



# Fire Struck (The Fae Universe #11)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Magic has returned to the world, but its brought more than just wonder in its wake.

As Layla Ironwood-Steelsinger prepares to host a massive Midsummer celebration, she cant shake the feeling that something dark looms on the horizon. And shes not wrong.

Ancient spells and plots are unraveling, gods walk among the party, and deep beneath the earth, a force that could destroy everything stirs in its centuries-long slumber.

For the Tuatha Dé Danann family and their allies, this Midsummer celebration could be their last moment of peace before chaos erupts. Dragons are awakening inside the Greatdrakes family, The Wild Hunt is restless, and magic is unleashing creatures that should never be set free on the world.

While couples find love and families reconnect under the solstice moon, secrets emerge that will shake the foundations of both the human world and Faerie.

Please note, this Fae Universe novella is a fun, slice-of-life check in with all our faves and acts as a bridge between The Lost Fae Kings and the upcoming Greatdrakes series. It contains adult content, swearing, and sex scenes.

**Total Pages (Source):** 11

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:31 am*

1

Layla Ironwood-Steelsinger stood on the front patio of her house and looked through the tall pines and birch trees to the field in the distance. The elves and the úlfheonar from their nearby settlement had been out there since dawn, erecting tables, digging pits, and building large bonfires. It was midsummer, and it was one of the year's largest celebrations.

This year, Layla was hosting the Tuatha Dé Danann family, the Ironwoods, and the Greatdrakes. With all of them combined with the elves and the wolves, it was going to be a raucous affair.

What was I thinking? Layla rubbed her sternum, where a ball of anxiety was forming. It wasn't like she had to do much because the elves were used to large midsummer parties. It was just a lot to have all the branches of the family together at once.

Layla took some deep breaths. It was going to be a good thing. The elves and the fae needed to maintain good bonds to keep their treaties strong. The Ironwoods and Greatdrakes were keeping Ireland free of magical pests and were flying all around the world to help with any others that sprang up.

Since the magical balance had been restored by the Fae Kings a year ago, all sorts of weirdness had oozed out of the dark places and cracks of the worlds. There had been no way to avoid it—the lack of magic was killing both the human world and Faerie. They knew healing magic would have consequences, and they had tried to manage the resulting fallout as best they could.

Layla counted out her breathing, taking in the sweet pine sap smell and trying to calm her nerves. She didn't know what was triggering the uneasiness. It felt like a storm was brewing on the horizon, just out of sight, unseen but felt in the air. She hadn't talked to Arne or anyone else about it because she had no seer ability like Tor's sister, Linnea, or any magic like Charlotte. She was just...Layla.

She had her skills, but sensitivity to the magical currents of the world wasn't one of them. That didn't stop her from keeping her eyes out on message boards, Reddit, and forums for anyone talking about the same magical storm building.

"It's fine. You're not going crazy," Layla whispered to herself.

"I could have told you that," a deep voice said from behind her.

Layla turned and took a moment to just admire her mate's beautiful long braided black hair, golden eyes, and the most perfect set of shoulders gifted by the gods.

And he's mine to keep. Layla still couldn't get over the last part, and she doubted she ever would.

Arne pulled her into a gentle embrace, and she rested her cheek on his chest. "You want to tell me what's wrong?" he asked, rubbing her back. "Or is this 'about to be inundated by family' anxiety?"

Layla smiled. Her mate knew her too well.

"A bit of that, but mostly I just have a weird feeling that something is about to go wrong," she admitted and tried her best to explain the stormy feeling.

"So much has happened in the past years that perhaps the peace is confusing. We all know it won't last, but we are all so tired that nothing really surprises us at this point,"

Arne said once she was finished. "I'm not going to try and reassure you that it's nothing."

"You could just try and pretend," Layla grumbled.

Arne tipped her face up. "I wouldn't lie to you like that. I might not be able to reassure you that your feelings are unfounded, but I can remind you that we aren't alone. Whatever is coming, we can all face it because we have proved time and time again that we can."

Layla sighed and pulled him closer. "You're right. I feel ridiculous worrying about something I can't even see or prove."

"How about this," Arne said in a thoughtful voice. "If the feeling gets to a point that it's truly bothering you, we will go and see the Norns and ask them about it?"

"Oh gods, going straight for the Norns? Why not Linnea?" Layla had never met the Norns, but from the stories Arne told, she was happy to avoid them.

Linnea's magic had flourished under Gudrun's teachings, but she still hadn't shifted. She could hear her inner wolf now, which everyone took as a good sign, but she still hadn't managed to complete the change.

Linnea threw herself into learning to be a volva, and not a single wolf in Ulfheim dared to speak poorly about her. It wasn't just because Tor would kick their asses, but because everyone had a healthy fear of a volva's power. Linnea hadn't been shy about just how powerful she was, either. According to her, she had done enough hiding in her life. Layla adored her.

Arne made a frustrated noise at the back of his throat. "Linnea and Gudrun are too close to us. I don't want to worry them until we need to. The Norns will be brutally

impartial," he said. He tipped up her chin and brushed his warm lips against hers. "I have your back, my wife, whatever is coming."

"I love you, but please don't make me horny when everyone is due to arrive."

Arne's grin was devilishly wicked. "It's midsummer when fertility magic is high. I have a stunning mate with the most perfect piece of heaven between her thighs. I can't help but be horny."

Layla laughed even as her cheeks turned red. "If you help me get through the next couple of hours with the family, I will drag you out into the woods and fuck you senseless under the stars. Deal?"

"Oh, that is very much a deal, wife," Arne said, his golden eyes glowing hot with magic and lust. He kissed her again, and Layla let herself relax into the feeling of safety and sexy joy running through her. She needed something to think about other than the chaos that was about to arrive, and there was nothing more distracting than Arne.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:31 am*

2

A pollo Greatdrakes was rarely nervous (that emotion was for people with no confidence), but tonight, his palms wouldn't stop sweating.

You are being ridiculous . He knew it, and it still didn't stop him from wanting to run away. He drank a mouthful of mead that the elves had in large kegs all around their party field and hoped it would calm the flutter in his stomach.

"You look like you are going to throw up already," Bas said from beside him. "How much of that have you drunk?"

"Not enough."

Bas could have pulled the answer out of Apollo's head if he wanted to, but his telepathic brother respected everyone's boundaries. "You want to talk about it?"

"No. I'm fine, little bro."

Bas nudged him. "Come on. I know about the present for Lachie. I think it's good that you are extending an olive branch. I never could figure out why you two butted heads so much."

"He just thought I was another sibling to watch out for as soon as Charlotte mated with Reeve. I don't need another brother," Apollo sniffed. "The man has serious issues with boundaries."

Bas gave him a pointed look. "He's not the only one."

Apollo ignored that. He didn't need another brother. Especially not one that he thought about getting naked all the time, but he couldn't help it.

Lachlan Ironwood was a rugged kind of handsome that both sexes were attracted to. There was something about him that screamed, 'I'm big and tough, and I can protect you.'

Apollo had dated plenty of hot people. Lachlan's looks weren't the problem. Well, not the whole problem.

It was that ever since Apollo had seen him, he had the most overwhelming urge to sink his teeth into him. He didn't know if he wanted to fight him or fuck him, and all of Apollo's easygoing nature went out the window as soon as he saw him.

Lachlan didn't have to say anything, and Apollo wanted to yell at him. It made zero sense. If he were just another hot guy, Apollo would fuck him and move on. But no. There would be no fucking Lachlan Ironwood.

Apollo had another mouthful of mead. "I told Dad and Charlotte that I would start to play nice with Lachlan, and that's what I will do. It's his birthday in a few days, and I'm giving him a present. That's nice and family-like."

"Surrree. You two are the most platonic bros I've ever seen," Bas replied, and Apollo scowled. "Don't glare at me. I don't need to read your mind to know you lose all your cool around him. I have eyes."

"Shut up. It's probably a dumb dragon instinct telling me to fight him that has kicked in since magic was fixed and dragon knights inundated us," Apollo huffed in reply and looked across the field, where said dragon knights were trying to out-drink a

group of wolves.

"Well, you better get your game face on, big brother, because Lachie is headed our way," Bas said.

Apollo fixed a placid smile on his face. He could do this. He could be nice and polite. He could make peace like he promised. Truth be told, he didn't even know how their disagreement started. It was like they saw each other and started fighting.

Lachlan wore jeans and a black shirt, his dark hair curling in the heat. Apollo swallowed hard. He just had to be cool, give Lachlan his peace/birthday present, and they could ignore each other forever.

"Hey," Bas greeted, rising from his chair. "Nice to see you, Lachie. I'm just going to refill my drink."

Apollo whispered, "You fucking traitor."

"Apollonius. You look well."

Kill me , Apollo prayed to the gods. They ignored him as usual.

"You need to come with me," Apollo said, stuffing his hands in his back pockets so he wouldn't touch things he shouldn't. He started walking away and didn't look back to see if Lachlan was following. Apollo could feel his dark blue eyes on the back of his neck. His pits started to sweat even more.

"If you are going to kill me, Layla's garage probably isn't the smartest spot to do it," Lachlan said, his deep voice filled with amusement.

"If I was going to kill you, I'd poison you like an alchemist should. A bit of Aqua



Torfana just to keep to the classics." Apollo opened up the garage door and turned on the light. On the work counter behind Layla's SUV was a long, polished wooden box.

"Okay, so you aren't trying to kill me. What's this about?" Lachlan moved in front of him. "Are you in trouble? Has someone hurt you? Because if they have..."

"No, you troglodyte, no one has hurt me. You don't think I can handle my own shit? This is why you infuriate me so much. I'm not your little brother to look out for," Apollo snapped and then bit his tongue. Don't fight. Don't fight.

Lachlan looked down at him. Apollo wasn't short or slender, yet having Lachlan Ironwood loom over him made him feel like a tiny twink, no matter how much he worked out.

