



Locking Down Qetesh (Jinx Paranormal Dating Agency #10)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: As the host of Jinxs Lock and Key parties, Qetesh loves watching other people fall in love but hasn't found it for herself.

Qetesh loves to help others find romance, but is wary of letting anyone in, thanks to her reputation as a love goddess and the secrets she's keeping. When she starts working with her best friend's brother, everything changes.

Jacob is wary of finding love, especially after his boundaries have been crossed a few times. Meeting a love goddess wasn't how he thought his love life would change, but now that he has, there's no denying the effect she has on him.

As the two of them learn more about each other, they discover they have more in common than either of them thought, and Qetesh soon finds herself admitting to things she's never told anyone before.

Locking Down Qetesh is a mythology-inspired paranormal m/f rom-com with two ace main characters and is part of the Jinx Paranormal Dating Agency series. It features a light-hearted romance with a misunderstood Egyptian goddess, a charming dryad, and a best friend's brother romance.

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QETESH

I made my way into the large hotel now owned by the Jinx Dating Agency, feeling the usual jump of nerves that I got whenever I considered how I'd tied my name to Jinx.

It wasn't that I regretted it. My Lock and Key parties had been doing better ever since I'd agreed to join with the agency, especially because I didn't have to do everything myself all the time.

But it was still my name on the line. I'd spent years building a reputation, and it would be remiss of me not to be concerned about how that could be affected.

I stopped in my tracks when I saw Aine waiting in the lobby. I smiled at the Celtic goddess of love and beauty, while internally wondering about what she was doing here when she was kind of my boss.

"Hey, Tesha," she said.

"Hi," I responded. "I didn't expect you today."

"I thought I sent an email, but I must have forgotten. We've had a new hotel manager start this week and I wanted to introduce you to him, he's going to be working with you for your events."

"Ah." I had no idea if that was a good thing or not. "Is he a god?"

She shook her head. "But he knows that we are, so there's nothing to worry about on that front."

I laughed. "You mean you're not going to make us pretend to be mortals?"

"If anyone took one look at you, they'd have no doubt you were a goddess," she responded.

"Thanks."

She nodded. "I've been meaning to stop by one of your events again, but I haven't had time to yet."

I laughed. "You mean you're worried that Min will call in a favour and ask for the key that matches your lock again?"

"That was a risky choice to say yes."

"I didn't give it to him. I don't actually know which key goes with which lock once they're on the table. I just gave him one when he asked."

Surprise showed on her face. "He said..."

"He asked, I gave him a key. If it fit, then it was purely a coincidence."

"Huh. So it was fate or something?"

"There are only twenty-five sets, and they all have a match. There are lots of combinations, but it's not supposed to be impossible to find the set."

"He's going to be heartbroken when I tell him," Aine mused.

I laughed. "Then don't. He asked, and I gave him a key. That's all he needs to know."

"I suppose he got what he wanted anyway."

"That was obvious to anyone who was watching you," I responded.

"Maybe." From her expression, I could tell that there might be more to it, but I didn't know her well enough to be able to pry.

Unlike most of the supposed love gods from around the world, I'd mostly kept to myself.

Sometimes, it made me feel a little lonely, even if I knew that it was better not to court the complications that came from spending a lot of time with them all.

"I should go set up for the event tonight," I said, gesturing towards the room I used for my Lock and Key parties.

There wasn't a huge amount of set-up that needed to be done, especially since the room was already laid out the way I wanted it to be.

It was certainly easier now that Jinx owned the hotel where I was hosting.

"I'll bring the new hotel manager in when I have a moment," she said.

"Thanks." I smiled at her and headed inside. It was larger than the room I'd had at the previous hotel, which did make me wonder whether I should consider releasing more tickets. I hadn't expanded beyond the size of my event in about five years, but it might be time to.

I reached out to touch the leaves of the peace lily on the bar, closing my eyes and

letting the inherent dryad magic I'd had my entire life spring into being.

I fed some of the energy into the plant, while also gaining a boost from being around one that was so healthy.

It definitely helped that I was feeding it with magic every week.

It wasn't necessarily something that added anything to the event other than a general welcoming atmosphere, but I loved it.

I went around the room and checked on a couple of other things, but I wasn't entirely surprised to find that everything was in place for tomorrow's event.

The staff at Aine's hotel did a good job at making sure everything was set up the way it should be.

Footsteps sounded behind me, and I turned in time to see Aine enter the room with a tall dark-haired man beside her. That must be the new manager she'd told me about.

I took a deep breath and prepared myself for the introduction. I didn't know anything about him, and the staff hadn't really been talking, so all I had to go on was what was in front of me.

Aine smiled. "This is Jacob, he's the new hotel manager. And this is Qetesh, she runs the Lock and Key parties for Jinx each week."

"Good to meet you," I said, holding out my hand.

He took it with a firm shake. "Likewise. I suppose you're the one who left the very detailed instructions for the staff on how to lay out the room."

"I'm sure I'm not the only one who does that," I said.

"I don't mind," he responded. "It makes it easier for us. Though I have to admit to being surprised about the request for potted plants, and not cut flowers."

"I'm a dryad, I prefer to be around live flowers than dead ones," I explained.

Surprise showed on his face, and it made me wonder if he didn't know about the paranormal world. It seemed unlikely that Aine would hire someone who wasn't, but there was always a chance of that. Except that she'd said he knew we were gods.

"I'll leave you to it," the love goddess said with a smile. "I have an appointment to get to. Let me know if either of you need anything." She waved and headed back out of the door, leaving us alone.

"Is there anything you need?" Jacob asked.

"Not really. The staff know what they're doing for me. Unless you've changed any of the rules about my event."

He laughed. "Not yet. I might change things in the future if I think they could be run better, but I don't intend on changing anything for at least the first month of being here. I don't believe in coming in and changing everything before I get a lay of the land."

"A wise way to approach things," I said.

"You're surprised?"

"About as surprised as you are that I'm a dryad."

"I thought you were a goddess," he admitted sheepishly. "That's what Aine said."

"Oh, I am. But I've been a dryad longer than I've been a goddess, so that's what I consider myself to be most of the time." I smiled at him. "It's not really that important, other than for knowing that I like my plants living."

"Fair enough."

"So, do you want me to run through what my event needs, or would you rather just experience it for yourself?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Is that an option?"

"It is if you come here around eight tomorrow," I responded. "I believe I'll even have a couple of locks or keys spare."

"That would be great, if you don't mind."

I shrugged. "I can understand wanting to know what's going on at the hotel you run," I said. "Besides, if your contract with Jinx is anything like mine, you get access to the dating services. I can just hook you up with a lock or key, and you can mingle to your heart's content."

He cleared his throat in a way that made him seem a little uncomfortable.

My gaze strayed down to his hand to check for a wedding ring, even though I knew that didn't mean much either way.

Married people could have the kind of relationships where they might be looking for someone else, and just because he wasn't married, didn't mean he wasn't in a committed relationship, or had other reasons to not want to take part. "Sure," he said.

"It's not an obligation," I said quickly.

"That's not how I run my parties. Everyone gets a lock or a key, and they mingle with the other guests.

If they match with someone, they take it to the bar and get a free drink.

That's it. There's no obligation for further dates, or even further conversation. "

He raised an eyebrow. "So what's the point?"

"To get people talking. Less than half of the couples who have told me they met at one of my events actually had a lock and key that matched, most of them just happen to meet here and get talking."

"Interesting. So I come, and you give me a key?" he asked.

I tapped my hand on the box waiting for me. "You pick yourself, and you can choose a lock if you prefer."

"Does it mean anything?"

"No. The whole point is that people talk, it would be reductive of me to insist that men took keys and women took locks.

Not only does that make it more difficult for anyone who doesn't identify as either, but it doesn't take into account orientation or anything else.

So people just pick whichever they like the look of and get talking. "

"And that actually works?"

"Sometimes, people just need something to break the ice.

That's what I'm here for." At least that I can be confident about.

My own love life was a bit more complicated, but at least I could hold onto my reputation as a love goddess if everyone thought that I was good at helping other people find romance.

And maybe Jacob was going to be the next person I found love for. He seemed sceptical in the way that many people were before they met the love of their life, I'd seen it countless times. Maybe my event would be the one that changed it for him.

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QETESH

The doorbell went and I grabbed my phone so I could click through to the app. My best friend waved at the camera from the other side, her hand grasping the neck of a bottle.

I hit the button which would unlock the door and then the microphone. "I'm in the greenhouse."

Ella didn't even respond before heading through the door and making her way into my house.

"You really should just give me a key, Tesha," she said as she entered the room and set down a bottle of non-alcoholic prosecco.

"You had a key," I reminded her. "It's not my fault that you lost it."

"Your plants stole it," she murmured.

"If that was true, then it would have turned up by now."

"Maybe."

"There's no maybe about it." I loved her dearly, but she did have a tendency to misplace things.

Especially keys. She'd somehow managed to lose the one she had at the Lock and

Key party where she met her fiancée too.

I'd had to spend hours working out which key went with which lock so that I could remove the lock without a match from circulation.

"Maybe you just need a passcode to get in the house instead."

"Keys are better," I responded.

"Ah, right. You're super old. I forgot."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not super old."

"You don't look super old, but you definitely are. I'm going to get some glasses."

I nodded and pulled off my gardening gloves, knowing that there wasn't going to be more time for tending to my plants. In Ella's words, that was what she spent all day doing, she didn't want more of it when she visited me.

The evening sun shone through the glass panes of the greenhouse connected to my house, and I let out a contented sigh.

This was my haven away from the world. Here, it was just me and my plants with the occasional visit from my best friend.

But as a dryad herself, she understood my connection to this place in a way very few other people ever had.

She returned a couple of moments later with a couple of champagne flutes and we made our way over to the comfortable chairs I'd had installed here for moments just like this. Ella sloshed some of the sparkling wine into glasses and handed one of them

to me.

"I'm going to drink so much real prosecco on Friday," Ella mumbled.

I laughed. "You're the one who decided not to drink in the lead up to the wedding."

"Because I don't want my liver to go on strike the moment I say I do ."

"That's not how it works," I reminded her. "You can do as much damage by binge drinking it..."

"I know, I know. Just let me have this, Tesha. Not all of us can have banging bodies after thousands of years."

"You don't know that," I countered. "You could become immortal tomorrow..."

"Pfft, no thanks. What's the point in only living once if you're not going to die?"

"I couldn't tell you." At this point, I'd reinvented myself more times than I cared to count.

It was less of an issue now that the world was more accepting of the gods in their mix.

Or at least, the paranormal members of the world were.

Humans still had no idea that we lived among them, but I had very little to do with them unless they found out about Jinx.

And if they knew about Jinx, then they knew about the world of gods and paranormals anyway, it wasn't the kind of thing people could just stumble across by

accident.

"You're coming on Friday, right?" Ella asked.

"Of course I'm coming," I promised. "I'm your Maid of Honour, I'm not going to skip the Bridal Shower."

"Good, because Nadia would be sad if you missed it."

I laughed. "Nadia? You're really going to say that your fiancée would be the one to miss me at your Bridal Shower?"

Ella grinned. "Oh, and you'll finally get to meet my brother. He's just moved back to town for a job. My parents are thrilled, naturally."

"Hopefully not to the point of overshadowing the wedding."

"Oh, no, not at all. My brother would never want that.

He's a good guy, you'll like him." The way she looked at me made it seem like she was thinking about more than just a friendly situation, but I was going to have to disappoint her there.

It was highly unlikely that I'd say more than three words to her brother beyond the two of us being introduced.

"I look forward to meeting him," I said.

"Good." She leaned back in her chair and let out a contented sigh. "I can't believe I'm going to be married in just over a month."

I laughed. "That's because you've only been dating Nadia for a year."

"Yeah, but when you know, you know. Right?"

"I couldn't tell you."

"You're a love goddess, you're supposed to know stuff like this," she countered.

"Allegedly," I said. "But I never claimed to be an expert on love, and anyone who thinks I am one needs to take a moment to actually think about it, because I am really not."

"You'd be a lot more convincing if you weren't the reason I met my future wife."

"It's not that I've not learned anything over the past few thousand years," I pointed out. "It's just that I'm not an expert. Now some of the other love gods? They really know what they're talking about."

"I'll refrain from judging considering I've not had any conversations with them knowingly. Maybe when you get married, I'll finally get to chat with some."

I laughed. "I'm not going to get married."

"So you keep saying, but I don't understand why. Do you not want to fall in love?"

"It's complicated," I murmured.

She frowned at me in a way that made me certain she wanted to ask a lot more questions.

Ones that I wasn't able to answer. It wasn't that I didn't know why I didn't date, it was

just that the answer wasn't exactly an acceptable one given my status as a goddess of love, sex, and all things related.

It would be much better if I'd just been able to keep being known as a nature goddess and not had to worry about the rest of it.

But if there was one thing I'd learned over the past few thousand years, it was that there was very little opportunity to choose what humans believed I was the goddess of.

It wasn't like I was the only god in that position either.

It was a common phenomenon, even if it could be frustrating at times.

Ella moved on to talking about the wedding, and I let her.

As much as I wanted to avoid the complications of love myself, I did enjoy hearing others talking about it, especially when I'd done something to help them find it.

And I was going to enjoy every minute of her wedding knowing that I'd helped her and Nadia meet.

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JACOB

I wasn't entirely sure about how sensible it was for me to go to Qetesh's Lock and Key party.

I was curious about precisely how it was run, especially considering it was hosted in the hotel I was supposed to be managing, but dating and I didn't seem to mix, even if there was a yearning within me to meet someone.

Which had only gotten stronger since my sister had announced that she was engaged.

I fiddled with the black ring on the right finger of my middle hand. I didn't usually wear it around the hotel, there was no need to when the likelihood of someone seriously trying to flirt with me was slim. But this was different. I was heading into a dating event, and it was safer to wear it.

Even before I entered, I could feel the buzz coming from the room. From what Qetesh had said about the event, there would only be about forty-six people in attendance, but they were certainly doing what she said they would and making the noise for it.

