverage while stabbing him. Beneath her palm and the layers he wore, he was even warmer than the sun and notably still alive.

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“All right, stay just like that.” Jynquil fluttered around them, and prickly magic followed, but Maewyn was terribly distracted by the hands on her waist and the thumping under her palm. She’d only been intimate like this with Dominick, and that had not turned out well at all.

She chanced a glance into Roan’s face as the tickle of something unearthly prodded at her limbs.

His jaw was even harder, his fiery brow narrowed, staring downward and past her countenance to the earth.

Well, if she was just that terrible to be near, then thank all the gods they were about to be done with each other.

A shimmer caught Maewyn’s gaze as a cord appeared betwixt the two, drawn from heart to heart.

If Maewyn moved her hand just slightly, she could pass through it but knew it would be solid despite its translucence.

That feeling came upon her again, the one that was like stifled mourning she’d first been subjected to out in the wood, yet Maewyn thought if she allowed the feeling to surface now, it wouldn’t be like mourning at all.

Jynquil’s blade thrust between them then, a scream catching at the top of Maewyn’s throat, but if it were because she was frightened of being stabbed or frightened to lose the cord, she didn’t know.

The iridescent blade caught the light, green one moment, yellow the next, and finally blue as it fought the tether.

Distinct pain tugged at her chest, but she held her ground against it, unmoving.

Roan was not so stalwart.

Wings burst from the male fae's back. Maewyn faltered as she gaped at the sight, the brilliant colors of the garden eclipsed by black feathers.

Roan's face was drawn into agony, terrifying to see on a fae, a creature Maewyn had always imagined beyond pain, especially when her own had been so slight.

Briefly she thought, How weak is this man? But the enormity of his wings coming around and enveloping them both struck her still. She couldn't back away, nor could she press into the source of the magic, but her hands flattened against his chest on either side of the tether.

"It's all right," she whispered, the words and comfort pulled from her as she curled fingers into his tunic. Why she felt she should offer him anything, she didn't know, but it happened all the same.

Roan exhaled, eyes flying open, green like gemstones and just as hard.

Bewilderment at the darkness around him lasted only as long as his wings, and then it was all gone.

The brightness of the sun blinded Maewyn, the smell of roses and grass replacing the earthiness that had arrived with his transformation, a fleeting hint of his court come and gone in a blink.

“Well, that didn’t work,” Jynquil quipped as if a grand show of magic had not just blown up in her face and knocked her to her backside. She still held the blade from her spot on the ground, but their cord remained unsevered.

“Obviously,” snapped Roan with a haughtiness that ignored the outburst as well, and he let Maewyn go, the magic between them fading into nothing.

Maewyn rubbed at her hips and backed over the now-dead ring of foxgloves. His grip had turned painful, but Maewyn hadn’t really felt it until it was gone.

“We’re not truly wed, there was no ceremonial binding, only an accident born of blood and this one’s violence,” Roan went on, crossing arms over his chest. “An avewil dagger is meant for breaking lawful pacts. This was a mistake .”

Maewyn was annoyed at that, but Jynquil was worse as she got to her feet and huffed. “At least I’m trying to fix things! I’m not the one who fouled up our plan.” Above them, clouds moved in, dimming the sunlight.

Roan straightened his coat and swept down his front. “At least she doesn’t want to be here.”

“That still upsets things! She was supposed to be totally enamored with you. How in the realm did you botch that up?”

“Well, now we do not need to trick her into wanting to leave, do we?”

The two glared at each other as thunder crashed in the newly stormy sky, but then Jynquil brightened, and the clouds were immediately broken as she turned to Maewyn. “I suppose not. So, are you going to help then?”

Maewyn rubbed a temple. “I don’t even know what you’re trying to do.”

“We had a plan,” she said, twirling the dagger around her fingers as it transformed back into a rose. “You were supposed to come here and fall instantly in love with Roan, fawning all over him and so on, as a human does, but then we would trick you into thinking you hate this place and him—”

“Oh, a nigh impossible task,” Maewyn hissed through grit teeth at a smirking Roan.

“—and once you hated him, you would find yourself a door and flee before your wedding day. Then it wouldn’t seem like his fault or that he’d broken any of our laws. It would just be a human being... human .”

“Well, I don’t want to be here, so if you’ll just show me the exit—”

“You’re tethered, remember?” Jynquil huffed.

“And even if you weren’t, fae aren’t adept at finding doors to the human realm, not ones any of us can pass through anyway, but humans always seem to find a way to make them.

They’re quite skilled at it, in fact. Disappointingly so. ” She pouted, light eyes narrowing.

“And once you left,” Roan continued. “I would feign heartbreak, mourning your betrayal for a year in solitude. Jyny would leave the Spring Court as well, feigning that she was entering the priestesshood, and no one would know that we would actually be together, holed up in Ulric’s manor.”

“Stuck there for a whole year, and it was all Roan’s brilliant idea,” Jynquil repeated then rolled her eyes. “But no one else knows you’re tethered, do they? Nothing has to change if she can sever this and find her way back.”

“I’m not sure a human will be as skilled at breaking a tether as they would be at escaping the realm.”

“Well, you ought to begin now if you’re going to have it done before your wedding!

” The fae princess clapped her hands, and there was a swirling of green leaves that knocked Maewyn forward to bump against Roan’s chest. When she straightened again, there were mounds of golden leaves everywhere, sticky tree trunks, and not a flower in sight.

“We’re back?”

“How astute,” Roan grumbled and glared out at the woods as if he could still see and feel the other fae’s challenge. “She kicked us out without even a warning.”

A chill swept through the forest, night all around them once again.

“I am sorry that your...companion is upset with you.” Maewyn was, in fact, not sorry—they deserved each other—but she felt she should probably say so anyway now that she was well and truly stuck with him.

At least if the two fae were in love, she could understand why he was being such a brat.

“I’m sure she’ll come around once I’m gone. ”

“Jynquil?” Roan snorted. “There’s very little to come around to—she’s only agreed to marry me and bear my child to infuriate her father.”

Maewyn blinked up at his face in the darkness, no upset there. “But you... you love her , right?”

He shrugged. “Love? No, we simply tolerate each other—we have since childhood—but it is not as if I have much of a choice. There are very few fae with royal blood with whom I can conceive an archfae. Most are not willing to break our law, but Jyny is, and that’s good enough.”

Maewyn felt her face fall into a frown. “That’s quite sad.”

“Don’t look at me like that—it’s prudent!”

She would have said she was sure he didn’t even know the meaning of the word, but it felt a bit too cruel to say just then.

“You’re the one who’s being pitied now anyway,” he spat when she only pouted back at him. “Stuck here against your will because your people sent you away.”

“So, both of us are pathetic,” she grumbled, but before he could retort, a gust of magic blew into the forest, kicking up leaves and pulling even Roan’s attention.

In stark contrast to the fae she’d met thus far, the one who appeared from a door that carved itself out of one of the white-trunked trees was decidedly regal.

His coat of fine maroon brocade gave off a violet light in the darkness, and the burnished copper of his hair’s length was woven with threads of gold.

Maewyn would have dropped into a deep curtsy on instinct if she weren’t so suddenly taken by the age on his face—it seemed the faelings hadn’t lied and that fae were not interminably young —though this fae was still stunningly handsome despite his pinched brow and deep frown.

“Father!” Roan wrapped an arm around Maewyn’s waist and swept her up against him.

“I see you’ve met.” The man who could only be the Autumn Court’s king barely raised a brow. “What in the realm is taking so long?”

The prince laughed coolly. “Only dallying in our newfound affection.”

Maewyn would not have been able to stop the scoff that threatened in her throat if fingers hadn’t slipped under her chin.

Her head was tipped up so that Roan’s green gaze caught and held hers.

Her limbs went loose then, letting him maneuver her with an affection she thought he was completely incapable of, but his eyes burned with a warning: play along .

“Yes,” she breathed, unable to look away, “I—”

And then Roan’s lips were on hers.

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A Court of Threats and Ridiculousness

Roan never intended to be severed, so it was just as well that he was kissing the human that had been sent to be his wife instead of thrusting her back over the Limindhwer. Though, he never intended to be tethered either, not without a rigid plan and an equally averse-to-marriage partner. And yet.

The human's lips tasted faintly of salt, heat from her breath flooding his mouth as he coaxed her into deepening faux affection.

Roan was accustomed to exotic tastes when his tongue found a fae's skin.

There had been one whose kisses were as bright and tart as pomegranates and another from the winter court whose entire body stung his tongue with peppermint.

But when he pulled back from the human, the taste left on his lips wasn't truly discernible, it was only special in that it was truly her .

Roan blinked, and she remained silent—a triumph. His father looked on with an indifference he'd been cultivating for years and then turned, robes trailing over the leaves as he went and the colors on the forest floor left doubly brilliant.

“You are enraptured by me, and we are ecstatic to be engaged,” Roan whispered in the human's ear.

She jolted out of the doltish stare she'd been giving him and corrected into her natural glare.

The Autumn Court's king had opened an eingress, and Roan looped her arm into his to lead her to it with another whispered command, "Smile."

Her pointed face went soft, and those lips he'd taken took him back, looking even softer as they gently pulled upward at both corners.

Roan hadn't fully believed Jynquil's reported experience with humans, but perhaps he should have.

The princess of the Spring Court insisted humans were deceitful to their core, but Roan hadn't thought himself lucky enough to acquire one that clever.

Yet the enamored, doll-like look his human had put on was wholly convincing, and it only brightened as they passed through the eingress and then the palace gates.

Of course the bailey was swarming with courtiers, great gods, and Roan had to fix his own face, replacing his wonder for pride as he walked his bride-to-be across the sweeping expanse of white stones.

His heart thumped as he caught the covert sneers on some of his least favorite courtiers, back prickling where his wings pummeled.

He would not allow them to slice through his skin.

No, weathering that kind of outburst on top of the courtiers' condescension would be unbearable.

It was bad enough that Prince Roan, inheritor of the Autumn Throne, was reduced to marrying a human—they would not also see him throw a tantrum about it.

After their too-long trek under so many judgmental eyes, Roan was relieved to be met

with the much more intimate banquet that had been laid out in the gathering hall.

Far fewer courtiers were invited within, and they were surrounded with the best that the realm had to offer.

Running the hall's length, tables as long as fallen redwoods were covered in heady braised meats, pastries smelling of peppery sweetness and browned butter, and roasted gourds of every color.

The human sucked in a sharp breath and then let out a quiet if admirable sound as she gaped at the welcome dinner. He hoped she wouldn't further embarrass him by acting like a pig rooting out truffles.

The king led them to the high table at the hall's end, places set only for three.

They came to stand and look out on his father's favorites, the most dutiful and restrained of the court, each waiting behind their own seats dotted about the hall.

Aunyx was amongst them, and Roan caught the shadow fae's gaze.

His friend gave him the slightest reverent bow, and the prince snorted—ever proper, even now when he was the only fae in attendance who knew the truth of Roan's intentions.

The king's pale eyes swept over Roan to fall on the human as his voice carried throughout the hall. "The Autumn Court extends the warmest welcome to our human sojourner, the Lady of the Harvest Way..."

Roan felt his face blanch—he hadn't gotten her name.

"Maewyn, Your Highness," she said in one demure breath, bowing her head and

bending her knees. Roan almost wrinkled his nose at the act, disappointed he wouldn't get a chance to see his father's horror at her defiant glare.

"The Lady Maewyn of the Harvest Way," the king announced. "Your future queen."

Polite applause pattered amongst the courtiers like papery leaves shivering under a gentle breeze, and the king swept a hand over the two as shadows crawled up the walls.

At Roan's side, Maewyn tightened her grip on Roan's elbow with the sudden darkness, but then the dancing motes blinked into life overhead and drifted downward to offer their luminous pulsing glow.

Humans didn't have such magic, he knew, so he forgave the way she reached out and let a mote land on the tip of her finger, eyes crossed as she brought the tiny orb to her nose to examine it.

After his father settled himself in the highest place of honor gazing out at the rest of the hall, Roan shifted the starry-eyed human into a seat as the rest of the fae took their places at the lower tables.

The dining chamber filled with quiet murmurs and the clink of wine-filled glasses, celebratory yet solemn.

"I half expected to meet a priestess at the end of this march," Roan quipped, slipping in beside his bride-to-not-actually-be.

"A king does not break his bargains." It was less a promise than a threat, his father's voice now low enough to be private.

"As agreed, when your requests have been met, there will be a wedding. Allowing

your bride to be clad in anything less than her heart's desire would be a poor gift, after all.

"There was an almost kind bend to the king's mouth as he nodded at the human. Well, that was new.

"Do you hear that, Pumpkin? Your demands are limitless. Ask for a gown sewn of maple leaf veins and silken starlight, and it shall be yours no matter how long it takes to craft."

"Silken starlight?" Her gaze darted to the place on his chest where she'd failed to kill him.

"Or...something slightly more opaque."

"And you will keep to your end of the bargain," his father cut in. "The wedding will be held by Salen, regardless."

"Salen?" Maewyn straightened in her seat. "In thirteen days?"

"Yes, but surely that is plenty of time." Roan waved the impending holiday away, knowing she would be gone long before then.

Maewyn's belly was full, her mind was overwhelmed, and the corners of her mouth ached. When Roan guided her down an empty hall, she finally let the brainless smile fall off her face and ripped her hands from his elbow to massage her jaw. He clicked his tongue, and she glared at him.

"Ah, there she is." Roan smirked, and Maewyn's full stomach somersaulted, though whether it was from a questionable tart or the taste of spiced cider his kiss left on her tongue, she wasn't willing to consider.

She glared instead at the hall ahead, so like all the others in the palace with its grand ceilings and etched marble, though this one had only a lone door at its end.

Their march through the place had been a blur of gold and white after the feast, her attention on maintaining that mindless grin while scheming for an escape, but now that there weren't guards and courtiers everywhere, there was only one place to go.

The chamber on the door's other side was vast and swathed in the amber light of many candles, their glow flickering over honey maple walls carved with intricate patterns.

Great arches lay open to an encircling balcony on the far wall, the dome of each filled with stained glass in reds and oranges, and their velvet curtains pulled back so that the room smelled of earthy fallen leaves and the promise of rain.

Though it was an elegant and massive chamber, there were messes here and there distinguishing the room as private: a book left open on a settee, papers strewn over a desk, a game of chess half-played. And of course there was the bed in its center, sizable, opulent, and...singular.

There was a flutter at Maewyn's side, and Roan's coat was dropped to the floor, the fae stretching with arms overhead and mouth drawn into a yawn. She crossed her arms and cleared her throat.

Disdain fell back onto that pale, sharp face of his. "What?"

"Where am I supposed to sleep?"

Roan blinked about the vastness of the room then shrugged.

Maewyn's throat rumbled with annoyance. "Isn't it... indecent for the two of us,

unwed, to share a bedroom?”

His nose wrinkled. “No? We are as good as wed in the eyes of the court, and what goes on within these walls is no one else’s concern as it is.”

“Well, I demand it as part of the wedding planning.”

“Ah, no.” He was unbuttoning his vest, not even looking at her.

“You said I can have whatever I want.” She’d not forgotten that but was disappointed to have to employ a demand so soon.

Roan slipped out of the vest and let it also fall to the floor. “Allow me to rephrase: you can have whatever I want you to want.” Then he tugged at his tunic and whipped it off over his head.

“Good gods, you’re a monster,” she breathed, turning swiftly from his display of flesh and marching to the open archways at the far end of the room.

“If you intend to throw yourself off the balcony, you will be sorely disappointed in the enchantment that only allows me to cross it,” he called after.

But there would be no throwing, the breath drawn out of her at the sight beyond the arches.

The night sky twinkled with starlight over a forest of trees like darkened jewels blending into the blackness of the horizon.

In that moment, she could barely recall the dull dustiness of Goulmead’s flat fields.

The rhythmic trill of crickets rose to meet her as she continued to the balcony’s edge.

Directly below, a dozen courtyards were laid out, just as vast and covered in the shadows of night, but Maewyn could still make out the thick hedges separating garden rows from decorative spaces.

This was a bit more like home, like that place she came from, yet it pulsed with magic that beckoned for her to explore the crops being grown there.

“Someone may attempt to kill you.”

Maewyn started, Roan suddenly beside her. His form was clad in a plain white tunic and loose pants, looking, well, not at all normal, not with that face and those pointed ears, but nearly.

“You’re betrothed to a prince, after all,” he went on a little lower, “so that is why you must stay here in the night, when the worst plans are hatched. And there is no better view in Tenhaef anyway.”

“Tenhaef?”

“The autumn corner of the fae realm. You know, this place I lord over? No one could magic up a better sight than right here on this balcony, so you can’t possibly convince me you don’t like it.” Roan smirked, and the smugness crawled over every handsome, obnoxious line of his face.

“It’s beautiful,” she quipped. “But plenty of beautiful things are wholly unlikable.”

“Well, you’re staring at my lands like you’re in love.” He leaned against the marble railing and rested his chin in his hand, and any fear Maewyn might have had at sharing his bedroom was immediately doused by the lazy adoration that spilled from his eyes as he gazed out at the realm.

Well, then, that settled where she would sleep, and she turned swiftly away from the railing.

“What are you doing?”

Maewyn slipped out of her shoes on the way to the bed and pulled back the topmost linen, a beautiful if thin fabric that shimmered like spun gold. “I’m exhausted.” The next blanket was thicker but filled with an airy softness, and then there was a third, plush and begging her to crawl beneath.

“That’s my bed.”

Maewyn shrugged as she climbed into it, but she couldn’t scowl this time, not with the softness that enveloped her. She was instantly ruined for straw mattresses forever.

Roan strode over to the bed’s other side, candlelight dancing over his form. He hulked there, unspeaking for once, and she took a moment to appreciate the shape of him, his looser garments revealing much more skin, then snuffed that thought out.

“Our bed is plenty big enough,” she said, pulling the blankets up to her chin, unable to fend off a genuine grin.

Roan stared her down, jaw taut, then grabbed his side of the linens and tore them back. Gaze smoldering with a fire that she’d just extinguished, he climbed in.

Maewyn’s grin unwittingly grew in return.

Roan fell with a huff onto his back, inexplicably finding a way to be uncomfortable in the coziest bed on earth.

Maewyn shrugged against the softness, eyes closing until there was a loud clap beside

her.

The candles all snuffed out at once under Roan's command, briefly filling the room with the pleasant smell of woodsy smoke.

The chamber fell into darkness, and then the moon's gentle glow filtered in through the arches.

Gods, it was just perfect.

"Tomorrow you will find a way to sever this bind, and then a doorway back into the human realm."

Perfect except for the angry fae in bed with her, demanding she fix all his problems.

"Why in your realm or mine is this my responsibility?" she grouched.

"Because it was always your responsibility to get yourself home," he snapped back as if she'd agreed.

Maewyn sighed deeply. "I doubt very much I can do that in a single day. Maybe not even in thirteen."

"Then you are doomed to become the next queen of the Autumn Court, and you will be lost to your home forever, not that your family or people will care."

Despite the sarcastic bend to his voice, Maewyn had noted that there was no current queen, an omen she thought rather grim. She swallowed hard and gripped the linens a little tighter. Roan muttered something unintelligible then, and she grunted, "What was that?"

“But I am sorry,” he snapped as if it were a terrible pain to have to repeat himself. He huffed out a sigh, seeming to struggle as he removed the terseness from his voice. “It is unfortunate that you have been displaced.”

Maewyn nodded only to herself. Perhaps not that unfortunate .

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:39 pm

An Excellent Library and Still Miserable

Morning in Tenhaef was not quite like in Maewyn's own realm. The world brightened with a hazy fog, painted drab at first with drizzling rain, but then golden shafts broke through the clouds and soon the warmest colors took their turns pulsing from the forest's heart.

Maewyn watched morning break from the plump comfort of Roan's bed as the fae breathed heavily an arm's length away.