"Trust me, I have never, ever looked at you like your brother," Lachlan said, his lips twitching like he was fighting a smile.

Just stab him. It will make everything so much easier .

Apollo took a deep breath and said quickly, "Just shut up for five seconds. I promised Dad and Charlotte I would stop fighting with you. Make peace. So I have a present for you. For your birthday. And a peace offering. To make peace." Fuck he needed to shut up. Apollo pointed at the box.

"That's my birthday peace offering present?" Lachlan asked.

Apollo wanted to hit himself in the head. "Yes. You're welcome."

Lachlan opened the wooden case, and the smart-ass smile on his face slid off. "Is this..."

"I know you like Highlander , like a big fucking nerd, so I got the fae to make you the MacLeod family sword. With Ironwood on the hilt. Because that's your name. Not MacLeod. It's a real sword that you can use to hit things. Or whatever," Apollo blabbed because his mouth wouldn't stop.

Lachlan lifted the sword out of the case and tested the weight. "Wow, this is perfectly balanced for me," he murmured.

"Yeah, well, the fae know their shit, and I got Emrys to talk to them about how you fight so that if you wanted to use it, it's made to move right or whatever the fuck swords do."

Apollo tried not to fidget, but he realized he was bouncing a little on his feet. This is why he hated being around Lachlan. It's like all his cool vanished, and his body just wanted to do its own thing like he was a demented puppy. Lachlan smiled so brightly that Apollo actually rocked back under the intensity of it.

"Apollo, this is the best present I've ever been given," he said and placed the sword back in the box.

"Yeah, well, I wanted to get something that you would actually use," Apollo said.

Lachlan turned and before Apollo could pull his hands out of his pockets to defend himself, Lachlan pulled him into a hug.

"It's perfect. You didn't have to, but I love it so much," he said, his big arms holding Apollo close. Apollo's hands came out of his pockets, but instead of pushing Lachlan away, his traitorous arms went around him. Fuck, he smelled so good.

Lachlan's big hand cupped the back of Apollo's golden curls, and all of Apollo's resistance left him. He melted into Lachlan's chest, the side of his face fitting neatly

in the groove of his shoulder.

Apollo's hand moved under the back of Lachlan's shirt and touched the hot skin underneath. Inside of Apollo, something woke up and growled happily. He didn't realize the sound was coming out of him until Lachlan laughed softly by his ear.

"Is that a good sound, or you're about to bite me sound?"

"Both," Apollo's mouth said without his brain's consent.

Lachlan's fingers twisted into Apollo's hair. "Your curls are so soft. I knew they would be."

Apollo breathed in Lachlan's scent, trying to memorize it, his alchemist brain already trying to label the notes of it. He turned his head, following the smell to Lachlan's neck where it was strongest. His mouth fixed on Lachlan's skin, the taste of him like ambrosia... Apollo's eyes snapped open, and he jumped backward out of Lachlan's grasp.

Lachlan's expression was burning hot as he looked down on him. "Apollo, your eyes..."

Apollo clenched them tight and opened them again. A clawing sensation ripped through his chest. Whatever was inside of him was pissed that he wasn't still in Lachlan's embrace. It wanted to dig its fangs into Lachlan Ironwood like he was steak.

"Fuck. Fuck. No. Gotta go. Yay to peace," Apollo said, hurrying for the door.

"Apollo, please don't run. Stay and talk to me," Lachlan called.

Apollo didn't stop. He kept running with his eyes half shut until he collided with someone.

"What the hell, Apollo!" Imogen said, turning on him. He must have looked worse than he thought because Imogen took hold of him. "Hey, steady on, sweetie. Your eyes are glowing like a dragon. You need me to go get Taran?"

"No. No. Don't let anyone see," Apollo said, trying to get away and into the woods where he could calm down the clawing in his chest. Imogen wasn't like Lachlan when it came to respecting boundaries. She led him into the trees and pushed him up against the nearest one.

"Talk, sunspot, or I'm getting Taran," Imogen demanded.

"Lachlan..."

"What the fuck did he do? If he upset you with his shit, I'll kick his ass," Imogen replied.

Apollo laughed, but it came out like a sobbing growl. "He didn't do anything. It's me. I almost bit him. I don't want to hurt him. I..."

"He's your mate," a deep voice said, and Arawan stepped out from the shadows. "Thought he might be."

"Fuck," Imogen whispered, eyes wide. "That actually explains so much. You need to talk to him."

"No, I don't. He's not my mate. I don't want a mate. I just need to stay away from him, and everything will be fine," Apollo said, sinking into the mossy forest floor. "I'll sit quietly here for a bit and catch my breath."

"I don't think that's how it works," Imogen replied and crouched down beside him. "You can't avoid him forever, Apollo."

"Watch me," he muttered, and then, because he wasn't already acting ridiculous enough, he burst into tears.

Imogen pulled him into a hug. "You really need to talk to Taran about this. You looked like you were about to shift, Apollo."

"I'll go and get him," Arawan said.

"No, don't!" Apollo didn't want Taran to confirm what he didn't want to know.

Arawan smirked. "I don't take orders from you, goldie." And he was gone.

Apollo wiped at his cheeks. "Please don't tell Lachlan. This is humiliating enough."

"I won't, but only because I expect you to man up and do it," Imogen said, kissing his forehead. "You might be surprised by his reaction, kiddo."

"I want to die."

Taran stormed through the trees. "Not on my watch, little dragon. Give me a look."

"You're not my real dad."

"Oh, you want me to get Cosimo, do you? Because I can, you little drama queen," Taran said and knelt beside him. "Show me."

Apollo lifted his head and opened his eyes. "I almost tore his throat out," he whispered, terror coursing through him.

Taran cupped Apollo's cheeks, turning his head this way and that. "I knew you Greatdrakes boys had sleeping dragons in you. Maybe fixing magic has allowed them to wake up."

"You don't mean...shifting?" Apollo squeaked.

Taran's smile lit up the gloom. "I think so."

All of Apollo's strength left him. He tipped sideways onto the grass and pulled his knees up to his chest. This was the worst party ever.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:31 am*

3

Imogen made sure Apollo was safely in the care of Taran before she signaled to Arawan, and they slipped away. She really wasn't equipped to deal with Apollo possibly mating with her cousin. She didn't want to have to keep it a secret from Lachie either.

"I don't suppose you can wipe the last twenty minutes from my memory?" she asked Arawan hopefully.

"Is Apollo discovering Lachie is his mate that bad? Because it makes a lot of sense. Charlotte is Reeve's mate, and the way Lachie and Apollo have always butted heads and pined for each other has always made me wonder," he replied. He took her hand and gave it a squeeze. "It's not your problem to work out. It's theirs."

"I don't like keeping secrets from Lachie. Now I have to look at his big puppy dog eyes as he goes full yearning. It was bad enough before."

Arawan laughed because he was a jerk like that. Imogen pinched his ass in retaliation. The walk in the forest was nice, at least.

The sun hadn't fully gone down, but it was good to slip away from the party for a moment so she could gather her thoughts. If she saw Lachie now, she would probably scream, "Apollo is your mate!" at the top of her lungs.

Arawan stopped walking so he could pull her close and kiss her. He might be a jerk, but he was her jerk. His tongue touched her lips, and all of a sudden, she was no

longer thinking about Apollo and Lachie's drama.

She wrapped her arms around Arawan's neck, and he pressed her up against the nearest tree. One of her hands was down his pants before she could really think about it.

Arawan chuckled, and her pussy went wet. Imogen thought that after a while, she would be immune to that smug little laugh. It had only gotten worse with time.

Arawan stopped kissing her and pulled back. He looked around him. "Something is wrong."

"I'll say, your dick isn't in me. I didn't wear this halter dress tonight just to look nice," she said and waggled her eyebrows.

"That's not what I mean," Arawan said, removing her hand from his pants.

The hair lifted on the back of Imogen's neck, a strange flicker of fear hitting her veins.

"What is that?" she whispered, pulling a dagger from her boot.

Arawan looked around him. "That blade won't do much. It doesn't make sense. He never rides on midsummer because the energy is wrong."

Imogen didn't get a chance to ask who he was talking about. Reality tilted, and a portal appeared through two trees. Snow blew in from it, cold and biting, and a white horse came through.

Imogen hadn't seen Gwyn, leader of the Wild Hunt, since the battle in the forest with Merion. Even then, she had only caught glimpses of him through the fighting. Up



close, he filled her with a mix of fear and awe.

Gwyn pulled off his helm, and the cold portal behind him closed. He had strange white hair threaded through with black and pale eyes. He was big, Celtic, and handsome in a terrifying way because your monkey brain knew it was going to be the last face you were ever going to see before he killed your ass. He was unmistakably of Arawan's pantheon because they were the same like that.

"Gwyn, this is unexpected," Arawan greeted. Neither of them was smiling.

"I needed to talk to you without all my Riders about," Gwyn replied and slid down from his saddle. On his feet, he was a giant, standing a full head taller than Arawan. He turned and looked at Imogen, and she tried to smile without looking like a maniac because she was nervous.

"Is something wrong with the Hunt's Riders?" Arawan asked.

"No. It's just none of their business. Not yet. This woman is your consort? She has helped you restore your power in the human worlds?" Gwyn asked, looking Imogen over.

Arawan's eyes narrowed slightly. "Yes, she has. This is Imogen."

"I would like to challenge you for her," Gwyn declared.

"Woah, woah. Wait, I don't even know you, big guy," Imogen said, thoroughly confused.

"I need your help to help restore power to the Hunt. You have helped Arawan. I see no issue with this."

"I am not going to fight you for the consort I have already won," Arawan declared.

Imogen raised a brow. "Oh, you're not going to fight for me?"

"I would fight for you," Gwyn said, pulling out the huge sword that hung at his side. "I would slaughter a world until its rivers ran with blood, and I would put you on a throne made of their bones."