I paused at the entrance, surprised to find that the hostess was waiting at a table just within and not mingling with the guests.

She looked the right balance of classy and professional, with a playfulness thanks to the flowers decorating her dress.

Which made a lot of sense now that I knew she considered herself to be a dryad over a goddess.

I should have responded better to that revelation, but not having met many gods before, I hadn't really given much thought to that kind of thing.

Qetesh noticed me and flashed me a welcoming smile. "So you decided to come after all?"

"I did," I responded. "It's good to know more about the events in the hotel so I can advise the guests when they ask which they should attend."

"Then hopefully I can impress you tonight," she said. "Though tickets to my events aren't cheap."

"Couldn't you get more people if you lowered the price?"

"I could, but this is one of Jinx's premium events."

"What does that even mean?"

"It means that the guests are usually gods, and paranormals who aren't looking for just anyone. Normally the kind who could be recognised, which can get awkward in the outside world. Here, they know that even if someone does recognise them, then it's going to be ignored."

"So people with money, basically."

"That's who the hotel caters to as well," she pointed out.

"True. As did the last three hotels I worked at," I admitted.

"There is also some matchmaking involved," she said.

"Kind of. People sign up to join one of my Lock and Key parties, and fill out a questionnaire.

It's not as intense as the ones the actual matchmakers use at Jinx, but it gives me an idea about interests, what people are looking for, that kind of thing.

That way, I can suggest the party dates that are most suited to the client.

Though some people just want to come every week. "

"Interesting," I said. "So, anyone I might know here tonight?"

She laughed. "I wouldn't be a very good host if I told you that."

"True, but I'm also here as the hotel manager."

"Fair point. So the two men at the back on the right are Nick and Pieter."

"Should I know them?"

"It depends if you believe in Santa," she joked.

"Oh."

"Yep. Anyway, two tables over is Athena. She's talking to Felix."

"Should I know who that is?" I wished I had a better grasp on mythology.

"Yes, unless you've been living under a rock," she teased. "They're the hottest new

artist after they collaborated with Mimi."

"The Chinese Idol?" I checked.

"See, you do know who I mean," she said.

"Though you won't see Mimi at an event like this.

The last I heard through the grape vine was that she'd met Chiguo on the Jinx Dating App and they're now together.

He's a Chinese god. I've never actually met him though, he spends most of his time at the Heavenly Palace.

Though I imagine that's got to change if he really is dating an Idol. "

"That's a lot of high-profile people."

"Welcome to Jinx," she said. "The only person you really need to watch out for is Zeus. He's not quite as bad as the stories say, but that's the best that can be said about him."

"I'll keep that in mind if I ever run into him."

"Good. Anyway, I'm supposed to be introducing you to the event. So we have six keys and four locks left, you can take your pick." She waved towards an assortment of them, each with a ribbon tied around it that I assumed was to go around the guest's neck.

"I just pick one?" I checked.

"Whichever one feels right." She tucked a strand of dark hair behind her ear and gave me an encouraging smile.

I reached out with my right hand, trailing my fingers over the various items until I settled on a lock.

"You're ace," she blurted.

I pulled my hand back and touched my ring, trying not to feel too surprised by her observation.

Her eyes widened. "I'm so sorry, that was really rude."

"It's fine," I assured her. "I wear it so people know. Though I'm surprised you know what it means. Most people don't."

"I'm known as a sex goddess," she murmured. "It's my job to know these kinds of things."

"Known as?" It was an interesting way for her to phrase it, especially when I'd done my research on her after I'd gone home last night. Not that I'd been able to uncover much. She was a little bit of a mystery to me, and to the world if my search history was anything to go by.

She cleared her throat. "Yes."

"So you're not one?" I shouldn't ask, but my curiosity got the better of me.

"It's complicated."

I resisted the urge to ask more. Not having had a lot of experience getting to know

any gods before, I had no idea what to believe and what not to about them.

"It doesn't really work like that," she said after a pause. "I was a dryad before I became immortal. Some people considered me to be a nature goddess, some a protection goddess, and some a goddess of sex and beauty."

"That's a lot of things to try and be all at once."

"Mmhmm. The latter is the one that stuck."

"I had no idea."

She shrugged. "That's just how it is. Most gods don't actually have all the magic assigned to them by their human followers. That's just me. The powers of a dryad, and not much more than that."

"If you ignore the fact you're immortal."

"Anyone can become immortal," she pointed out. "You just have to know the right person."

"I wouldn't even know where to start."

"You ask a god, and hope that they say yes."

"Have you ever made anyone immortal?"

She nodded. "Most gods have at one point or another."

"Huh, that's not something I knew about either."

"Even though you work for one of the most notorious love goddesses of the moment?"

"That's a recent development," I told her. "And I wasn't actually aware that I was being hired by a goddess until after she'd offered me the job."

"That sounds like Aine. Hopefully, you weren't too shocked to learn that gods exist."

I laughed. "I already knew. I'm a dryad myself."

"Ah. I didn't know that."

"I'm surprised you weren't able to tell that because of something I was wearing."

She raised an eyebrow. "Should I have?"

"No. I don't tend to advertise that I'm a dryad to anyone who doesn't already know. Even other dryads."

"But you want people to know you're ace?"

"Tonight is about dating," I said. "So it seemed like the right thing to let people know."

A thoughtful expression crossed her face. "So would you only want to be set up with other aces?"

"No. I'm okay with anyone allo too, so long as they respect my boundaries."

"Fair. I guess this is why I should have had you fill in a questionnaire."

I laughed. "It's fine. I'm not really looking for anyone. I'm open to dating the right person if I happened to meet them, but I'm not actively looking."

"Those are famous last words, Jacob," she joked. "I hope you find your match here."

"Thanks."

"But don't forget your lock."

We reached for it at the same time and my fingers bumped against hers. She pulled back and gave me an apologetic smile, letting me pick up the lock for myself.

I headed towards the bar and ordered myself a drink, not able to help it when my gaze strayed back to the goddess welcoming guests.

Someone new had already arrived, and she was talking them through the event, or at least, that was what I assumed she was doing.

There was something charming about her, but I knew it wasn't anything I should think for longer than a moment about.

Even if she said that it was more complicated than being a goddess of one particular thing, I should stay away from getting involved with a goddess of sex.

That was just a mess I didn't need to invite into my life.

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QETESH

I shifted my present under my arm as I made my way up the steps to my best friend's house. Though technically, I think the house belonged to her fiancée, not that Ella hadn't made it her own.

The door swung open before I could even reach the top, revealing Nadia in a dazzling pink and green headscarf and a glass of something sparkling in her hand. Knowing her, it was probably elderflower pressé or something like that. I wouldn't mind a glass myself.

"Hey, Tesha," she said brightly, pulling me into a hug.

"Hi, Nadia, how are you doing?"

"I'm good. Can you believe the wedding is nearly here?" There was no stopping the excitement pouring off her, even if she was more restrained than her fiancée about it.

I laughed. "I'm surprised it wasn't last year considering how the two of you were chatting after you met."

"Mmm, true." She looked over to where my best friend was talking with a man whose back was turned to me. "And here we are, joint brides at our shower."

"Aren't you supposed to have that separately?" I wasn't sure what the current tradition was. Sometimes, these things moved too quickly for me to properly keep track of.

"Why would I want to have a Bridal Shower without my best friend at it?" she asked.

"You're not going to convince me otherwise," I said. "Marrying your best friend is the right way to go."

"Well, hands off yours," she joked.

I chuckled a little uncomfortably. Not because I'd ever been into Ella, but because if I said I never had been, then I'd have to explain to Nadia why I was sure that I didn't want to sleep with her future wife. "I brought you a present," I said in order to deflect.

"You really didn't have to," she said, taking it from me anyway. "You got us together, we're going to owe you for the rest of our lives."

"You don't," I promised. "I enjoy seeing other people fall in love."

"And when is it going to be your turn? You can't always be the bridesmaid?"

"I'm perfectly fine on my own," I promised. Though it was a lie. I think I would like to find someone, it would just need to be someone who understood my specific needs, and that just didn't come easily.

Nadia gave me a look that said she wasn't so sure about that, which was fair.

I pushed the thoughts to the side so that I could focus on the more important task of celebrating my best friend's upcoming wedding, something that wasn't a hardship for me at all. I was over the moon for both of them.

Ella spotted me and waved me over enthusiastically, without stopping her conversation with the man in front of her, making me assume that it was the brother she'd told me of many times.

Though now I was about to face him, I couldn't recall his name.

She always just referred to him as her brother and not by his name, but I should have asked.

I headed over to them, hoping that she was going to properly introduce him now that we were face to face.

"Tesda!" Ella said, her smile stretching her cheeks and the slight flush giving truth to her promise of drinking tonight.

The man turned, and I blinked a couple of times as I took in his features. "Jacob?"

"Qetesh?"

Ella looked between us. "You've met?"

"I work at the new hotel Jinx has bought," Jacob said. "That's where Qetesh runs her events from."

Ella snorted. "I know that as well as anyone. I met Nadia at one of Tesha's events. How come neither of you mentioned it?"

"I didn't know he was your brother," I said.

"Well, considering I'm not needed for an introduction, I think I'll go and talk to someone else." She slipped away without even pausing to say goodbye.

"She's trying to set us up, isn't she?" I asked.

Jacob chuckled. "I suspect so, yes. She's always been talking about how much I'd like

you. Though I didn't realise Tesha was short for Qetesh."

I shrugged. "People question it less than Qetesh."

"I suppose that makes sense."

"Does she know that..." I gestured to his hand even though he didn't seem to be wearing his ring right now.

"That I'm ace?" he checked.

I nodded.

"Yeah, she knows. But she knows I'm open to a relationship."

"And she thought that setting you up with a sex goddess was a good idea?"

"You're the one who said that was only allegedly," he pointed out. "But before I quiz you further on that, you should get a drink."

"Ah, a gentleman, I see."

He gestured towards the temporary bar that had been set up in the corner with a menu that looked like it could rival the fanciest cocktail bar. It wasn't a huge surprise. Nadia knew how to throw a party.

We headed over to the bar and waited while they served a couple of other people. I glanced over the menu, impressed to see that the cocktails all had alcoholic and non-alcoholic versions.

"This is good," I said to Jacob.

"Mmm. Maybe a change I'll make to the bars at the hotel once my first month is up."

I laughed. "Are you really not going to make any changes for a full month?"

"I think it's better not to," he responded. "People working there don't know me, and I don't know them. It's better that I give them time to get used to me before I start actually changing things. If I don't, they're just going to get angry and it'll create distrust between us."

"Seen it before?"

"Yes, though thankfully, it wasn't while I was the boss, I saw it several times when I was working up the chain at hotels. Bad managers would destroy the loyalty and good faith of the workforce, and before you knew it, people were leaving and everyone was starting to struggle."

I nodded. "I haven't worked for other people in a long time, but I can assure you that they haven't changed."

"And yet now you're working for Jinx," he said.

"Aine is persuasive. And I'd gotten about as far as I could with my parties on my own, so it was time to try something different."

He raised an eyebrow. "Any regrets?"

"No. It's not going to be a forever thing, but for now, it's good. I like being able to help people find love. Or whatever else it is they want to find."

"Not just love?"

"Some people are looking for other things. Companionship, friendship, sex. They're all entirely valid, even if I'm not looking for them myself."

He gave me a curious look. "You're not?"

I froze for a moment, only to be distracted by the bartender calling our attention.

"What do you want?" Jacob asked me.

"A mimosa," I responded.

He nodded and ordered the two of us drinks. Despite the wait, the bartender was pretty quick to put them down in front of us, and I took mine.

Jacob gestured for the two of us to return to the corner where he'd been talking to Ella. "Unless there's other company you'd rather keep."

"I don't really know anyone other than Ella and Nadia," I said. "And you."

"Ah, then we're in the same boat. I've only met Nadia a couple of times before this too."

"It must be nice to be back around your family," I said.

He nodded. "I'm sure you know about Mum?"

"That she's struggling with her health," I said. "Ella told me about it."

"Ever since she started to decline, I hoped that I'd be able to come home and help Ella look after her. It just wasn't until the Jinx job was offered to me that I was able to."

"Good timing."

"Something like that. I still need to settle in, but I think it's going to be a good job."

"You do have some great company to keep while there," I joked.

He laughed. "So it would seem. Everyone has been very welcoming so far."

"Aine is good at making her staff feel valued. She's a good boss."

"That's good to know as someone who has just started to work for her."

"Just watch it when she starts flirting with you," I joked.

"I thought she was with someone."

"She's with Min, he's an Egyptian fertility god. Their relationship is exclusive, but they like to play a little when it comes to sex."

Surprise crossed his face. "I had no idea."

"They don't really flaunt it," I said.

"And you?"

"I've not slept with Aine, if that's what you're asking."

"It wasn't," he responded. "But I suppose it is good to know that you haven't slept with the boss."

"Would it change anything if I had?" I asked curiously.

"No. I don't spend very much time thinking about other people's sex lives."

I paused for a moment, not really knowing what to say in response. If I was true to myself, then there was a way I'd want to take the conversation, but I wasn't sure if I could say the words out loud.

"Qetesh?" he prompted.

I cleared my throat. "You can call me Tesha if you prefer," I said.

"Tesha," he said softly. I liked the way he said my name, it made me feel as if I could trust him. "Did I say something wrong? You went quiet."

"No, it's not you," I promised. "It's...complicated."

"I can get Ella..."

"No," I blurted out. "Don't get Ella."

"All right then, maybe we should talk of something safer. What's your favourite flavour of ice cream?"

"What?" I asked with a laugh.

"Your favourite kind of ice cream," he said. "What is it?"

"Praline. What about yours?"

"Banana cream."

I wrinkled my nose. "Really?"

He laughed. "It reminds me of being a kid."

"I suppose that's a nice reason to have a favourite ice cream."

"I wouldn't make anyone else eat it," he promised. "I might like it, but I know that not everyone else does."

"So a bit like sex, then."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Sorry, sex goddess," I murmured.

He gave me a curious look, like he'd figured out one of my biggest secrets despite the fact I'd never told anyone about it. "I thought you weren't a sex goddess."