It couldn't be called snoring, what he did, but she desperately wanted to whack him in the chest to wake him with the accusation anyway.

The only problem was that she didn't find it annoying at all, probably because his sleepy breathing was the first thing he'd done that was not entirely calculated and self-centered.

Roan had pushed back the mounds of blankets in the night as if he'd dreamed fitfully, full lips open, chest rising under a tunic that could use a lace to keep it closed, a few warm-colored freckles on his chest exposed.

Maewyn couldn't remember feeling him toss or turn, though, nothing but solid slumber after a brief contemplation of how she could...

well, not kill him, she supposed—he really hadn't done anything worth being slaughtered over yet.

And where else was she to go anyway?

She sighed, gaze drifting to the ceiling and the copper tiles there that caught and reflected the fiery oranges of the forest.

“Good morning, Pumpkin.”

All right, maybe he had earned being slaughtered after all.

Roan was every kind of slow—slow to get out of bed, slow to dress, slow to tell her what they would do—until it came to actually getting rid of her.

“You can have breakfast when you solve this severing problem,” he whispered while ushering her out of his private wing of the palace.

He squeezed her middle in a false show of affection to the fae guards who stood in gleaming armor at the long hall’s end.

“How sweet of you,” she said loud enough to keep up the ruse, then when they’d passed, grit her teeth. “If you plan to get out of this wedding by starving me to death, you’ll be dealing with an incredibly cranky betrothed until I wither away.”

“Crankier than this? If you get any worse, surely I will perish first.” He grinned with all the malice in every realm, then shifted her hips under firm hands to turn her down a new corridor before she could gasp out any real offense.

Through a maze of white marble and gilded archways, they came to the place Roan insisted they would be late to despite his own dallying all morning. She assumed it was an appointment with some wedding official, but when he opened the door, her heart nearly stopped.

The library wrapped around Maewyn like a great hug, towering in its height, walls curving inward and filled with the warmth of unread words.

Of course, she'd crossed a threshold, so magic was bound to take hold, but Maewyn's mind pushed out the sparks of pretension and wisdom and instead substituted in her own awe.

On closer inspection, the chamber revealed itself to be a hollowed-out tree with roots and bark that clung onto a corner of the palace, seamlessly weaving themselves into the marble wall at her back and jutting up like a tower.

The shelves had formed from branches growing off its excavated innards, spiraling steps from level to level more of the same, and deep maroon leaves filled in the ceiling many stories above.

Maewyn swept away from Roan to the nearest shelf and plucked off a book.

Words in a beautiful but illegible script met her hungry eyes.

She flipped through the pages to discover not a single symbol she could understand.

When she traded the book for another, her disappointment morphed into anger, and she huffed at Roan. "What are these scribbles?"

"The language of my people, you uncouth cretin. Every corner of the realm has its own sacred syllabary, and this is Tenhaef's.

" He snatched the tome from her hands and strode across the round chamber to where a bundle of roots rose from the mossy floor.

Roan offered the book, and the roots slithered upward and accepted it.

“Fortunately for your ignorant mind, we are prepared.”

Maewyn crowded in at his side, ignoring his barbs for the wonder of the book being held by the tree itself.

He nudged her toward another bundle of roots as they twisted into a seat, and when she took it, the book was brought right before her.

The ink on the pages melted away as sap drew itself across the parchment, new words forming in a language that Maewyn could read.

“They’ll all do this?” she whispered, leaning close as a page was flipped for her by the root.

“All nine hundred and seventy-six thousand of them,” Roan lilted and gave her head a pat. “Be studious, Pumpkin.”

She swiped at his hand but missed, the fae already flouncing away and looking terribly delighted at her annoyance.

Maewyn almost forgot the prince’s threat of withholding food until she was shaken from her reading by a pretty fae woman presenting her with a tray of dark toast, sweet jams, and hot cider.

When she was alone again and had stuffed herself, she realized that, for all the joy she was getting from the stories at her fingertips, the library was massive, and she only had thirteen days to find the answers demanded of her—answers that the prince himself had yet to find.

“I wish there were some appendix to this damn place,” she mumbled.

Much like in the banquet hall the night before, a sprinkling of lights fluttered down from the leaves above and then hovered, as if waiting.

“If I did have something like that,” she said as she watched them, voice low, “I would search for stories of how humans escaped the fae realm.”

The lights darted about and landed on specific books where they remained and pulsed. With a deep breath and an unwillingness to count just how many there were, Maewyn fetched the closest tome and began to read.

Roan rubbed at the spot where he had seen that fucking tether.

He could still feel it, as if it pulled taut the farther away he got from her.

He was glad to leave the human in the library, pain be damned, but he’d brought his hastened steps through the palace to a stop in an alcove for a quick brood anyway.

Perhaps she could figure it out after all—well, she would, she had to. He’d been tentative but hopeful at Jyny’s plan to heft the drudgery of escaping his lax clutches onto his future bride, but that was before Maewyn and before the bond.

Gods, why were fae like this? Always yearning for something as pointless and fleeting as love was pathetic.

It was perhaps the only enviable thing about humans, that they did not have to suffer such magic.

At least, he could only assume they did not suffer it as his tethered mate was so damned dismissive and unhurt and—

“Your Highness?” A breathy voice called Roan’s eyes into focus on a fae woman,

thin brows knit in concern. “You seem terribly upset.”

“Ah, no, no”—he scrubbed a hand over his face and forced out a laugh—“only pondering my impending wedding and the work to be done.” There, that was...appropriate? Surely he should be consumed by plans and a future with his supposed spouse.

A grin crawled up the woman’s face as one of those concerned brows arched. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

Uh oh . Roan knew that look—in fact, he knew it intimately.

His eyes flicked down her body, and then he recalled her name, Breena, and her taste, pecan pie.

“You can bring my future wife some breakfast in the library where she is teaching herself our written language to compose our vows,” he said with a bite even he was surprised by and then strode away.

He was supposed to be utterly smitten, after all, so long looks at other fae would be dangerous at best. It helped that an actual dalliance with even the most beautiful fae in the palace sounded like torture at the moment.

“Impressive salvage, Your Highness.”

Roan clicked his tongue as Aunyx materialized out of the shadows and fell in step with him. “I am engaged, for fuck’s sake. What was she thinking?”

“That you’re excellent in bed,” Aunyx mumbled, not a shred of mirth on his stony, pale face.

Roan broke into laughter and clapped his friend on the back. “Of course! You’re brilliant as ever.”

“I can only make assumptions based on what you insist, though there is no evidence to support it.” Aunyx shrugged a shoulder almost imperceptibly.

Others found shadow fae tedious and draining, sometimes even unnerving, but Roan couldn’t help but be amused by Aunyx’s constant melancholy.

It was only coincidentally useful that his father considered the fae a good influence.

“It’s either that, or she wants to take you somewhere private to cut out your heart. ”

“Because I’m engaged?”

“Because you’re you.” A dark brow rose, an even darker pupil darting toward Roan and piercing him. There was no argument to be had with that. “I assume you’ve assigned a guard for your other half?”

Roan snorted, the shadow fae unaware of how heavy those words were. “Always on the lookout for assassins, aren’t you? Altair and Kree are stationed just outside the library door to protect her, not that she needs it. Too bad you weren’t there when my betrothed attempted to slay me.”

At this, Aunyx actually did look him up and down, slowing his steps for a brief moment and losing that bloodless glare he always wore. “You appear unscathed.”

“Appearances are deceiving.” Roan rubbed the spot on his chest again then snorted at the darkening look on his friend’s face. “Worry not, we have a sort of accord. She is, I am loath to say, perhaps an easier plight than anticipated.”

Roan explained the situation in low tones when they passed out into the gardens to take stock of the aster fields.

They avoided the other courtiers as best they could, though many were eager to congratulate him on his impending wedding.

There were those who were genuine, sniveling even, and then others who mocked him so covertly there was nothing to be said back but a begrudging thank you .

Eventually, they escaped the palace walls and found a secluded place to sit and watch the great elk graze.

Shadow fae were elusive, but Roan had come to know Aunyx well enough, and so he fell silent, waiting. Eventually, his friend spoke into the quiet. “You are still confident in all this?”

Roan hummed in the back of his throat with confirmation. If anyone could question him without irritation, it was Aunyx, though his friend’s opinion was clouded by an unfortunate aspiration.

“And Princess Jynquil feels...similarly?” The fae’s gaze was locked on a great antlered elk in the distance so fiercely that Roan worried it might explode into naught but shadows with an accidental spell.

“She is as hostile as always, so I believe so.”

Aunyx relaxed slightly at that, the corner of his mouth ticking up.

“And you know you can call her Jyny.”

His long nose crinkled, and he sucked in a breath. The shadow fae would never, of

course, propriety and other unspoken things disallowing him.

Roan stood, a familiar discomfort making him fidgety. “Come, let’s count the forest motes, shall we? First to one hundred wins.”

“Daemonrhizus.” That was the rarest flower Maewyn could think of, and she held her breath.

“Wonderful choice,” said the fae who had come to find her in the library.

He was quite a bit older but still regal and tall with spindly limbs and fast-moving hands.

He’d been writing down her responses to questions about the wedding ceremony at a dizzying rate, but then he lifted his quill and drew it through the air.

To Maewyn’s dismay, a bouquet of daemonrhizus appeared and fell right into her open hands. “You don’t like them?”

“No—I mean, yes! I’m just...overcome!” Maewyn buried her face in the blue petals to cover her disappointment at how easy that had been.

If she wasn’t creative enough to stall the wedding, she’d have to be better at finding answers in the library, but that would require visitors to stop barging in on her, and he was the third of the day.

She’d been reading stories between interruptions—that was all the library was filled with, not a single reference book amongst the tales, but she had to assume the truth she sought was buried within those pages.

Humans were rarely spoken of well, but then it was often at great peril to the fae

when they escaped.

She'd learned that opening a door back into the human realm required a tremendous power.

It could come in the form of a weapon or a potion, but there were also hints it could be somehow inborn.

Each example was story-specific, though, and there was nothing to suggest she could forge her own dagger of desertion or brew some door-transfiguration elixir.

Fae used the word door liberally, it seemed, and were quite fond of crafting hidden ways through their world. It was a great pastime to create places that weren't meant to be seen or only available to a select few—she suspected that garden of the Spring Princess's to be one such place.

These places were a necessity as some fae had much more to hide.

There had been a tale of an old fae, or an elylae as they were sometimes called, that had hidden her true form behind something called an eingress buried deep within a cupboard.

The story was accompanied with illustrated pages of bears and wolves and snakes.

To find a door created by one of those old fae was to find a much deeper truth.

I wonder if Roan has a door and what might be behind it...

“My Lady?”

Maewyn blinked, and there were suddenly seven different bouquets piled in her arms

threatening to topple.

“Are any of these to your liking?”

Gods, the daemonrhizus of every color were beautiful.

“Ah, no,” she strained, and pushed the bunches off into the fae’s arms.

He floundered but took them, his list poofing into nonexistence so the bouquets could be saved. “Apologies. Tomorrow I will do much better,” he breathed, bowing, and then there they all went, daemonrhizus petals scattering all over the library floor.

Maewyn apologized, sure she wasn’t supposed to be sorry that she was being difficult but unable to help it—it wasn’t this fae’s fault that either was stuck in this ridiculous situation. No, it was all because of Prince Fucking Roan.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:39 pm

Boredom is A Playground For All

After three days of studying with constant interruptions, Maewyn was no longer so contrite.

Every morning, Roan bustled her off to the library, and she attempted to read until late evening when she played the prince's mindless lover with the king over dinner—not terribly difficult when her thoughts were still with all those tales.

And then it was right to bed where she fell into an exhausted heap, mind swirling with questions.

So when the older fae and his ever-growing retinue of wedding helpers came to see Maewyn every hour, she was quicker to send them off with short and nondescript demands, easier than coming up with something impossible—she could simply be impossible by giving them nothing to work with.

“I’d like my shoes to embody the smell of rain,” she would say. Or, “I want the guests to be gifted with their earliest wish upon a star when they arrive.”

Maybe they could do it, maybe they couldn’t, but from the looks the fae gave her, it would certainly all take time. And she made sure to add countless minutes to each helper’s day by requesting they fetch her fresh cups of cider.

But by the fourth day, Maewyn grew restless. She’d complained to Roan, and he’d only encouraged her to branch out with her research. “I am doing my own important things,” he insisted, and so Maewyn shifted her inquiry to focus on archfae only to

end up terrifying herself.

One had not existed in centuries, and the last had found himself in some battle with an umbrabrute, which was apparently some ancient monster born from the creation of the fae realm.

The two had both been destroyed, falling to equitable wounds from each of their terrible powers.

Had the archfae been weaker, it said, the umbrabrute would have devoured it and used their combined power to tear through the Limindhwer and wreak havoc in the human realm after consuming all it could in each of the fae realm's corners.

Well, as long as Roan's child remained without threat, perhaps things would be fine, and with the prince for a father...

She shook her head and moved on to research fae courting much to her own chagrin.

The tether between the two of them wasn't terribly well understood, only that it was a thoroughly magical force, as old as the fae realm itself, referred to frequently as a mating or blood connection—and yes, that had been what she'd done, drawn his blood and connected them.

"How in the realm does a human form a tether with a fae?" she asked herself, but the tree was listening.

Motes floated down from the ceiling canopy to land on more books, but one burned brighter than the rest. Maewyn retrieved it and let the roots find the right page.

It was only a footnote in an epic tale about the dangers of fae entering the human realm and losing their powers, but the few words made Maewyn choke on her cider.

It is common knowledge that it is much less dangerous for a human to travel to the fae realm, for there is nothing for them to lose; however, we must remember the perhaps greater danger that when a human enters the fae realm, there is always something waiting for them to be gained.

The world around Maewyn went bright and sharp with untouched magic. She always felt it, just beyond her reach, but with those words settling on her, it became crisp like the first breeze of coming autumn.

“My Lady, I have brought the cake samples you requested. I expect you will be delighted by the pistachio cream and boar-blood-soaked sponge.”

Maewyn stood, and the book shut itself, roots curling back and away. “Leave it: I must see my groom-to-be. Now.”

The courtyards were a triumph of color, if limited to the reds and golds she had become accustomed to.

Maewyn was guided through them and then to the palace wall.

The two guards that accompanied her were stoic and broad chested, but when they reached the gate, they came to a stop in the presence of another fae.

He loomed there, blocking the way with only his will. “Yes?” His question hung in the air like a scythe.

Maewyn recognized him as frequently flitting in the shadows around Roan but had only gotten the briefest of glances as if he couldn’t be looked at directly. Now, however, she could see what the others did—a brutal darkness in his features.

One of her guards cleared his throat. “The Lady of the Harvest Way has made a

request.”

“I could no longer bear to be apart from my betrothed,” Maewyn cut in, feeling the guard falter, but her gaze was drawn beyond the gates and out into the field.

Maewyn vaguely sensed Altair and Kree leave, but she was completely wrapped in wonder at Roan.

He was fifty paces off, crouched down and feeding an apple to a speckled fawn.

With his head tipped to the side and the gentlest smile on his face as the wobbly-legged baby nibbled at the fruit, the Autumn Throne’s inheritor looked positively adorable.

“I’ve come to see my prince,” she murmured, watching him still. “We need to discuss our impending nuptials...which I am eager to consummate.”

“You needn’t concoct lies for me.”

Maewyn stood straight, the dark fae’s words pulling her from the strange reverie that may not have been entirely put on.

“But do not grow complacent,” he warned, the bend to his brow never shifting. He was a fae of the Autumn Court, this she knew from the colors he wore, but there was an odd gloominess about him, and it tugged at Maewyn as he turned to lead her to Roan.

The prince stood at the sound of them approaching, and his easy smile stayed when his eyes fell on Maewyn. For the third time in as many moments, she was taken aback. “Uh, My Lord,” she said and gave a small curtsy.

Roan huffed out a chuckle. “Please, feel free to be yourself before Aunyx.”

“Humans have magic here, you dolt,” she spat. “Why would you keep something like that from me?”

One of Roan’s eyes twitched as did the corner of Aunyx’s mouth. “Perhaps be a little less yourself,” the prince grunted.

“I’m not sure what I’m meant to be.” She held out her hands as if waiting for magic to spark at her fingertips, but it didn’t come. “Don’t you think teaching me would help with all of this?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I read it in your library! It was a footnote and the only reference I could find...but still!”

“Wonderful, you’ve become familiar with the books, but I certainly haven’t read all of them—”

“Any of them,” the other fae cut in.

“You see?” Roan gestured to Aunyx, who stood with hands clasped and lips sealed as if he hadn’t said a word.

“So I don’t know why you would expect me to be aware of every little detail on those pages.

Especially of humans and magic?” He screwed up his face, and beside him, his friend shook his head.

Maewyn's excitement that had turned to anger shifted yet again so quickly it pulled the breath from her.

"I don't know either," she finally admitted, annoyed with herself for thinking he would be a better source than a whole tree full of books.

"I guess you're right—you're brainless, and I was expecting too much. "

"All right, while perhaps slightly fair, that's cruel." Roan grimaced then in earnest. "Why did Altair and Kree even let you out of the library?"

Maewyn rolled her head on her shoulders. "I demanded the smallest of breaks—something I'm sure you're very familiar with, out here hand feeding baby deer."

"All right, well, break's over—off you go." He waved at the air betwixt them.

Dread built in her stomach at the thought of the cake waiting for her, which was wholly unfair to cake, but she'd had so much of it lately. If only he would just eat it himself, but of course that was it! "Isn't it strange that we aren't together?"

"I'm not sure we could be more together—we're getting married," he said as if she had forgotten and it had to be repeated slowly enough to weasel its way into her brain and stay.

"But you're not doing any of the planning." She licked her lips, unsure her words would work. "No one's going to be convinced once I leave that you're at all heartbroken if you don't spend any time with me."

Roan's face snapped out of its confusion into a broad smile. "Oh, Pumpkin, do you miss me? Do you yearn for the closeness of your lover?"

“Great gods, of course you’re not really listening to me. Never mind!” She spun on her heel to leave.

Roan caught her by the elbow and spun her right back. “No, no, you may well have a point. I’m not doing my part, am I? In fact, since you’ve come to the palace, I’ve had to fend off twice as many more carnal propositions than usual.”

Maewyn blinked, mouth agape. “You’ve what?”

“I said, I’m fending them off. Not that jealousy isn’t exquisite on that face of yours.” He tapped her chin and popped her mouth closed again. “Now, if my presence is what it takes for you to get on with it, then so be it.”

Roan hadn’t thought death from boredom was possible until he teetered on its precipice.

It had been a whole day—unless one counted the first half when he was out in the orchard—but otherwise an entire day, and they appeared no closer to the severing solution he longed for.

And to make things worse, Maewyn was ignoring him.

Didn’t she want him there? Hadn’t she begged him to play paramour at her side?

He’d been so shocked at the warmth in his chest that her appearance in the orchard inspired that admittedly he tried to send her away again, but after she pleaded with that longing look in her golden eyes, he gave in to her desires.

So why now was it only the quiet hum of his tether playing in his ears and not her breathy voice? Why was she being so awful?

Roan lay sprawled, limbs flopped over the reclining branches that caught him when he'd dramatically fallen, trying to prove that he indeed would not survive a moment longer.

Maewyn had only flicked her gaze to him once and then right back to whatever damned book she was so invested in.

Sure, she sampled cakes with him—all of them would do, yes—and they'd rejected three portrait artists—no, they needed someone who could marry whimsy and solemnity in one image—but it had been an hour since, and there was at least one more to go before dinner, and what in the realm was Roan to do surrounded by books?

"You could help," her voice finally cut into his swan song of low moans.

Roan lazily reached for the nearest tome, and the shelf rocked it toward him so he could pluck it off with minimal urgency.

He enchanted the book to float overhead, easy since everything in the library was imbued with weightlessness, and he flicked a finger as his magic flipped through ancient tales of daring romance.