Arawan looked like he was about to explode, and because she had the devil in her, Imogen decided to fuck with both of them.

"I mean, that sounds lovely and all, but you have got to understand, Arawan has an absolute monster-sized dick, and it's hard for a girl to walk away from that," she said sweetly.

"Imogen..." Arawan growled in warning. Whatever he was going to say next, Imogen never found out because Gwyn had unlaced the front of his leather pants and pulled out his dick.

"Bigger than this?" he asked, completely unfazed.

"Oh my stars," Imogen said because she was staring too hard.

"Put that away, you idiot," Arawan snapped.

Gwyn shot Imogen a wink and tucked his dick back in. She didn't even think they came that big.

"The fae believe in mates, and Imogen is mine. You can't have her," Arawan continued.

"I believe a lady can make her own choices," Gwyn countered.

"Look, this is...very flattering and all," Imogen began, clearing her throat because it kept cracking, "but believe it or not, I am in love with the Dark Lord here. It works because we are like the equivalent of the fae's mates. How about you tell us why you need a consort to help you? Maybe we can, I dunno, set you up on some dates?"

Arawan looked at her like she had lost her mind, but she didn't see why. Gwyn was hot and scary, and some women were into that. Ginormous dickage, her brain provided unhelpfully.

Gwyn sheathed his other massive sword again. "The Hunt's magic is fading. Part of it is because it is run on the belief of humans, and they have forgotten us, not just in Wales but throughout the world. I have been watching the fae's return to this world and how they grow strong once more. I see consorts, or mates, as the key to that. They have helped rejuvenate the magic."

"But isn't the Hunt made up of bad people? It's a punishment, right?" Imogen asked. It had been a long time since her mother had schooled her on Celtic legends.

"It is not punishment, but atonement. My Riders are taken to make up for the deeds they have done in life. The worlds, magic, everything is made up of a balance. The Hunt takes who they were, strips it from them, and makes them feed the balance of magic that way," Gwyn replied.

To Imogen, having all the pieces of who you once were stripped away felt like a punishment. Luckily, she knew when to keep her mouth shut. Well, most of the time.

Arawan rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Have you tried recruiting more Riders?"

"I have, but sometimes, when I find a suitable candidate, they can't perceive us. It has

gotten better since the fae returned, but not much."

Imogen hummed. "If everything is about balance, you think the love of a good woman, or man, or whatever, is going to help? Is that what I am hearing?"

Gwyn nodded. "It is worth a try. I thought I would be able to barter for partners for my Riders, but you have made it clear that you aren't available even for me."

"Well, there are lots of people out there better suited than me. I'm suited to Arawan, but I'm sure if you look, you never know, the universe might throw a mate in your path?" Imogen said. A thought occurred to her, and she put her hands on her hips. "You can't go around stealing other people's partners, Gwyn. No matter how good your intentions are. You need to give your Riders like, time to go on some dates. Courting rituals or whatever. That's how you get them partners."

"Imogen, my love, the Riders aren't people you just let loose on the world," Arawan said, his tone dropping into a warning.

"She has given me much to think about. Thank you, consort of Arawan." Gwyn swung back up into the saddle. "If you ever tire of him, you only need to call my name to a waning moon three times, and I will come for you."

"You most certainly will not come anywhere near her—"Arawan began, but Gwyn turned his horse, summoned a portal, and rode through it.

Imogen let out a long breath. "Well, that was weird."

Arawan turned on her, his face furious. "You made him show you his dick! He was going to try and fight me for your hand!"

"He was also going to give me a throne of bones, which is rather flattering, don't you

think?" Imogen added.

Arawan let out a sound of utter fury and tackled her to the soft moss and wildflowers.

"You are a menace, Imogen Ironwood," Arawan growled as he pinned her down. "I clearly need to remind you who you belong to."

"Oh no, I guess you must," Imogen said dramatically.

Arawan snarled in frustration and kissed her hard, every furious nip of his teeth and stroke of his tongue designed to dominate her.

Imogen reached for his pants, but his silvery power snatched her wrists and pinned them over her head. Oh, yeah, he was pissed, and she had to try really hard not to smirk about that. She could still goad him so easily. Embarrassing for him, great for her.

Arawan reached for the tie holding up the top of her halter dress and freed her breasts. He made another growling noise, this one of horniness. He kissed his way over them, covering them with love bites.

Imogen had sensitive nipples, and every rough suck and caress sent her back arching and body squirming until hopeless little sounds were coming out of her. She wasn't proud of the fact he could make her moan like a porn star with just some titty action, but she was enjoying herself too much to care.

"That's right. You make sure you remember that there's no one else that can make you feel like this, Ironwood," Arawan hissed. His hands went under her skirt and tore her panties off. His long fingers found her pussy and stroked expertly through the wetness gathered there. Arawan smirked as she wriggled. "That's right. You feel how wet this pussy is? That's because it knows who its master is."

"Fuck...you. Its only master is me. Jerk," Imogen groaned. Not her finest comeback, but he knew exactly how she liked to have her clit toyed with to make her lose her fucking mind.

Arawan's laughter was silky darkness in her ear. "Lie to yourself all you like. I care not." He licked the sensitive curve of her ear as he thrust his fingers inside of her and ground them against her G-spot. She let out a strangled cry and came hard and hot.

"I hate you so much," she muttered.

"Another lie," he chided, lifting her wide hips and thrusting his dick inside of her. It was rough and taking, but Imogen loved it. Loved that he still could get a bit possessive and jealous over her even after years of being together. Imogen wrapped her thick thighs around his lower back and held him tight.

"You really are an idiot if you think I would have gone with Gwyn," she said between gasps. "I would be the one slaughtering worlds if he tried to take me from you."

"Oh, yes? Because you seemed pretty interested in having two gods fight for your hand...when I had already won it," Arawan snarled, his own big hand closing around the side of her throat.

"It's nice for my ego, but you're mine, and I'm yours. You know it in your bones and blood. There's no separating us, baby," Imogen said.

Arawan kissed her, his desperate pounding never slowing down as he pinned her and fucked her into another universe. His free hand went to her clit.

"Come for me, consort," he hissed.

"Not my master," Imogen hissed back because she never knew when to quit.

Arawan gave her pussy a slap in retaliation, and she came so hard, she nearly blacked out.

"That's better," he purred before he pulled out and came hot all over her tits and soft belly. " Mine ."

"Oh gods, you're such a beast," Imogen panted, her brain still not able to form proper sentences.

Arawan gripped her chin and turned her face towards him. "Yes, but I'm your beast."

"Hell yeah, you are," she replied and kissed him. "And I'm never letting you go."

Arawan brushed a lavender lock back from her face. "And every time you pretend to forget it, darling, I'm going to remind you."

Imogen grinned wickedly. "How terrible for me."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:31 am*

4

Linnea sat by one of the bonfires with a basket at her feet. She watched the party around her while stitching together small red bags and filling them with dry herbs and flowers. They were charm bags, and if put under a pillow, the person would dream about their one true love. At least, that was what the tradition said.

Linnea adjusted the flower crown on her sunny blonde braids and returned to work. It had been years since she was kidnapped, and yet, large gatherings still made her uneasy. She was okay if she stayed a little out of the way and no one shouted too much near her. The wolves were always loud, and when they were partying, they were worse. They were still a little afraid of her, which she didn't mind.

"It's a good thing," her mentor, Gudrun, always told her. "A good volva always has to have a little mystique about her. The pack needs to know you do not favor anyone above another. They come to you for help and advice and expect it to be unbiased."

Linnea had always been wary of the wolves despite being one. The pack had come a long way in the years she was away, but that didn't erase how they completely turned a blind eye when her father had been beating the shit out of his family.

Do not think of it now. He is dead, and you are still alive .

That thought always comforted her. The wolves that had kidnapped her and had tried to sacrifice her to Fenris, the wolf god, had also died. Linnea was less comforted by that thought. No matter how many months passed, she still wasn't over that. She still dreamed of the great wolf asleep in the earth. Alone in a black void of nothing.



Sometimes, in the dreams, she would sit by his large paws and sing to him, knowing that they had disturbed him unnecessarily. Linnea's stitch slipped, and she hissed as the needle went into the pad of her thumb.

"Shit," she muttered and put the bleeding thumb to her lips.

"Are you okay?" a woman asked.

Linnea looked up and almost tipped backward off the bench chair she was sitting on. Freya was sitting on the other side of her basket, wearing a red linen summer dress, her hair in a braided crown.

Linnea knew it was Freya, not only because someone had taken a photo of her on their phones when she had arrived at the battle with Vili, but because Linnea had met with her during her dream walking. All the volv? were Freya's, and Linnea was to never forget it.

"Lady Freya," Linnea stammered and lowered her head.

"None of that, child. I am here just as Freya tonight," the goddess replied. Her eyes were as golden as her necklace Brísingamen hanging around her throat.

"You honor us with your presence," Linnea replied because it never hurt to be polite to a deity. Especially a goddess of war.

"You honor me by lighting the fires and sewing love charms," Freya replied and lifted a cup of mead to her mouth. "Besides, there are things we need to talk about, my little volva."

Linnea put her sewing down. "What is wrong?"

"Nothing yet, but tonight is a good night to talk with family and tell some truths," Freya replied and nodded toward the far side of the field. Linnea caught sight of another god walking amongst them. Alruna was talking with a tall god, with an eye patch over one eye.

"Odin is here too?" she squeaked.

Freya laughed softly. "Havi is visiting. He needs to discuss some matters with Alruna."

Havi was indeed leading the queen of the elves away, his long black and silver braid over one broad shoulder. Whoever thought Havi looked like Gandalf would be in for a rude surprise. He was a war god, too, and was built like one. All the stories of him seducing giantesses and fair maidens suddenly made a lot more sense. Linnea wisely didn't mention how Freya's eyes followed the king of the gods either.

"Why am I suddenly worried?" she asked instead.