"It's complicated," I murmured.

"Well, if you want to talk about it, then I can listen."

"You barely know me," I pointed out.

"Sometimes it's easier to talk to someone who is almost a stranger. Though if I listen to my little sister, you're already part of the family."

I laughed. "Fair enough."

A cheer went through the room, stopping any admissions from escaping unbidden, and keeping them away when speeches started.

Thankfully, I didn't have to give one tonight, though the wedding was going to be a

whole different matter.

But I'd known what I was signing up for when I'd agreed to be Ella's Maid of Honour, and I was going to do the best job I could at it.

QETESH

There was always something nice about sitting in the corner of the hotel's coffee shop with my laptop.

Theoretically, I could claim one of the offices at Jinx HQ if I wanted to, but the idea of actually going into an office every day sounded terrible to me.

I liked the freedom of working for myself and on my own timeline.

The barista brought over a fresh coffee for me and I flashed them a grateful smile. Of all the things that had become available over the years, coffee really was one of the best. Whoever had dubbed it the elixir of the gods wasn't wrong. It was certainly something that kept this goddess going.

I resisted the urge to drink some of it, knowing that it was too hot, and focused on my work instead.

My coffee was nearly finished when I heard a familiar voice, and I looked up to find Jacob standing at the counter talking to the barista.

From the way they were interacting, it seemed like the conversation was going well, and that Jacob's choice of management style was working for him.

I couldn't help but be impressed. It took a certain kind of restraint not to start changing things immediately.

I was sure he had plenty of ideas for how to improve the way the hotel was run, and if I were in his shoes, I doubted I'd be able to do what he was.

He turned and caught me looking, flashing me a friendly smile.

I returned it, feeling a surprising surge of affection for the person I barely knew. Maybe it was just because he was Ella's brother. I'd heard her talk about him so many times that it was as if I knew him.

He finished his conversation with the barista and headed over. "Hey, Tesha. Hmm, is that weird?"

I laughed. "It's not."

"Oh good."

"Do you like Jacob? Or do you prefer being called Jake?" I asked curiously. I hadn't heard anyone refer to him that way, but maybe it was because he was at work.

"Jacob," he responded. "It made me feel important when I was a kid, and it kind of stuck."

I laughed. "Fair enough."

"Mind if I join you for a coffee?" he asked.

"Sure. I've just about finished this one," I said. "Though I was actually considering lunch."

"I've been meaning to try the food in the restaurant."

"I wasn't trying to insinuate anything..." I said quickly.

"You're not," he promised. "I really do want to try the food. I've tried samples in the kitchen, but it's not the same as sitting down to eat. Want to join me?"

"Are you sure I'm not an imposition?" I asked, even though I was the one who had brought up lunch in the first place.

"Eating alone is less fun than eating with someone. It's my treat."

"All right, but only because I've always wanted to try the chocolate bomb dessert."

He laughed. "Got it."

I powered off my laptop and slid it into the designated pocket of my handbag.

Even though there was literally no way that this was anything other than a work lunch, there were some unfamiliar butterflies in my stomach, ones that I'd heard other people talk about, but not experienced that much myself.

I looked over at Jacob, wondering if I was experiencing a kind of attraction I didn't usually. But even if he was clearly a physically fit man, with a handsome face, it wasn't really doing anything for me. Other than being pleasant to look at.

He caught me looking and raised an eyebrow.

"Sorry," I murmured.

He shrugged. "It's fine. I'm used to it."

"That's not what I was doing," I said quickly. "I...can't really explain."

"One of the complicated things?" he guessed.

"Yes."

He nodded, and the two of us headed towards the restaurant. It wasn't particularly busy, which wasn't a surprise given that it was only just midday and a random Wednesday. Having seen it at other times, we were lucky.

A waitress showed us to a table at the back, where Jacob asked to be seated so we were out of the way of the other customers.

"Do you think you're going to get better service or worse because of who you are?" I asked him.

He chuckled. "Depends on how much the chef likes me. Normally, when I take a new job, I try to come and eat at the hotel before I start working there. That way I can get a totally unbiased view of the food and service."

"That's smart. And something I'll save in case I ever decide that I'm done working for myself."

"Is that likely?" Jacob asked.

"Not really. I've not always run Lock and Key parties, but I've worked for myself for longer than I can remember. Not that it was easy at some points in time, but I always managed. And it was better than being a wife."

He raised an eyebrow. "Not the getting married type?"

"It's complicated."

He chuckled. "I'm starting to think that's what you want people to think your main personality trait is."

"It's better than what they do assume my main personality trait is," I muttered.

He gave me a questioning look, but then glanced down at the menu. "So what do you have time for? Full three course meal and coffee?"

"Are you sure we have enough to talk about for three courses?"

"I should hope so if you're going to be at Ella's pre-wedding weekend," he joked. "And you did say you're complicated, I've found that can lead to a lot of conversation."

"Three courses it is." I scanned the menu, though I already knew exactly what I was going to eat.

The waitress reappeared and took our order, before disappearing to get our drinks.

"So, Ella's pre-wedding weekend," he said. "Any idea why she's calling it that and not something snappier?"

"I don't think she's come up with a better name for it, and she hates the term hen party," I responded. "I think the intention was to find a better name, but now it's next week and she hasn't come up with one, so it's kind of stuck."

"Fair enough."

"I didn't realise you were going."

He nodded. "I was always supposed to be," he said. "No doubt she was planning on

introducing us then, but our jobs beat her to it."

"They really did."

Our drinks arrived, and I smiled at the waitress. Not having eaten here before, I had no idea if this was her normal level of service, but it felt like it. And it was still good.

"So, how are you finding working for Jinx?" I asked.

"Great, actually," Jacob said, picking up his sparkling water and taking a sip. "I wasn't sure what to expect, especially when I found out that Aine is a first-time hotel owner, but it's all running smoothly so far."

"It might be her first time owning a hotel, but it's far from her first time owning a business. That's the thing with gods, we tend to have a lot of experience."

"Aren't you supposed to say that in a suggestive tone?" he joked.

"Would you be able to tell if I did?"

"Of course. I'm ace, not clueless," he said. "What about you?"

I froze. "What?"

He gave me a curious look. "Are you okay?"

I opened my mouth, but the words got stuck in my throat. I wasn't even sure precisely what I wanted to say to him. Did I want to brush him off again? Or tell him that it was complicated when it really wasn't?

Or did I want to tell him the truth? It didn't mean anything if I did, it was just that he

was one of the first people I'd spoken to who might actually understand what was going on in my head. Or not the first, but the first I actually knew for sure would understand.

The starters arrived, cutting through my thoughts, but not alleviating the concerned expression on Jacob's face.

"I feel the same," I blurted out the moment the waitress left.

"About not being clueless?" he asked.

I took a deep breath. I could still change the topic of conversation, but maybe for the first time, I didn't want to. "About being ace," I said softly.

Surprise crossed his face, but it disappeared quickly. "That makes a lot of sense, actually."

"It does?" There was no hiding the panic in my voice.

"Don't worry, not to anyone who isn't paying attention," he said quickly. "It's just how you've been reacting to certain statements. And why you knew about my ring."

I took a deep breath. "Yeah. Well, people don't know."

"I figured you're not out." He picked up one of his battered prawns and dipped it in some sauce, reminding me that I was supposed to be eating my starter.

"I've never told anyone," I said. "It felt like it had to be this big secret."

"Thank you for telling me," he said, offering me a genuine smile. "Do you want to keep talking about it?"

I shook my head. "Maybe another time. If that's okay? But not now. Not here."

"Of course."

"Thank you." I smiled.

"So, how did you meet my sister?" he asked. "I'm curious now."

"Oh, that's a tale as old as time, at least for dryads. I'd just moved here, and I was looking for a new plant for my greenhouse. I searched for a nearby nursery and found your sister's. I only went in for one thing, but I spent hours there after we bonded over a calla lily."

He laughed. "That is very Ella."

"Now that I know her better, I know that's true," I said. "We kept talking about plants, I bought a few more, she looked after my plants while I went back to Egypt for a few weeks, and then she came to one of my Lock and Key parties and met Nadia. The rest, you've pretty much surmised."

He nodded. "She could have told me that she met her fiancée at a party run by a goddess. Or by Jinx."

"She probably just didn't think to mention it," I said. "She never told me your name either. You were just the mysterious brother."

"I should be glad she didn't refer to me as Captain Snowpants."

I raised an eyebrow. "You have to know how many questions that raises."

"When I was ten, I got these pyjamas with snowflakes on them for Christmas. We

barely even celebrate, but I loved them and refused to take them off for a week."

I wrinkled my nose. "Not great."

"Not really. She started calling me Captain Snowpants after that."

"What did you call her?" I asked as I speared the last of my goat cheese and beetroot starter with my fork.

"Ella-Tella, because she would blurt out every secret anyone ever told her. She got much better at keeping them to herself as she got older, but I pretty quickly learned not to trust her with anything too important."

"Oh, I think I've met Ella-Tella," I joked. "She really doesn't know when to not share sometimes." I smiled at the thought of my best friend, knowing that she wasn't the kind of person to mean anything by it. She was just overexcited and had very few boundaries.

"That's my sister." The way he smiled made it clear that he held a lot of affection for her, which did make sense. Everything she'd ever told me about him made it sound like the two of them were close, even if she hadn't actually shared his name with me.

And everything she said seemed to be true. He had a good feel about him, something that made me want to open up to him, which wasn't exactly something I could say about anyone.

It was making me look forward to Ella's pre-wedding weekend celebration more. I didn't know many of her friends, but if I did know Jacob, then at least I'd have someone to talk to when Ella was busy.

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JACOB

I pulled into the car park of the small hotel that Ella had hired for the weekend. Or more accurately, Nadia had hired. My sister was often generous with the people she loved, but there was no way she could afford this. Luckily for her, her fiancée didn't seem to mind.

I spotted the two of them waiting at the entrance, giggling away to one another.

A strange feeling passed through me that was somewhat akin to jealousy, but wasn't at the same time.

It wasn't that I resented Nadia for taking my sister from me, it didn't work like that, and Ella and I had been messaging even more than before since the two of them got together.

It was because there was a part of me that wanted something like that. Someone who understood me so completely. And someone who didn't want to celebrate something without me, even when people would expect them to celebrate separately.

A car door slammed shut, and I automatically looked over in that direction to find Tesha getting a suitcase out of the boot of a tiny blue car. The wind caught her hair and blew it into her face, causing her to sigh and push it away from her eyes.

I raised my hand to wave at her, and she responded immediately, making me glad that I hadn't imagined how well lunch had gone between us. I wasn't sure what had possessed me to ask her to join me, there was just something about her that made me

want to get to know her better.

It took me a moment to realise that I was lingering in the car park weirdly, and headed towards my sister who seemed to have noticed my arrival.

"Hey," she said, pulling me into a hug. "I'm so glad you came."

"You know I wasn't going to miss it," I reminded her. "I'm always going to want to celebrate my little sister getting married."

She grinned. "I am." She reached out for Nadia's hand and gave it a squeeze.

The other woman smiled at me. "Hello, Jacob."

"Good to see you again, Nadia," I responded.

"Oh, and Tesha," Ella said, a twinkle in her eye that couldn't be ignored. "That's good, we can send the two of you in to explore together."

Nadia chuckled. "You're not being very subtle."

"I'm not trying to be," Ella sing-songed.

I turned my attention to the approaching goddess without acknowledging my sister's clear attempts to try and set us up.

"Afternoon," she said as she reached us. "This place looks beautiful."

"And it's all for us," Ella said. "Reception is right inside. You just need to tell them your names, and they'll give you a key."

Nadia smiled and held out a packet to each of us. "That's got everything you need to know. Meal times, events, information on the spa and amenities. It's all fair game, but we do ask that everyone is on time for meals."

"You'll have more of a problem with Ella being late than either of us," Tesha joked.

"I'm going to be doing what I can to keep her on time," Nadia said, giving my sister a stern look.

Ella just shrugged. "It's our weekend. So what if we're late because we're..."

"That's my cue to go inside," I said.

Tesha laughed. "I'll come with you and leave the lovebirds to it."

"Good idea." I dragged my suitcase behind me as we entered the hotel. It was small and cosy, more like a country home than a hotel, but that made it perfect for the event that it was supposed to be. "You should go first," I said, gesturing to the check-in desk.

She nodded and exchanged a few words with the person behind it, taking a key on a small wooden keyring. Despite the fact she could go off in search of her room now, she hung back, waiting for me to talk to the receptionist and get my key too.

"What room have you got?" she asked.

"Ten. What about you?"

"Twelve. What's to bet your meddling sister has something to do with that?"

I chuckled. "My sister, your best friend. Which is the most meddlesome?"

"That question would only work if they were different people," she responded. "Do you really think she's trying to set us up?"

"Definitely. I've seen her do this before. And she's only going to get worse," I said. "Don't be surprised if she tells us that she wants us to dance together at the wedding."

"Are you a bad dancer?" she asked.

"Is that important?"

"If you're going to step on my toes all night, then I should find myself a date in time for the wedding. If you're a good dancer, then I don't see the need."

I pushed open the door and held it open for her. "I'm fine at dancing."

"Then that saves me a lot of time finding the perfect fake date."

"Could it not be a real date?"

She shrugged. "Seems like a lot of effort just to get out of dancing with you. It would probably be easier to try and find you someone at one of my Lock and Key parties."

A strange feeling came over me that had nothing to do with thinking about a relationship.

I pushed it to the side and got into the lift alongside Tesha.

It was strange how quickly it had become comfortable to call her that, especially when she was a goddess, but there was something about her that put me at ease.

Maybe it was just that I knew something about her that most people didn't, but I

wasn't convinced.

"I'm looking forward to hitting the spa," she said. "It's been too long."

"I know what you mean. I spend a lot of my work time on my feet, it'll be good to relax."

"You know the Jinx hotel has a spa too, right?"

"I do," I said.

"And that you get to use it?"

I chuckled. "Yes, I know that too. But there's something weird about getting a massage from someone when you're their boss."