The subject matter wouldn't have been his first choice, but the book had been such an effort to get that he was hardly going to put it back now.

He finally settled on a tale of an elylae who had fallen deeply in love with a human after watching him chop down a tree at the edge of her forest.

"A bit counterintuitive," he mumbled to himself.

"What was that?" Maewyn perked up, brushing a curl away from her eyes. For once,

that face of hers wasn't drawn into anger but anticipation.

"Uh, well, humans," he said carefully, wanting to offer her something if it meant she'd keep looking at him like that. "They can beguile fae. Elylae anyway, you know, the old ones—our common ancestor."

"Our what?"

"Where the immortality myths come from." He waved a hand. "The gods' oldest creations, some of which are still rumored to, you know...troll the realms? The things that came before my people and before yours from which we are both derived, albeit in quite converse directions."

Her brows knit and lips drew into a pout, but her eyes fell back to her book. She whispered something to it, the pages flipped, and once again she was entranced.

Roan went back to his own dull set of pages, a descriptive tale of the fae's hesitancy to approach the object of her affection and the resulting yearning.

Oh, just seduce him for all the gods' sakes, he thought, and his gaze shifted away from the parchment once again to fall on Maewyn.

She was chewing on her lip as she read, brows ticking up and down, and then she mouthed a few words, full lips probably sounding out a foreign phrase.

Finding a way to sever them and a door back to her home realm was possible, it had to be, but doubt crept into his gut. What if he'd set her to all of this for naught? What if they were caught in their tether forever?

Then a smile broke out on Maewyn's face, and she nodded to herself.

A breakthrough? Roan sat up slightly, but didn't call out to ask, afraid to spoil that look she was wearing.

Motes hovered around the edges of the book and illuminated her face from below, golden over her bronzy skin and glinting off individual strands of amber in the mass of deep brown hair that haloed her face.

Why had her people sent her away? Why would anyone do such a thing?

“Your Highness?”

Roan sat up with a start and went face first into the book, knocking it askew and setting off the roots in a scramble to collect it from the ground.

Aunyx stood at his side, appearing as silently as mist. “You are half an hour late for dinner.”

Roan blinked and huffed. Wonderful, now the human was enchanting away the time as well, and she wasn't even using magic.

Extending A Pumpkin Vine

“T oday we are doing something a bit different.” Roan tugged at his tunic, one of the simplest he had, but it would have to do.

“You have a secondary library for us to scour?” Maewyn had just come out of the bathing chamber clad in the dress he’d chosen for her.

Since arriving in his realm, she’d picked out painfully plain shifts from the multitude of gorgeous gowns that had been brought to her, but today required something more.

He didn’t insist on anything too extravagant, of course, but she still argued—pointless as the layers of mossy green gauze and golden lace looked exquisite on her, falling just to her knees and tying behind her neck to expose her arms.

Roan quickly focused back on his sleeves and the embroidery that matched her hemline.

“We’ll actually be outside, as I can’t imagine another day cooped up in that stuffy tree full of books.

” Really, Roan could imagine it quite clearly, watching Maewyn fall deeper and deeper into unspoken thought and his own heart threatening to burst, all of which was unacceptable.

She scoffed but then perked up. “Oh, are we going to visit that herd of deer your little fawn friend is from?”

Roan gave her a long look, drinking in the length of her legs as she tied a golden sash around her waist. He waited for an additional pithy remark, but there were only her expectant eyes flicking back up to him. “Would that be...all right?”

“What does it matter if it’s all right with me?”

” Maewyn produced a second length of gold ribbon and turned for the mirror just outside the bathing chamber’s door.

Roan watched her tie up her hair, bare arms working overhead as her curls were lifted off her neck, and he wondered if the skin just below her ear tasted the same as her lips.

When she finished, her yellow gaze found him once again in the mirror. “Well?”

Roan’s mouth had gone dry, not that he could remember how to speak, so he mimed that they would be late if they did not leave immediately.

The gardens were overflowing with giant globes of fruit, orange, white, and the most beautiful mossy green.

Delicate but full leaves sprouted from climbing vines, soft to the touch with edges that curled like lace, and golden sunshine dappled the earth in flowing ribbons from between grey clouds.

It was the perfect day for their task, and Roan’s dread at accompanying his father into the gardens was squashed.

Maewyn, however, walked tensely at Roan’s side as they followed the king, his cloak leaving a shimmering trail over the earth. Her eyes darted around the patch with a buzzing interest. “Are we harvesting these?”

“In a way,” the king said, his voice low as he leveled pale eyes over his shoulder.

Maewyn stiffened even more—she was always apprehensive around the king, unaccustomed to the coldness he wore, so Roan slipped her hand from his elbow and instead clasped it in his. It was meant to be a comfort, but her eyes widened as they darted downward.

Roan gave her soft palm a squeeze. “I think my bride should choose the elonhyea this year.”

Maewyn’s hold tightened, and she sucked in a breath. It made his innards hitch—how fun to see her in such minor, pointless distress.

“Marvelous and fitting,” said the king, and the decision was made.

The moment he turned away, Maewyn’s face creased with upset. “Do what?” she hissed.

“All you must do is pick out your favorite from this crop. Choosing the elonhyea is mostly symbolic.” Roan tilted his head, grinning.

“Symbolic of what?”

“The prosperity of autumn in Tenhaef. Of course...” Roan let his grin slide along his lips from one side of his face to the other. “Your choice will have a much more substantial effect on the harvest in the human realm.”

“Oh, this is how you bless our crops?”

He shrugged a shoulder, trying to withhold the elation rising inside him at handing over such power. “This is how you bless their crops. I would caution you to be

judicious in your choice, but then again, you can choose to starve them if you think that's what they deserve."

"No," she said quickly. "I wouldn't do that."

"No?" But he could see quite clearly that she would never—it was only his own rotten idea to let her bring about the downfall of the people who had sent her away so mercilessly.

"Then be generous with your pumpkin, Pumpkin." Roan lifted her hand to his mouth, pressing her knuckles gently to his lips, disappointed only in that propriety meant he couldn't truly taste her.

She watched his mouth, her eyes lidded heavily for but a moment.

The regret at releasing her hand nearly made him snatch it back, but she was already being guided by his father to the center of the patch.

The king explained the more intricate ways of the elonhyea to her, and Roan squeezed his hand into a tight fist as if to trap the feeling of her softness and keep it.

It was the ruse, of course, inspiring such sentimentality, but damn if he wasn't good at playacting.

Maewyn was not so apprehensive then, listening intently to the king as he explained in florid language that she needed to simply pick out a gourd.

When she was finally given free range of the garden, Roan grinned at each of her stuttered steps as she paced the rows and doubled back many times.

Despite her indecision, she looked every bit a princess as the golden accents of her

dress caught the fleeting beams of sunlight, and he knew he had chosen well.

Though she could not see herself, the others would, and they might finally begin to extend to her the respect she deserved—or rather, the respect he deserved for having her.

While she was around...for however long that might be.

The space between Roan's shoulders prickled when Maewyn bent to inspect one of the gourds, and then his pulse jumped as she caressed the thick skin of another.

She was being meticulous, and it probably wasn't just for show, but Roan couldn't complain either way.

In fact, he quite enjoyed watching her fingers trace the creases of a particularly plump pumpkin, her bottom lip caught between her teeth.

She was always so careful with her hands—when she ate, when she flipped through pages, when she tied up her hair—but not with him. Roan had been shoved, swatted, even stabbed for all the gods' sake, but never touched so earnestly. How might he change that?

“This one,” Maewyn finally said, standing to her full height, triumph on her sun-dappled cheeks.

Roan had seen the next part many times—the king would place his hand on the chosen elonhyea, it would pulse with magic as it cracked open, and then brilliantly colored seeds and guts would spill out—but he had never seen a human observe the ritual.

Maewyn watched, apprehension replaced with wonder. Magic flooded into the gourd

and lit up the honeyed skin of her face just like the library motes. Was there anything more beautiful in this realm or any other?

Yes, it turned out, when she lifted her eyes to spy him across the garden, grinning widely as if just for him.

Not to be outdone, Roan commanded his own magic, and his wings came. This time, the transformation was smooth and easy as he took to the air, calling to the other ravens in their raspy cry. The surrounding maples gave up an unkindness, and hundreds of black wings took to the sky.

Maewyn watched with a brightening delight as each raven plunged downward to snatch a seed and then rejoined the swirling mass above. Roan soared on the outskirts of their cyclone, his wings shimmering with iridescence among the black feathers.

“The shadow flock will carry these seeds into the human realm,” the king told her, his voice breaking her wonder.

“Roan’s going to the human realm?” Maewyn’s heart hitched.

“No, no. He is only their guide to the veil.”

She sighed, touching her chest, the pang there softening.

The king chuckled, and despite how odd the sound was, it made Maewyn brighten even more. “Do not worry,” he said, giving his head a slight shake. “He will return.”

The relief she felt was no small thing, and the beating of her heart was even less small. “Thank you,” she managed, throat going tight with something like embarrassment. At least Roan himself was not around to see it.

“I should be thanking you. My son hasn’t been so agreeable to take part in this ceremony since he was very young.” The king almost smiled then, but just as quickly his face returned to its usual stoniness. “If you will excuse me.”

Maewyn fell into a deep curtsy, startled by his brusqueness, and when she again lifted her head, he was gone. In his place stood Aunyx, which shouldn’t have surprised her, yet he always did.

In truth, she preferred Aunyx’s presence to Altair and Kree, even if he was a shadow fae which, as Roan described it, were shuddersome to most. If she couldn’t be left alone, Aunyx would do, but he was still second to Roan, a thing she had to admit as she searched the now empty sky.

“What do you turn into?” she asked, wanting to fill up the empty silence that came with his presence.

“Nothing.”

Maewyn nodded, assuming shadows were similar enough to nothing. “Is it only royal fae who become animals?”

His dark eyes turned to her. “No.”

She stared back, waiting, and then huffed. “You’ve got to say more than that.”

“No, My Lady.” After another long moment, he cocked his head, giving in. “Transformation, like shadow magic, is an old, inherited trait from the elylae that only manifests where there is true need.”

“The elylae, our common ancestor,” she mumbled to herself and then blinked at Aunyx. “Roan needs to be a raven?”

The shadow fae considered her, and though his features didn't shift, she felt a change in his demeanor. "At one time, yes. The prince, I suspect, needed an escape and a form that was closer to what he was searching for. Always searching." He turned his gaze back to the sky.

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Maewyn tapped her fingers on her lips in thought as Roan's raven appeared again above the trees. "For what?" she asked, but Aunyx was already gone.

The prince circled overhead before swooping down to land at her feet, a fae once again as his black feathers shimmered out of existence.

Suddenly alone in the gardens and standing so close, Maewyn felt a rush of warmth in her face.

He really was quite handsome, crimson hair disheveled and tips of pointed ears peeking out, the hard lines of his cheeks and jaw pulled taut with a satisfied smile.

"That was an impressive finish," she admitted around a lump in her throat.

"Oh, but we are not quite done yet." He flitted a hand over the broken pumpkin beside them, and the entire garden filled with the cracking of the other gourds.

Maewyn hadn't seen them arrive, but there were suddenly many other fae amongst the rows collecting pieces of the newly broken fruits.

True color blossomed on her face then, afraid they'd seen how she had been staring at Roan.

But that was probably fine, good even, since infatuation was all part of the game they were playing.

Roan gestured, and yet another creature appeared while Maewyn was blindly

entranced. An elk, coat white as snow with a great antlered head and a regal step brought itself right up to her and bowed deeply, bending its snout just to the ground.

“Oh, um, hello,” she said to it, and Roan chuckled behind her as she curtsied. The elk did not stand.

“He’s waiting for you.” Roan took her by the hips and guided her to the animal’s side.

She went stiff under his touch, her heart flying into her throat, but then he lifted her to sit on the elk’s back, and the breath went all out of her when he took his hands away.

She gripped the fur of the creature’s neck, trying to steady herself.

“Take this, Lady of the Harvest Way.” Roan offered her a large piece of the cracked pumpkin. Maewyn needed both hands to hold the chunk of gourd. Earthy and crisp smelling, the stringy innards were piled in its center, but no seeds were left after the ravens.

Roan then climbed up onto the elk behind her, and the animal stood.

Her body heaved forward, but steadying hands fell on her hips again.

Roan’s touch was firm, fingers curling around and gently digging into the soft flesh there.

The heat of him shored up against her back, and then they were moving, the elk carrying them out of the orchard.

On foot, the other fae followed. Maewyn had been both impressed and not with fae until now, frightened of them, annoyed by them, in awe of their magic, but as they

traveled from the gardens and through a dark gateway, a somber sense of wonder took her.

She and Roan led the others, the elk taking slow, plodding steps.

The prince's hands did not come away from her waist, and she didn't want them to, her own occupied with the fruit.

There was a power within their silently moving procession, and despite her desire to fill the quiet with a hundred whispered questions, she held her tongue, feeling the answers were only over the next ridge.

A foggy field lay ahead, crimson rhododendrons appearing in the mist. The bushes climbed over the ground and wrapped themselves around the few trees that dotted the field, a wash of deep red painting the grey.

From behind one of the trees stepped another elk, its whiteness blending into the mist. Another followed, this one antlerless, and then another, much smaller.

Their ears flicked this way and that as they took in the approaching fae, and soon there stood a whole herd, massive bodies half hidden in the fog, and the assembled fae came to a stop twenty paces apart.

Roan dismounted, Maewyn's waist cold where his hands had been, but then they came back as he helped her slip down off the great creature.

With a simple nod from the prince, Maewyn knew just what to do, offering what she carried to the elk who had given them passage to this hidden place.

He snuffled at it and then, with an enormous munch, took a bite that brought a spark of joy to Maewyn's chest.

Some agreement had been sealed—she could feel the magic as well as she could feel her own heart beating. The harvest would be plentiful in the human realm, so she had decided.

The other fae stepped forward then, each meeting with an animal and making a similar offering.

There were quiet voices in the field and gentle braying in response.

One calf playfully chased another, and Maewyn couldn't hold back her laughter.

It was then she noted the young fae children that had accompanied them, some so small they could barely toddle about, but they too were partaking, holding up mounds of sticky pumpkin innards for elk to taste.

She hadn't thought about fae being children just as she hadn't thought of them aging, but of course they were young once—everything was.

“This isn't just symbolic for your people, is it?” she asked Roan as the elk licked her fingers of the last pulpy bits.

“My father says we're compelled to complete this ritual every year, both by magic and by our own past,” he told her.

“There was a time when the elylae ruled that the corners of the realm did not honor the seasons but used them to dominate. Instead of a harvest, those in Tenhaef used the magic here to rot the other lands and bring about death. When the fae came into power, they did so by befriending the earth. We're stewards as much as we are servants, it seems.”

“You're at the mercy of some greater magic?”

He touched his chest. “I suppose so.”

That night for the first time, Maewyn found Roan’s bed exceptionally uncomfortable.

She tossed and huffed, vexed she could no longer enjoy the best part of her predicament.

In her defeat, she squeezed her eyes shut and tried to imagine cozier things: warm cups of cider, plump roasted gourds, Roan’s hands on her hips.

Damn him—he’s even ruined sleep!

Maewyn glared at his sleeping form from the corner of her eye, crimson hair disheveled as he lay there turned away from her.

Roan had no trouble that evening, stripping in that maddening way of his, careless and borderline crass, and then sinking below the covers beside her.

She’d gotten so used to his annoying voice and minor jabs that when they were gone, she just didn’t know what to do with the empty sound.

But it wasn’t just his words she missed.

It was beyond ridiculous, craving his touch, but it had finally happened. All she could do was pray the desire would be broken when she returned home, so long as she could find the way.

And if she could bring herself to go.

Unhidden Adversaries

Torture . That was what Maewyn was doing to Roan, and she wouldn't even acknowledge it!

Over the next two days, he agonized in her presence.

It wasn't really anything to do with her , of course, not the sounds she made in the back of her throat when she read a particularly interesting passage, not the way she held her cider cup in both hands, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath before every sip, and definitely not how she peeked over his shoulder, curls brushing his cheek as she chastised him about not doing something valuable with his time. It was just the damn tether.

Could he have roamed the gardens? Sparred with Aunyx?

Wallowed in his bedroom alone for once? Yes, probably, but then she would complain, and as much as he would have liked a little more begging out of her, he also knew the outcome—he would end up right here in the library staring at her over the edge of a book again because the tether demanded they be as close as possible.

Well, there was closer still that they could get, but the risk was far greater.

At least the constant barrage of wedding planners interrupted Roan's most ravenous thoughts. And Maewyn was at least correct about one thing: helping... helped . So, he read. And read. And read .

He'd taken to sighing too, and since that got Maewyn's attention, he experimented with a few differing sounds until she finally snapped at him, "What?"

Roan had floundered but only for a moment, reporting to her the last bit of knowledge he'd picked up from his reading: humans in the fae realm could draw on magic by manipulating words in just the right way.

It was useless information, he thought, until her foxlike eyes lit up as if she'd spotted a tasty vole.

Oh, to be a tasty vole. Gods, this tether!

The next morning, when an invitation came from Ulric, one of his oldest friends, Roan could have cried. "There is to be a celebration in our honor tonight!" he exclaimed and thrust the enchanted maple leaf in Maewyn's face.

She delicately touched his hand to move it away, and he fought a shiver. "Won't this take us away from our—er, my work?"

"Only for a day." And one less day of pining in the library would be a gift.

His father insisted he bring a retinue of certain attentive fae, and so Roan matched the number with his own rambunctious courtiers—and Aunyx, of course—but an ingress would not allow so many to pass through, and so they set off by carriage immediately.

Roan had not thought about what it meant to sit across from Maewyn during the afternoon-long ride through Tenhaef's forests without a book between them, but to her it apparently meant suspicion.

"This is a ruse," he finally admitted in the privacy of the coach when he could no

longer take the leery look in her eyes. “Ulric has been pivotal in helping me realize my potential, and now that the wedding looms so close, he is likely confused and simply wants to help.”

Maewyn chewed on her lip. “Help? You trust him?”

“Implicitly. His manor is the sanctuary to which I’ll flee once you break my heart and leave, after all.” Roan felt his grin falter and quickly looked away from her. “And any excuse for a party—we both love parties.”

“I’m sure you do,” she said with no approval. “Well, I hope this is worth it. I’d just discovered a recipe for a potion made with eldermoss and something called sinoveet said to dissolve bonds.”

Roan frowned deeply. “Sinoveet renders one impotent, so I don’t think that’s an actual option, sorry to say.”

Maewyn growled, but the corner of her mouth ticked, and soon they were both snickering in the carriage.

Ulric’s manor was tucked into a valley deep within the autumn wood, its exterior always crumbling.

“It’s an illusion,” Roan told Maewyn when he saw she had once again fallen into wariness.

“The two of you have vigilance in common it would seem. He keeps up the crumbling facade to hide from his enemies.”

“You’re not concerned about these enemies?”

Roan shrugged. “If the illusion works, why would I be?”

Once they stepped inside and the manor’s entry revealed its polished obsidian floors and garnet-encrusted columns, Maewyn took on that wondrous look again, the one Roan had come to enjoy when introducing her to magic.

Then the studious bend to her brow shadowed her features, and he was even more pleased.

Perhaps she would learn something here and save them all—though...

though he would prefer she have a little fun first.

“Ulric the Ancient!” Roan called when their host met them in the grand entry.

Ulric, of course, did not look ancient, but he didn’t appear to have aged a day since their first meeting when Roan was just in his ninth year.

Some fae were skilled at maintaining their beauty long into their old age, and Roan suspected the secret to his magic was what made him hide away despite his penchant for celebrations.

“Prince Roan of the Autumn Court, it is my pleasure and great honor to welcome you and yours to my humble home.” Ulric dropped to a bent knee, ever overindulgent with respect.