Freya grinned. "It's because your intuition is strong and you are smart. Tell me, do you still dream of Fenris Lokisson?"

Linnea choked on her mead. "How... How did you know that?"

"Call it a wild guess." Freya's expression went serious, and a whisper of fear danced up Linnea's spine. "Does he still sleep?"

"Yes...but it's not like anyone has gone back down there to check. I mean, I dream of him, and he's still asleep in them," Linnea babbled.

"What do you do in these dreams?" the goddess asked.

Linnea's cheeks went hot. "I...sing to him. I know we disturbed him, and I feel awful about that. So I sing him lullabies."

Freya smiled. "You sing lullabies to the wolf who will eat the world?"

"You asked," Linnea huffed. "And he hasn't eaten the world yet. It's just a dumb title that men came up with. All he's done is be captured and locked up so far."

"So far," Freya reiterated. "He is more important than you could possibly know, Linnea. He needs to sleep for at least another year. There are things coming into play that we have been waiting for centuries to come about."

"Wait, but we stopped Ragnarok. Didn't we?"

"No, you only postponed it." Freya took Linnea's hand, and hot golden power thrummed through her palm. "Listen to me carefully now. You must keep singing to Fenris. He cannot wake yet. The time is coming, and soon, but if he wakes too early or too late, all will be lost."

Linnea frowned. "You want him to wake up in a year? What is this about? He's meant to destroy the world, isn't he?"

"Not exactly. Though, it is a story that has been told. Just like it's been told that Loki will be the doom of us all. They are just stories. The truth is far more complicated, and I can't tell you what it is." Freya squeezed Linnea's hand. "You have a part to play in all this, my volva. You comfort Fenris. Keep him asleep for now, and all will work out as it should."

"Can you promise me that?" Linnea asked.

Freya stared into the fire. "No. Such things only the Norns could tell you. This is

bigger than all of us, and it will decide all our wyrds."

"But I'm no one. I don't even know if my dreams are real. I can't turn into a wolf form. I can't be responsible for Fenris!" Linnea argued, her heartbeat thrumming in her ears.

"Your dreams are real. You can turn into a wolf, and you are Fenris's guardian. This is your wyrd, Linnea. It is time for you to stop hiding and face it," Freya said. She let go of Linnea's hand and stood. "This is who you are, child. No more hiding. Learn your magic. Trust your heart. Protect the Great Wolf." Freya leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. "You have more power than you know."

"I'm scared," Linnea whispered.

Freya laughed. "It's because you are smart. Happy Midsummer, little volva. Let's make it a happy one for everyone, shall we?"

With a mischievous smile, Freya sketched her rune, Fehu, over the basket of charms. Golden magic sizzled in the air, and with a parting wink, Freya was gone.

"Linnea!" Ciara put a hand on her shoulder, and she started. "Woah, sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. You have been staring into the fire, unfocused for the last ten minutes. Thought I better check on you."

"Shit." Linnea rubbed her eyes and turned to her brother's mate. She liked the Wolf Slayer and her blunt way. She was a part of the pack and wasn't, just like Linnea. Even if she hadn't been her sister-in-law, Linnea would have liked Ciara. She was no-nonsense, pragmatic, and kept Tor following her around like a moon-eyed pup.

Ciara sat down beside her. "So what are you doing hiding out over here? What are these?" She picked up one of the red flannel bags from the basket and sniffed it.

"It's a Midsummer tradition. If you put it under your pillow, you will dream of your true love," Linnea replied.

"She already knows who her true love is," Tor grumbled and set two freshly filled beer steins down on the table.

"Oh, does she?" Ciara said sweetly.

Tor's eyes narrowed. "Keep it up, rabbit, and I'll be chasing you down in the woods tonight."

"Ew," Linnea said, wrinkling her nose at their flirting.

"I think my cousin has beat us to it," Ciara commented and pointed where Imogen was caught up in a drinking game. The back of her dress was covered with green grass stains, and Arawan beside her had a dry leaf still tangled in his black hair. All three of them burst out laughing.

"Well, that's the whole point of Midsummer," Tor chuckled. "It's all the fertility magic in the air."

Ciara's smile went mischievous, and she grabbed a red bag from Linnea's basket, shifted, and took off through the party.

"You better run!" Tor shouted and bolted after her.

Linnea just shook her head at their antics. At least their silliness helped relieve some of the tension Freya's visit had put in her.

At the edge of her vision, the basket of red charms glowed with golden magic. With a smile, Linnea picked up the basket and went to hand them out. Whatever the goddess

had blessed them with shouldn't go to waste.

As for Fenris...she would just have to make a dreaming potion and visit him more often. Strangely, the thought lifted her spirits. She might be worried about Ragnarok starting, but if there was one thing Linnea knew never to do, it was ignore a direct instruction from her goddess. She hoped Alruna was getting better news from Havi. Somehow, she doubted it.

Alruna had always enjoyed Midsummer. It had always been a loud and joyous affair, and with the Fae, it was even more extravagant. It made her heart glad to see her son and his beautiful mate so happy. It was all she had ever wanted for Arne. She had walked away from her own mate in order to secure a happy future for him.

Alruna swallowed hard and pushed down the longing for Vili. It would never go away. Now that she had seen him again, the connection was alive and awake in a way it hadn't been for decades. She looked at the party around her, at Arne and Layla laughing together with their friends.

How could you have passed this up? Alruna had often wondered what had happened to her mate to make him turn away from them. To desire power more than what they were building together. He had pretended to be a dark elf because he didn't want her to judge him for being Havi's brother. That part she could understand. In ages past, the Aesir had made war on all the worlds.

But then he sided with Morrigan and became her creature, all because he wanted enough power to start a war with his brother.

No matter how many years passed, Alruna could never understand what had created the change in him. She had left him to protect Arne, and it was still the hardest thing she had ever done. Her hair had gone white from being separated from her mate, and it still hurt, but it was a hurt she had grown used to like a war wound that still ached on cold nights.

Magic hummed in the air like a warm breeze, and Alruna was torn out of her reverie. She knew that magic. She moved quickly through the crowds, following the call to the tree's edge. Sure enough, Havi was waiting for her. No one seemed to realize he was there. She spotted Freya talking to Linnea. So maybe it was a private visit.

"Happy Midsummer, Havi," she greeted as calmly as she could. "I trust this is a friendly visit?"

Havi smiled, and for a moment, he looked like his brother, and her heart ached. "Alruna, my sister, it is nice to see you under better circumstances than a battlefield."

"What is wrong? Why are you here?" she asked. She was a queen, and perhaps she shouldn't be demanding anything of the king of the gods, but she didn't like the anxiety that was now coursing through her veins. Her magic was on alert, and that was never a good sign.

"I owe you answers and apologies. I can't give them to you here, so I'm asking you to come with me," Havi said. A snort of a horse brought Alruna up short. Slepnir was waiting for them which only meant one thing.

"We have to go to Asgard for these answers?"

"We do, but I will bring you back as soon as our business is done. Or you might hate me so much you don't wish to. In that case I offer you this," Havi said and gave her a golden stone as long and thin as her finger. It would open up a way to the World Tree and lead her straight home.

Alruna tucked the stone into the pocket of her pants. "Very well. I will come with you." She had no idea what was going on, but if Havi had come as a personal escort, it was serious. He mounted the stallion and held out a hand to lift her up behind him.



"Thank you for trusting me," he said.

Alruna snorted. "I wouldn't go that far."

"So wise and so beautiful," Havi said with a rumbling laugh.

"Save your charms for someone they might work on." Alruna hung onto the back of his saddle as Slepnir started to run. The horse could travel worlds without having to visit the World Tree first. She knew what was coming and mentally prepared for the nausea. When the world started to blur around them, she clenched her eyes and waited for it to be over.

When Alruna opened her eyes again, they were roaming the golden fields of Asgard. Ahead of them wasn't Havi's hall that she expected but another. It was built of a pale golden wood that shone brightly, and above the door was carved a massive sun.

"What is this place?" she asked when they pulled to a halt.

"This is Breidablik, the home of Baldur." Havi helped her down before dismounting.

Alruna swallowed the lump in her throat. Baldur had been slain by an arrow made of mistletoe, and Loki had been behind it. At least, that was what the stories said.

"I'm confused as to why you have brought me here, Havi. Seems like a strange place if you want to kill me," Alruna commented.

"You will see." Havi went to the back of the hall and lifted a wooden door for her. "After you."

Alruna's magic warmed her fingertips, ready to drag her out of there. It made sense that Havi had given her the stone straight away. It was to reassure her that she wasn't

being kidnapped.

Alruna went down a set of stone stairs, the passageway lit with enchanted stones. Her heart began to race, which made no sense. Havi had never shown any animosity toward her. At the bottom of the stairs, there were rows of cells, their bars carved with warding runes. All were empty, save one.

"Hello, Runa, thank you for coming," Vili said from where he sat on a comfortable-looking bed.

"Havi didn't tell me you would be here, or I wouldn't have," she said. Now she knew why the treacherous organ in her chest was fluttering like a bird.

"I thought you would have come and visited me by now," Vili said.

Alruna turned on her brother-in-law. "Why am I here? What is this about."

"This is an explanation," Havi said and crossed his arms. " And...an apology."

"For what? What have you done now, Vili?" she demanded, tears already clogging her throat.

Vili chuckled. "My beautiful mate, for once, I have done nothing. Won't you look at me?"

"If I look at you, I will kill you," she growled.

"No, you won't. Look at me, Runa."

"You lost the right to call me that," she replied, but she still turned to face him. His golden eyes moved over her like they were drinking in the sight of her. The rune

mark was missing from his brow, and he looked...good. Painfully, beautifully good. The longing that went through her made Alruna want to carve her eyes out.

"I know I've lost the right to many things, but you are still Runa to me," Vili said, not looking away from her. "Tell her, Havi. She won't believe it coming from me."