"Okay, fair point."

"Do you use it?" I asked.

"I haven't had a chance to yet."

The lift came to a stop with a ding, announcing that we'd arrived on the floor with the bedrooms. It wasn't a huge corridor, and it appeared as if there were only a dozen rooms on this floor.

"All right, so I'm going to head in here," Tesha said, gesturing to door twelve. "I guess I'll see you down in the spa."

"Is there nothing else on?"

She shook her head. "Ella told me the other day. The first event for everyone is dinner tonight."

"Then down to the spa it is." I flashed her a smile. "Though if you'd rather I stayed at the opposite side of the room to you, I'd understand."

"Why would you do that?"

"Maybe you don't want someone you work with to see you in your swimsuit."

"I'm several thousand years old," she reminded me. "I think I'll survive you seeing me in my bikini. Unless this is your way of telling me that you don't want me to see you like that."

"It's fine," I promised.

"Then I'll see you down in the spa. I'll be the one in the polka dot bikini and ignoring everyone."

"Sounds good to me."

I watched as she disappeared into her room, feeling a strange kind of kinship to her, even if we'd only just met. Though with the way Ella and Nadia's pre-wedding celebration weekend was going to go, Tesha and I were going to be fast friends by the end of it.

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QETESH

Despite the small size of the hotel, the spa was surprisingly large, and I was looking forward to spending most of my free time here over the weekend.

Maybe I should start going to the one in the Jinx hotel.

Unlike Jacob, I didn't have a good reason not to.

I wasn't really anyone's boss, and I could take my time and relax.

I draped my towel over one of the chairs and set down the bag with a puzzle book and a pencil in it by the side of the bed. I felt a little silly bringing a whole bag just for a couple of things, but I needed to put it in something for when I was in the water.

The hot tub was blissfully empty, which made it the perfect place to head first. I grabbed a scrunchie from my bag and used it to put my hair into a bun. I knew from experience that it was better not to have it in the way during a spa day.

I closed my eyes and sank back into the warm water and let out a sigh. This was the life. There had been many human inventions I'd enjoyed over the years, but the spa was definitely one of the ones at the top of my list. There was something about places like this that truly soothed the soul.

"Mind if I join you?"

I opened my eyes to find Jacob standing by the side of the hot tub in a pair of

surprisingly boring black swimming trunks. "Be my guest."

He got into the tub, leaving plenty of space between us, which was appreciated, though not entirely necessary. I never felt as if he was invading my space, probably because he wasn't.

"It looks nice in here," he said.

"It does. And the rooms are nice. The mattresses don't have annoying springs."

He chuckled. "It's a good thing, so many of them break if you have a hotel mattress with springs. It can get expensive to replace them."

"I can't say I've ever thought about that. I imagine they're also the most cleanable kind of mattress. And if that isn't a factor, then I don't want to know. I want to live out my life in blissful ignorance."

Amusement danced over Jacob's face. "If it were my hotel, then I could assure you that I would make sure that everything was up to the highest standards, cleaning included."

"Is that what you want?" I asked. "To have your own hotel?"

"I don't really know," he admitted. "I never really planned my career, it just happened to me."

I started working in the restaurant of a small hotel when I was a teenager, and then when I finished school, I moved up a bit.

Before I knew it, I was a manager for a different small hotel.

And then a bigger one, and then another, and then Jinx. "

"Do you like it though?"

He nodded. "I do. I like working with people most of the time, even if I also like having peace when I'm by myself."

"I see that. I love being at my parties and seeing all of the people interact with one another and have a great time, but I want to go home at the end of it and put on noise-cancelling headphones."

"I can imagine that must be a relief after the intensity of one of your parties."

"It really is," I said. "But I do love them."

"Even if you're not looking for anything yourself?" he asked.

I took a deep breath. "I guess it's not that I'm not looking, I've always been open to finding the right person."

"But that's hard when you've been hiding part of yourself."

"Something like that," I responded. "And now you can safely say that you know me better than most of the people I've ever met."

"I don't think that's true," he said. "There's lots I don't know about you."

I laughed. "I've lived a long life, I can't tell you everything I've ever done."

"True. But you're a dryad. What's your favourite type of tree?" He swished his hand over the bubbles in front of him.

"You're going straight for the hard questions, aren't you?"

"Absolutely."

"Fig trees," I said. "I have a couple of them in my greenhouse. You should come see them some time."

"Inviting me back to your house already?" he joked.

"Mmhmm. But only for the trees."

"Oh, I know," he assured me. "Why are they your favourite?"

"I love figs," I said. "Especially dried ones."

And I just think that the trees are really pretty.

But honestly, it's mostly because one of my oldest memories involves a fig tree.

I wish I could remember who the woman in it is.

Maybe my grandmother? We were picking figs, and I could barely reach the lowest of the branches.

So I did whatever any fearless child would do, and climbed up the tree.

I got all of the best figs, but I also fell off and broke my arm.

"I smiled at the memory, despite the slight echo of pain that came with it.

"I did that while playing hide and seek with Ella. Breaking my arm by falling out of a

tree, not picking figs."

"I figured. Though I imagine we were doing our tree climbing a few thousand years apart."

"And several thousand miles," he said.

"True. So, what's your favourite kind of tree?" I asked.

"Willows. I liked to watch how their leaves dragged across the surface of the water when I was younger."

"Like you're doing with your hand?" I asked, nodding down to it.

"Huh, I suppose so. But that's just because I like how the bubbles feel. Try it."

"What?"

He reached out for my hand under the water and held it over some of the bubbles. They popped against the skin of the palm of my hand, tickling in a way that was kind of too fast to actually be ticklish, but was also impossible to ignore.

An involuntary sound burst from me that was suspiciously like a giggle, making him grin widely.

"That was a bit unbecoming of a goddess," I murmured.

He shrugged. "You just seem like any normal person to me."

The statement should insult me, and I knew a few gods who would get angry about someone saying something like that, but it actually made me glow within.

I never asked to be special. I was just me, and it was nice to have someone who could see that.

Even if I hadn't known Jacob for long, it was clear that he was thinking about me more as Qetesh, or maybe even Tesha, and not as a goddess of whatever it was that was most important this week.

I liked it.

"I should get out of the hot tub before I turn into a prune," I said, lifting my fingers and revealing the skin where it had gone a little wrinkly.

He chuckled. "You're at the spa, you're going to turn into a prune."

"Alas, there are some things that even magic can't help with."

"Not unless you were a mermaid."

"Still just a dryad," I said.

"Same. Though I did hope to sprout a tail every time I went to the beach."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. It was my secret boyhood fantasy. I wanted to be a merman." From the smile on his face, I had to guess that was true.

"What colour was your tail?"

"Blue. There was nothing particularly inventive about my fantasy."

"Does there need to be?" I asked. "It's a fantasy, it can be as basic as you want it to be. I wanted to be a lion shifter."

"See, that's inventive."

"I lived in Egypt. Every other person wanted to be a lion shifter," I pointed out.

"And it stayed with me long afterwards. When humans started putting me on their walls, they would ask me what animal I would want to be associated with.

I thought I was going to get a fun head like a lot of the other Egyptian gods, but instead, they painted me standing on top of a lion. "

He chuckled. "I might have seen those drawings. I hoped you were going to tell me an exciting story about a time you really did stand on a lion."

"I hate to disappoint you, but it never happened. I didn't go around holding a snake in my hand either. I'm actually quite scared of them."

"I have to imagine that's a normal reaction to have if you live in Egypt."

"You get used to them after a while," I assured him. "But now I really should get out. You're not supposed to spend too long in the hot tub."

"I've never understood why that is."

I shrugged and moved over to the stairs. "I always assumed it was something to do with making sure other people got to use it, rather than anything else. But I could be wrong."

"No idea," he responded.

"It shall have to remain a mystery."

"I'm going to go for a swim," Jacob said, gesturing towards the pool.

I smiled at him. "Have fun." I headed over to my chair and made sure that my towel was spread out. It was warm enough in here that I should dry off quickly, but there was no harm in making sure of that.

I let out a contented sigh and relaxed, letting all of my worries slip away. It was going to be a rowdy weekend if some of the past events of Ella's were anything to go by, so I was going to make the most of every moment of peace that I could get.

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QETESH

Any predictions of noise had been underestimated now that there were forty people in the room.

I didn't even understand how Ella and Nadia were this close to so many people.

I'd certainly known more over the course of my long life, but that didn't mean I'd want to invite them all to an event like this.

Then again, it was probably because I wouldn't have an event like this in the first place. I didn't mind this many people around when they were supposed to be talking to one another and I was just there to oversee everything, but here, I was one of the guests.

"Tesda!" Ella cried as she sat down in the seat beside me. Her cheeks were already a little flushed from drinking, but she seemed happy.

"Are you having a good time?" I asked.

"The best. I'm getting maaaaaariied!"

"I certainly hope so, this is a lot of celebrating to do if you're not," I teased.

"It's going to be amazing." She let out a wistful sigh. "And it wouldn't be happening if it wasn't for you."

"You might have met Nadia another way," I said. "Or have found love somewhere else."

"Pssssshhhhh, don't tell me that you don't believe in soul mates?"

"I believe in good matches," I said. "And people who work hard to be a good fit for one another."

"Eurgh, you're so boring. What about the love of your life?"

"If there's a love of my life, then they've waited a long time to show themselves," I pointed out.

"Ah." She clicked her fingers. "That's because my brother hadn't been born yet."

I raised an eyebrow. "I thought your plan to set us up was a sneaky one?"

"It's taking too long."

I shook my head in amusement. "Okay, so why do you want to set me up with Jacob?"

"Then you'd be my sister." She threw her arm around me and kissed my cheek.

"Not a good enough reason."

"I don't know. Do you never just get a feeling about two people? I thought you'd get on well because you're kind of similar."

I froze, worry threading through me that I hadn't been as careful with my true feelings about some things as I should have been.

It wasn't that I didn't trust Ella to know the truth about me, I just wasn't entirely sure how I was supposed to present myself to people when I was both ace and a supposedly a sex goddess. "Similar how?"

"I don't know, it's hard to describe. It's just something I noticed about the way the two of you interact with the world. When you touch a tree, you get the same look on your face."

"I didn't realise I had a look."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "You're a dryad, of course you know you have a look when you touch plants. It's fine, there's nothing wrong with it."

"And you think that's a good enough reason to set me up with your brother?"

"I'm not saying you have to marry him." She reached forward and flicked my nose.

"You're drunk."

"A little," she said. "But seriously, you don't have to marry him. But give him a chance, you might like him."

"I do like him," I promised.

"Good. Then you won't mind if I love ya and leave ya." She leaned forward and kissed my cheek with a little too much sloppiness for my liking.

I wiped it with my napkin just in time for the new arrival to get to me.

"It would seem that I'm going to have to fight my sister for your attention," Jacob joked as he took a seat.

I laughed. "Less than you think you have to, she spent most of the time telling me that I should give you a chance because I'll like you. Something about how you touch trees."

"I've never heard that one before."

I shrugged. "That's Ella. I suppose she has seen us both touch wood."

He snorted. "Please tell me that was purposeful?"

"Of course. Though I can assure you that she's never seen me touch that kind of wood."

"I should hope not. Though I don't think I can say the same. Her lack of boundaries is not a new thing."

"That's not an image I'll be spending much time considering," I promised.

"Probably for the best, I was a gangly teenager."

"I'm sure you weren't."

"Oh, I definitely was. One second." He pulled out his phone and tapped on a few buttons until he pulled up someone's profile. He turned it so that I could see a grainy photo on the screen. "You can blame my dad for uploading that one."

"You and Ella look cute," I said, clearly picking out both of them. "But you're right, you were a little bit gangly."

"I grew into my limbs."

"I'd show you a photo of teenage me in return, but I think we both know that's not something I have access to."

"I've seen your wall paintings, that counts."

"Very true. I suppose you could even say that you'd seen me naked thanks to those."

He let out a snort. "I don't think that counts."

"It doesn't really."

A server arrived and poured the two of us some wine, before carrying on around the table. I'd forgotten that there was a set menu for this evening and that I'd filled it in ages ago.

"Though I have had the temptation to send a wall painting back to people who have messaged me asking for nudes," I told him.

"I would have found that hilarious." He leaned in and picked up his wine.

"That's because you wouldn't have asked for them in the first place."

"Not now. But when I was in my early twenties and trying to fit in, I was guilty of it a couple of times. I felt awful after both."

"Who did you ask?"

"A girl I was dating at the time. She was all for it, I think she thought it might improve our sex life."

"Did it?"

"Not really. She was just the first of a string of partners I disappointed during my university years," he said sadly.

I reached out to touch his arm. "You didn't disappoint them."

"I did. Several of them told me so."

"Then that was cruel. You were just figuring out who you were. I'm sure some of them found out some surprises about their desires once they got older."

"I'm sure they did."

The starter arrived, cutting through our conversation. Some of the general noise in the room faded away as people started to eat, and I dug into my salad.

"I have a question for you," Jacob said.

"Mmm?"

"Are you vegetarian?"

"Should I be worried about how closely you've been watching me?" I joked.

"What? No, I'm sorry..."

"It's fine. I'm not, but I'm picky about my meat, so I tend to order vegetarian when I'm eating out. Sometimes, I tell people just because it's easier than explaining." It wasn't something I ever really told anyone, but it seemed like I was just telling Jacob all of my secrets.

"I'm the same with fish," he said. "I avoid it whenever I can. If I have good fish, it's

fine, but bad fish? I won't want to eat anything for three days."

I grimaced. "That's not fun."

"Not really, no. So I avoid it. Maybe I should take a leaf out of your book and try ordering veggie."

"Only if you like it," I said. "And sometimes, only a trashy burger will do."

He chuckled. "One with lots of pickles?"

I wrinkled my nose. "Definitely not. I love good-quality pickles. But the ones from fast food places are a no-go."

"Got it, so always order them without."

"If you're ordering for me, then yes, absolutely."

"Why do I feel like I should be making notes?" he mused as he took another sip of wine.