He held out a hand for Maewyn’s and then pulled her knuckles to his lips.

“And you, Lady of the Harvest Way, my home is yours as it is His Highness’s.

I offer to his mate all that I would him, both as a loyal servant and as a friend. ”

Maewyn returned his polite smile, but Roan sensed a discomfort in her that he wanted to peck at and chase away.

Ulric was often flowery and old-fashioned with his words, but calling her Roan's mate was likely squirm-inspiring.

Roan pushed down his displeasure at that and cleared his throat. "There will be drinks, I assume?"

Ulric's wolfish grin returned. "And a chamber already prepared for the exhaustion you will collapse into at the night's end."

"Excellent." Roan would need several drinks to really enjoy the night and perhaps several more if he would convince Maewyn to enjoy it as well.

The manor was abuzz with fae in the final moments of preparation, so Ulric ushered Roan into private quarters. Maewyn was offered her own elsewhere, but Roan could see the flash of apprehension on her features and insisted she stay with them. "She is in on it," he said when the three were alone.

Ulric's steely blue eyes flicked between the two. "She understands the need for her...departure?"

"And my grander plans, yes. She is eager to go home."

"And she's standing right here." Maewyn crossed arms beneath her breasts in a delightful show of haughty indignation.

"Apologies," Ulric said with a deep bow. "It is only that most creatures would not give up an opportunity to take the Autumn Throne. Forgive my doubts concerning your altruism."

Maewyn loosened her limbs, and Roan was more than a little sad to see the valley between her breasts disappear while her discomfort remained.

“My companion has been working tirelessly to resolve our issues,” he said, stressing the compliment. “But we’ve a small hitch. The two of us were mistakenly tethered.”

Ulric’s face twisted into abject shock, and Roan was surprised himself to see it.

“We were hoping you could help us sever it,” Maewyn ventured quietly.

Ulric turned and paced the chamber, his long strides filling up the empty room.

Doubt at the wise fae’s assistance crept into Roan’s belly, and he had the brief but strong urge to reach out for Maewyn’s hand until Ulric spoke again.

“I can do this, but it will only be possible after the archfae is born.”

Roan wished he could see into Maewyn’s mind, to see the wheels turning as her face changed many times.

There was a struggle there, and she licked her lips when she could no longer keep herself from speaking.

“The only way for me to leave...is to stay?” A lump traveled down her throat.

“I would have to marry Roan and watch him have a child with someone else.”

Roan should have thought that this was a brilliantly clever idea—a human bride who was complicit, who would be his co-conspirator and the most convincing facade while he pursued his machinations—but cleverness was the last thing on his mind.

“You do not have to, Maewyn.” He was sure he had heard a pained tinge to her words, and if it was because of the time she would lose in her home realm, the fear she had of deceiving the court, or for unspoken sentimental reasons, he did not wish her to suffer any of it.

“This is just one of the solutions that Ulric can offer us.”

Maewyn nodded then shook her head, clearly confused.

Ulric made a small, dubious sound, and so Roan cut in before he could say anything more disheartening. “We aren’t out of our own options either. Your research has already proved invaluable.”

Maewyn only shrugged, eyes on the floor and fingers worrying her skirt.

Well, the hours Roan had spent in her presence had been invaluable to him, at least.

“Come, let’s not think on it too much. Tonight is meant to be a respite from all that! The wedding isn’t for, what, four more days?”

Maewyn groaned, much less satisfied with the number, but Ulric was quick to match Roan’s vigor, advising that he would leave them to refresh themselves and change out of their travel attire.

Maewyn had argued against the contingency of fae Roan brought along to dress and primp her, but their minor argument was worth it when she presented herself after their work.

Even the flush on her cheeks that bloomed all the way down her chest couldn’t cloud her brilliance.

The dress he had picked out painted a heart over her breasts, silken red material that clung to her middle and wrapped about the curve of her hips with a spray of embroidered acorns trailing downward into a full skirt.

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Her shoulders and arms were bare, warm skin an absolute treat.

He wanted, of course, to cover her in jewels, but knew she would object, yet the delicate golden necklace that draped itself over her collarbones was perhaps even better than glittering garnets and amethysts.

Her curls had been bundled at the back of her head, sprays of white phlox woven in—another compromise to a shimmery bauble or two on her head, but it proved perfect.

When she moved, she was like a flame, alive and bright as she walked up to him.

“My Lady.” He gave her the deepest of bows.

“Oh, stop it,” she hissed, fingers gripping at the generous poof of her skirt. “Get up.”

“As you wish.” If only she knew how she fed his thrill when she scowled at him so prettily. “One last touch,” he said and held up an eye mask, its deep red hue matching her dress and adorned with gold lace.

Maewyn’s lips formed a small circle, and instead of protesting, she simply turned.

He hesitated, such a strange sensation, then brought his arms around her head and placed the mask.

It needed no tie, magic simply holding it in place, and when Maewyn realized, she turned back to him, foxlike eyes glowing through the veil.

He quickly placed his own mask before she saw too much. “Shall we?”

Ulric’s manor had been transformed into a display of all things bountiful.

Faelings skittered all over, carrying trays of food and drink despite the buffet tables stacked precariously with every delicacy from across the realm—not just the earthy splendors of fall but the fruits of spring, the bright bite of summer citrus, and winter’s decadent sweetness.

A separate musical ensemble filled every corner of the grand ballroom, each playing a different tune yet remaining harmonious with one another, and new reliefs had been carved into the pillars to honor the occasion.

“This could be our wedding,” Maewyn said breathlessly, taken by the abundance at every turn.

“Ulric has always had quite the eye.”

“Where does it all come from?” she asked. “Is he a king too?”

“It’s just magic,” he said with a grin. “Ulric is very gifted.”

She nodded toward the room filled with many more fae than the score they’d brought. “But his...subjects?”

“Not subjects, only loyal friends who he undoubtedly rescued at some point in their otherwise mundane lives.”

“Rescued?”

“Ulric’s other proclivity: altruism. Most live here at the manor now, not as a subject

but as a friend,” Roan told her as he led her out to the dance floor.

“Oh, no, I don’t do this.” She shook her head, necklace catching the lights as she gestured to their feet.

Roan scoffed. “One does not come to the fae realm and not expect to dance.”

But expectations and attainment were not the same.

It was like Maewyn had five legs and only three feet, and the generous skirt was doing no one any favors, yet Roan minded not at all, his arm tight around her waist as he tried his best to lead the unleadable across the dance floor.

She was completely inelegant, too stiff one moment and too loose the next, and the two made quite the ridiculous spectacle of themselves.

But Roan could only laugh despite how many times his feet had been stepped on, and eventually Maewyn joined in.

Breathlessly, they went around and around, laughing and tripping and holding onto each other as they battled to remain upright.

It wasn’t at all a proper way for a prince and his future wife to behave, but Maewyn neither knew nor would likely care, and Roan did know and didn’t care one bit.

They didn’t even stop to sample the food, just snatched what they could as they passed.

That was dangerous too as Maewyn nearly took off his finger when he plied her with a lemon tart, but as he admired her pointed grin in the aftermath, he thought he might have enjoyed her drawing blood this time.

The wine was also plentiful, but Roan only took small sips, wanting to remain in Maewyn's presence rather than lose himself in drink.

His father always said that drunkenness was unacceptable, so Roan usually overindulged at every opportunity, but the fae king was not here—he didn't care for Ulric, or parties, or much at all—so with no one to disappoint with his inebriation, Roan didn't bother.

Their messy dancing was disturbed only when Ulric requested to cut in, but Maewyn was returned to Roan when the music slowed, and after her absence, he was quick to pull her close again.

There was less tripping to be done when one only swayed, and Roan's firmer hold on her back helped to keep Maewyn upright.

Her eyes widened at the feel of his hand slipping around her waist, big pupils following how he guided her hand to his chest and clasped it there.

"We must make a good show of it," he told her.

"We've only two conspirators here amongst so many other courtiers. "

She lifted her chin slightly and then sank toward him with an ease he wasn't expecting. "If you insist."

"I don't," he said, sharper than he meant. "Or, well, I do, but..." Roan's mouth went a little dry, and he suddenly wished he had an extra glass of wine to swallow back.

"Why do you think we're tethered?"

Roan blinked as if he'd been slapped, not the question nor the inflection he'd

expected. Maewyn was gazing up at him with that curiosity he'd admired in the woods, but there was a melancholic sheen to her eyes, a bit like Aunyx in that way, specifically when Jyny was about.

"Because you stabbed me," he answered with the only truth he could muster.

Her gaze darted upward with a hint of annoyance, but the smile that played on her lips told him it was only in jest this time. "If that were the case, wouldn't enemies be tethered to one another all the time?"

"Not if you do it right and actually kill your rival."

Her lips pulled into a pout instead of the scowl he expected.

A lump formed in Roan's throat, and he held his breath.

"I've been reading..."

I know. I've been watching.

Maewyn casually glanced about, other dancing couples very near. Roan tugged her closer—for balance only, of course—and spun them away into an empty section of the dance floor where the colored lights were deep scarlet.

Her eyes were glassy even through the mask. "Your books say that tethering doesn't simply happen because blood is spilled. It doesn't even always happen when a vow is spoken in marriage."

Dryness scratched at Roan's throat, and he was gladder than ever for the mask, though it didn't cover his mouth, so he smirked and injected sarcasm into his voice for further protection. "Are you hoping for something grander with me, human?"

Seeking a way to ensnare me tighter? Drag me deeper?"

She snorted. "I've been researching how to break it."

Ah, no, don't hide away from me, Maewyn. "Of course, I know, and I am grateful, but I'm just..." Roan rubbed a thumb over the back of her hand while his thoughts swirled with sensations, none of them appropriate.

"To be on one end of a tether," she said, softness returning to her voice, "means both desire it. At least, according to every book I find on the matter."

Roan knew this— always knew this—and it had gnawed at him like a chained animal on the last of its marrow. "This is what we're taught, yes."

"But why us? Neither of us wanted this. We didn't even know each other before it happened."

"Because the soul is always searching," he said as if the words were being pulled out of him by the tether itself. "And when it thinks it's found whatever it's searching for, it latches on with a death grip. The quickness of our bond suggests an...eagerness in both of our souls."

The words hung between them in the near nonexistent space that their bodies left, but instead of squirming in to push them apart, the two were drawn together.

He felt the heat of her humanness, felt it slithering right into the wound she'd made, the one that was already healed but still stained his veins.

What would it hurt to ask, he wondered, so that he could know her more intimately? "Your life before this, was it...fulfilled?"

Maewyn shook her head without hesitation. “I longed to leave Goulmead. The people there, they never—” Her voice broke, and she swallowed, unblinking.

“Tell me.”

The words spilled out of her then as if they’d been stoppered against her will for far too long.

“They hated magic, but I always loved it. I collected books about it from merchants when they came through town, and I played silly games with the other children— just games ,” she said with the insistence of someone in the deepest of troubles.

“But when bad things happened in the village, they needed something to blame, and the fault of poor crops or two-headed calves fell on me. They treated me like a curse, and even those who claimed to be my friends only spent time with me in secret. Even my own mother kept me at arm’s length. ”

Cruel , he thought, and he wished they had starved the entirety of the human realm with the elonhyea , but instead he swallowed back his anger. “That desire to belong must have been tempting to the tether. And there was a...a space here looking to be filled.”

Maewyn’s head tipped upward, those lips of hers parted and painted red like the blood she’d spilled. What would it hurt to press his mouth to hers again? For her, for him, for the crowd, for no one in particular—just to know for sure this was all a mistake.

“Then it could have happened to anyone who was lonely, to be fair,” she whispered, biting down on an un-kissed lip.

“Yes, and we must be fair.” Roan threw back his shoulders as the music swelled.

“Ah, I love this one!” A bitter smirk took over the only unmasked part of his face again, and he danced her toward the nearest tray of wine.

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Change is Constant Unless One is Stuck

The fae prince was drunk. Maewyn dropped him onto the bed in the chamber they'd been given to share, his eyes already shut to the world.

She huffed, exhausted from dragging him into the room, from dancing, from laughing.

Laughing . He had done that, had inspired mirth she'd tucked so far away she thought the ability to feel it at all had been lost, and now she found even more laughter bubbling up as she stared down at the Crowned Prince of the Autumn Court splayed out and snoring.

Gently, she pulled at the mask he wore, and the magic let it go. Gods, he was pretty, even when he sleepily scratched at his nose and snorted. Maewyn cackled, but he didn't wake.

When was the last time I found something so funny?

Certainly not when they had arrived at this strange manor in the woods and met Ulric.

That fae had an ominousness about him, punctuated each time his blue eyes met hers while she and Roan danced.

Roan was oblivious, which neither shocked nor unsettled her—he had been confidants with the fae for the majority of his life.

He'd not said it, but Ulric seemed almost like a father, just one who couldn't tell him what to do, which she suspected was the preferred kind.

But Maewyn didn't have any such blinders on about the fae, and even if she had, they would have been ripped right off when Ulric cut in and swept her into a dance.

"Your bond concerns me," he had said as soon as they were away from Roan. "Tethers should easily be broken if both are willing."

Maewyn had felt her brow go sharp at that.

"Tethers are complex," she argued weakly, as if she were some expert after only a few days of study.

She faltered then, tripping over her feet as she had with Roan, but Ulric was quick to correct her, fingers pinching her side and jerking her into place painfully.

"You are holding on, yet you are well aware the prince does not want you." This he said with a smile as if he were paying her a compliment, his voice too low for any other courtier to hear. "If you care for him, why do you stand in the way of what he truly wants?"

Maewyn stuttered, no answer found in her throat. She was helping Roan to get what he wanted, wasn't she? The very dangerous, very stupid thing that he wanted.

Her eyes darted away from Ulric to find Roan in the crowd. The prince stood beside Aunyx engaged in conversation, but their gazes immediately locked. He had been watching her, and when she finally watched him back, he broke into a wide smile and tipped his glass.

Ulric spun her, and she lost sight of her fae.

“This realm is dangerous. Beasts prowl forests and halls alike, and the corners are at odds. Power is needed, not genuflecting to fae nobles.” There was a venom in his voice, and his teeth glimmered as he smiled, pointed and perilous.

The mask he wore obscured much of his face, but the blue of his eyes struck her, alive with intent.

She had been relieved to return to Roan, but also confused, and their ensuing conversation about their tether had only made her heart heavier. Roan was quick to cheer her, though, and they returned to their chaotic dancing as he fell deeper into his cups until she dragged him to bed.

“You’re too trusting,” she whispered down to his sleeping form, brushing a crimson lock away from his forehead.

Roan’s lips curled, and he moved like he would have nuzzled into her hand had she left it there.

Her fingers trembled as they hovered over his face, the desire to touch him so strong, but the knowledge that it would be a mistake even stronger.

That sealed the decision she’d been pondering, though, and Maewyn stood from the bed, determined to find the truth.

The manor was silent in the wake of the masquerade when she finally sneaked out of the bedchamber.

The other fae that made their home in Ulric’s court didn’t concern her—even if they weren’t sleeping off the drink they’d imbibed, they had seemed so hollow .

The courtiers in the Autumn Palace were of all sorts, some scowled at her while

others smiled, but every fae under Ulric's roof wore the same serene look and had the same spiritless tone to their voices.

If she met one in the corridor, she was sure she could feed them a simple lie and continue on unbothered.

Still, Maewyn didn't want to run into anyone. She wished she could just quiet her steps a little more as she hugged the manor's walls, but then there was a tickle along her spine like the prickling of hair. She halted, felt the strange embrace of some foreign magic, then shook it away.

A trap set by Ulric, she thought, but it wouldn't stop her. She had done her research on locked fae doors, and he had all but handed her the key with his words: "my home is yours."

It took a few hours, pushing back tapestries, lifting cauldron lids, and blindly feeling along crevices, but eventually she found it.

It wasn't a door at first, only a misshapen stone in the wall, but she could see the wood grain when she squinted, and then the handle when she bent down, and finally she was able to push it open and spy the threshold.

"Now, to fit," she whispered, feeling about the opening in the darkness.

The size was only another trick to keep others out, Maewyn knew from her reading, yet she wasn't quite sure how she would get her shoulders or hips through.

Kneeling there in the hall of Ulric's manor, she swore as she tried to fit, frustration mounting.

Maybe there was another way in...but no, she knew better than that: fae wouldn't risk

having more than one door that they kept their secrets behind.

She huffed, determination renewed. It wasn't her curiosity that needed satisfying, but her desire to protect Roan—her need to protect him—and she thrust herself through.

A breeze carrying a grossly unpleasant stench, rot and dirt and musk, hit her.

How she knew the specifics of what she smelled, she couldn't understand, but the doorway didn't feel quite so small once she pushed forward.

In fact, if she crawled on her hands and feet, only her whiskers brushed the doorway's edges.

It was simple then, the ground changing under her paws from cold stone to cold earth, and her tail just grazed the top of the archway as she passed through.

Oh, I'm a fox.

The thought was only briefly alarming before it felt as natural as having a nose—snout or otherwise.

Oh, my gods, I'm a fox!

Maewyn bounded forward with a pounce, excitement and magic coursing through her as her paws scuffed at the earth.

Paws . All of those years of silent wonder, all of the scorn and loneliness, all of the worry at being the curse everyone said she was—it all fell away as her tail—her tail—flicked through the air.

She had transformed, and she had done it with magic, and it was wonderful .

But then the greys of the world beyond Ulric's hidden door washed over her, and she stilled herself.

Was it her new eyes that changed the landscape so?

They could see more than her human ones, but they wouldn't focus on any one thing—a rocky outcropping here, a tangle of tree limbs there, the shiver of a tuft of grass in the breeze.

This wasn't the welcoming autumnal forest they had traveled through that day.

The world was too much then, too volatile, too dangerous, and she snapped her jaws shut to listen.

No, it wasn't just her new awareness—something here was wrong .

Slowly, Maewyn padded forward, the quiet footsteps she'd yearned for in the manor finding her now as she hunched low to the ground.

She scurried into the shadow of a bush, its thorns unable to prick at her fur like they might have her skin.

From where she'd come, there was dense fog, the vaguest sense of walls beyond, and in every other direction... nothing.

The wastes stretched, flat and desolate and grey.

A few scraggly trees dotted the dried earth, gnarled branches reaching for a moon that wasn't there.

Maewyn couldn't imagine a sun nor rain, though the sky held clouds.

The only light came from mist that rolled over the barren land, a sickly yellow flush that undulated with the breeze.

Maewyn scampered on to search the bleakness for answers. There was an anomaly ahead, rows of dirt and dried-out vines that had withered away. Something snuffled amongst the deadened plants, and then a head snapped upward, one odd, long ear bending toward her.

It was a rabbit, or would have been once, but it was merely bones and patchy, grey flesh now, one missing eye and an ear that had been gnawed to shreds. It froze under Maewyn's gaze, and then it darted, speed shocking for how frail it was, disappearing into a swirl of dim mist.

Maewyn clawed at the dry, pebbly earth, noting how much more robust her paws were than the rabbit's had been. She took a brief look at her tail, too orange and fluffy for the arid lands around her, then tucked it between her legs as she trotted off.

This place must still be fae , she thought, sniffing at the air and distinctly smelling ravenous magic. Old magic. Ancient magic. But the life has been sapped from it.

A cluster of something like trees swelled from the earth ahead, limbless and leafless.

She skittered across an open plane to reach the odd orchard then tucked herself within.

Another sniff told her what had been there once, a true forest under the golden glow of a low hanging sun that would shimmer between crimson leaves and house an entire unkindness of ravens.

If she pricked her ears just right, she could hear them too, many wings flapping...

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A shadow fell over Maewyn, but there were no feathers on the outstretched limbs swooping above her. Skeletal with skin drawn taut from bone to bone, the wings contracted as the creature dove between the pikes of ashen trees, jaws open.