"Won't you sit, Alruna?" Havi gestured to where two chairs and a small table had appeared with mugs of ale.

"I don't want to sit. I want someone to start talking," she said, crossing her arms.

Vili chuckled, and the sound danced in her ears. Curse him to the darkest of Hel's realms. "I told you she would be mad."

"Fine. Stand. I don't care," Havi grumbled and took his own seat. "But it's quite a story, so prepare yourself."

"So be brief." Alruna made a hurry-up gesture at him. She didn't want to be here in the past; she wanted to be with her son, enjoying Midsummer.

"Long ago, the Norns, Freya, and I all had the same vision. A terrible darkness was going to come and destroy the world. It would eat the sun, the moon, and the stars, and the world would die in ice and darkness," Havi began.

"Ragnarok. I've heard the tales more than once."

"This version is the one that's true," Havi said, and Alruna bit her tongue. "Troubled by the visions, we sought pathways to avoid that fate. Loki was always a master of magic, and he was the one who came up with a plan. When he told it to us, I nearly cut off his head. But then, when we all looked into the future again, we saw that it was the only way to defeat the devouring darkness."

Havi had a long drink of his ale. Alruna had never seen him look as vulnerable as he did at that moment.

"My son Baldur was the light and sun that would be strong enough to defeat it. But not as he was. He had to willingly sacrifice himself in order to become a dying and rising god. Only by rising when the darkness was at its peak would he be strong enough."

Alruna had heard many a myth about the power of dying and rising gods—Osiris, Dionysus, the Christ, Tammuz, Attis, Baal...and Baldur. They were stories that were tied to agriculture and seasonal changes. They would be born in a time of darkness to bring back light and spring. The cold ice growing in her stomach told Alruna that this was going to be no folk tale.

"Unfortunately, Baldur wasn't the only one who would go into the earth. I had to openly punish Loki and lock him and his own son Fenris away," Havi continued. "My own brother had to turn on me, and I would be forced to become a villain."

"The rune mark on Vili's forehead. Why is it gone?" Alruna asked, almost too afraid of the answer.

"It was a binding spell to make sure that he played his part. He had to submit to it willingly, and he did. We didn't see you or Arne in the vision or how the rune mark would force Vili to side with Morrigan," Havi said.

Power pulsed through Alruna's veins. She placed her hands on the table and leaned forward. "You are telling me that all of his warmongering, the way he turned on me and our baby— everything horrible he has done was because of a spell you put on him?"

Havi looked up at her. "Yes."

Alruna knocked the table aside, her magic smashing it to splinters. "You fucking monster. You almost got my son killed because of your machinations!"

"And my son was killed, Alruna! All to save the world, save everyone's sons. No one could know. Frigg walked willingly into Nifelheim and never returned because of the loss of Baldur. I couldn't even tell my own wife, lest it change the future," Havi said, his golden eyes flashing hot with pain. "I have lived with this for centuries upon centuries. When I saw that Vili's part was over, and it was confirmed by Freya and the Norns that it would change no outcome, I released Vili from the binding spell. And I have brought you here to say that I am sorry."

Alruna's hand struck him hard across the face before she could stop. He caught it before she could do it again.

"You only get one, Alruna," Havi growled.

Alruna was so furious that she burst into tears. "He almost killed my baby, Havi. Your stupid spell robbed me of my mate."

"As he said, we never saw you coming, Runa," Vili whispered softly. He was close to the bars now, so close she could have reached in and touched him. "You, being my mate, was never a part of the magic. My love was never a lie."

"It still became collateral damage," she said, her fury turning on him. "What is happening now? When is the darkness meant to come?"

"If the visions remain steady? A few years at the latest. Fenris will awaken, and he, in turn, will find his father, and Loki will rise. With his help, the spell of death over Baldur will be broken, and with him, the darkness will be defeated," Havi said and rose to his feet. "You are entitled to your anger and to hate me, but I am still deeply sorry for what you have been through, Alruna."

Havi nodded to his brother and left them alone, Alruna still furious and heart shattered. None of it made sense, and yet all of it did. Every story always had Loki and Fenris as villains, and yet they had willingly been bound for centuries, all to save the world. Alruna didn't know what to believe anymore.

"Runa, please, stay with me a little while," Vili begged and reached for her through the bars of the door. It creaked open a crack.

"You're not even a prisoner, are you?" she demanded.

Vili pushed open the door. "No. But I thought it might make you feel...safer."

"Oh, it's not me that is in danger right now," she said, the urge to strike him so strong her hands shook.

Vili saw the rage, and he still stepped forward. "Do what you will. I deserve it for all the hurt I caused you. Spell or no spell. I'm sorry for it all. You deserve better than me, my mate, my wife, my heart..."

"Stop. Just stop it... I can't do this again," she begged, tears streaking her cheeks.

When Vili's arms came around her, she didn't push him away. She pressed her face to his neck and sobbed.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:31 am*

6

Elise walked through the crowds of revelers, her hand tightly clasped around Kian's. She had gotten used to big celebrations over the years because the fae loved a party, but she had also learned to stick close to her mate and use him as a buffer when she got tired of talking.

"You are frowning, Elise. Is everything okay? Do you need some water?" Kian asked, pulling her gently away from the fire.

Elise smiled fondly up at him. "You're still a pushy ass mate."

"And you are still an infernal human," Kian replied, leaning down to kiss her forehead. "I'll never stop worrying about your comfort, Elise."

"You're so sappy," she said, gently pulling on his antler.

His eyes heated. "Don't start that, or there will be trouble."

"Ohhh, you got me so scared, Blood Prince."

Kian nipped her on the neck, making her jump and horny all in a split second. He whispered against her skin, "Scared is not how I want you, my beautiful mate."

Oh gods, she really shouldn't have started this when they had fuck knew how long to go of socializing. They were interrupted by a group of screaming children running to the lake to swim. Kian chuckled at the sight.

"I'll have to ask Alruna what the elves do to have so many little ones running about," he said, his smile dimming. Fae fertility rates were a problem that he was still trying to solve.

You need to tell him , a little voice whispered to her.

Elise wanted to tell him about not having a period for eight weeks now, but she didn't want to get his hopes up and have it not happen. She knew it wasn't just a hunch. She had been carrying around a positive pregnancy for days. She just didn't know how to bring it up. She hadn't even told Chrissy. Mostly because she would tell Oberon, and there would be no way to hold back his excitement.

"Our secret to getting children is a blood sacrifice every nine years," Gudrun piped up from behind them. The volv? wagged her brows at them.

"Really? What kind of blood sacrifice?" Kian asked curiously.

"Don't tell him that. He will believe it," Elise complained.

Gods, the things he had done to protect and preserve his people weighed heavily enough on him. He didn't need to think blood sacrifice was the way to go to make more babies.

"It's a joke, my prince. The real secret is the land. You look after its fertility, and the land will look after you. You and the fae have only just realigned your magic to the earth, so it needs time," Gudrun replied. She looked Elise over. "Something tells me it's already working."

The witch winked at them and twirled away into the crowd. Elise was going to murder her.



"Hmm, a blood sacrifice might have been easier." Kian frowned at her. "What's that look about? She was only joking. And I would never consider such a thing...unless there was no other choice. I mean, technically, it could work if it was the right spell."

"Fuck. Stop. You are not sacrificing anything or anyone. I forbid it, Kian," Elise said and grabbed his hand. "Come with me."

Kian followed her to a quiet place in the trees surrounding Layla's house. Elise took a few breaths, fighting back her sudden nausea. There didn't seem to be anyone in hearing distance which was good. The fae were the absolute worst gossipers, and that wasn't even including her nosy family members.

Kian crossed his arm. "Elise, I really wouldn't sacrifice anyone without your permission. You seem more upset than usual about?—"

"I'm pregnant," Elise blurted out. She rummaged in the bag over her shoulder and pushed the pregnancy test at him. "It's really early, and I wanted to be absolutely sure before I told you. But no blood sacrifices, okay? They aren't needed."

Kian stared at the test in his hands and then back at her. There were a few moments in their relationship where she had seen him too shocked to speak. He looked at the test again and back at her, his golden eyes wide.

Elise put her hands on her hips. "Oh my god, if you don't say something soon, I'm really going to start freaking out. I've been freaking out since I missed two periods. I know you have wanted kids forever and I wasn't ready, and you never pushed me. I stopped taking my pill about six months ago because I thought that maybe I was, and now I'm scared you're not ready, or that if I lose it, you will hate me, and I'm just so goddamn emotional."

She was crying, and she really, really didn't want to be more of a mess than she

already was. Stupid hormones .

Kian pulled her into his arms and held her close. "I would never, ever hate you, my love. I'm just... I can't form the right words. I'm so terrified, happy, and in love with you. I don't know how to express it. Please don't cry, my heart. Don't cry."

"But you're crying," Elise pointed out.

Kian reached up and touched his wet cheek. "I...I am. Elise, you are pregnant."

"Yes," she sniffed. "But I don't want to tell anyone else for a while in case something happens. And I swear to all the gods, if you start acting like an overprotective dick bag more than usual, I will lose my shit."

"We can't have that," Kian said, his laugh caught in a sob. "I agree with you. This can be our secret joy for a while longer yet."

"Because you don't want to give people false hope, I get that," Elise said.

Kian cupped her cheeks. "That's not the reason. So much of our life has to be shared because of who we are. We need some things to be for us until they can't be. Whatever happens, if you give me ten children or none at all, I'll always love you, Elise. You are first in my heart, no matter what happens. You are my everything."

Elise was crying again as she pulled him closer to kiss him. "And don't you forget it."

"Never." Kian lifted her up in his arms, and she wrapped her hands around his neck. She breathed in his scent of fir and smoke and kissed him with all the love and frightened hope she had in her heart.

Elise pulled back from the embrace. "And you have to tell Oberon, not me, because

he will cry like a lot. And then try and do something crazy like grow an enchanted forest around me so nothing can harm me. He'll be more overprotective than you."