"No idea, I'm not going to quiz you on the things I like at the end of the weekend," I promised.

"Maybe it's just because I feel like I've known you for longer than I have."

"Makes sense." I picked up my wine glass and swilled it around. "We've both had Ella talking about us. There are things that you know about me that I don't even know you know. And vice versa."

"Now there's a scary thought."

I laughed and finished my wine, only for one of the servers to return and top it back up. "I'm going to have to be careful with that, or I'm going to end up drinking too much."

"Are you a lightweight, Tesha?"

"Definitely. There are some things that even thousands of years of life can't improve, and tolerance to alcohol is one of them.

I really should pace myself. I'm going to set a reminder to drink some water before bed.

"I reached out for where my handbag was hanging on a hook at the edge of the table and knocked it off, causing me to devolve into a fit of laughter.

"Maybe it's time for the water now," Jacob said.

"I'm fine, just a clumsy moment," I promised, leaning down to pick up my stuff and shove it back into my bag.

"Mmhmm."

I was grateful when he sat back and left me to it, though the rush to my head when I sat back up wasn't great. "Maybe I'll have that water." He reached out and picked up my glass, holding it out to me. "Thanks. Is there any bread?"

"You can have the other half of the slice of toast from my paté," he said.

"That'll do."

He handed it over without even questioning whether it was too intimate of a thing for

us to do.

Even as I munched on the bread, I didn't think it was.

It felt right. Which was just how being around Jacob was making me feel in general, even if it had been a long time since anyone had made me feel that.

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JACOB

Tesha stumbled up the stairs, and I steadied her, causing her to laugh more.

"You only had three glasses of wine," I said.

"I know," she groaned. "It just goes right to my head. It'll wear off when I lie down."

"True. Though maybe the stairs were the wrong idea."

She laughed again, then covered her mouth. "We had no choice. Someone threw up in the lift."

"Yeah, I'd probably have added to that if we'd gone inside. The smell always sets me off."

"Then it's good to walk."

"Yes, though you should maybe take off your heels..."

"It's fine, we're almost at the bedrooms, and I already feel better."

"Good." I still stayed close to her as she stumbled down the corridor. Her words might be clear, but her body definitely hadn't caught up when it came to coordination.

"This is me!" She threw her hands into the air when we got to the door of room twelve.

"So it is."

"Thanks for walking me home, Jacob."

"My pleasure, Tesha."

She smiled in a way that made her whole face light up. There was truly something beautiful about the way she expressed her emotions. She was animated and endearing, all at the same time. She opened her bag and searched through it, presumably to find her key.

Her smile fell and a more concerned expression crossed her face.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Will you hold these?" she asked.

I opened my hands and let her pile things into it, mildly surprised about how much could fit into such a small bag, and the fact she was trusting me with her keys and purse.

She turned the bag upside down and shook it, letting out a groan and rubbing her forehead.

She looked up and let out a frustrated sigh. "I've lost my key."

I raised an eyebrow. "I thought you were supposed to be good with those."

"Very funny," she responded.

"Sorry, the joke was right there."

"I know." She started putting her stuff away. "It must have fallen out of my bag when I knocked it. Do you think I could go back to the dining room to look?"

"They kicked us out and locked up, remember?"

She groaned. "I guess I'm going to have to go down to reception and ask for a new one."

"It's closed for the night," I said.

"What? Who closes the reception when there are guests?"

"No hotel I'd ever run. But the one my sister picked for her pre-wedding knees-up? That one."

"Eurgh. What am I going to do? I can't wake someone up in the middle of the night."

"My bed is huge, you can share, if you want." The suggestion slipped out before I truly had time to think about whether it was a good idea. But she looked so stressed by the idea of not having a key, and it wasn't like I could just let her sleep out here on the floor.

She laughed. "If you were a different man, I'd think that you had ulterior motives."

"Definitely not," I promised. "I can promise you that my hands will stay to themselves."

Indecision warred on her face. "Are you sure? I don't want you to be uncomfortable either."

"I'm the one inviting you," I reminded her.

"All right, but you're going to have to lend me a shirt, too. This dress makes me look good, but it's not exactly great for sleeping."

I laughed. "All right, you can borrow a shirt."

"I'll wash it before I give it back..."

"That's really not necessary," I said, digging my key out of my pocket and letting us both into my room.

I held the door open and let her inside, realising that there was surprisingly little about this that actually felt uncomfortable.

I liked that. But it wasn't a huge surprise.

Tesha had made me feel like that almost since the moment we met.

"I know this is a really strange question, but you don't happen to have a spare toothbrush, do you?" She looked at me with large, dark eyes that didn't seem nearly so drunk any more.

"Would it surprise you if I said I did?"

"A little." She looked around the room, but I doubted she'd find anything of interest. It was likely the same as hers.

"My toothbrush ran out of charge this morning and I couldn't find my charger, so I just bought a packet of toothbrushes from the supermarket on my way here. You're free to take the other one."

"Thank you. I hate trying to sleep when I haven't brushed my teeth. And even if we're

not going to have sneaky sex in the middle of the night that we pretend didn't happen tomorrow, I don't want to offend you with my morning breath."

"You think we'd regret sex in the morning?" I asked curiously.

She shrugged. "I didn't say we'd regret it, I said that we'd pretend it didn't happen. Those are two different things."

"I suppose that's probably not what Ella wants to hear when she asks if we had a good time tonight."

Tesha laughed, a beautiful sound that lit up the room. "Either that, or she'd love it and start planning our wedding."

"Are you not married already?"

"Not last time I checked. You shouldn't believe everything you read about the gods online."

"You'll have to tell me what's true and what isn't." I dug a clean t-shirt out of my suitcase and held it out to her. "It's nothing fancy."

"I appreciate it all the same." She took it with a genuine smile. "Mind if I use the bathroom first?"

"Knock yourself out." I gestured in that direction.

She set her bag down on the bedside table and headed into the bathroom with my shirt.

I sat down on the bed and let out a sigh.

This wasn't the kind of situation I envisaged getting myself into when my sister had invited me on this weekend.

And yet there was a tiny part of me that was excited at the prospect of getting to spend a little bit more time with Tesha, especially when we'd be truly alone this time.

There wouldn't be anyone we worked with waiting tables nearby, or my sister planning some kind of thing to get us to spend more time together.

It was just going to be the two of us, and I definitely liked that more than I wanted to admit.

QETESH

It should feel strange to lie in a bed with someone for the first time, but that wasn't what it felt like to have Jacob beside me. I could hear him breathing, and knew that he wasn't asleep.

But did that mean he'd want to talk to me?

"Thank you for letting me stay in here tonight," I said softly.

"It's no problem," he said.

"I like your choice of shirt. It's really comfy." I reached out to touch the fabric.

"It's one of my favourites," he admitted. "It's old and worn, but it's comfortable, and that makes it perfect for travelling. I was going to wear it on Sunday when I drove home."

"I'm sorry to have stolen your travel shirt."

"That's okay, this is also a good use for it," he promised.

"It's a nice end to a good night," I whispered.

"It is."

I let out a small sigh of relief. It was nice to hear him say it, and there was no doubt in

my mind that he meant it.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"I think I owe you answers to a dozen questions for tonight," I joked.

Jacob chuckled, the sound rich and deep. Welcoming. I liked it. "How long have you known you were ace?"

I took a deep breath. That wasn't the question I expected him to ask, but it was reasonable that he wanted to know the answer. "A few thousand years. I mean, I didn't have a name for it then, but I knew that I wasn't interested in sex the same way other people were."

"Wow, that's a long time," he said.

"It is." I was glad it was dark. It made the admission come easier, especially when it wasn't one I'd made at any other point in my life.

"Was that before or after you became known as a sex goddess?"

"I don't actually know," I admitted. "I didn't keep much track of what people were worshipping me for, it's not like I can do much about any of it. People have called me a lot of things. A goddess of nature, sex, beauty, protection, fertility..."

"That's a busy roster."

"It's nothing compared to some of the other gods. If you want a long list, you should ask Hathor."

"I'm not very used to making small talk with gods," he pointed out.

"And yet you work for one."

He chuckled. "Aine didn't reveal that to me until after she'd offered me the contract."

"Did you consider turning it down when you found out?" I asked curiously.

"Yes. But she offered me a great salary, and the job is close to Ella and our parents. That was too good to turn down, even if the risks of annoying a god were greatly increased by taking the job."

"Do you regret it?"

"No. It's a good job. And even if I haven't used some of the benefits available to me, it's an attractive package, especially if I want to start dating."

"Do you? You said you were open to it."

"Yes, but I'm hesitant." He sighed, and there was a slight movement from the other side of the bed. "I don't mind sex, it can be fun, with the right person and the right situation, but...finding that can be tough."

I stayed silent, waiting for him to elaborate if he wanted to, but not wanting him to feel like I was pushing him further than he wanted to go.

"My ex said that she understood, and that she respected my boundaries, but when it came to it, she didn't," he said.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"Not your fault," he reminded me. "She just didn't understand that my body responding didn't mean that I wanted to have sex thrust upon me."

If she wanted it, all she had to do was ask if we could that night, or something like that.

I wouldn't have said no very much. But she'd just start touching me and expect that to work.

Then she'd get angry because her touching me would work in as far as I'd get hard, but I'd still say that I didn't want to have sex.

She couldn't understand that I didn't want that. "

"Oh, Jacob."

"It's okay. I ended it with her once I realised it was never going to change. But it's made me wary of dating. One of my other exes was also ace, and things were easier on that front."

"But on others?"

"We weren't compatible. He wanted a family, and I definitely wasn't ready for that. I'm still not sure that I am. But that was the end of the relationship."

"That's hard."

"Yeah. It was after the last relationship that I started wearing the ring on my right hand.

I figured that I could be open to dating, while not pursuing it, but the ring might help with knowing who could be trusted to respect my sexuality.

" From the movement of his arms in the dark, I had to assume he was touching the

finger where his ace ring would go.

"Does it work?"

"Good question. You're one of the few people who has known what it is."

"I have one of my own," I whispered. "I've never worn it outside the house."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm supposed to be a sex goddess. Or the goddess of sacred ecstasy , whatever that means."

"I have to assume orgasms."

I laughed despite myself. "I guess I do give good orgasms. But it's not related to my magic, kind of. Being a goddess is complicated."

"It sounds like it."

"I feel like I can't really talk about how I feel about sex because people don't understand. Most of the other love gods seem to adore sex."

"Have you ever asked them about their opinions?"

"No," I responded.

"Then you can't really assume to know what they think," he pointed out. "If you've not told any of them about how you feel, then it would seem reasonable to assume that some of them feel the same. Maybe even Aine."

"Aine isn't ace," I said firmly. "But I concede to the rest of your point.

And it's not that I don't like sex. I feel like you do.

It can be fun, but I don't want to be surprised by it.

The thing is, that's not what people expect from a goddess like me.

I've not really had many relationships, and they've been spaced out over the decades.

And it's been a while since I had sex with anyone at all. It's just easier not to."

"What's a while to an immortal?"

I frowned and stared at the ceiling while I tried to work it out. "I'm not sure. Five years or so? I don't really count. What about for you?"

"About two, I think."

I nodded, even though he couldn't see it. "If you were with someone else who was ace and sex positive, would you have sex with them?"

"Asking for yourself?" he joked.

I cleared my throat. "I guess I'm just asking because I haven't had many chances to actually talk to other people who feel the same way I do."

"I'm just teasing," he responded. "If they wanted to, then I'd be up for it, just as something fun we could do together. But I don't imagine it would be often."

"No, I don't think I'd want that either," I said softly. "It is nice to talk to someone who

understands that."

"I suppose now could be a good time to ask you on a date, then."

I froze. "A date?"

"Dinner, maybe. Or a movie if you prefer, though there won't be any making out in the back row if we do that, I actually want to watch the movie."

I laughed. "Fair enough."

"So, would you like to?"

"Is that wise?" I asked. "We sort of work together..."

"In that our boss is the same person," he pointed out. "But if you don't want to, I understand."

"No, that's not what I'm saying," I responded quickly. "I guess I was just worried about work. And Ella. How would she respond?"

"I wasn't planning on telling her straight away."

"That makes a lot of sense. I'm sorry, I'm not very good at any of this. I've really not had much experience."

"You don't need to be good at it," he assured me. "All you need to do is decide if you want to go out to dinner with me. One where my sister is nowhere near."

"Yes, I'd like that."

"There's no sex afterwards," he joked.

I laughed. "If I thought there was a risk of that, I'd be saying no." I took a deep breath. "Which isn't to say that I don't think sex with you would be fun, I'm sure it is."

"I'd like to think so. And if the date goes well, we can find out at some point."

"But only if we plan it."

"Yes." There was something like relief in his voice. "Really, we've already talked about the hardest part."

I laughed. "Have you forgotten that I'm an immortal goddess?"

"Actually, I kind of had. Is that another hard conversation?"

"I guess so. I don't age, and I'm probably not going to die. That has to be something you're okay with."

"I have to ask...you're probably not going to die?" There was a curiosity in his voice that I should have expected.

"Well, I heal at the normal rate for any dryad, so I have to assume that if I suffered from a fatal accident, then it would kill me. But I have no proof of that, because I've never been in a fatal accident."

"Ah, fair enough. But shouldn't my mortality be more of something that should be a deal breaker for you?"

"That depends on whether you'd ever consider immortality," I said.

"I didn't realise that was something I could consider."

"It's not hard to do," I said. "All gods are capable of it."

But I think that is something we would need to talk about.

I think I'm theoretically okay with whatever a partner would want when it came to immortality, but I don't think that will stop it from hurting if they choose to leave me through death. "

"Ah, understandable," he said softly. "I guess I've never really thought about it. But I guess I'm open to talking about immortality. I suppose it has its downsides."

"Several thousand years is a long time," I said. "And the people around you die. I've said goodbye to more people than I could tell you tonight."

"What do you do to remember them?" he asked.

"What makes you think I do anything?"

"Just a hunch."

"I have a series of journals," I said. "Though some of the earlier ones are papyrus scrolls."