Maewyn shrieked, the sound she made foreign and shrill, and all four of her limbs took her on instinct. She darted from tree to tree as the leathery-winged monster screeched behind her. A regretful look back only made her heart pound harder. How could anything have that many teeth?

Another shadow joined the first overhead, and there was a gnashing so close she could feel the wind off its fangs snapping at her back feet.

Maewyn abruptly changed course, running deeper into the dead forest where the trees retained their limbs.

Her heart pumped with a speed she'd never experienced, eyes searching for safety but finding none.

One of the creatures slammed into a branch, the limb toppling through the dried-out wood, trees splintering as it crashed before her.

She skidded to a stop and turned just as a leathery-winged beast landed only paces away.

Maewyn tumbled, her control over four limbs tenuous, and fell just at the taloned feet of the ghastly creature. It was sickly skinny and only that much more terrifying when every bone in its long neck jutted up against its skin. Its jaws snapped, but she

scrambled just out of their reach.

Her tail was not so lucky as the rest of her, and she was wrenched to a stop before she could flee.

Her fox voice screamed as a searing pain ran through her from the tip of her tail to her skull.

With but one recourse left, Maewyn turned and snapped her own jaws at the beast, and surely it would have snapped back if its head was not summarily severed from its neck.

Black blood spurted as the body fell, a golden sickle glinting in that terrible yellow light where her attacker had just been.

Roan stood to his full height, impossibly tall from Maewyn's place on the ground.

Anger cut across his face in cruel lines as he took a steadying breath.

In his hand, the sickle pulsed with magic, and then he spun, graceful and effortless, striking out and slicing the head off the second creature.

More blood, another thump, and then the bleak forest fell quiet.

Roan turned back to her, and Maewyn's fur-covered body went cold.

He had lost every ounce of carefree self-indulgence and was painted instead with deadly terror.

Free of the dress coat he'd worn to the party, he stood in an undone tunic so that his muscled chest expanded with each deep breath.

Though her own body was different, the shiver that ran through it was remarkably familiar, and she would have gone all swoony if she didn't fear she would soon be on the pointy end of his golden sickle.

"You've gotten yourself into a fair bit of trouble, Pumpkin." The weapon disappeared from Roan's hand in a swirl of black magic, and he scooped her up in one swift move.

While she was relieved to not become the next headless corpse, it was almost as bad suffering the way he held her.

His hands were firmly under her front legs, and her tail end dangled as his face shifted from murderous menace to only annoying menace.

She scrambled her back paws, but the pain made her fall lax again.

"Lucky thing that you have me. Those were some nasty faelings," he mused.

Faelings? She'd thought surely those horrible things were the umbrabrutes she kept hearing about.

Roan frowned as he lifted her higher, green eyes taking in her injuries. "They got what was coming to them for hurting my human."

Maewyn drew in a sharp breath through her snout.

Roan's head cocked, and a grin crawled up the side of his face, telling her he knew exactly how her heart skipped when he called her his. "Are you stuck like that, Pumpkin?"

Oh, damn it, she was! Maewyn flicked her aching tail and whimpered. She had no

idea how she'd even gotten herself into the fox form; how was she to get out of it?

“That’s all right. This is often how it goes the first time.

The second and third too.” He began to walk, her fear replaced with indignation at being carried.

“Fascinating you found this form at all. I suppose you were right about humans having magic when you come here. If only you could use it to actually protect yourself.”

Embarrassment coursed through her, and as if compelled by instinct, she chomped down on his arm with the pointy fangs of her snout.

Roan gasped, and she expected to be dropped, but instead an arm wrapped around her underside, and she was cradled right up against his chest. “Now, now, is that any way to treat your savior?” His voice was a purr against her ear as fingers massaged the fur under her chin.

“I know you are frightened and overwhelmed, but I think I’m owed at least a little gratitude. ”

Maewyn grumbled with the only voice she had, humiliation deep in her belly, but with his arms safely around her, the horror of the bleak place he carried her through fell away.

She may not be able to protect herself very well, not yet, but if she had him, she supposed there was nothing really to fear.

And she did have him, or rather he had her, evident in the tenderness of his hold and the warmth in his eyes. At least fur hid the flush blazing all over her body.

Nothing approached them on their return, and the door she had used made itself much bigger at Roan's command.

He stepped through into the silence of the manor and carried her confidently back to the chamber where she'd left him drunk hours before.

When he lifted her and said, "You are lucky that I missed your body beside mine and this damn tether told me exactly where to find you," there was no hint of alcohol left on his breath.

Roan brought her into the bed still wrapped in his arms and slid them both beneath the blankets.

Maewyn thought she should protest, nip at his fingers and wriggle herself away, but the beating of her heart had calmed, and he was just so warm in the wake of that cold, desolate place.

Maybe it was all right to stay, just for a little.

"Be still, my furry little fiend," he said with a chuckle into the back of her head, an arm wrapped gently around her.

"I too have had my share of being stranded in a body that is not my own. I was trapped as a raven for three whole days once, overwrought and out of sorts. I had to eat a mouse. It was awful."

A snicker echoed in Maewyn's mind in her human voice, but the sound that came out of her snout was only a huff.

Roan's hand smoothed the fur between her ears as he settled fully on his side with her tucked up against his chest. "But you can transform back if you understand who you

are and what you want to be.”

Oh, gods, I’ll be trapped as a fox forever.

“You are human,” he said into the quiet of the darkened chamber, nothing snide in his words. “And humans, I think, might not be so different from fae after all. At least, I believe you and I share more than either is willing to admit.”

She could feel the pull of the tether then, tugging her backward and closer to his chest. She could never get close enough, it seemed to say, not like this.

“Our existences are so full of yearning that maybe nothing will ever satisfy either of us.” He sighed, but the wistfulness wasn’t as somber as she thought it should be. “Perhaps it’s our shared fate to always be shut out of the affection we long for most.”

The hot sting of tears burned at Maewyn’s eyes though none fell. She had only ever wanted someone to favor her as she was—curious, strange, irritable—whatever others thought she might be. But she had never said, never even hinted...yet the tether knew.

Roan let out a heavy sigh, his breath caressing her ear. “Now, listen, you will need that human face of yours to properly scowl at me,” he whispered with more mirth. “And that human body to barge in and force me into doing whatever work I’m trying to avoid.”

Warmth built in her chest again, and her nose twitched.

“Your true body will also be necessary to enjoy the delights of this realm. Those fingers of yours especially, to lift teacups and turn pages. I know I would miss them if they never came back even though you refuse to use them on me the way I wish you would.”

Maewyn shivered, and she could smell another kind of magic with her snout then, something compassionate and comforting.

“But I suppose I haven’t done much to deserve your softest touches,” he murmured, voice dreamy as his hand slid down from her chest to her belly, the smoothness of her skin lighting up under his fingertips. “Come back to me, Maewyn. Give me a chance to earn your favor.”

She was floating then, yet anchored, free and safe at once as that warm magic encircled them both.

“Ah, you’re a quick study, aren’t you?” Roan’s hand trailed over the swell of her hip, nothing between their skin, not even fur. “Well done, Pumpkin.”

The warmth in Maewyn’s chest surged down between her legs at his intimate touch, fingers encircling her hip bone.

She had returned to her human body but completely naked.

At least her back was pressed against him and they were beneath the linens, but his exploring hand caressed her thigh, and her shuddering breath barely concealed a moan.

Traitor , she thought of her own body, but it had only done what she’d wished it to do: return her to a form that fit perfectly in Roan’s arms. His hand slid back up to her stomach and wrapped carefully below her breasts as his knees cradled behind hers, fitting them together just how she wanted.

Maybe Maewyn should have fought off his hold instead of sinking into his warmth, and maybe she should have discouraged the passionate thoughts corrupting her mind and tickling at her skin, but it was so much nicer to not be at odds, if only for a night.

Even if it was foolish and temporary and as make believe as a fae tale, to be held by someone who understood her was all she could ask for as she fell asleep.

Familial Faults

Maewyn woke wrapped in so much comfort she considered never moving again, but all it took was one rumbling taunt in her ear to ruin everything.

“Not quite skilled enough to manifest clothes after a transformation, are you, Pumpkin? Not that I’m complaining.”

“Well, that would be a first,” Maewyn responded and rolled herself right off the bed. She might have been naked, but at least she was skilled enough to take a linen with her and wrap up all that nudity.

The prince could only click his tongue and moan about being left cold.

There were many other things she wanted to say, but just the very sight of Roan reclining in bed and begging her to return to it made her pulse race between her thighs, and that made her shut herself up in the bathing chamber until it was time to leave Ulric’s manor.

The fae prince took the hint, but he was all knowing smiles and waggling brows on the ride back. “Tell me how it felt,” he prodded.

She flushed and tried to cover her face. “Don’t you already know?”

“I know what it is to be a raven, not a fox.”

Maewyn popped her head up from behind her hands and glared at him in the quiet of

the carriage.

“Oh, that.” When she realized he wasn’t asking her to describe how pleased she was to snuggle up against him or how excited she’d been to feel his fingers grazing her bare skin, she finally gave in, and the rest of the ride was filled with excitable comparisons and theories on transformative magic.

But then they returned to the Autumn Court, and something in the air changed. Roan sat up when the carriage entered the gates, he grimaced, and then announced, “Fuck, she’s here.”

There was no time to ask “who” as the prince hopped out, Maewyn following much more reasonably after the carriage stopped.

Jynquil was prancing about the halls but wasn’t the apparent she .

Roan only gave the spring princess a cursory nod when Maewyn caught up to him, then ordered Aunyx off to prepare his steed with an uncharacteristic vitriol.

“What is the matter with you?” Maewyn asked under her breath, flashing a smile at the horde of courtiers who had arrived while they were gone.

The palace was flooded with fae from every court if their attire told her anything, entire families intending to celebrate the wedding that wasn’t meant to be.

“I sense a disturbance,” he muttered back, slipping an arm around her waist and guiding her through the throng.

There were elder fae and children too, even very young ones being worn on the backs of others, but Roan merely nodded at them all until he reached the grand chamber that served as a dining hall that first night.

Maewyn glanced up at him when he stopped, reading the pained expression that passed over his face and then followed where his gaze fell.

“Mother!” he called. “You’ve arrived. Splendid.” There was... affection in his tone, surely, but it was like the words had to slice a hole through his neck to escape.

The fae woman was easy to spot amongst the rest, a fall of golden hair so stunning it was more precious than the actual metal.

There was age on her face, but only just, and she went to Roan with open arms, pulling him into an embrace that he returned.

They traded affectionate pleasantries, and then she turned to Maewyn.

“Oh, your mate .” Maewyn was pulled into a delicate but sincere embrace. “I do hope our realm has offered you every kindness and you’ve been given all the comforts to make this place your home.”

The words sank into Maewyn—kindness, comfort, home—and she could only smile back and confirm that yes, she loved Tenhaef, and it came so easily she wondered if it might have just been the truth even on the tail of being nearly torn to shreds.

Roan’s mother stepped back to stand beside a male fae. They were both dressed in the green and blue pastels of the Spring Court, and Roan’s mother slipped her hand into the man’s, pressing to his side. “My son has been on his very best behavior, I expect, yes?”

The look Roan gave Maewyn utterly implored her to lie.

“Of course,” she breathed, clasping her hands. “Your son is a perfect gentleman.”

When Roan's arm slipped around her again, she didn't seize up, but her pulse began running sprints. When had his touch turned so friendly? So soft? Why couldn't he just dig his fingers in and yank her toward him and—well, no, even that sounded tantalizing!

After Maewyn smiled stupidly through a bit more friendliness, Roan excused the two of them and brought her to the quiet of the library, face painted with a deep scowl.

“By Cerewin's Horn, what in the realm was all that about?” She rubbed at her cheeks after he shut them in alone.

“All what? I was terribly polite.” Roan threw himself into a branchy chair, arms crossed, a pout as clear as the sunshine that followed around the members of the Spring Court blighting his face.

“I supposed you were, but...” Maewyn rolled her hands over each other, unsure how to explain that in only ten short days, she had somehow come to know him well enough that none of this behavior felt normal at all. “Your mother. You...hate her?”

“Hate? No, I love her! She's my mother .”

Frankly, Maewyn was relieved the woman was alive at all. “Then why are you so upset to see her?”

“I'm not. Well, maybe a little. It's just...” Roan chewed on his lip and sat forward, finally sputtering, “She's just so happy .”

Maewyn spread her fingers, waiting, but that seemed to be the only explanation forthcoming.

She huffed a sigh and paced over to stand just before him.

“Well, I thought she’d been beheaded by your father or something equally heinous, so happy seems a fair bit better than headless—especially if you love her. ”

Roan’s green eyes lazily slid upward, utter misery on his face. “It was my father who should have been beheaded,” he groused. “But she just chose to be severed from him and left us instead.” Roan threw himself back again, scrubbing a hand over his smooth jaw.

Maewyn touched her chest, a tug there that hurt in a way she’d not experienced before. “I hadn’t thought they could be severed, but that’s a more reasonable explanation for why there’s no queen.”

“There would be if it weren’t for him,” Roan spat. “My father, he used to be...different. He was carefree, wild, indulgent—”

“Like someone else I know.”

His nose crinkled. “Who?”

Maewyn waited, but it would never dawn on him, not in this place where the sun rarely slipped out from behind the clouds. “Never mind. You were saying?”

Roan twiddled his thumbs, scowling down at his lap.

“He never respected their bond. I’m sure he truly loved her once—considering how awful he’s been since she left, there is no other explanation—but while they were wed, he slept with whomever he wanted.

My mother never acted as though she cared until the morning they found my father’s latest conquest dead in the bailey, blood seeping into every one of those cracks in the white stones.

There's still a stain if you catch it in the right light. ”

Maewyn swallowed hard. “Did he—”

“No, it was her own doing. She used a blade enchanted so that only she could wield it, and she was not subtle in letting others know her plans. She was simply in deep grief over betraying her own husband and knowing she would never truly be with my father. It just broke my mother.”

And that poor fae woman , Maewyn thought.

“I suppose it broke everyone,” he admitted with a helpless huff.

“But when my father's lechery shifted from embarrassing to lethal, my mother chose to no longer ignore it.

The two were severed, and she settled in the Spring Court where she learned to paint and sing.

And, I mean, good for her, I suppose, but then she met Gregor.

” This he said with the ire of a child spitting out peas.

“You know, that fae with her? That's Jyny's second cousin once removed or something ridiculous, but apparently he's funny and kind and even Jyny likes him, so, you know, whatever .

The point is, since she left, my mother has made it her purpose in life to show my father how happy she is without him. ”

And without me , Maewyn heard Roan say despite the words never leaving his mouth

because she too knew what it was to feel unwanted. “I’m sorry this is difficult,” she said, easing herself onto her knees and placing a hand over the back of his.

Roan opened his mouth then closed it again as he peered down at her. His features were frozen somewhere between alarm and confusion until he swallowed. “Are you...being earnest right now?”

Maewyn nodded.

His head cocked just like a bird’s with deep misunderstanding. “But surely you mean to say that you are sorry this is difficult because I am so ill-equipped to handle the actual difficulties of life.”

She shook her head.

“Because I have very little to grouse over, you know.”

Maewyn shrugged, placing her other hand on his knee.

“And my ache is but a single leaf fallen from the mightiest oak of heartbreak. It matters not .” He pushed himself forward so that his face was quite close to hers.

“It matters to me,” she said, and though it was nearly silent, she knew he could feel her breath on his lips.

The library door groaned on its hinges. It was a wonder that anything in the fae realm would require lubrication, and yet the sound was so loud it made both jerk away from each other as they hissed matching curses.

Aunyx stood on the threshold, hands behind his back, stoic face painted with the briefest discomposure. “Your Highness, your steed is ready.”

Roan stood awkwardly, and Maewyn got to her feet with equal floundering. The prince announced he would return that evening, a murmured apology for not assisting with research for the day.

When the door closed behind him, both Aunyx and Maewyn stared at it for a long moment.

“Would it be acceptable if I remained here?” the shadow fae asked.

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Maewyn dropped herself into the reading chair and fanned at her face to wave the flush out of it. “Frankly, I would prefer it. Especially if you can scare away the wedding planners.”

Aunyx hesitated, but something out in the palace kept him there regardless, and Maewyn was grateful for the distraction.

“Did you have a nice time at the party?” It was a stupid question because she knew he didn’t—she’d caught glimpses of him glowering in the shadows the entire night.

“Lord Ulric is a gracious host,” he said as if he had forgotten every complimentary word in existence and had to grasp for the right ones.

“I’m sure Lord Ulric is many things,” Maewyn scoffed.

Aunyx halted his pacing before the shelves, dark eyes turning on her. “I feared you were far too clever a match for the prince, seeing the things he does not. It seems I was correct.”

She pursed her lips. She didn’t know Aunyx well at all, but she’d known people like him who insisted on wearing only one face—a skill that served until it didn’t. “You don’t trust Ulric either.”

“I do not,” he blurted and then spoke with a quickness, “but the prince believes he owes him his life.”

“He’s in debt to him?” She sat up, alarmed.

“Only in his mind.”

“Aunyx,” she said with a command that felt foreign. “Please, you have to tell me everything.”

The shadow fae hesitated, hands clasped behind his back, and then he nodded to himself.

“Roan was a sensitive child.” When she laughed at that, Aunyx only sighed.

“You might not have recognized him then, but his heart was easily bruised, and his magic was powerful and volatile, so when he first became a raven, it was disastrous.”

“When his parents were severed.”

“He told you?”

“Not exactly.” She could simply feel it, the pieces falling together. “Go on.”

“There isn’t much else. He was lost for days trapped in that feathered skin, and the way he recalls the story, Ulric supposedly rescued him like all those other fae in his manor.”

“Something’s wrong with those fae.” Maewyn pressed a hand to her stomach as it turned over, the thought of their dull stares nauseating. “It’s as if half their life has been drained away just like that barren place he’s got hidden behind that door.”

“Door?” Aunyx took a step toward her. “Ulric has a hidden eingress? And you revealed it?”

“If that’s what it’s called, yes,” she went on quickly as she plucked up one of the

books she'd studied, flipping to the pages about the doors fae sometimes locked their truths behind.

"It's a wasteland, and everything there is starving.

I thought I'd find something that would tell me what he really is or what he wants, but there were just lifeless trees and these creatures with leather wings that tried to eat me.

Roan called them faelings, but they were horrible.

"She pushed the book toward him to show him the pages.

Aunyx took the tome, dark eyes flitting over the words. "How old was it?"

"Ancient," she said without a second thought, knowing he meant the place itself.

The shadow fae held her gaze for an intense moment then returned to the book.

"What does that mean?" she insisted.

"I don't know. I've tried to voice my suspicions, but Roan already thinks I'm..."

"What?"

He looked up at the door to the library, and there was a deep sadness in his black eyes, but it was gone before she could really see it.

Maewyn placed her hand on the pages so that Aunyx had to look at her instead, and though the stoniness crept back into his gaze, she knew what she'd seen. "Roan told me that he and Jynquil will be living there in that manor with Ulric after all this. He

must have some ulterior motive.”

Aunyx opened his mouth, and a name formed on his lips too quiet to be heard, but the springy sound of it found Maewyn’s ears anyway.

“We all have ulterior motives,” he grumbled as he stepped back, propriety wavering.

“Just because some of them could never come to fruition doesn’t mean we aren’t blinded by the impossible things we want.

You— you just want to go home, don’t you?

Do you really care about what happens here? ”

“Of course I care,” she snapped. “Roan might be a self-absorbed prick, but he’s...he’s my self-absorbed prick, and I couldn’t bear it if something happened to him that I could have stopped.”

Aunyx looked utterly taken aback.

“And this stupid war,” she said, throat burning with something like embarrassment.

“You’ll all probably be killed if Roan does the inane thing that he wants with Jynquil.