"You're wrong. Killian will be the cryer," Kian said, making her laugh. "But you're right about Oberon and the enchanted forest."

"I know. They are all going to be more overprotective than you," Elise said. She tried to think about how her father would have reacted to her being pregnant. Probably worse than all of them put together. It made her miss him more than ever.

Kian kissed the tip of her nose. "You gave us all hope when we were cursed, Elise, and now you give us hope again. You are never going to stop being a wonder, my love."

"I might remind you of that when I'm big as a house and have cankles," Elise said, her heart aching with so much happiness.

"I will rub them for you," Kian promised. "I'm so happy I kidnapped you."

"There is my psychopath prince," Elise said, kissing him again. "You better not teach our kid any of your bad habits."

Kian's smile was sharp and full of danger, sending a hot thrill through her. "Maybe just a few."

Killian watched as his little brother slipped away with Elise and tried to hide his smile. He had seen more than one couple do the same throughout the night. It was good to know that some things never changed, and midsummer shagging was a tradition worth keeping. He planned to disappear with Bron himself, but first, he had a peace treaty to see to.

Moira Ironwood was the little sister he'd never had. She was turning into a teenager before their eyes, and sometimes, he would panic about it. With the combination of Ironwood training and what she was learning with the fae warriors she followed about, she was already scarily proficient with blade and bow and would be a downright terror when Kenna finally agreed to take her on hunting missions.

Despite that, Moira still had a fondness for pretty dresses. Tonight was no exception. She had been learning about Vikings and was wearing a traditional pinafore dress, complete with brooches and chains. It was embroidered with elvish and Viking runes, and she had her hair in battle braids.

Sometimes, she seemed nothing but a girl growing up, and sometimes, she looked at you like some eldritch witch sizing up your worth. Killian had never been on the receiving end of the latter because he was her favorite uncle, but he almost felt bad for the ancient dragon knight standing before her.

Avallach's arrow wound had healed, but Moira's animosity toward him hadn't, so Bron and Killian were staging an intervention.

Avallach couldn't understand why she was so offended by him calling her a little girl to begin with.

"The thing you need to understand, my dear dragon, is that they are Ironwoods first and everything else second," Killian had tried to explain. "Before gender and mates and everything under the sun. Ironwoods don't forget offenses, and I have a scar on my ass to prove it. So you will make this right before you leave, or when she comes of age, she will go dragon hunting."

That had given the knight some pause. Killian could see it from his perspective, and in a way, he, too, felt the whole reaction was ridiculous. But Moira was his little sister, and he didn't like seeing her hurt or offended. So Avallach would make amends before he returned to Faerie even if Killian had to tie him up and hold a blade to his throat to do it.

Avallach was a legend throughout the whole of Faerie. Killian remembered him visiting his parents when he was Moira's age and growing up, hearing stories about the legendary warrior. Avallach's long hair was bound up in braids and silver bands that matched his eyes and dragon form. He had trimmed his beard and looked his best for the moment.

The dragon knight joined the three of them by the fire as planned. He knelt down on one knee before Moira.

"Moira Ironwood, I have caused you great offense, and my honor as a knight demands that I make this right with you before I journey back to Faerie for my king," Avallach said formally.

Bron was trying not to laugh behind Moira as the smallest Ironwood fixed her eldritch stare on the knight and lifted her little chin. She said nothing, and the dragon actually squirmed. He pulled a long, beautifully made dagger from his belt. One look and

Killian knew it had been forged in the legendary dragon city of Mag Argatnél.

"I offer you this blade as a peace token so that I may leave knowing that there is no bad blood between our houses," Avallach continued.

Moira sniffed and took the blade, sliding it from its sheathe to admire it. It was large enough to be a sword for her. Killian hadn't expected him to give her a weapon—gods knew she had enough—but he didn't try and stop her from taking it. She couldn't have a finer blade to use.

"Why are you leaving?" Moira asked, ignoring his apology.

"Your uncle Taran needs someone to see to problems in the north of his lands. I am being sent back to guard the borders," Avallach answered.

It wasn't just the human world that had its issues with magical monsters waking up. Magic being realigned had unleashed all sorts of terrors and powered up creatures, magic users, and other monsters.

The Fae Kings were journeying back and forth between their realms, as was Killian, but it made sense to have some of the knights stay behind on guard. The dragons were protective of their cities and their secrets.

"How long will you be gone for?" Moira continued with a child's tenacity.

Avallach frowned. "I don't know. Time moves differently in Faerie."

"Who is going with you to fight these monsters?"

"Yelena and Emyr will return with me for a time but will come back before me. I'm going to stay on to be the Seneschal of the North to look after it for your Uncle Taran.

I will have other dragon knights with me. Why? Are you worried for my safety?" Avallach asked, a teasing smile on his lips.

"No." Moira's eyes narrowed again, and Killian shot him a warning look. Avallach loved to tease, but that was what got him into trouble last time with Moira.

"Cora said that your hair is so long because you said that you would only cut it if you were defeated in battle," she continued, looking at the warrior's long braid.

Avallach's smile slipped a little. "Yes, that's true."

A triumphant light shone in Moira's eyes, and Killian was suddenly afraid.

"In that case, when you return, I will be big, and then we will fight, and when I defeat you, I will cut your hair with this pretty knife you have given me. Don't die, dragon. I'm looking forward to our fight," Moira declared before walking away with her head held high.

"Dagda spare me, that girl is going to be an unholy terror when she hits puberty," Avallach said, his grey eyes wide with awe. "She's never going to let me live this down, is she? I even got down on one knee and gave her my favorite knife, Killian, and she still hates me."

Bron shook her head in exasperation, but she was still smiling after Moira, with sisterly pride on her face.

"Bloody Ironwoods," Killian said fondly. "You did your best, Avallach, but dueling and death threats are practically an Ironwood family tradition."

Avallach rose to his feet. "I'm kind of relieved to be heading back to the wilds of the north, to be honest. I'm less likely to get my throat cut in my sleep."

"There is no threat of that with Moira," Bron said, her smile bright. "She wants to fight you fair and square. I get it. She's the smallest and wants to defeat the biggest and baddest warrior she knows to prove herself. Really, you should be flattered she thinks that's you."

"You've got to be joking," the dragon said with a shake of his head.

"Bron's not joking. It's why she crept into Morrigan's keep and broke me out. It was the most dangerous thing she could come up with," Killian said, tucking one of Bron's burgandy locks behind her ear.

"Well, Taran can't accuse me of not trying to make things right," Avallach sighed. "Good luck to you both dealing with her when she decides to start dating."

"I have a plan that involves a tower and a massive lock," Killian said. The breath whooshed out of him as Bron's elbow dug into his ribs.

"You will not lock up my sister."

"My darling love of my life, she will enjoy the challenge of getting out," Killian replied. "It would only be to keep her mind distracted and off anyone trying to go out with her."

"You might want to add a moat to that tower," Avallach grumbled. "Dark gods, I need a drink."

"Well, that could have gone worse," Bron said, watching as the dragon disappeared toward the nearest mead keg.

Killian rubbed his chin. "You know, what you said makes sense. Moira has been fascinated with the knights since they arrived. You don't think..."



"That she was waiting to pick a fight with him? Absolutely," Bron said with a grin. "She will keep that knife sharp until their duel, that I can promise you."

Killian kissed her cheek. "You Ironwoods are as devious as you are terrifying."

"That's why you love me."

"One of many reasons." Killian stroked his hand between her wings, making her shiver. "It's a nice night for flying, my pretty mate."

"Hmm, it is. You want to get out of here?" Bron asked, biting her bottom lip in a way that hit him straight in the dick.

"More than anything in the world. I know of a nice private lake not far from here we can go skinny dipping in," he said. In fact, he had purposely scouted it earlier in the day and had left a bottle of her favorite wine nestled in a safe place.

"Then let's go. There are plenty of other people about to keep an eye on Moira if she decides to attack Avallach with that knife," Killian said.

Bron took his hand. "You say that like my mother would try to stop her instead of encouraging her."

Killian only shook his head and laughed. There really was nothing like Ironwoods.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:31 am*

Bas Greatdrakes was stuck at a table between a glowering Valentine and an increasingly drunk Apollo. He knew that Apollo was hiding out from Lachlan Ironwood because he was incapable of being normal around him. He almost felt bad for him, but the little brother in him was enjoying watching Apollo act like a ridiculous tit. Valentine's pout, however, was a mystery.

"Out with it, Val. You're ruining my buzz," Bas complained. He had learned not to rummage about in his brother's brain, but he was still tempted to do it some days.

"He's pissed because Yelena is leaving." Reeve sat down opposite them and pushed some food in Apollo's direction. The wolves had roasted pigs and lambs over spits, and the bowl was full of bread and meat. Apollo cooed in drunken happiness and started eating.

"It's good that she's leaving. Maybe now I will be able to get some work done without her jumping out from behind the stacks to try and catch me doing dark magic or think that I'm going evil or some shit," Valentine muttered into his ale mug.

"She doesn't think that," Reeve said and pushed another bowl of food at Valentine. "At least not anymore. She's been spending time with Charlotte, and she's convinced her you aren't some evil dark sorcerer, even if you like to dress like one."

Valentine ignored the food and shot Reeve the finger. "If Yelena doesn't think that, why is she always spying on me?"

Bas sometimes found it hard to believe that his eldest brother could be the most accomplished magician of them all and yet be so clueless at the same time.

"Maybe dark and broody does it for her?" he said.

Valentine pulled a face. "Don't be childish."

"It's more to do with your magic," Charlotte said and slipped onto the bench beside Reeve. "She's never seen anything like it before. So dark, but you aren't evil."

"Not yet anyway," Apollo slurred. Charlotte kicked him under the table. "Ow! That was mean."