When I lose someone who means something to me, I write down everything I can think of about them, and I draw their picture.

Now, I add a photo, if I have one, but I still draw them.

When I'm feeling like I miss someone, I look over their page, and then start reading

the others.

It makes me cry, but it also makes me feel close to the people I've lost, and there's something beautiful about that, even if it hurts. "

"That is beautiful," he said. "Is that what you'd do for me? If we worked and I chose to die?"

"It's what I've done for a couple people I've had relationships with before. There's one I haven't added because they're immortal, and the rest ended badly, so I never put them in."

"I'm sorry about that."

"I'm not. They weren't right for me."

"Even so, I'm sorry they couldn't see what an amazing person you are."

I didn't really have anything I could say in response to that. Instead, I reached out across the bed and took his hand in mine, enjoying how well they fit together, even if it was something new.

Sometimes, things just felt right, and I was looking forward to finding out where this went next.

QETESH

It was strange waking up in a bed with someone else in it. It was hardly the first time I'd shared with someone, but it had been a long time.

I shifted in the bed, bringing me closer to the warm cocoon of Jacob's arms. He tightened his grip around me, and I relaxed further into him. I wasn't sure precisely when the two of us had started cuddling in the middle of the night, or which of us initiated, but it felt good to wake up like this.

Jacob cleared his throat. "I'm going to need to move, Tesha."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to take up your space."

"You're fine. It's just that certain things are reacting."

"Ah." I shuffled away and he laid back, but opened his arm, inviting me back into the cuddle. I should say no. I should say that now I was awake, I should leave and go sort out my missing key situation, but instead, I rolled back towards him and rested my head on his shoulder.

"Thanks," he murmured.

"No problem. I don't want you to be uncomfortable."

"I appreciate it." There was something in his voice that made me think there might be more to it than I first thought.

"Is this the kind of situation your ex wouldn't understand?" I asked without really thinking about whether I should. It was morning now, there was a chance he didn't want to have the same kind of conversations we'd been having last night.

"Yes." His voice cracked slightly as he said the word. "She'd say that my body was telling me that it was time to have sex, and when I said that wasn't how it worked, she'd tell me that I was wrong. Often while trying to get me to have sex with her."

"That doesn't seem like a very good way of getting anyone in the mood."

"No, not really."

"I'm sorry she did that."

"We were young."

"That's not really an excuse," I pointed out. "Unless you were sixteen and just coming to terms with hormones, she should have understood that you saying you didn't want to have sex meant that you didn't want to have sex. Especially in the morning when these things just happen."

"I wished she'd understood that. But in reality, that was only one of our problems. I stayed with her longer than I should have done."

"How long?"

"Five years. That's probably nothing to you, but it feels like a long time to me."

"It is a long time." My chest aches for him. "Especially when someone is forcing you to do something you don't want to."

"It wasn't always like that," he said. "It grew and became too big of a thing over the years."

Maybe we should have talked to someone and we could have gotten through it, but in the end, it was just better for us to part ways.

Thankfully, she cut off everyone in my life, so she won't be at Ella's wedding. "

I snorted. "Is it really a lesbian wedding if there isn't an ex there?"

"I think that's meant for the ex of one of the brides, and as far as I know, there are going to be four of them."

"I should really research them so that I can make sure I keep them away from Ella and Nadia."

"Oh, one of them is the other Maid of Honour."

I groaned. "Of course they are."

"You'll be fine. I can point them out to you at breakfast."

"Great, I appreciate that." My stomach rumbled. "Speaking of, I should probably go and see if they've found my key, otherwise my choices for breakfast attire are last night's dress, or your shirt, and I'm sure both of those would cause some questions we'd rather not answer."

"Mmm. Fair."

"Though it's hard to get out of bed," I admitted. "It was nice to wake up with someone, even if this was unplanned."

"Unplanned cuddling is fine," he assured me.

"Oh, good. I didn't want to have accidentally cross a line or something." I sat up, regretting leaving his arms, even though I knew I needed to.

He smiled at me in a way that made me certain everything was fine.

Reassured, I got off the bed and scooped up last night's dress.

As much as I didn't want to go traipsing around the hotel wearing it, especially because I didn't want to run into Ella and have to explain where I'd been, there really was no other option.

I brushed my teeth, grateful for Jacob's spare toothbrush, and got dressed.

He was propped up in the bed by the time I got back, and I paused for a moment, feeling as if I should do something more before I left, but not knowing where we were in whatever this was in order to do it.

In theory, we'd agreed to a date, but that didn't mean that we were more than just friends yet.

"I should go," I said, gesturing towards the door.

He nodded, though there did seem to be a hint of disappointment on his face. "I'll see you at breakfast. And I'm going to be keeping you away from the mimosas."

I laughed. "One is fine. Two is not."

"Got it."

I pulled open the door, looking back at him and lingering for a moment.

Neither of us said anything, but that didn't stop the atmosphere from feeling like there had been something.

I pulled the door to a close with a click, trying to ignore the smile that was pulling at my lips.

That had been a good night, even if it hadn't been anything like I'd planned.

I turned around, my whole body going cold as I came face-to-face with Nadia.

She looked at me, then at the door, her eyes widening.

"It's not what you think," I said quickly.

"I don't think anything," she said. "But isn't that Jacob's room?"

I closed my eyes and groaned. "Yes, but it's really not like that.

" Except that we'd stayed up for hours talking, and then woke up embracing.

"I lost my key in the dining room last night, and there was no one in reception, so Jacob offered me a place to crash.

Please don't tell Ella. She's just going to see things that aren't there, and I don't want to take any of her attention away from the wedding. "

Nadia chuckled. "I don't think you're going to manage to do that."

"True. But please?"

"Of course I won't. I was actually coming to see you anyway. I went for an early morning run, and when I came back, one of the staff members said they'd found the key for your room, and gave it to me to give to you."

"Shouldn't they have waited until I came to claim it? You know what, never mind." Now wasn't the time to get into the ins and outs of hotel management.

"I think it's because the rooms are technically booked under us, but yeah, maybe not the best," Nadia said. "Anyway, you'll be glad to know that you don't have to go down to reception in last night's dress and heels, which is probably a good thing because the lift is still out of action."

I wrinkled my nose, the memory of the lift still fresh in my mind.

"Here." Nadia held out my key to me. "Though maybe don't lose it again."

"I don't intend to," I promised. Though how I was going to do that was beyond me when I hadn't meant to lose it the first time. "Thanks, Nadia."

"No problem. I'll see you at breakfast?"

I nodded and turned to my door.

"Oh, and Tesha?"

"Yes?"

"If you really don't want Ella to know that you're into her brother, maybe be a little less obvious about it." She walked off before I could question her further, leaving me staring after her and not really knowing what else to say.

I wasn't being that obvious. Was I?

QETESH

I pulled my suitcase out of my room and wrestled it into the lift. There was still a slight lingering smell that made my stomach churn, but it was only a short trip down and I didn't want to have to navigate the stairs with my suitcase.

The doors opened quickly enough, and I hurried out, going to put my suitcase in my car before I returned for the last breakfast of the weekend.

Everyone was milling around, chatting and eating some delicious-looking pastries.

Without even fully meaning to, I searched the room until I spotted Jacob, and drifted over to him.

His welcoming smile was enough to let me know that I'd made the right decision.

Not that we hadn't spent a lot of time together this weekend already.

I didn't know most of Ella's friends, and the ones I did know, were more like passing acquaintances, while Nadia's were even more like strangers.

From what I'd gathered, Jacob was in the same position of not knowing very many of them, though he had done a good job of pointing out the exes I needed to know about, which had been helpful.

"Morning," he said.

"Morning," I responded. "What's good?" I looked over the buffet table, my stomach rumbling as I did.

"The almond croissants, I tried one yesterday. Not the best I've ever had, but they've got to be up there."

"Then I guess I'm having an almond croissant."

"Get me on too, and I'll grab the drinks?" he checked. "I'll meet you at that table?" he nodded to one at the back.

"Sure. Anything else?"

"Maybe a yoghurt? I can't just eat pastries for breakfast," he said.

"Sure you can, it's a holiday. But I'll get you one."

"I headed over to the buffet and grabbed two plates, adding a croissant to each of them, along with a pot of Greek yoghurt that looked like it had fruit at the bottom.

It wasn't normally something I ate for breakfast, but they looked good, and that was enough of a reason to have one.

Satisfied with my choices, I headed over to the table where Jacob was already sitting with two coffees.

It wasn't until I got there that I realised it was kind of impressive that he knew what I liked already, but I supposed we had been able to drink a couple of coffees at work, as well as those he'd seen me drink this weekend.

I set the plates down on the table and joined him.

Ella's laughter filled the room, and I looked over to where she was talking with a couple of people and not paying us any attention.

"I'm guessing Nadia didn't tell her that she caught me leaving your room," I said.

Jacob laughed. "Probably not, or she'd have demanded an explanation from one of us and definitely would have said something suggestive at least once."

"Even knowing you're ace?"

He shrugged. "She knows I have sex, we've talked about it."

"Isn't that weird?"

"We don't talk about the details," he assured me. "And never will. But it was something that bonded us when we were in our early twenties and working things out. She was figuring out that she didn't like men at all, while I figured out the ace thing."

"That's nice. That it gave you a connection."

"Yeah, it is." He tore the end off his croissant and popped it into his mouth.

"I wish I'd had someone to talk to when I was figuring it out," I said.

"It's not that I didn't have friends, it's just that I didn't feel like I could tell them.

Not feeling like I thought everyone else did made me feel broken, and even more so when they started referring to me as a sex and love goddess. "

"Love and sex aren't the same thing."

"I know that. Though I've said they're entwined for me more times than I can count."

"That's still kind of true," he pointed out. "If you just want to have sex because it's fun and intimate, then you're not going to be doing it with anyone you don't have feelings for. So love is kind of influencing it."

I frowned. "I suppose I've never thought about it like that. I was just saying it because it felt like what people expected me to say."

"I'm sorry you've had to live like that." He reached over the table and touched my hand.

I turned my own and laced our fingers together. It was a dangerous display of affection considering that Ella was in the room, but it felt right, and I cared more about that than I did about the potential of my best friend finding out.

"Maybe things will be different now. Is telling the first person the hardest?"

The contemplative expression on his face told me that he was considering the question, giving me a moment to eat some of my own breakfast, even if it meant letting go of his hand.

"I guess it is," he said after a minute or so. "Not because the first person is the hardest, but because that's the time that you actually admit it to yourself, and you commit to it."

I took a deep breath. "That makes sense."

"You also don't have to tell anyone else until you're ready. I'm not going to tell anyone, and even if we do decide that we're a thing and we want to tell people, no one who knows about me is going to assume that you're ace."

"Thanks, I appreciate it." I smiled at him. "I'll probably tell people eventually. Though maybe as a quiet thing."

"You can tell as many people as you want to," he assured me. "Even if that is only the people you want to start a relationship with."

"That is reassuring." And it was. It was amazing how much a little change like this could make a difference. I'd always felt a disconnect between what I wanted to do as a love goddess, and someone who wanted to help others with finding a connection, and the feelings I had when it came to sex.

Being able to talk to someone else about it had changed things, even if it hadn't been for very long, or even very much. I was different, not difficult. There was nothing wrong with the way I viewed things, I was just wired this way.

I picked up my coffee and took a sip, noticing my watch flashing as I did. I checked it and sighed. "I hate to leave, but I need to get going."

He nodded. "I can walk you out."

"I'd like that." I smiled at him and let him gesture to the door that led out of the dining room. "It's been a good weekend."

"It has."

"Ella seems happy."

"She is," Jacob agreed. "Though there's one thing I'm almost disappointed about."

"Oh?"

"You didn't lose your key last night."

I laughed. "I think once in a weekend is often enough. I'm really grateful that you let me stay with you on Friday night."

"You're welcome. I had a nice time."

"No need to sound so surprised, I'm good company," I joked.

"You are. And it was nice waking up next to someone."

"It was," I said quietly. In all honesty, it had felt better than I expected it to, even if it was still so early in the two of us getting to know one another.

"You know, there was one question I forgot to ask you," Jacob said, bringing us to a stop.

"Oh?" The hotel entrance was completely empty, giving us the perfect amount of privacy for the conversation.

"How do you feel about kisses?"

"I like kisses," I responded.

"Do they need to be planned?"

"No. I mean, I guess it depends. Are we talking about a sweet kiss, or a sexy kiss?" My heart fluttered at the thought, mostly because there was no mistaking why he was asking.

"A sweet kiss. I assumed that sexy kisses would fall under the sex rules."

"They do," I said softly. "Sweet kisses are okay without planning."

"Good." He stepped closer and reached out to brush my hair out of my face.

I looked up at him, a little nervous, but not as much as I expected to be. Maybe it was because I knew that a kiss was just that. A kiss. It didn't mean that he wanted to take me upstairs and roll around with me, it was just a form of affection.

My eyes closed as his lips brushed against mine, soft and gentle, full of emotion. It wasn't like the majority of first kisses I'd shared, mostly because I'd been too aware of what the other person expected from me when we'd shared them. This was better.

We broke apart, and I found myself smiling. "You can surprise me with kisses like that," I promised.

"Good." The skin around his eyes crinkled as he smiled back at me.

"I..."

"I knew it!"

I grimaced and let out a groan at the sound of Ella's voice.

Jacob sighed and turned to his sister. "You didn't know anything."

"I knew the two of you would like each other," she said brightly. "And I was right! Nadia thought I was wrong." She clapped her hands together.

I exchanged a look with Jacob, not really knowing what to do. Ella was my best friend, and I'd normally talk to her about this stuff, but it was a little bit different when she was also his sister.

"This is new," I said. "We haven't been on a date yet."

"I know, I know. But you're a love goddess, you wouldn't even be considering a date if you thought it couldn't be something."

I opened my mouth to protest, but she'd already disappeared before I could get any words out.

"Well, I suppose that didn't quite go to plan," Jacob said.

"No," I said. "It was good before Ella interrupted."

"It was," he agreed.

"Unfortunately, I do need to get going, I have to get back for a meeting."