” She bit out the Spring Princess’s name just to see, and there it was again, that spark of pain that made the shadow fae look like he would throw himself on his own sword if he had to hear it again.

“Neither of us can just let this happen. Ulric will hurt them both.”

The shadow fae’s jaw worked in deep thought. “We don’t have much time. Lord

Ulric will soon arrive at the palace for your wedding.”

“A wedding he does not want to happen.”

Aunyx cocked his head. “A wedding that you would have happen?”

Maewyn took a slow breath, unable to answer. “Please, do whatever you can. I’ve got quite a bit more reading to do.”

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Even when she was sniffing and pouting, the Princess of the Spring Court was beautiful.

She had crafted herself a seat out of a stump at the edge of the harvested gourd garden, turning the bark of the fallen maple pink and blooming white petals around its base for no reason other than that was the way she liked things. So frivolous, so playful, so wonderful.

All things Aunyx was not.

He lurked between the hedges as a shadow and watched her like some deviant fae overtaken by his most vulgar desires.

That was what many of the others already thought about shadow fae anyway, and perhaps it was fair—he was lurking after all, and his desires were often completely vulgar.

But licentiousness wasn't his intention just then, it was only that he had to work up the courage to speak with her.

Which was pathetic, and that was nearly as bad.

But then Princess Jynquil heaved a sigh so great it scattered her ever-present butterflies, and the knowledge that she was in even a modicum of distress was too much to bear.

Chivalry struck down his apprehension, and he pieced himself together out of the

shadows, but as soon as his boot fell into a pile of dead leaves, Jynquil whipped around.

Even in the dim light of early evening, green eyes pierced right through Aunyx's chest. Their jade-like shimmer was always teasing the edges of his mind, but to really see them, to have them on him, was almost enough to break him entirely.

"Aunyx," she said on an inhale as she straightened.

Instead of looking terrified to see the shadows coming to life and stalking toward her, a bright smile spread over her face.

Jynquil's ability to hide the fear that so many others couldn't or wouldn't was unmatched and frankly more than he deserved.

"Princess." Aunyx bowed as he stopped four paces away from her makeshift seat. It was a respectable distance, and when she turned fully to reveal her dress, it was probably a necessary distance too.

She was trussed up in pink lace, just a shade lighter than the blush on her cheeks.

The dress hugged her middle and chest creating the illusion of a second skin, and her crossed legs peeked out through the generous slit in her skirt.

Gods, it was all so unfair, but perhaps the worst of it was how she bounced her bare foot so casually as she grinned up at him.

Don't look at that, he chastised himself, but then his eyes darted to the lacy, revealing patterns over her breasts and that was surely worse. Thankfully, she was holding a crimson rose in her cupped hands, and that's where his gaze finally landed.

“You disappeared as soon as you arrived this afternoon,” she lilted, and his guts twisted that she noticed at all.

He had noticed her, of course, before the carriages even passed through the gates. Honeysuckle, distant thunder, a warm breeze through a willow tree, none of it belonging in Tenhaef but all of it her .

“The prince assigned me many tasks,” he lied through his teeth, but he could pretend that discussing the court’s safety with the Lady of the Harvest Way was indeed part of his job even if it hadn’t turned out to be the distraction he’d hoped for.

“Well, you’re wandering out here all alone now,” she said in her most impish voice. “Unless you came to the empty gardens just to find me?”

Shit. Fuck. Gods damn it.

“I heard you,” he lied again, biting his cheek, but he couldn’t very well say it was something unidentifiable deep in his chest that always told him exactly where she was. “You sounded...upset?”

Jynquil’s shoulders sagged, and her lips lost their curl, all he needed to know the truth.

“Point me in their direction, and I will have the perpetrator apologizing on their knees at your feet.” The words came out stiffly, but at least the real threat, the one that was slow and bloody and painful, hadn’t escaped his mouth.

The princess’s eyes lit up like new sprouts catching the spring sun, another tactic of hers he admired, smiling to cover up her horror.

She bit down on her lip and wrinkled up her nose, and he held his breath so that he

wouldn't match her perfect grin.

"There isn't anyone for you to drag before me and make beg for their life.

Unfortunately." She sighed again as if she really meant the disappointment.

"Unless you want to rip the petals off this flower."

Aunyx tipped his head. The rose held all the markers of Jynquil's exquisite magic.

"Didn't think so. I can't let you anyway," she said, lifting it to her face and peering downward with crossed eyes. "It's too good. Not perfect, but good. Maybe even great. It's just that I made it to do awful things, but I don't need it anymore, and now it's making me sad."

The shaft of his scythe tickled at his hand, ready to cut the bloom in two for its offense, but he didn't conjure the weapon.

"Stupid, huh?"

"No, not at all," he breathed. If he could strike that word out of her vocabulary, he would.

"Well, they're going to be disappointed in me for wasting my new skills," she said quietly, tucking the flower into a pouch beside her.

"The priestesses?"

She nodded. "I feel a little bad for lying to them, but at least I don't have to go on that awful pilgrimage to Nagneara. I was not looking forward to that!"

Aunyx swallowed, the thought of Jynquil traveling so far on her own striking fear deep within.

Of course, most priestesses in training were assigned at least one escort, but the thought of someone traveling with her all that way, spending all that time together, basking in all her glory, struck and even deeper jealousy than the fear.

But it was the somber tinge to her face as her eyes searched the ground that made Aunyx take a step closer. She looked up, and he abruptly stopped.

Do you really want to do this? He wanted so desperately to ask, and even more desperately, Please, don't do this, Jyny. Please.

But she would ask him why, and it wouldn't be like with Roan who could see into Aunyx's soul and know what was there despite what he said. He would have to lie to her, and whatever he came up with would sound like an insult to her intelligence, her power, her choices.

But Lady Maewyn had bolstered him, and he had to say something.

"If the flower offends you so, but you don't wish to destroy it, perhaps it belongs with someone else?"

Her lips curled up again then, faster than he expected, and she clasped her hands in her lap. "All you had to do was ask."

"Not me," he cut through her giddiness like he'd indeed conjured his scythe, and she pouted those too-pretty lips of hers.

"That is, I would be a terrible caretaker of something so..." Aunyx swallowed.

It was cowardly, but if he could not do what was needed of him, Lady Maewyn could.

“Surely there is someone better suited. Someone who, perhaps, would appreciate a gift so close to a celebration of their own.”

“The human!” Her eyes lit up again, forgetting his accidental rejection as fast as she’d pretended it wounded her, and her butterflies panicked. “Oh, but I have to wrap it up, make it really special.”

“Splendid idea.” He nodded and took two steps back. “If you’ll excuse me.”

Princess Jynquil’s brows pinched together over jade eyes, but she nodded and let him go just as he too would have to let her go, as impossible as it would be.

A Full Cauldron

R oan returned sweaty and exhausted. He had ridden out past the gardens and fields and then continued deep into the wood before taking to the air.

He'd hoped that a flight would calm the boiling in his mind and his revulsion at the idea of being severed like his parents.

There was that other inkling too, the one that told him to wholly embrace the tether he never wanted, but it wasn't until he was submerged in a bath that his thoughts quieted to a low simmer.

Intending to indulge in only another hour or so more of sulking, he expected his bedroom to be empty when he left the bathing chamber, but the root of his problems stood scowling in its center like the broodiest tree.

It would have been easier to hide just how much he was coming to like that scowl if he were wrapped in more than just a linen about his waist, but fate saw to leave him nearly naked in Maewyn's presence, and he wasn't going to object.

By the looks of things, she wasn't objecting either, glower shifting into approval as her eyes flicked down his length before she shook her head. "Why do you want to have a baby with Jynquil?"

Of all the things he both hoped and feared she might say, that wasn't even a passing thought, and so he blurted, "I don't."

Maewyn's brows rose even higher than when her eyes had fallen on the only covered part of him.

"That is, I've known her so long that she is like a sister," he admitted awkwardly and leaned against the bathing chamber's door. "In truth, I'm a little concerned about being able to perform at all."

Maewyn rolled her eyes so heavily he thought her whole head might pop off—ah, so she was not in the mood for a joke. "I'm not talking about that part. I mean the archfae part. The part where you create and bring forth an entire life and disrupt the balance of all things."

"Well, I—"

"Because I've been researching archfae, you know," she cut in, arms crossed beneath her breasts, her skin reddening with the pace of her speech. "They're terrifyingly powerful, and you admitted yourself one's mere existence could thrust this whole realm into war."

"Yes, but not a baby, Maewyn," he groaned. "It will be rather helpless at first, surely! And probably pretty cute too, considering." He gestured to himself.

She scrubbed a hand down her face. "Yes, all right, but eventually it's going to get bigger and then what? There must be a real reason you want this all-powerful child. Is there a danger you need to overcome? Are you afraid of someone?"

He scoffed.

"If someone is threatening you, you must tell me so that I can help."

"Maewyn, you cannot—"

“I can, and I will.” She crossed the room in a few long strides to stand just before him. “You’ve trusted me with everything else, so trust me now.”

Roan stood straight. What was that in her eyes? Concern? “I...I do trust you.”

“Then why?”

Reasons jumbled together as he stared back at her, none of them good enough, and so he whispered, “I just want to see what happens.”

Maewyn looked as though she might break, and then she did—arms thrown overhead as she stomped toward the windows with a screech of utter frustration.

“What?” he called, following after. “You’ve never been curious before?”

She stopped abruptly on her mad march as if she’d been caught around the waist.

Roan eased up behind her and breathed into her ear. “You’ve been curious your entire life, haven’t you? And it never goes away, not without satisfaction.”

He felt the tremble that crawled up her back as she tried to remain still before him, but she didn’t storm off.

“If you’re going to be angry with me, at least turn around so I can admire that scowl of yours.”

She did turn then, leaving only an inch between them, but she wasn’t glaring at him.

Like in the library when she had so gently caressed his hand and like on the dance floor when she had spoken so sweetly about their tether and her past, Maewyn’s warm features were painted with a worry he hadn’t been expecting to touch him so

deeply.

“You may not be afraid, but I am,” she said, and the truth cut into him like a cord pulled taut around his neck. “Please, at least tell me where the idea came from.”

He slipped fingers over her hips and drew her up against him, wanting to chase away that fear. “It has been law that I marry a human since before my birth, so of course the alternative is like a shiny fleck on the forest floor ripe for plucking.”

She licked her lips, eyes darting down to his bare chest as her palms came to rest on his arms. “But who told you that you could? That you should ?”

He ran a hand up her back to twist fingers into her curls and grinned. “You think I’m not clever enough to come up with something like this on my own?”

“I don’t think you’re stupid enough to do it.” Her gaze found his again, cutting but playful. “I don’t think you’re cruel enough either.”

And then she was kissing him.

Maewyn’s kiss was a marked improvement on the one Roan had given her. Their meeting had been tainted with shock and subterfuge, but now her lips burned as she bit back at him, dragging him near.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled against his mouth.

Roan gathered her up from behind, lifting her as he consumed her lips. “I am not .”

Maewyn’s arms wrapped fully around his neck. “This isn’t what you want,” came between another bout of searing kisses.

“Lies,” he growled and tossed her on the bed, falling right after.

Maewyn’s mouth tasted of heat and breath and human . Her tongue slid over his as she arched herself against him, nails clawing at his back. “I’m worried,” she gasped between kisses. “About you.”

Gods, her words only fanned the flames. To have someone worry for him was a surprisingly arousing delight.

Roan steadied himself over her and broke their mouths apart. “Funny, I’m worried about you .”

He trailed lips down her jaw and across her throat, wanting her mouth free to make the noises he longed to hear as he rutted his hips into hers.

She was hotter than a summer fae between her legs despite the sheath of her dress and the loosening linen around his waist. He grazed her collarbone with his teeth, and she tugged at his hair and moaned, grinding her hips back.

She felt like molten amber and rich earth, and as he slipped the neckline of her dress down and encircled her nipple with his tongue, she cried out in exactly the way he’d been fantasizing about all this time.

He would have chuckled at those needy noises, maybe even told her to beg for more if she were anyone else, but by gods he was wound so tightly by the tether, by her taunts and touches, by everything .

He’d had her in bed the night before, naked and ravishing, and yearned to be inside her, yet found contentment in simply having her beside him.

It was strange, terrifying even, but it had...

well, it had ruined him, hadn't it? Perhaps she was exactly right to be worried, even if it was too late.

He rose from her chest and nibbled her throat. "If I could make you mine, truly mine, I would."

Maewyn stilled beneath him, but his next gentle thrust against the layers between them made her eyelids flutter. "No one is stopping you," she said, legs falling farther apart.

"You are," he growled. "You would be tamed by no fae."

She breathed out heady laughter and gripped the side of his face. "I think you prefer me untempered."

Roan swallowed, the heat of her palm against his cheek so inviting he leaned into it. Maybe it was a mistake, but he was compelled as if by magic to give her the pleasure she was so desperately seeking by rubbing her hips against his. "Please," he said, voice cracking, "let me taste you."

"How could I deny you that request, Your Highness?"

Maewyn let Roan slither down her body, his mouth trailing over bare breasts and then her clothed middle as he pushed up her skirts and drew out another chuckle from deep in her chest. She'd been powerless the moment she saw him nearly naked and still dripping from the bath despite all her determination, but then Roan's body atop hers and his cock—however covered it was—drawing out her pleasure had made her go truly stupid.

Then his tongue between her legs broke her mind completely.

Roan had said he wanted a taste, but Maewyn was being completely devoured.

Hands wrapped around her thighs and held them steady against her bucking as quakes of pleasure rumbled through her core with the caress of his tongue.

She sank into the softness of the linens with every arch and wriggle, closing her eyes but still seeing the coppery glow of the ceiling in her mind.

Everything was fiery colors and swirling leaves and trembling earth as his fingers clung onto her flesh and he nipped and teased and lapped.

Then it came to a halt just as she was losing her breath. "Please, don't stop," she choked out.

Roan was peering up at her from between her legs, emerald eyes glittering in the low candlelight. "I just want to look on you a moment," he murmured, his fingers still kneading her thighs.

Maewyn had never felt so exposed, locking eyes with a prince hovering between her knees as his chin dripped with her wetness, and yet she felt no need to hide away. Damnedest of all the damns , she thought, I am well and truly lost now .

She reached for Roan's face and dragged him right to her own, the tangy taste of herself on his lips followed by the spiced cider of his tongue blossoming to life in her mouth with his heady kiss.

"I know you would never allow yourself to be taken by a human," she breathed, hand sliding between them and beneath the linen he still wore at his hips.

"Take it from me then," he growled, though Maewyn already knew she would.

She gripped onto him, nestling his cock between her legs still sheathed by the linen around his hips.

They shouldn't consummate the marriage neither intended to enter into, she knew, but her body insisted she take some satisfaction from his.

He thrust against her as she encircled his crown, his face contorting, then she stilled her hand.

"Not yet," she strained, squeezing him tight and holding him still as she drew her own pleasure from his covered base. He'd done well to take her to the precipice, and in just a few thrusts, her climax burst against the back of her mind and against him.

Sated and yet not, her legs quivered with release, and she sank into the down of the linens, moaning out a sigh.

Her core clenched around nothing, urging her to slide him inside, but even in her lusty reverie, she knew that could never be.

Instead, she ran a thumb over the velvety skin along his cock and only imagined what it might be like filling her.

"Don't leave me like this," she heard him say, and when she opened her eyes, he was straining to hold himself up on his elbows above her, still as stiff as ironwood in her hand. "Be merciful to your prince."

Floating in the afterglow of surrender, she grinned and trailed a finger up his veiny length. "You're sure you would waste your spectacular seed?"

Roan shuddered. "Please," was all he could manage, just as delicious to her ears as the first time.

Maewyn took him in both hands, working at his cock and watching his breath hitch with every slow stroke.

His arms trembled as he held himself up, hands pressing in on either side of her head and gripping the pillow so tightly she was sure it would explode into a mess of feathers.

Crimson hair fell in his face, the muscles along his shoulders and arms bunching and jumping with the strain, and then he lowered himself just enough to press his lips to hers in the most remarkably sweet kiss.

Roan cried out against her mouth then, and spend coated the inside of the linen as she continued to caress him through his release.

The prince may have been a braggart, but he had not exaggerated when it came to quantity, multiple waves swelling through his length.

And then he collapsed as delicately as he seemed able, falling beside her with arms circling her middle to draw her against his chest.

Maewyn's eyes widened at the embrace as she slipped her hands out of the linen. It was reminiscent of the night before, but he had held her then only to change her back, not...not for comfort, and certainly not because he wanted to.

"Terribly embarrassing," he mumbled into her ear. "I swear, it's never happened that quickly before."

"I'm sure you say that to all the fae."

Roan's sassiness was perhaps tied to his seed, suddenly running low as he hummed, "Not the fae. My human." His effort instead was entirely focused on getting her to

nuzzle back into him.

Maewyn turned toward Roan and let him hold on, let him mumble something about being a great prince who would someday be king and would need a queen to match, and then let him fall asleep wrapped in her arms.

Truth and Trust and Other Terrifying Things

Roan was complaining, likely because Maewyn had roused him so bright and early to take her out into the woods, but her mind had barely let her sleep. Even wrapped in the fae prince's arms and drowsy with satisfaction, her worry had only increased for this world, for her role in it, and for him .

So, of course, she was rather cranky as well.

Maewyn refused to acknowledge Roan's nakedness that morning or the pressing demand in her nethers. They hadn't actually consummated anything, she had convinced herself, and that was just how things would stay despite the longing between her legs that begged to be filled.

"There's something I need," she had told him instead, "and you're taking me into the woods to get it." The scowl she gave him doused the carnal fire in his eyes—no, not that , though she would have traded almost anything to be bent over one of the mossy boulders they passed.

So Roan complained even though it was his forest they were traipsing through. "What are you looking for?" he finally asked as he lazily overturned a stone with his boot.

"Help," she said, poking her head into a felled log.

"That's what I'm trying to do! But you won't give me anything to work with."

"Oh." Maewyn blinked up at him, not really expecting him to be so eager. "I'm

looking for the mushroom faelings.”

Roan screwed up his face. “What could you want with the mykiis?”

“You see”—she flung her arm out at him—“not being helpful, just judgmental.”

Roan groaned but took her by the elbow and hauled her to her feet.

“Apologies,” he gritted out, then sighed.

“If you wish to go to the mykiis, then to the mykiis we shall go.” But he didn’t move to take her, only delicately wrapped his fingers around her upper arm and stood there close enough to kiss.

That was what he was hoping for, she was sure of it, and even though she craved the spiced cider of his lips, it was the last thing she would give him. “Lead on, Prince.”

He sneered but indeed led, and she followed behind, arms crossed and feeling so tightly wound she thought she might snap.

It had been such a mistake taking pleasure from each other.

In the moment, it was wonderful—wonderful to feel as though someone cared even though he knew all of her awful truths—but now she would have to live with their time together as a memory.

He wasn’t going to keep her. That was really what he meant when he’d said she couldn’t be tamed.

She wouldn’t be Roan’s wife; she wouldn’t be the Crowned Prince of the Autumn Court’s anything except a conquest forgotten in his past.

But she would not find herself bleeding out in the bailey for having lost something she never really had to begin with.

“Knock knock!” Roan gave the stump a kick, and a whole host of mykiis trailed out, bleary-eyed and mushroom-headed.

“Oh, that could have been done much more politely,” Maewyn slapped his arm, and he got a shiver just from that small, unkind touch. Gods, everything was well and truly fucked if he even craved her abuse.

The human squatted down and spoke with the faelings in a honeyed tone, one much sweeter than she had used with him that morning.

He only half listened, annoyed by the false timbre but also with himself for feeling so sorry and miserable and frankly more than a little embarrassed.

He had been enthusiastic with her the night before, yes, but he had not worried about withholding anything either, not like when he dallied with fae.

Roan might have been a prince, and he might have been male, but with Maewyn, he had simply been , and in the moment, she had made him think that was enough.