"Keep it up, and I'll get Lachie to take your fool ass home," Reeve threatened.

Apollo muttered under his breath but went back to his food.

"Why does she care about my power? None of the other dragons do. She's the kind of girl that would cry over a butterfly, not be curious about dark magic," Valentine said, his words slurring just a little. He was more wasted than Apollo but was hiding it better.

Charlotte snorted, trying to hold back her laughter. "No, she isn't. You know why she's here with the knights? Because she's so powerful, she terrifies the rest of Taran's court. They are worried if they step out of line when Taran is not there to control her, Yelena will eviscerate them."

"Baby Girl Galadriel couldn't eviscerate shit," Valentine argued.

Bas let their drunken rantings wash over him and gently dissociated from his body. He instantly felt calmer. It was something he had done since he was a boy when all his brothers' personalities became too much for him to deal with. It probably wasn't healthy, but his magic was all about his mind, and letting his consciousness go off to the astral plane was as easy as breathing. His body was in no danger where it was,

and his family was used to him drifting off into his own little world.

Instead of his usual mind palace, Bas found himself walking through a forest in the astral plane. He had never been there before, but the astral plane was infinite in space and weirdness. As long as he was careful of anything that would try and eat his consciousness, he was totally safe.

The forest was brightly lit with twisting gold and green trees. Like a lot of places in the astral plane, the usual laws of nature didn't apply. Trees were covered in autumn leaves, sitting next to those in full spring plumage. He crossed a pretty bubbling stream of crystal clear water. Nothing tried to jump out and eat him, which was nice. He followed the path and began to spot stone statues of animals in the trees, along with stately people who looked like they could have been gods and goddesses.

"So this is feeling more and more Narnia by the second," he whispered under his breath. He kept walking until he found the ruins of a great building that looked like a Gothic cathedral that had been overrun by trees.

Inside was filled with piles and piles of books. It was like someone had dumped the Library of Alexandria in the middle of a fairytale forest.

The rustle of a page turning had him looking behind him. A woman was sitting in the bower of a tree that was filled with velvet cushions. Her black hair was in braided pigtailed that hung to her shoulders, and she had a small spray of freckles over one golden brown cheek.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" she demanded, making Bas startle.

"Ah..." he said.

"You can't be in here! This is my mind palace, and you aren't welcome," the woman

said, lifting a heavy tome like she would slog him with it.

Bas lifted his hands in surrender. "I hate to be the one to break it to you, sweetheart, but this isn't a mind palace. It's the astral plane."

"No, it's not. It's my mind palace, and I don't think I would create some scruffy nerd to bother me." She was still holding the book defensively in front of her. Her bower was higher than him, and he couldn't see what other weapons she had up there.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said, keeping his hands up. "But I don't understand how it's possible I am in your mind palace right now when I specifically went to the astral plane."

The woman laughed. "Haven't you figured it out yet? Anything is possible here, nerd," she said and tossed the book at him. Bas caught it before it could hit him, and the woman was suddenly a hawk. She dive-bombed him, making him duck, and then she was gone.

"What in all the fuck..." he murmured.

Strong hands shook him, and Bas hit his body with a start. Apollo was shaking him. "Hey, you in there, little...little Bas bro?"

"Yeah, I'm here," Bas said, jittery still from being ripped back into his body.

He had never seen someone transform like that so quickly in an astral plane before apart from him. What the hell was that all about? Who the hell was she? If he had been in her mind palace, he didn't know how that was possible either.

Bas rubbed his smoke-sore eyes. Maybe the elves had put some fun mushrooms in their mead. "What's wrong, Apollo?"

"Need...need you to take me somewhere to lie down," Apollo said, resting his head on Bas's shoulder. "Gonna pass out. Too much magic in the air."

Now that he mentioned it, Bas could feel currents of power rising up from the earth. It was close to midnight, and he had to assume it was just a part of the elf's bond with their land that made the natural power almost heady on a solstice.

Was that the reason he had casually wandered into someone else's head? It was a worrying thought, but the magician in him was intrigued.

Bas helped his older brother up and slung an arm around him. They were sharing a cabin near the lake, and as they crossed the field, Apollo started crying.

"Oh gods, you really did a number on yourself tonight," Bas sighed.

"I'm going to be a really bad dragon, Bas," Apollo cried.

"What nonsense are you talking about now?"

"Taranis used his king daddy voice on me and said I had a dragon waking up in me. That I could shift," Apollo babbled. "I don't know if I want a dragon in me. At least, not unless they ask nicely. Oh shit." Apollo stumbled and landed face-first on the grass. "Just leave me here. The grass is soft."

Bas took a deep, patient breath. His other two brothers would absolutely leave Apollo's drunk ass where it was. Unfortunately, after their mother died, the nurturing duties had fallen to Bas. He helped Apollo back up, but only after taking a video of him muttering things about Lachlan's hair to the crushed wildflowers underneath him.

"You're going to shift into a dragon, or you are going to seduce one?" Bas asked him.

"I wish I was seducing one. They are all so handsome. I should be seducing them all at once," Apollo babbled. "But noooo. Stupid face Ironwood would be there to stop me having any fun at all."

"I thought you were meant to make friends with Lachie tonight. Didn't the sword work?" Bas really couldn't keep up with his brother's dramas some days.

"Oh, it worked. Then my sword worked, and I ruined it," Apollo said and started crying again. "I made an ass of myself, and now he's never going to look at me like I'm not a weirdo fuck up little brother."

"I'm sure Lachlan doesn't think of you that way."

"Taran said we are going to turn into dragons now that magic was fixed. What color do you want to be?"

"Blue. How about you?" Bas helped him up the stairs of their cabin and put him into bed in one of the rooms.

"I don't know, but what if I'm ugly? I don't think I could handle being an ugly dragon. Then stupid Ironwood will never think I'm cool."

Bas tried not to roll his eyes. "Look, don't worry about it tonight, okay?"

"I'm sorry if I turn into a dragon in my sleep, Baby Basset Bear," Apollo slurred into the pillow.

"It will be fine if you do," Bas said, and after making sure his brother had some water on his bedside table, he quietly shut the door.

He didn't want to go back to the party, so he sat on the grass in front of the cabin's

porch and stared up at the sky. The power in the land curled around Bas's ankles like an affectionate cat, whispering secrets to him that he couldn't understand.

Dragon shifting and pretty hawk girls in your head all in one night . Bas lay back, looked at the stars, and grinned at the thought of a new magical puzzle to unravel.

He had a feeling it was going to be another weird year, and he couldn't wait to see what happened next.

Thank you for reading!



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:31 am*

### CHARACTER LIST

#### THE FAE & THEIR MATES

KIAN - the Blood Prince, mate to ELISE. Rules in England and is technically in charge of all the fae residing in the United Kingdom. See 'Kiss of the Blood Prince' for his full story.

ELISE - Kian's mate, librarian extraordinaire and cousin to FREYA.

BAYN- the Winter Prince, mate to FREYA. Lives in a castle in Scotland. See 'Heart of the Winter Prince' for his full story.

FREYA- Bayn's mate, owner of antiquities businesses, viking badass.

KILLIAN - the Night Prince, mate to brON. Lives in Dublin and gets up to shenanigans with the IRONWOODS. See 'Wings of the Night Prince' for his full story.

brON IRONWOOD - Killian's mate, eldest Ironwood sister, possessor of a god killing sword.

#### THE LOST UNCLES

OBERON - the King of Forests, eldest of the Tuatha Dé Danann. Mate to CHRISSY.

MANANAN - the King of Seas, wielder of the magic sword Fragarach. Mate to

ELLA.

TARANIS - King of Storms and Magic, the youngest of the brothers and only dragon shapeshifter. Mate to QUINN

KYNAN - Deceased father to the Fae Princes and youngest of the Tuatha Dé Danann, married to RHIANNON.

THE IRONWOODS (in age order)

KENNA - The Matriarch of the family.

DAVID - The Patriarch of the family.

IMOGEN - Second eldest in the Ironwood family, consort of ARAWAN.

CHARLOTTE - Third eldest in the Ironwood family, and the only magician, mated to REEVE.

LAYLA - Fourth eldest in the Ironwood Family, mated to ARNE.

MOIRA - The youngest in the family.

EXTENDED IRONWOODS

CIARA - Cousin of the Ironwoods, sister to Lachlan, mated to TOR.

LACHLAN- Cousin of the Ironwoods, brother to Ciara.

THE GREATDRAKES (in age order)

COSIMO - The Patriarch of the family, like Valentine, he can use many forms of magic but specialises in glamor and persuasion.

VALENTINE - Oldest of the Greatdrakes, considered a prodigy, he specialises in many forms of magic.

APOLLO - Second oldest of the Greatdrakes, he specialises in alchemy.

BASSET- Third oldest of the Greatdrakes, he specialises in telepathy and psychometry.

REEVE - The youngest of the Greatdrakes, he specialises in transmutation magic, usually in the form of 'trash' every day objects that he can turn into whatever he wants. Mated to CHARLOTTE.

#### RE- OCCURRING CHARACTERS

ARNE - An elf from Norway, friends to BAYN and TORSTEN. Prince of the Light Elves and son of VILI. Mated to LAYLA.

TOR - an úlfhéenar wolf shifter from Norway. Friends to BAYN and ARNE. Brother to LINNEA. Mated to CIARA.

LINNEA - Sister of TOR, training to be a Volv? (shaman).

ARAWAN - Welsh God of the Dead, ruler of the underworld of Annwn, IMOGEN's consort.

MORRIGAN - Celtic goddess of War. She attacked Dublin but was defeated by brON. See 'Wings of the Night Prince.'

ALRUNA - Queen of the Light Elves in Midgard, mother to ARNE, mated to VILI.

VILI - Morrigan's third general, HAVI's (Odin) brother, father to ARNE, mate to ALRUNA.

HAVI - the All Father aka Odin, brother to VILI.