"On a Sunday?"

"What do the days of the week mean to gods?" I responded.

He chuckled. "Ah, I hadn't thought about that."

I shrugged. "It's something you might have to get used to."

"I hope so."

I went up on my toes and pressed my lips against his. It was only a fleeting kiss, but I hoped it would reassure him that I really did have to go, and I wasn't just trying to avoid him. "I'll see you at work?"

"That depends," he said.

I raised an eyebrow. "On?"

"Whether you want to go on a date before then or not."

"I'm free tomorrow night," I said. "Message me?"

"I will."

I waved and walked away, feeling like something major had changed for me.

And I supposed it had. I'd been on plenty of dates before, but it was different this time.

I was going to go on one with someone who understood a part of me I'd never shared with anyone before.

And maybe if I had done, I would have been in this position sooner, but that wasn't how my life had turned out.

Ultimately, the past didn't matter. I couldn't change it.

The only thing I could do was enjoy the moment I'd found myself in.

And I had every intention of doing that.

QETESH

There was a part of me that felt like I should be nervous about going on a first date.

But then again, it turned out that there were a lot of things that I felt like I should feel that I actually shouldn't.

And while this might technically be my first date with Jacob, it wasn't like we hadn't had date-like situations, at least when it came to the intimacy between us.

It should have felt strange to wake up in bed with him, but he'd made it so comfortable that I hadn't had time to think about that.

My taxi pulled up outside the restaurant, and I paid the fare, getting out and finding him waiting for me wearing an open-necked shirt with a grey blazer over the top.

His face lit up when he saw me, reminding me of exactly why I'd said yes to this date, and why we were going on it so quickly after we'd first floated the idea.

I leaned in without even thinking about it, and gave him a kiss. It was fleeting, but it was also perfect in that. After saying goodbye yesterday, it would have felt stranger not to kiss him.

"A kiss before the first date is kind of impressive, all things considered," he said with a laugh.

"It doesn't really feel like a first date," I admitted.

"True. Now, I'm going to warn you that I've never been here before," he said as he turned towards the restaurant, placing a hand on the small of my back.

It was a nice touch, reassuring. And even better because I knew his hand wasn't about to stray downwards.

At least, not without asking and planning.

"I'm surprised you chose it if you don't know it." That didn't seem very like him.

"I asked a few people I knew for recommendations about the nicest vegetarian food in town," he said. "Apparently, that's what the chef who runs this place specialises in."

"Oh, I didn't know that." A warm feeling filled me at his thoughtfulness, especially because I wasn't vegetarian, it really was nothing more than a preference for what I ordered at restaurants, and nothing more than that.

"I hope it's good. But if it's not, then we can find something else."

"I'm sure it'll be great."

It was reasonably busy inside, but whoever had designed the layout of the restaurant had clearly thought about the dining experience, and the table is still intimate, without it feeling like we're just at one of our houses.

"You look beautiful," he said once we were alone. "I meant to say outside, but I forgot."

"You look good yourself," I responded. "The grey suits you."

"Thanks, I like to think so." He touched his blazer. "It's been a while since I dressed up for a date."

"But you didn't wear your ring," I said, nodding towards his right hand.

He shrugged. "I didn't need to wear it. You already know, and I have no doubt that you're not going to forget."

My heart constricted at the words, and at the certainty in his voice. This was a safe place for him to be. And that meant that it was a safe place for me to be. I liked that we could create that, even in the short amount of time that we'd known one another.

"I'm glad you feel safe."

"I do."

The waitress appeared to take our order, leaving Jacob smiling when she left.

"What?" I asked.

"I knew you were going to order the fig salad."

I laughed. "What if I'd not been in the mood for figs?"

"Then I wouldn't have said anything and still looked smart."

"It was a good bet. I also really like goat cheese."

"It does make a good salad," he said.

"You don't mind that we're somewhere with mostly vegetarian food, right?"

"Of course not," he assured me. "I do like to eat meat, but I wouldn't want to restrict your choices just so that I could have it. Besides, if I'm honest, it's just good food that I like."

"Getting ideas for the menu for the hotel? You can change that in just over a week."

He chuckled and leaned closer. "I don't think so. I know better than to mess with chefs and their menus."

"Fair enough. Did you know that Poseidon is a chef?" I asked.

"No?"

"You wouldn't want to go to his restaurant, he mostly does seafood. But it's supposed to be good."

"I should tell Ella, she loves seafood."

"I'm sure Nadia has taken her there already, she knows all the best spots in town."

Our waitress set out drinks down on the table between us, and I picked up my glass, glad that I'd gone for a non-alcoholic option.

"Put off by wine?" he joked, nodding towards my glass.

"I had enough of it at the weekend," I joked. "I'm just more of a social drinker. If I'm left to my own devices, I'm more likely to go for something non-alcoholic. I've actually been enjoying Ella being on her no alcohol before the wedding events kick."

"Did she actually manage?"

"When she was around me, she did. I'm not sure about anyone else."

"I'm impressed. I know what Ella is like."

"Chaotic," I responded with affection. "Unless she's talking about plants, and then she knows everything the moment that you mention the name of what you're looking for."

"She does do that. She was always spending time in the nursery as a kid. Our grandparents used to run it, and every free moment she got, she'd be there asking Grandad about the names of all the plants and everything else he could tell her about them."

"Did you not like that?"

"I didn't want to be confined by what I was," he said. "Don't get me wrong, I like plants as much as the next dryad. But I never wanted them to become my personality. So I tried to do other things. I liked playing tennis when I was a teenager."

"Would you believe I've never played it?"

"I don't imagine it was a thing in Ancient Egypt."

"Oh, it was. It didn't look exactly like modern tennis, but it existed. I just never played it. There was a lot going on at the time."

"I can imagine that becoming a goddess took up a lot of time."

I laughed. "Less than you might think. Becoming immortal is easy, all you need is a god."

"That doesn't sound that easy," he responded.

"You're on a date with one," I reminded him. "And I was a priestess at the time, it was almost guaranteed that I would come across gods fairly regularly."

"Ah, fair enough."

The waitress came over and set our starters in front of us. I picked up my fork and twirled it around.

"Once I was immortal, it was just a case of amassing enough people worshipping me in a certain amount of time. And no, I can't tell you exactly what that time is, or how many people, no one actually knows the answer to that. I just know that it was enough. And here I am."

"Okay, so what's the difference between being a god and being immortal?" he asked.

"A little extra magic," I said. "I have a couple of abilities other than those I have from being a dryad, but they're not particularly flashy."

I'm certainly not about to start performing miracles.

"I stabbed one of the figs with my fork, and added some of the cheese to it."

I let out a hum as the burst of flavour hit my tongue.

"Can people still become gods?" he asked.

"Yes. But it's a bit harder now, and they'd need to become immortal first. It'll be people like huge celebrities who would be able to become gods now, rather than people who are worshipped as gods, if that makes sense."

He nodded. "And that's how Santa was at your event."

"He goes by Nick," I said. "But yes. He's technically a god because of how he's been worshipped."

"It's fascinating."

"It is, but I can't really explain much of it to you," I admitted. "I'm not really a philosopher."

"That's fair enough. Neither am I. These are just things I've wondered about since the moment I learned that the gods were real and walked among us."

"I guess it's because we're not gods in the sense that most people think.

I've never been able to control anyone or anything outside the bounds of my own magic.

And it's the same for the others. Zeus can create small lightning bolts, but he can't make storms. Neptune can influence the small patch of sea around him, but he can't control the creatures within it, or the waves to a greater extent than that.

It's like being a slightly more powerful version of what we were before. "

"Except that you said that you were able to do more than just your dryad magic."

"Well, yes. I have the ability to make someone else immortal, and I'm able to control my own fertility.

But that's about it, unless there's an ability I haven't discovered in the past few thousand years.

It's one of the reasons I've always wondered about my position as a sex goddess,

other than the obvious. "

"You've lost me."

"Oh, well some of the other pleasure gods have the ability to give magical orgasms. I've never had that ability."

He raised an eyebrow. "I see."

"Sorry, probably not what you wanted to talk about."

"I don't mind," he assured me. "But you said some of them, meaning not all of them do. So it could just be a coincidence that you can't."

"Maybe. Or that not enough people worshipped me for sex, so I never gained the ability." I frowned as I thought about that and leaned back in my seat.

"Everything okay?" Jacob asked, a concerned expression on his face.

"Yes. Sorry. It was just a freeing thought. If not enough people ever worshipped me for it, so I never gained the ability, then it kind of means that no one really cares if I am a sex goddess."

"I guess not."

I considered a moment longer. "I think that just makes me feel a bit more comfortable with myself."

"Which can only be a good thing," he responded.

"It is." I put my fork down. The food was delicious, but in all honesty, I'd barely been

paying attention to it, the company was too good for that. And the conversation was making me consider things in a way I never had before.

I wasn't entirely sure what I was going to do with that, but it was helpful to me figuring out who I was. Which sounded like a ridiculous thing for me to say, even to myself, when I was a few thousand years old, but at least I'd gotten here, and that was the main thing.

I looked across the table and smiled at Jacob. He looked relaxed, which wasn't a surprise. It was easy to be around him, and that was why I kept searching him out. And I had every reason to think that he felt the same.

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JACOB

Tesha turned around the moment I entered the room and flashed me a smile that made my heart skip a beat.

She put down the plant pot she was carrying and came over with a confidence that could only be gained from knowing herself so well.

Even so, I was reasonably sure that since she'd told me she was ace, she'd grown even more so.

It made sense. By saying the words out loud to me, she'd fully accepted it about herself, even if she'd known inside for a long time.

"Hey," I said.

"Hi," she responded.

"I brought you a coffee."

"Thank you. I didn't even realise you knew I was here."

"I might have only worked here a few weeks, but I noticed you always come at this time to get ready for the party tomorrow."

"I shouldn't be nearly so predictable."

"To be fair, it's your work schedule, it's okay to be predictable." I held out the coffee for her and she took it.

"Thank you, this was very sweet."

"I got one for myself too," I said, lifting my other hand so she could see my coffee cup. "It was time for a break."

"Well, you are the hotel manager, you do get to decide when people go on them. Except for me, because I'm technically not under you. Not yet, anyway."

I laughed. "Innuendo, really?"

"Sometimes, it's funny." She grinned.

"True."

"So, I was thinking," she said, tapping her finger against the cup.

"Oh?"

"About another date."

"Then we've been thinking about the same thing," I said. "What did you have in mind? I picked last time, it only seems right that you pick this time."

A slightly hesitant expression came over her face. "I thought you could come over and see my plants."

I chuckled. "Is that meant to be a euphemism?"

"No. But also, not no. I do want to show you my greenhouse, it's important to me, and we're getting to know each other, right?"

"Yes," I said.

"But I guess I also wouldn't be upset if we did have sex afterwards. Well, after dinner."

"You want to have sex?"

She took a deep breath. "Yeah, I do. It's been a while, and it is more fun with another person rather than on my own. But I've never actually had sex with someone who completely understood my situation, and I'm kind of curious about that."

"Sure. We can have sex if you want," I said.

"Are you sure? I don't want to push too far."

"It's fine, Tesha," I assured her. "And like you said, it'll be fun."

She let out a sigh of relief. "Okay, so, just how planned do you like it?"

"We don't have to write minutes to have sex," I assured her. "Though I do have ground rules."

"Sure. What are they?" She leaned against the counter and took a sip of her coffee.

"We use protection."

"Absolutely. Trust me, I've seen enough complications that come from gods having kids, I don't have any desire to add them to my life."

I stared at her for a moment, a little taken aback by the statement.

Not because she was against having kids, but because I'd kind of assumed that she couldn't have them.

Then again, she had said something about being able to control her fertility, and there'd be no need for that if she couldn't get pregnant.

"What?" she asked curiously.

"I didn't realise you could have kids."

"I have no reason to think I can't."

"And is that where demi-gods would come from?" The question wasn't really relevant to the current conversation, but I was too curious to not ask it.

"Oh, no. Any child I had would be either a dryad, or whatever the father was. They'd be mortal."

"Ah, I can see where the complications could come from," I said.

"Exactly. It's just not something anyone wants without being prepared. Is that your only rule?"

I cleared my throat. I didn't think I really needed to say this part, but there was no reason not to say it when we were clearly going to be putting these rules in place. "I don't want spontaneous sex at any point. We have the sex we agree to, and if we want more, we have to plan it."

"That's fine by me," she promised. "I like it that way."

"Good. So I guess that's it."

She raised an eyebrow. "Nothing about what we can and can't do?"

"I mean, it's the first time we're going to have sex, I was assuming that things would be fairly standard. Unless there's something in particular you like that isn't."

She nodded. "I've not done this part before. The actual talking about it. I guess I feel like I should have a checklist or something."

"We can do that, if it would make you more comfortable," I said.

"Do you have one?"

"No, but I'm sure someone does somewhere, all we have to do is look for it. I've never had one with anyone else."

"Not even with your ace ex?" Her dark eyes watched me intently, making me feel a lot safer than I had with anyone else. It was clear that she wasn't just assuming that everything would be fine just because we'd agreed to one thing.

"He was sex neutral, so we didn't have sex very much," I said. "It was just never really an issue."

"Ah." She frowned. "Maybe it's something we can do if we think it's really fun and we want to do more?"

"Sounds good to me." I checked around to make sure no one was paying attention. There was nothing in my contract that said I couldn't date another Jinx employee, but I didn't want rumours to start going around until we were ready for them.

Satisfied no one was around, I caught her hand in mine and laced our fingers together.

Tesha relaxed almost instantly at the touch, giving me a warm feeling inside that made me certain that this was right.

"We don't have to do this the exact same way as anyone else," I said. "There's no blueprint for how to have a relationship when two people are ace, or even how to have sex as aces. We work out what works for us, and that's that."

"You make it sound so easy."

I chuckled. "It's not. We're probably going to get things wrong at some point."

"This is just new to me."

"Every relationship feels like that," I pointed out.

"It makes sense when you say it," she said.

"It does." I smiled at her, hoping she could sense how sincere I was being. "So, you want me to come over?"