But she had turned cold again, and not in that way he liked. This coldness bit into him like the winter realm and left him feeling utterly rejected. Hadn’t Maewyn said she was worried about him the night before? Where in the world had that worry gone?

A single stream of golden sunlight broke through the orange leaves above and played across her bronzy skin, and he craved the heat that came with her antagonism.

But then he heard a word, elylae , that pricked his curiosity, and another, umbrabrute , as the mykiis told Maewyn the beings were one and the same. Well, he could have

told her that too.

“But you said the umbrabrutes devoured everything and that led to the elylae disappearing.” Maewyn worried her skirt as she knelt before the faelings.

“Yes, that is true. The creatures of old consumed everything until there was almost nothing left, but they did it to themselves.”

Roan sighed loud enough for Maewyn to look at him, her eyebrow cocked.

“Before the fae ruled this realm, the elylae indeed ruined it and most died off,” he told her, bored with the legends himself.

“You remember the elonhyea ? The ritual is meant to be a reminder to not overindulge and turn the four corners back into barren wastes. Every court has their own ceremony to keep with the seasons.”

“You did say something like that.” Maewyn tapped fingers on her lips. “But there are still some elylae around—they’re just these umbrabrute monsters?”

“The faelings often call them umbrabrutes because they stalk the wood in one of their eerier forms. When they interact with us, they typically just look like fae.”

“So they can look like whatever they want? Like fae or humans or animals? Which is their true form and which is a lie?”

“Elylae cannot lie,” a purple-headed mushroom spoke up, using its little arms to make the fact seem much bigger than it was.

“That’s awfully inconvenient for them”—she bit her lip—“but very convenient for me.”

“That’s only half the myth.” Roan dropped himself down on a stump as the conversation didn’t seem to be ending. “The old ones cannot lie, but they’re very good at telling untruths.”

“Isn’t that just lying?”

“No, it’s the truth, just un . You know, like, I am not a prince of the Autumn Court.”

“That is a lie,” she huffed.

“But I’m not a prince, I’m the prince.” He pointed to himself and waggled a brow. “Articles are very important, don’t you agree?”

The mykiis all nodded their great bulbous heads, and Maewyn just scowled at him deliciously—there it was, that heated ire! He grinned, and he watched the corner of her mouth twitch in response. Oh, to lick that corner, to coax her open, to devour her...

“That’s only two-thirds of the myth, actually.”

Maewyn’s attention was stolen from him then, handed off to a little bastard of a green mushroom sitting on an acorn.

“You can be the cleverest question asker that’s ever been,” the mykiis said, voice low and intriguing, “but the most cleverest know that there is a danger in asking anything at all because if an elylae is forced to tell a truth they want to keep secret, then they are forced to reveal their most powerful form. No one wants to see an umbrabrute’s true form, especially not a human. ”

Roan grunted. “Well, yes, that too, so it is said.”

“How do you do that? How do you force them to tell the truth?”

“How does one force an old one into doing something?” Roan scoffed. “By threat of death, I imagine.”

“You’ve seen this happen?” Maewyn was full of questions again, just like when they first met in the wood, and the tether pulled itself taut in Roan’s chest.

The prince wished he had something better to say but could only shrug. “No. Elylae are so few. I don’t even know any.”

“You’re certain you don’t?”

He smirked at her. “Unless you have been deceiving me all along.”

Maewyn clicked her tongue and sighed, thanking the mykiis for their time. She stood and wandered off, deep in thought and muttering to herself. She paced through the burnt colors of autumn, stopping only once to retrieve something from the fallen leaves and tuck it into a pocket.

Roan followed as if on a leash—and wasn’t he?

He rubbed his chest, the thrumming there so familiar now that he no longer regarded it as a bother, the thought of silence there much more alarming.

As he walked through the leaves, something hard thumped against his boot, and he looked down to see an orange.

That would have been a nasty trick to play when they first met, making her taste something he’d magicked to be utterly disgusting and insisting she tell him how much she enjoyed it, but that had been the plan then—slowly lure the stupid human

into believing she wanted to flee.

But she was not stupid, and the thought of her fleeing was...

“Have you come up with a solution to all of this?” Roan caught up to her, heart racing.

“If I would have known the mykiis were better than the library, I would have...” He scrubbed a hand over his face.

Would he have actually brought her to them if he thought the mykiis held the key to the door she would flee through?

“Please, tell me what you’re thinking, Maewyn.”

She upturned worried eyes to him. “You won’t like it.”

“I’ve already been proven wrong about a thing I thought I wouldn’t like—I’m more than prepared for another.”

Her cheeks flushed, but she frowned. Surely the night before hadn’t been that bad.

“Wouldn’t you agree that you enjoyed our...tryst?” If she still intended to desert him, fine, but at least she could admit to appreciating their time together and not leave him thinking it meant nothing.

She coughed, refusing to look at him again.

Roan caught her chin. “Come now. You certainly did last night.”

Maewyn’s face reddened but this time with anger. Her brows drew together, and her

nostrils flared, and he worried for the briefest moment she would stab him again. “I loathed it.” And just like that, she did.

Roan stepped back, hand falling away from the softness of her face, her words worse than any bit of metal to his chest.

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“Just like I loathe this place and all these leaves and all this magic!” She rubbed at her cheeks and squeezed her eyes shut.

“And I loathe worrying about what’s to come and what I’m to do when I return to a place that doesn’t want me, and how on earth I’m meant to sever the two of us when I...

” Tears had welled up in her eyes, but they were as obstinate as she was, refusing to fall. “I loathe it all, you included!”

Roan swallowed hard, pain and magic prickling at his back. Fly , said the magic. Leave her and go .

But he fought the childish instinct and breathed through the fear instead because he had already been convinced by her, and he wouldn’t let her unconvince herself. “Certainly you don’t loathe me, Maewyn,” he said and let the words linger as he waited.

She did not immediately bite back that she indeed did, but her hand shot up and wiped at the single tear that had escaped.

“You dislike me, perhaps, and are annoyed by me, of course,” he went on carefully. “It’s doubtful you find me unattractive, though I suppose almost anything is possible, but loathe me? Truly hate me?”

“Yes,” she croaked.

“But I don’t...I don’t loathe you,” he admitted.

“Oh, shut up, yes you do.”

“No, I don’t. I find you frustrating and impossible at times, but I don’t loathe you.

In fact, I like you quite a bit. More than I probably should and definitely more than you deserve, but your mind is delightfully sharp and your face is more pleasant to look at than the sum of all Tenhaef, and your company, even when you are simply existing silently in the same chamber, is the greatest comfort I can think of.

” The tautness in his chest wound tighter than it had ever been.

“Gods, Maewyn, I don’t actually find you frustrating at all, really. I think I may actually—”

“Stop.” She held up her hand, voice sharp, fingers trembling. Her eyes darted into the forest, and Roan’s followed.

The shadow of something large shifted through the trees, and the brush rustled.

The forest had otherwise gone quiet—no, devoid of life.

Everything had fled in the wake of whatever was there, dark magic filling up the space the critters and faelings had abandoned.

Something was drawing near, and it was hungry.

Roan’s back exploded in a plume of black as he swept Maewyn into his arms. She shrieked, but he spent no time explaining, simply scooping her up and taking off, breaking through the branches and into the sky.

Below them, something ran—something huge and shadowed.

“Was that a wolf?” Maewyn asked, breathless as she clung to him.

Roan did not look back, flying for the safety of the palace. “Not a normal one,” he gritted out—he wouldn’t risk her life by staying to discover what it truly was.

“No,” she whispered. “I think it was Ulric.”

Roan nearly dropped from the air, stuttering out a shocked sound as they faltered in the sky.

“I knew you wouldn’t like it, but that’s what I’ve been trying to say.” Her fingers curled around his neck as she pulled herself even closer. “I don’t trust him.”

“Ulric? Wha—why not?” Roan’s brow pinched as he caught another current, and they returned to smoother flying.

“You saw that place he keeps hidden. Everything there is dead.”

“The place I rescued you from? He rescued me from the very same one when I was small. He’s not hiding it—it’s simply leftover wastes from a time long ago.”

“What about those dull-eyed, enchanted friends of his who live in his manor?”

“They aren’t enchanted,” he sputtered. Though, he really never interacted much with them as Ulric gave Roan all of his attention when he visited.

They were just strange lost souls who had each befallen a tragedy and were unaccustomed to conversation.

Even after all these years... He shook his head.

“They’ve suffered in their pasts, and Ulric brought them in. ”

The wind whipped at Maewyn’s hair as they soared over the forest, her voice shouting over the sound. “Is that what he told you? What else did he say? About you and Jynquil? About the archfae?”

The questions were coming too fast and were too pointed. Roan could only grit his teeth and focus on the spires of the castle ahead, beating his wings hard. “We’ve spoken countless times over many years, Maewyn, and he has been my friend. One of the very few.”

“Well, you’re a very good friend to have—influential, powerful, and full of so much potential you could end the entire realm. You and Jynquil both.”

He grunted, spying his balcony as he dipped from the heights of the sky. “Ah, yes, of course, the only reason anyone would befriend me is my power.”

“That is not what I am saying, Roan.”

“But it is.” He jerked the two of them upright as he came to land on the stones just outside his bedchamber.

She gripped him tighter, but he only went on, “You are saying that Jynny gave up her marriage prospects and has pretended to join the priestesshood only to deceive me, and that Ulric’s gracious offering of his home is... what exactly?”

“I wish I knew, but there is something sinister about him,” she said, voice cracking. “I can tell he doesn’t want me here—”

“Only because I do not want you here.”

Maewyn sucked in a breath, mouth clamping shut. She scrambled out of his arms, and he wished he could simply hold on and keep her there, but he had to let her go.

“Wait. I mean because we have discussed—”

“You may think you are invincible, Prince Roan, but I will not stand by and watch you”—she swallowed hard and shook her head—“and watch this realm be destroyed. I have more reading to do.” She turned then and strode away, hands fisted at her sides and not even casting him one last scowl before she went.

Bountiful Gifts

“ O h, human friend, are you here?”

Maewyn lifted her gaze with great effort.

She hadn't gone to dinner nor returned to Roan's chamber after their...

discussion , though the faint twittering in the library tree suggested morning had arrived.

Notably, he had not come to fetch her either, but multiple trays of food had been delivered to the library as well as a heap of pillows, blankets, and finally Roan's own bed.

She allowed the things to pile up but didn't use them out of principle.

Her back protested that she was stupid, and in her weariness she was hard pressed to agree.

Jynquil peeked in through the cracked door and called for her again, but when her bright eyes landed on Maewyn, she burst in like a beam of sunshine through a viciously torn back curtain.

Utterly stunning in layers of buttery yellow gauze, a train of lavender hydrangeas flowed behind her.

Her skirt was markedly short in front, bare legs and feet hustling, a wreath of twigs held in both hands.

Aunyx stood at the entry, holding open the door for her dress as it took its time trailing inside. He frowned down at the petals left, shadows around him darkening, and then shut the two of them in and himself out.

“I’ve brought you a gift!” Shoots of new maroon leaves sprouted up as she skipped over the uneven, root-bound floor. “I was told this is where I would find you, and—oh! Are you ill?” She stopped her sprint abruptly only a few paces away.

Maewyn pushed back her loose curls, but it did nothing for the sleep she knew lined her face. There were probably other lines too, likely the imprint of bark from when she’d fallen asleep against the book pedestal. “I’m fine,” she lied and stood, body stiff.

Jynquil’s button nose bounced like a rabbit’s, dubious. “Well, maybe my presents will help. Here!” She thrust her hands forward and revealed three eggs within the wreath of twigs she carried.

Oh, gods, was Maewyn being gifted a—er, multiple pets? “You shouldn’t have.”

Excitement flickered around the fae princess as palpable as the butterflies that followed her everywhere. “Well, I sort of didn’t actually, it wasn’t even my idea, but you can consider them a wedding present, I guess. Go on, open them!”

The fae was nodding eagerly, but as far as Maewyn knew, eggs opened themselves when the time was right.

She hesitated a moment too long, so Jynquil swiftly plucked one up and knocked the shell against the book pedestal.

Instead of a wet, disoriented creature flopping out, the most beautiful scarlet rose unfurled on the open pages.

“Oh, it’s stunning ,” Maewyn breathed, lifting the delicate bloom.

“Just be careful. I made these things while I was practicing my priestess spells. That’s heavily laden with pollen that will either make you sneeze uncontrollably or temporarily blind you.”

Maewyn chuckled uneasily. “Thank you?” Assured there would probably be no baby animal slumbering in the others, she cracked the next egg, and a long, woven cord unfurled from inside, crimson glass beads hanging off of it.

“Again, careful,” Jynquil cautioned, holding up the cord. “This is a belt, and these pomegranate seeds are enchanted to be irresistible once one bursts, but after consuming them, you’ll fall into a deep slumber. And if you’re wearing it, the juice will ruin your dress.”

Maewyn made a noise she hoped sounded grateful and cracked the third and last egg. A thin gold chain fell out, a small locket dangling from it.

“Now, this is really special!” Jynquil’s eyes sparkled as she held up the necklace. “The locket can carry anything within regardless of size or composition, so you can stuff it endlessly with poison or weapons or...or good things too, like sweets!”

Maewyn looked on the three fae gifts. “These are...unique. Especially for a wedding.”

“Well, I originally intended to use them to make you hate the fae realm and chase you away, but once Roan explained that you wanted to leave, I didn’t really have a use for them. Now, when you’re back home, you’ll have something to remember us by.”

Though Jynquil looked quite pleased with herself, she fidgeted, bouncing on the balls of her feet. Maewyn tried to make a grateful show of it, but the thought of returning home struck many bands of fear within her.

“Uh oh, something’s gone wrong, hasn’t it? Ulric said there was another way, but...”

Maewyn blinked—so, Ulric had finally arrived for the wedding. “But?”

Jynquil scrunched up her nose. “No one told me the alternative plan, but I can only assume it’s not good.”

No, the alternative was not good. It meant entering into a sham of a marriage with a man she was beginning to...

well, no, it wasn’t a beginning, it was barely still in its middle, in fact.

Maewyn desired Roan from her deepest depths, possibly even loved him, and that was a culmination.

Ulric’s proposed arrangement was certainly not good at all, especially when the plan involved hurting so many others, Jynquil included, and put Roan in so much potential danger.

Maewyn swallowed, taking a breath. “Jynquil, I’m sorry that all of this has come between you and Roan.”

The fae’s face twisted like she smelled something foul. “Oh, don’t be. We’ve been begrudging friends since his mother came to live at my court. There is nothing to come between.”

Maewyn’s gaze darted to the door, double checking that Aunyx really had left the

two of them alone. “You’re not really in love with the prince, are you?”

She made a significantly less than royal sound. “No! Not at all! I just want revenge on my father for making me second best to my brother, Jaspvr.”

“I see. And this is the right way to get your revenge?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t think so at first, but I needed help from someone outside of the Spring Court regardless of what I was going to do, and Roan was adamant about this whole archfae thing.”

“He was?”

“Yes, but can I tell you a secret?” She leaned in like they weren’t all alone in the library.

“It’s not really his idea, I know, because Ulric came to me first and suggested the whole thing seasons ago.

He just told me to keep our conversation quiet and let Roan think he came up with the whole thing.

” She snickered behind her hands. “You know how the prince is, always needing everyone to think he’s so clever! ”

Maewyn’s stomach flipped over. “So, the two of you sneaking off and conceiving the archfae is all Ulric’s idea?”

“ Conceiving ”—she stuck out her tongue but then squinted upward—“well, now that you mention it...yes?”

The leafy decomposing fear and suspicion that had been littering Maewyn's mind finally produced a spore, and she nearly shook the fae before her. Why couldn't the princess see all of the manipulation and danger when things were so clear?

"I can't say anything to Roan, though, which is so very annoying, especially when he has second thoughts!

" Jynquil waved her dainty hands through the air, missing her butterflies by a stem's width.

She tittered as if she were discussing the most minor disturbance and not potentially dragging the realm down into ruin.

"Because the truth is, I've had second thoughts too, but I can't very well go through with actually becoming a priestess which is what I'll probably have to do otherwise. "

"You don't want to do any of this either?"

Jynquil opened her mouth, but before another long tendril of words fell out, she stopped herself. A butterfly landed itself on her nose, and for a long moment she didn't even seem to notice. "Don't I?"

Maewyn waved a hand, shooing away the fluttering bug, and that seemed to fix the fae.

"Oh!" she squealed, reeling backward and laughing.

"Well, I do hope you feel hale enough for the pre-wedding celebration tonight. There's supposed to be lots of dancing, and since priestesses-in-training don't have to worry with all that marriage prospect propriety nonsense, I can pick any partner I like, and I've got my eye on someone, but I fear there won't be any celebration if

you're too ill to go! ”

“Another party?” Maewyn almost rolled her eyes but then inhaled sharply as an idea struck her like a falling acorn. “Actually, do you think you could help me get ready for that?”

Jynquil's eyes lit up with a hundred dawns. “Oh, yes , I most certainly could!”

Maewyn nodded tightly and smiled, though nerves bashed themselves up against her innards as if she'd swallowed the fae princess's most aggressive butterflies.

Her words would have to be delicate with the woman, and her plan foolproof, but she had meant it when she said she would not stand by and watch the realm fall into ruin, nor would she let Roan be hurt no matter how much of an idiot he had been and for so long.

Roan was angry—angry with the words that had been so poorly exchanged, angry with the elderly fae who had concocted the damned laws he now had to live by, and perhaps angriest with whomever had built his bed since Maewyn had chosen to keep it instead of returning to his chamber the night before.

Never mind how uncomfortable it was to lie on the marble floor where the bed had been—how in the realm was she to expect him to sleep at all without her body beside his?

It only occurred to him that he should have just gone to the library himself after Jynquil came looking for the human the next morning.

Unsure he would be articulate enough with so much ire still rumbling inside him, he did the next best thing and called for a celebration to be thrown that night.

The Lady of the Harvest Way would simply have to attend a party in her honor , and perhaps by then Roan would think of the right things to say.

“You are not looking as chipper as I would expect.” Ulric walked at his side as he trudged the palace grounds. “You worry too much, Prince. Your plan is impeccable.”

Yes, it was originally, and that may well have been the problem—Roan had been pecking at it. “I slept poorly,” he mumbled.

“Your bride-to-be kept you up?” The fae’s dark brow ticked as the two wove through where gourds had grown, only vines left behind. “Is that why she is not hanging off your elbow now with eternal yearning in her eyes? She’s recovering?”

Roan knew it was meant to only be in jest, but he felt the intense urge to convince Ulric then that he and Maewyn hadn’t so much as traded lusty glances. “She’s composing her vows,” he said miserably, a lie he would have liked to believe.

Ulric made an overly intrigued noise. “Ah, so you’ve decided to go through with things?”

“You are here for the wedding, after all.” Roan eyed him. Ulric had told him many times before Maewyn had ever arrived that marriage to anyone, and tethering especially, would be a terrible idea, though he had never really said why. “Unless you did not come here expecting that?”

“You should go through with this wedding,” said his friend, comfortingly confident.

Roan grinned—what he would have given just to be told what to do days earlier, to just marry Maewyn, just live with this tether, embrace it, embrace her .

Of course, that was the answer! If only Maewyn had been there to hear Ulric say that

he wanted what was best for them both, and then she would understand.

“I’m sure she will be very entertaining while you wait for the archfae to be born.”

Roan’s smile wavered as Ulric gazed out at the harvested orchard.

“Humans make the best playthings,” the fae said, wolfish grin widening. “They’re quite complex when it comes to enchanting them, but the struggle is half the fun.”

“I don’t think she would like that much.” Roan swallowed, not recognizing the meekness in his own voice. He didn’t use enchantments, not like that, not on other living beings, and never on Maewyn.