LOKI - Trickster god, blood brother to HAVI, Father of FENRIS.

FENRIS - Son to LOKI, wolf god, and first shifter.

GUDRUN - Volv? (shaman) of Ulfheim.

CHRISSY - Best friend to ELISE, mate of OBERON

ELLA - Mate to Mananan

QUINN - Mate to Taranis

AVALLACH - A Dragon Knight

EMYR - A Dragon Knight

OWAIN - A Dragon Knight

YELENA - A dragon shifter and mage.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:31 am*

### THE DRAGON AND THE MAGICIAN

Long ago, when magic flourished throughout the lands of Albion, a magician called Darragh was befriended by a great red dragon. After a mighty battle, the dragon lay dying, and as its final act, it passed on its magic to his dearest friend.

Darragh took the name Greatdrakes to honor his dragon friend and ensure no one in his bloodline forgot where their power came from.

All magic, and especially wild dragon magic, comes with a price, and the power in the Greatdrakes bloodline was no different.

With the dragon's blessing, there came curses. The first was that at least one child in every generation of Greatdrakes tended to go mad.

The second curse was that when their dragon side decided to choose a mate, they had absolutely no say in the matter.

This is the history and legacy of the Greatdrakes.

Unfortunately, this was mostly wrong because, like many ancient family histories, it was passed down by men. The truth was far more complicated.

For a start, the great red dragon had been a female. She was one of the ancient dragon shifters who had lived in Albion before men decided to drive them into Faerie. She had died because an army of men had hunted her down, and Darragh had arrived too late to help fight them off.

Her magic had been passed down through their five children, who Darragh hid away until they were old enough to go into the world, smart enough to hide who they were, and powerful enough to smite anyone who tried to hurt their family.

The madness of the Greatdrakes was a result of their brilliance and heritage of magicians breeding magicians. Magicians are generally too clever for their own good and are as haughty and mad as cats when provoked.

The only true part of the original tale is that they did tend to have a dragon side that chose mates. The unions were always happy ones, despite any rocky beginnings, so they never really bothered to try and find a way around that.

All of this went on for generations quite easily, and every generation knew what to expect. All of that knowledge and comfort went to hell when the Fae returned and subsequently restored magic.

Now, the Greatdrakes family was facing more new and exciting problems within their lineage. For example, the patriarch of the family, Cosimo, had learned that dragons could have more than one mate if their first one died. He had been a widower for a long time, and the thought that he could have another mate out there that he didn't know about unsettled him greatly.

Another new and dangerous possibility was that every one of them had dragons inside them, waking up and getting more and more eager to get out. No one knew if any of the other Greatdrakes in their long lineage had inherited the ability to shift into dragons because the fear of ignorant humans made them too cautious to write it down.

They were at the dawn of a new magical age, and none of the Greatdrakes knew what changes would come from their bloodline.

Luckily, they had inherited a large extended family of ancient and powerful fae through marriage, who knew how to deal with magical problems, aforementioned ignorant humans, and dragons coming into their power for the first time.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:31 am*

For as long as Bas Greatdrakes could remember, he dreamed of flying. All the dream books and websites would say that flying in dreams represented freedom and new beginnings. And in other people's dreams, it probably did.

Bas knew that his flying dreams were because his ancestor had fucked a dragon. Now, he had a dragon part of him who longed for the wind rushing over its scales and the sun on its wings.

Unfortunately, he had wanted to dream about libraries growing in woods and strange, beautiful women who threw books at him (like he had on Midsummer's Eve) and not bloody flying.

It was now the beginning of autumn, and while Bas still hadn't managed to find his way back to the library in the woods, that didn't mean he had stopped thinking about the stranger he had met there.

You didn't even ask her what her name was. He had been so surprised by her appearance that he didn't have the sense to introduce himself.

Bas had the most sense of all the Greatdrakes boys, but he had failed to have any in the moment it mattered. It annoyed him and when a magician got annoyed, he got obsessed. He was definitely obsessed with thinking about the beautiful woman in the woods.

Bas's magic had manifested when he was a kid, and he had read his father's mind before asking him telepathically to take him to the library. The day his mother died was the first time he went to the astral plane.



Like all Greatdrakes, his abilities had been prodigious, and now anything to do with minds and magic were his purview. Dreams, telepathy, telekinesis, and astral projection were as easy as breathing for Bas. Every night, he swam in the waters of the collective unconscious and manipulated the astral planes to dance to his will.

That was why Bas knew he hadn't created the woman or the library in the woods. They were her creations, and yet he had wandered right in. A magician who was experienced enough to build such a sanctuary in the astral plane should have been smart enough to build protection wards, too.

That was what his mind couldn't stop chewing over. She was brilliant...and unprotected. His overprotective side, which his Uncle Taranis had assured him was all dragon, was worried about the woman he had met. So what if she had thrown a book at him? It could have been a lightning bolt.

In the astral plane, you had to be careful how you reacted to fear, lest you manifest something greater and more terrifying than the thing you were trying to defeat or create.

And it wasn't just your fear you had to worry about. Monsters lurked in the liminal spaces of the world. Bas had often seen them and avoided confrontation as much as possible. They had been rare in the past, but when the fae kings had restored magic in the prior year, all sorts of bizarre shit had been waking up and roaming the worlds again.

The astral plane, which had always been a weird place, had become infinitely more dangerous.

Bas had tried to find the library in the woods again to warn the woman about what was lurking out there but hadn't been able to.

Maybe she had moved it to a different part of the plane? She believed they were in

her mind palace, but Bas knew otherwise. Mind palaces were contained and anchored to the creator. Sure, he could have walked into her mind palace, but only if he had touched her or, at the very least, been in the same room.

The library he had stumbled on was out in the open, and he had walked right in. Much to his professional annoyance, he hadn't been able to do it again.

So now Bas was flying through the astral plane, letting his inner dragon free to hunt her down once and for all. The woman he had met had shifted into a hawk before flying away. Hawks were also flying predators and Bas's dragon side wanted to find the creature and make it know just who was boss.

She is hiding there, the dragon prompted him, and Bas looked down. Through misty clouds, he could make out a crumbling stone tower. He couldn't see the woman walking about, but he trusted the dragon's instincts.

Bas dived through the mist and landed on top of the tower. The mist had been acting as a roof, and as it cleared, he saw the raven-haired woman standing with her hands on her hips, glaring up at him. Bas tried to say hello, forgot he was a dragon, and spat fire instead.

"Have you lost your mind? There are books down here, you fucking jerk!" the woman yelled.

Cursing, Bas shifted back into his human form. "Sorry!" he called down. "Wait right there! Don't run. Or fly!"

He climbed down the crumbling stone wall and found a winding staircase. Like the rest of the ruins, it felt like the woman had pulled them out of a fairytale book. Bas filed that fact away for future examination.

The woman was standing by a set of bookshelves and didn't look even a little bit

happy to see him. Now he was closer, he could see her eyes were a mahogany brown color like dark rum. Beautiful.

Bas tried hard not to stare but he couldn't help it. She was all black hair and golden brown skin. Like a hawk, with a glare that was twice as sharp. She had a scar cutting through one dark eyebrow that made her expression even more disapproving.

“Not another step, nerd boy. I know Krav Maga, and I will not hesitate to kick you in the nuts so hard your physical body feels it,” she warned him.

Bas stopped walking. He didn't know if she could really do it but wasn't about to take the chance. “Firstly, ow. Secondly, I'm Basset. Bas. Not nerd boy. What's your name?”

The woman crossed her arms. “Like I'd be dumb enough to tell some stranger my real name in a place like this, Basset. A named thing is a tamed thing, after all.”

Shit. She's right. Dumb ass. Stop staring at her like a creeper.

“That's wise of you,” Bas blundered on. He really did know better. Cosimo would murder him if he found out. His mouth, however, seemed determined to plunge on without him. If she could give him nicknames he would play that game too. “I'm so glad I finally found you, Hawk Girl.”

The scared eyebrow rose. “And why is that?”

“Because there's lots of weird shit roaming the astral plane right now, and you have zero wards on this place. You're lucky it's only me that has found you.”

“Am I now? Look, Basset, I don't know how you keep turning up here, but as I told you before, this is my mind palace,” she said, and walked slowly around him. “You look familiar, but I don't think my mind would have created you.”

“It’s not a mind palace, sweetheart,” he said, trying to be patient. “It’s a pocket dimension in the astral. Mind palaces are confined within your mind. This isn’t one, or I wouldn’t have been able to come in at all unless I was touching your physical body in some way.”

The woman stopped walking and crossed her arms. “And you’re the big expert, are you?”

“As a matter of fact...yes, I am,” Bas replied.

Damn, he never thought the few academic articles on consciousness he had written would ever come in handy. He opened his mouth to tell her his last name and credentials when he remembered that he shouldn’t be giving some random woman in the astral those details.

“Sure you are. Look, I don’t mean to be rude?—”

Bas grinned. “Yes, you do.”

“Okay, fine. Politely bugger off. It’s weird having you turn up and ruin my happy place like this,” she said and pointed at a stone archway that led back out into the forest.

“Well, I don’t mean to come across as an ass, but you really do need to set up some...” Bas let the sentence drop.

A shadow had rolled over the mist, covering them in the darkness. He saw the image of a man-shaped creature with claws standing on the stone walls, and cold swept through him. He could feel its voracious hunger and the gnawing terror it wanted to inflict on them.

“Hawk girl! Fly! Now!” he shouted and pushed her with all his mental might. She

cursed at him, but Bas was already shifting into his dragon form. He let out a roar of fire, and the dark, creepy thing that was trying to sink its claws into them let out a screech of fury and fled.

“Fucking parasite,” Bas growled, fire dripping from between his fangs.

Bas turned to tell the woman everything was okay, but he was alone. She was gone. He let out a furious roar of frustration that she had slipped through his fingers once again, only a gold and black feather remaining to prove she had been there at all.