“Well, that hardly matters,” Ulric laughed. “You are the prince of the Autumn Court—you should be getting exactly as you wish, and it’s increasingly clear that what you wish for, inexplicably, is her. Why should she be an obstacle? Just keep her until you tire of her.”

“But we’re tethered...”

Ulric shrugged in that wise way of his and clapped Roan on the shoulder. “Tethers break with death.”

Promises Kept

Roan stood stiffly with Aunyx at one side and Ulric at the other.

Both men knew something was wrong, but neither had the privacy to ask when the other was so close, which was exactly as the prince intended.

He clasped his hands before him to hide his fidgeting, and he clenched his jaw to keep nonsensical babble from spilling out, staring straight ahead and watching the ballroom doors, waiting.

Roan was not one for admitting to mistakes, mostly because he didn't make them. Well, no, Tenhaef bent around his blunders so that they seemed sound. But Maewyn was not of Tenhaef, not of the fae realm at all, and the mistakes he made with her were clear now.

But those mistakes would be made right tonight, and whatever she chose to do, at the very least Roan would have really tried for perhaps the first time in his life.

When the ballroom doors opened and his human stepped into the glow of the motes gathered overhead, he wondered how he could have ever thought her unsuitable.

She had chosen a dress with a corseted top as deeply russet as the fertile earth, flaring at her hips with a cascading, silken material, tawny like a fawn's fur.

Burnt orange and glittering gold maple leaves trailed from her waist and curved around the skirt, littering the bottom hem as if she were enchanting them to encircle

her.

She was very simply adorned otherwise, a few crimson baubles hanging from her hips and a thin golden necklace pooling in the dip of her collarbones.

Maewyn had left her hair free and long, the loose curls tucked back over one ear with a flower, but none of it mattered really—she could be clad in a sack, or better yet nothing, and he would beg her to be his queen just as she was.

And not a queen in name only.

She swept right to him, the motes following as courtiers instinctively moved aside. She may not have been fae, but she commanded the court in that moment, head held high, just as she had commanded him from the moment she'd tethered the two.

“My prince,” she said as she came to stand inches away, golden eyes trained on his.

He took her offered hand, guiding it to meet his lips as he bowed. But before he could straighten, her hand slipped from his and took him by the jaw, lifting his face to meet her own.

Maewyn pulled Roan into a kiss that nearly tore away his last thread of composure.

Her palms encircled his face with such fervor, her lips taking his completely, her body bending to close what little space had been between them.

He was hers, the kiss announced to the entirety of the court, and gods, it was everything the prince wanted.

“Stay with me,” he breathed into her mouth, a whispered plea if he had ever made one.

“Of course, my love, for as long as you wish,” she said, and the words burrowed into Roan’s heart like a fox in its den, prepared for whatever winter might bring. Then she pulled back and raised her voice. “But first, we must thank our guests for attending with a dance.”

A hand was slipped into Roan’s as music filled the ballroom, but it was not Maewyn’s.

Jynquil was there, tugging him away as Maewyn shifted elegantly to stand before Ulric.

She bowed to the fae—not a curtsy, but a full bow, which made Roan snort wryly even in his confusion—and then she pulled Ulric out onto the dance floor.

Maewyn had not become a better dancer in such a short time, but she was determined to fake it.

She allowed Ulric to put a hand on her waist, but she made sure her grip on his shoulder was firm as she pushed him deeper into the thrall of courtiers who adopted her example.

Couples spun around them to the quickening tempo, and she grinned widely up at her partner, moving him this way and that, her rhythmless prancing hidden amongst the others.

“Thank you for coming,” she said through lips pulled back into the most pleasant of grins—that, at least, she had practiced plenty and become an expert.

Ulric opened his mouth, but she redirected their dancing, and he tripped.

“Oh, do be careful—it would be a shame if something happened.” She did not hide

the tick to her brow as she pulled him upright.

“I would caution you ,” he said, own smile crawling back on, though his blue eyes darkened. “The heart of a palace, surrounded by fae, has never been the safest of places for a human.”

Maewyn briefly glanced out at the ballroom filled with courtiers, but there were many of Ulric’s own there as well, their hollow gazes watching as they stood eerily still amongst the others.

“I’m not entirely surrounded by fae though, am I?” She spun them both around and giggled, sure the sound was demented to his ear.

His eyes narrowed, and she saw in them the exact glare she’d found watching her in the forest nearly a fortnight ago.

“Have you eaten?” she asked, brightening even more. “I know how hungry you often are.”

Ulric snarled but quickly pulled it back.

“No? Or are you saving room for something?” At this, Maewyn let her grin falter, let her eyes deaden, let her fingers dig in.

“What are you implying, human?” he spat as again they spun.

Maewyn brought their clasped hands to her chest, and with the simple flick of her thumb, flashed the interior of her locket. “I know what you are,” she said even though she was not certain, but then she could indeed lie. “And you know what this is.”

“Iron,” he hissed.

“Not blessed by starlight but brought from the human realm through the Harvest Way.” She flicked the locket closed again, but the fact changed nothing for him. “Tell me what you intend to do with Roan and Jynquil.”

“Give them sanctuary to fulfill...the arrangement,” he said through pointed teeth.

Maewyn felt his shoulder move strangely in her grip, as if the bones were slipping against one another on their own. “Your arrangement,” she corrected, “to bring forth the archfae into this world who will then be under your roof, just like all the others who are slowly being devoured by you.”

“What could I do to an archfae?” he whispered, and surely he meant to chuckle, but it came out strangled.

She tipped her head back to keep their gazes level, the span of his fingers on her waist lengthening.

“Fight it to the death, I assume, but not when it’s newly born.

Even an archfae would be rather helpless at first, don’t you think?

” She dropped all pretense, falling still in the dance floor’s center. “Helpless and delicious.”

Ulric’s next breath was labored as something like claws pressed to her side. “And to think,” he snapped, all decorum gone, “I was going to let him keep you.”

Maewyn saw the wolf a second before it became real, but it was long enough for her to rip the rose from her hair and hurl it into his blue eyes.

Shrieks filled the air as Maewyn pushed herself out of Ulric’s grip, feeling the fabric

of her dress tear, eyes closed against the enchanted pollen.

She stumbled backward and hit the marble floor, confident then she could open her eyes but wishing she hadn't.

Before her stood a massive creature very much like a wolf and yet not at all in so many ways. Ulric had become a thing twice as tall as any of the fae, his skin covered in fur and limbs bent in the wrong direction twice over, all four ending in claws that could have taken off her head.

She scrambled backward from her spot on the floor, the motes above in an utter frenzy and illuminating the chamber with flashes.

The only boon was that Ulric's massive head was thrown back and jaws open in a terrible roar, the pollen of Jynquil's enchanted rose having done something to upset him.

It was enough for Maewyn to flee, but before she could get to her feet, she bumped into the legs of another.

A group of the fae from Ulric's manor loomed over her, hollow eyes and deadened smiles gazing downward in mock affection.

They were the only ones unfazed by Ulric's transformation, but of course they held no fear—they held nothing at all, and they were encircling him completely so that there was nowhere for her to go.

Maewyn grabbed the belt at her waist, the cord already severed by Ulric's claw.

She squeezed, and a pomegranate seed burst. The fae above her cocked their heads and sniffed.

“You’re starving too, aren’t you?” she called through a shaking voice and then whipped the belt overhead.

It flew as far as her strength would allow, and the fae stalked off behind it like a flock of geese chasing warm southern winds.

She stood amidst the chaos that was left, limbs trembling, motes darting, heart pumping, courtiers screaming, pain—so much pain—stabbing.

But she was struck still by the wonder of Ulric and his new form, the true form of the elylae forced to show itself.

The mykiis were right about an umbrabrute’s true form—it was not something humans were meant to see. Not see and survive, anyway.

But then there were only feathers, dazzlingly iridescent yet as black as the night sky.

Roan’s wings burst before Maewyn in a protective wall, the brilliance of a mote tearing across the darkness like a shooting star.

She glimpsed a flash of gold as Roan’s sickle materialized in hand, and then there was a sickening tear.

A scream ripped out of Maewyn at the sight of so much blood, but shadows folded in around her, and a tug at her middle disoriented her entirely as she fell backward, suddenly in a darkened alcove of the ballroom instead of its middle.

Aunyx was there with her, placing her gently on the ground as he called out something she couldn’t understand.

Then he melted into the shadows again and reappeared in a black haze at the

ballroom's center with a scythe in hand.

The beast had fallen to all fours, but it was no less horrifying, a gash across its face, fangs still bared.

Though it was surrounded, it tossed attacking fae away like they were dolls.

A spray of vines shot across the ballroom, wrapping around Ulric as he lunged and holding him still, a blow of the scythe landing, but then the wolf ripped through and continued to attack.

Maewyn's vision blurred, and she pressed a hand to her side.

Wetness coated her palm, but the pomegranate seeds were gone and...

oh, that was a lot of blood. Her trembling fingers dripped onto the white marble, and a mote came to land on one of them.

It pulsed gently, a last light in the tunneling darkness.

"Maewyn!" Roan's voice was in her mind, and then his hands were in her hair. His eyes had caught her own as her head was tipped back to look up at him. "Stay," he whispered as he pulled her to him. "I want you—I need you. Please stay with me."

She sighed, falling against his body as he knelt in her blood. How sweet it was to be wanted, to be needed...

"Maewyn, please. I love you."

To be loved .

She struggled to blink her eyes open again and whisper back that she loved him as well and that she was sorry she hadn't figured out things sooner and avoided so much mess, but the sight of a monstrous wolf breaking free of vines and shadows and barreling right toward Roan's back silenced it all.

Jaws opened, claws rose, and then the creature jerked and froze mid pounce. Roan's grip around her remained tight, but he turned, and the glittering of a golden spear revealed itself from the beast's chest, run through from behind.

"You will not touch my son," growled the king of the Autumn Court, hitching his spear deeper into Ulric's back.

The head of the elylae that looked down on them was rearranging, attempting to cobble itself back into what had been Ulric's most familiar face, but it was clear the thing was stuck, undying and too powerful to overcome.

Maewyn opened her locket with a shaking hand and pushed the bit of iron she'd once lost in the forest but found again into Roan's palm. Her fae prince stood and paced up to the elylae that had been tricking him for so long.

"Your Highness," the thing wheezed in a voice that could have once been Ulric's. "I have been your most loyal servant. See me for what I've done, for striving to give you exactly as you wished."

"I am getting exactly as I wish." The prince plunged the sliver of iron into the umbrabrute's heart.

Ulric was naught but dust then, just like in her useless books, and Maewyn sighed, eyes closing.

In a way, the task she had been given was finally complete: she had severed

something, and there was a door beckoning her forward.

If only she had been able to truly begin, then to live, and to complete her chosen task of loving Roan as well.

She could hear his voice still calling to her in the darkness. Maewyn's chest ached, the pull of the tether as strong as it had ever been, urging her back, but she couldn't seem to find her way.

And then there was a second voice, a high-pitched and urgent one shouting above the din, "Excuse me, pardon me, a little room, if you all would just—oh, damn it , priestess-in-training coming through!"

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Roan squinted out at the great hall and felt bile rise in his throat. “One would think, betwixt the two of us, there would have been at least one good idea.”

But there wasn’t, and the wedding was unsightlier than either he or Maewyn could have imagined.

It wasn’t even taking place on Salen as had been promised, Maewyn’s fragile human body needing an additional fortnight to recover from that elylae bastard’s wounds.

It might have been better if her initial healer had paid closer attention in her training, but then it might have been much worse had that same healer not chosen for Maewyn the stiffest corset dress after being told of the plan to confront a monster armed only with a flower, a locket, and a handful of pomegranate seeds.

But the time had allowed Roan to sit at Maewyn’s bedside and dote on her, to have long discussions about the past and future with her, to argue to utter frustration and then burst into raucous laughter with her, and to know for certain that the tether had brought them together correctly.

The time had also allowed the fae who once lived in Ulric’s manor to recover from the enchantment laid on them.

Each had a similar story to Roan’s if a different ending, finding themselves lost in some barren waste and rescued by a beautiful and wise fae who eventually convinced them that his home was the safest place they could belong.

Their memories after that were naught but a dense fog, undoubtedly Roan and

Jynquil's fate too had it not been for Maewyn.

Ulric's manor had reportedly fallen into rubble, the wastes beyond it finally exposed, but not immune to magic.

It would be Roan and Maewyn's first undertaking as husband and wife, to tend the land and return it to its former glory, a task he looked forward to completing together. But that would be after...this.

The flowers were atrocious, Maewyn's shoes were perpetually wet with rainwater, and there was a surprising number of pink ponies handed out as guests entered the gathering hall, which was delightful for all of ten minutes until the herd needed somewhere to empty their bowels.

But amidst the offensive colors and sensations and smells, one thing was about to go absolutely right.

"Ah, well, we did come up with one good idea, didn't we?" Roan took Maewyn by the hand and began leading her down the aisle.

"We?" She shot him a delicious scowl as they strode between fae from every court. "I think this was mostly my idea."

"You stabbed me to try to get out of this, Pumpkin," he hissed through a smirk.

"And tethered us," she quipped, squeezing his hand.

Roan inhaled deeply and bent to whisper in her ear before they reached the arch at the aisle's end. "Fine, I've an even better proposal—we skip the reception and return to our private chambers to finally consummate our bond."

She gasped with faux concern, but her golden eyes lit up with hunger. "What will

everyone think?”

“I don’t give a flying fuck what they’ll think,” he said and kissed her.

“There’s something I need,” Maewyn whispered in Roan’s pointed ear. “And you’re taking me into the woods to get it.”

She led him along under the burnt orange and golden canopy, fingers entwined with his own as she hurried ahead.

They had been working on the fallow fields where Ulric’s manor once stood, a crew of autumn fae at their disposal to cleanse the pestilent magic.

The work was long and hard, and bickering often overshadowed the good they did.

Roan had said something pithy about pumpkins, and Maewyn had wanted to slap him, but then she thought of something even better.

So they headed deep into the wood, Roan likely confused as she had been shouting and scowling at him moments prior.

But then she laughed as she slipped her hand out of his, and she heard his dark chuckle from behind.

Maewyn was running then, and with a leap over a fallen log, transformed herself into a fox.

“Maewyn!” Roan called, but she had embodied the exact colors of Tenhaef and darted unseen through piles of leaves.

The tether never let them escape each other, however, and she could still feel him running behind at first and then taking to the air on enchanted wings.

Maewyn shrieked with laughter in her mind, the sound through her snout very different.

She streaked through the forest until she spied the perfect spot and burst back into her human form.

She'd gotten a bit better at transforming, her clothes appearing in a pile at her feet instead of being lost entirely, but she ended up exactly as she intended.

Maewyn pressed her body to the nearest tree, the bark biting into her hands as she fell silent and peeked upward through the branches, waiting. A breeze rustled through the golden leaves and over her bare skin.

"Ha, I've finally outrun him," she whispered as she peeked around the other side of the tree.

"Oh, have you?" Transformative magic prickled over her skin as a hand slid down along the swell of her hip and another crawled up her back as fingers threaded themselves into her curls.

Maewyn's head was gently tipped back as Roan's body pressed against hers, his length already hard and nudging her backside as his cidery breath fell down over her face. Her nipples hardened as her body scraped against the bark, sensitive flesh going even tenderer, and she cried out.

"Caught you, Pumpkin," he rumbled in her ear, easing her more fully against the tree as he tugged her head to the side and dragged his lips down her neck.

"Oh, no," she feigned, but this was her favorite part, the part where his hand slid around to the front of her body and sank into her eager wetness.

"Oh, fuck," she moaned as his body further trapped her against the tree, itchy pain

melding with the pleasure he was coaxing out with perceptive fingers.

“Is that what you want?” He nipped at her shoulder. “You want me to fuck you?”

She nodded though his hand was so wrapped in her hair it was difficult—easier, though, than finding the words.

He let her go then, and when she leaned away from the tree another chilly breeze teased goosebumps all along her flesh.

She might have tumbled to the forest floor if his hands hadn’t found her hips again, spinning her to face him.

Viper-colored eyes drank her in for a painfully long moment before he fell to his knees in the amber and orange leaves and pressed his mouth to the place she needed it most.

It was Maewyn’s turn to weave fingers into hair and pull, scratching at Roan’s scalp as he coaxed her legs open to lap at her entrance.

Her back fell against the tree as her legs trembled, and Roan slipped an arm beneath her thigh.

He lifted her and delved deeper, a finger pressing inside her core and making her cry out into the wood like an animal.

She looked down on her prince as he worshiped her on his knees, his gaze finding hers and demanding without words she come for him. It took only another slow circle of her entrance and a curl of his finger, and her release shattered through her body and into his eager mouth.

Half limp, she felt herself be raised up and draped arms over his shoulders. What a

good idea this had been, she thought languidly. Much better than bickering some more.

“Don’t surrender just yet, Pumpkin,” he purred, the sound of him tromping through fallen leaves filling up her dizzy, satisfied mind. “Now I’ve got to get what I need from you.”

Maewyn was tenderly placed back on her feet and maneuvered so that her hands found purchase on a mossy surface.

She took a deep breath of damp air and blinked blearily into the colors of the forest, a lazy grin crawling up her face.

Roan was not standing before her but everything that he was was still there in the autumn wood’s colors—the fieriness of his passion and the golden glow of his heart. A heart that was hers.

And then her eyes widened, and the forest sharpened as Roan’s length teased at her entrance from behind.

She squealed with delight as a hand took her by the waist, the other pressing into her back so that she bent over the boulder beneath her.

Smooth, cool stone scraped against her skin, and his cock easily slid inside her then stopped.

Maewyn wriggled backward, but there was nowhere to go and no more pleasure to be had, not trapped still and in such a precarious position. She felt him breathe long and low, and that gave her the slightest thrill, but he remained firmly in place.

“You bastard,” she snapped over her shoulder.

“What? I’m only giving you what you asked for,” he huffed and deliberately dragged himself backward at the pace of a snail.

“No, you’re not.” She widened her stance and attempted to take over, but both of his hands gripped onto her waist and held her still.

Roan descended into her wetness again with a painful laziness. “You know what I want to hear,” he groaned.

Her body quivered around him with another slow stroke in and out, but she kept her mouth shut tight.

“Come now,” he rasped, falling still. “Just the once is good but twice is much better.”

Maewyn whimpered at her prince’s crown sliding out of her and teasing her entrance, refusing to fill her up again until she gave him what he wanted. “Fuck me,” she commanded, wiggling her hips.

Roan released one of her hips and reached between her legs but only pet her with the softest of caresses. The fringe pleasure of his circling fingers and his throbbing cock made her breaths come short and her legs tremble.

Stomach clenching and muscles twitching, begging for release, Maewyn huffed and lifted herself up to scowl over her shoulder.

Roan was half delirious with lust himself, eyes burning into the back of her.

His clothes had been abandoned, and his pale skin caught the dappled light through the trees, warm freckles like the first fallen leaves.

His form moved with deliberateness, another excruciating stroke as he pushed inside her, but only just. His lips curled upward when he caught her eye, and he held still,

halfway through a stroke that would never come unless she gave him what he wanted.

“Give me your spectacular seed,” she growled, and Prince Roan buried himself to the hilt.

Maewyn cried out, and Roan matched her as he rutted, pleasure coursing through her veins and driving her to wildness.

He drew back and drove forward, and she clenched around him, urging him on faster, harder.

She threw back her head and his hands encircled her body as they both came before collapsing onto the forest floor.

They were barely breathless heaps for an uncountable time until Roan dragged her up against him there on the earth. “My future queen,” he mumbled into her hair. “You’ve undone me.”

She shifted in the soft fallen leaves so that she could fully see his face. “Don’t be too undone—we still have quite a lot of work to do.”

Roan groaned irascibly.

“Come on,” she said, lifting up onto an elbow.

But he grabbed her and dragged her back to the forest floor. “Stay with me,” he pleaded, emerald eyes gleaming in the autumn light.

And so, she did.