She nodded. "When are you free?"

"I'm helping Ella with wedding stuff this week, but I could do Friday?"

"Friday is good."

"Then it's a date," I said. "But I probably should get back to work before my boss gets mad at me."

She laughed. "If you tell Aine it's in the name of finding love, she'll forgive you."

"Is that so?"

"It'll work on most love gods. There are two things that are true about just about all of us."

"Oh?" I raised an eyebrow.

"We love to meddle, and we're all secretly, or not so secretly, romantics."

I let out an amused laugh. "Then I'll try to keep that in mind while I'm trying to convince one to keep dating me."

"No convincing needed," she promised, checking around again before leaning in and kissing my cheek. "I look forward to Friday."

"Me too." It was hard to leave her, even though I knew that we both had work to do, but it was just so easy to be around her that I wanted to do it more.

But I supposed that was what Friday was about. And if we kept spending time together, then who knew where this would lead.

I just knew that I wanted it to be somewhere .

QETESH

I smoothed down my dress and checked myself in the mirror, trying to work out exactly how I was feeling. I wouldn't say that nervous was the right word, but neither was excited. Maybe it was curious. That was how I felt about my upcoming evening with Jacob.

My phone beeped, alerting me to someone at the front door. I grabbed it and clicked through to see Jacob standing on the other side of it.

I pressed the microphone button. "I'll be one second!"

"Got it," he responded.

I shut off the app and hurried down to my front door, realising that now I felt excited, but mostly about the prospect of getting to spend time with him.

Even when it was a brief conversation, I seemed to come away feeling good about myself.

I didn't think it was necessarily him that did it, but the way I felt around him.

Like I didn't have to hide. All parts of myself were able to be seen, and that was something I hadn't had before.

Not that it was the fault of the people I'd spent my time with, it wasn't any of their faults that I hadn't been strong enough to tell them how I felt inside.

I pulled open the front door and let him inside. He reached out for me, and I went closer so that I could kiss him.

"I brought this," he said, holding out a bottle to me. "It's not fake alcohol, but it's supposed to be really good."

"Oh, rhubarb and ginger," I said as I read the label. "It sounds good. Come in, I'll put dinner in while I show you around the greenhouse."

"What are we having?"

"Stuffed peppers," I said. "It's one of my favourites. And more importantly, it can just go in the oven while we're in the greenhouse. I did wonder whether to make it with meat, but I didn't know what you liked, so I just made them with things I've seen you eat."

"They sound good," he assured me.

I led him into the kitchen and got us a couple of glasses for the drink he brought. I poured it into them and handed one back to him before sliding the tray of peppers into the preheated oven.

"It's nice in here," he said, looking around the kitchen, his gaze lingering for a moment on the solid wooden table that was set for two. It was rustic, but I liked it that way, it made the kitchen feel more like a home.

"Thank you. It took me years to work out what I wanted. But now you should come and see the reason I bought this house."

"It already had a greenhouse?"

"No, but it had the perfect space for one, which was almost as good." I waved him through the door that connected the kitchen and greenhouse. It was warm from the sun that had been shining through the glass all day, making it perfect right now.

"Wow, I know you said you had a greenhouse, but this isn't exactly what I was expecting," he admitted, looking over the array of plants I had set up. "It's more like an indoor garden."

"It's my oasis," I said. "It's where I come when I want a moment away from the world. If I'm home, I'm often in here."

He nodded and drifted over to one of the fig trees. "May I?"

"Of course."

He reached out to touch the tree trunk and closed his eyes.

I watched curiously. I'd seen other dryads interact with plants before, especially Ella, but it was something completely different to see him do it.

Especially when it was one of my trees that he was touching.

I'd been using my dryad magic on this particular tree for over a decade, and as far as I was aware, no other dryad had ever touched it before.

"It's so strong," he said.

"You should taste the figs it produces," I said. "You actually will. I have some dried ones left that I'm serving with cheese after we've eaten."

"A cheese course? That surprises me, every time we've eaten out, you've chosen a

chocolate dessert."

"I'd have had to buy one if I wanted one, though, and that didn't feel right. I can cook decent mains, but I'm not a baker. I did consider getting some desserts from the restaurant down the road, they do really good ones, but I thought that might be a bit too far."

"We could always go get some later, if you want."

"That's okay, we can do that another time. Though it reminds me that there is something I wanted to ask about tonight."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Are you planning on staying over after?"

"If that's all right," he said. "I wasn't planning on just running away."

I let out a relieved sigh. "I hope that's what you had planned, but I didn't want to assume. It was around the time I was buying stuff for breakfast that I realised I should maybe have asked beforehand."

"I appreciate you asking," he assured me as he stepped away from the tree.

I smiled at him, feeling safe and secure in the knowledge that he meant what he was saying. "So, yes, this is my greenhouse."

"It's lovely," he said.

"My bedroom window opens into the greenhouse on one side." I pointed it out. "Though it has good blinds to stop the heat, and the other window opens into the

street, so it does let air in. I just wanted to be able to look down on this from my room."

"That makes sense," he said. "If it's where you put most of your time and work."

"Yes. This bird of paradise is from Ella's nursery," I said, gesturing to the plant with orange and yellow flowers.

"It's beautiful."

"She's very talented when it comes to plants."

"And you are at keeping them. I don't need to touch all of them here to be able to tell that they're all healthy. I can feel it in the air."

"I think that's why I like being in here. It recharges me, and makes my magic hum inside me. I probably sound ridiculous."

"You don't," he said softly. "I can feel it. Not as well as you can, I don't think, but it's there, and it's reacting. You probably know better than most about how dryad magic works."

"True, I have had a lot of practice."

The timer for the food beeps from the kitchen, breaking through our time in the greenhouse. I should be disappointed, but I'm not. I know this is just the start of the time I get to spend with him tonight, and I'm already sure it's going to be a great evening.

QETESH

The bedroom door closed behind us, and I took a deep breath. I turned to face Jacob and set myself off laughing.

"Tesha?" he prompted.

"I'm sorry, it's just that I realised I don't actually know what to do now."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Usually, I've just let the other person drive the interaction," I said. "And I brought you in here, but now I don't really know what to do."

"Okay, well, maybe we start slow." He stepped closer, his hand landing on my waist as he drew me to him. The weight of it felt nice, though it wasn't enough to start me responding.

He dipped his head lower and pressed his lips against mine. There was a softness about the kiss, and a surety, that made a lot of my worries slip away, even if I currently had no answer.

We broke apart, and he lifted his fingers to trace over the lines of my face. "Tell me what you like," he said.

I swallowed hard. "Out loud?"

He chuckled, the sound vibrating his chest under my palm. "Preferably. I can't read your mind."

"I like my nipples touched," I whispered. "They're sensitive."

"Okay, good start." He turned me around and found the zip at the back of my dress, drawing it down slowly.

The knowledge of what was going to happen, and the way his touch lingered on me a moment longer than it needed to, were enough to start the anticipation building.

This part had always felt a little contradictory for me.

I didn't feel any need to be here, but I was still looking forward to it.

Though it was a lot more comfortable to be in this situation with someone who I knew understood how I felt inside.

My dress dropped to the floor, leaving the cool air to prickle against my skin.

"You'll need to tell me if anything is too much," Jacob muttered as he skimmed his hand over my arm.

"It's good," I responded, reaching for his hand and drawing it up to my breasts. My bra was still in the way, but it seemed like a good idea to start there.

He traced his thumb over the edge where my skin met the fabric, sending a thrill through me.

My body started to respond, just like I knew it would when someone was touching me like this.

It had never been a case of disliking this part, it was just that I found it difficult to explain that I didn't crave it, not like a lot of people seemed to.

I turned around and put my arms around his neck. "We should get rid of the clothes and go to the bed."

"We can do that," he responded, leaning in and brushing his lips against mine. It was still a sweet kiss, but that only added to how safe all of this felt.

I broke away from him and stripped off my underwear, knowing that it was just going to get in the way if I kept it on. I got onto the bed and watched as he stripped off his clothes, leaving us both one step closer to what we'd agreed to do.

He joined me on the bed, and reached out to touch my waist, smoothing his thumb over my skin in an intimate gesture.

I cupped his cheek in my hand and drew him to me, kissing him again, a bit more firmly this time. His hand skipped over my skin, making me gasp as his thumb flicked over my nipple. He smiled against my lips and repeated the motion.

"Okay?" he asked.

"Yes, okay," I murmured.

"Tell me if anything isn't." He shifted so that he could pay attention to my other nipple, causing a small moan to escape from me.

Slowly, his free hand drifted down, and I parted my legs without even thinking about it.

This part was natural, and being with someone I trusted was adding to it more than I

expected.

I arched up into his touch as his hand drifted up my inner thigh.

"Show me," he murmured.

I nodded and reached down to guide his hand into position. I could feel the pleasure starting to build within me, and I was aching for release, and I liked the idea that I wouldn't have to do it myself tonight.

He took direction surprisingly easily, and I moaned as he slipped two fingers into me, using his thumb to press against my most sensitive spot, never letting up his attention on my nipple either.

I wish I could think of something to say as he sent me higher and higher.

I grabbed hold of his wrist, hoping to hold him in position as my release reached its peak and exploded through me, making every part of my body tingle in response.

I collapsed down onto the bed breathing heavily. "Good," I murmured.

He chuckled. "I'm glad you think so."

"It's different from doing it myself."

"I think that's the fun part," he responded.

I took a few deep breaths and propped myself up on the bed, looking at him intently.

"So, what do you like?"

"A lot of different things."

"That might be a little much for one night," I said

He laughed. "Probably."

"So?"

He took my hand in his and wrapped it around himself. He twitched under my touch, even without me doing much. I paid attention to the speed he was showing me, being careful to keep it up when he let go of my hand. He'd made me feel so good that I wanted to return the favour.

"Do you have a condom?" he asked through laboured breathing.

I nodded and rolled over so that I could pull open the drawer of my bedside table, grabbing one from within and holding it out to him.

He took it from me and tore it open, rolling it onto himself with swift ease, then shuffled back so he was sitting with his back propped against the headboard. "Straddle me?"

I nodded and moved so that my legs were over him. He reached down to guide himself into me, watching my face intently. I assumed he was trying to make sure that I was comfortable, which was sweet of him.

I touched my fingers to his face and gave him a smile that I hope he took as reassurance that I was doing just fine. I let out a small cry as he seated himself within me.

Concern crossed his face.

"I'm fine," I promised, putting a hand against the wall and using it to move myself

over him.

His eyes glazed over a little, and one of his hands guided my hips, keeping me in the perfect rhythm. I lost myself in the moment, enjoying the sensations that being with him like this was bringing.

Pleasure curled up within me, and I felt another release growing close, but I wasn't going to get there without help. I moved my free hand between my legs and pressed it into the right spot, but the pleasure was a little too intense for me to concentrate.

"Let me," Jacob murmured, moving my hand out of the way and pressing his fingers where I needed them.

I cried out as the release ripped through me, completely losing all sense of the world around me. I was dimly aware of him groaning as he found his own release.

Everything started to come back into focus and I collapsed onto the bed while he got rid of the condom and came back to join me. He shifted the covers so that we could get under them and opened his arm to me.

I shuffled closer, hooking my leg over his and resting my head against his shoulder. "That was good," I murmured.

"It was," he agreed.

"No regrets?"

"No." He leaned in and kissed my forehead. "It was fun. I like spending time with you, and I look forward to doing more things together."

"Same." I looked up at him and smiled. There was something comforting about lying

here with him and knowing that we both felt the same.

That we could do this again without it being something that made either of us uncomfortable.

"I'm glad you're staying the night too." I traced a pattern over his chest.

"Me too. I liked waking up to find you in my arms last weekend."

"It was nice. I didn't realise how much I'd missed that part of being with someone."

He pulled me closer. "It's hard not to get confused between physical affection and sex sometimes."

"Yeah, I think so. I've avoided one in order to avoid the other a bit, I think."

"You're not the only one."

"Another date is on the table, right?" I checked. "Without sex."

"I mean, you are going to my sister's wedding," he reminded me.

I laughed. "Yes, but I have my own invite to that, you can't take me as your date," I reminded him.

"True. But Ella is going to ask us what's going on."

"What do you want to tell her?" I asked quietly.

"We could tell her that we're just hooking up. I'd love to see her face."

The laugh burst from me without me meaning it to. "It would probably be funnier if she knew I was ace too."

"Mmm, true. But honestly, we can tell her whatever we want to."

"That we're dating, and it's going well?" I shifted up so that I could meet his gaze. "If you think it's going well."

He tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear, his eyes soft and full of something that looked similar to adoration. "I think it's going well."

"I'm not seeing anyone else. I mean, that was probably obvious from the fact I said I hadn't been with anyone in about five years, but just so it's out there."

"I'm not either," he said. "Which was also probably obvious."

"You say that, but you were at a dating event recently," I teased.

"So I was." His amusement made his eyes dance, filling me with warmth. "But I guess that's what we tell Ella when she asks. We're dating exclusively, and it's going well."

I settled into his arms and let out a contented sigh. "I like the sound of that."

And I did. This wasn't what I'd expected to happen when Aine had introduced me to the new manager at the Jinx hotel, or when Ella had introduced me to her brother, but I liked it, and I could tell that I wasn't going to regret it.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:57 am

QETESH

If I'd thought Ella and Nadia knew a lot of people who they invited to their pre-wedding party, there were even more at the wedding reception. And one thing I hadn't thought about was the fact that Ella's parents were going to be here.

Which meant that Jacob's parents were going to be here. Despite being thousands of years old, I could count the number of times I'd met a partner's parents on one hand. Not that we were that serious yet.

"Teshaaaaaaaaaaaaa!" Ella said, throwing her arm around my shoulder. "I'm married." She wiggled her left hand in front of me where a ring that twisted around like a vine now sat on her ring finger.

"Congratulations," I said. "The ceremony was beautiful."

"It was." She let out a satisfied sigh. "Now it's your turn."

I laughed. "I'm not getting married."

"Not even to my brother?"

"We've been seeing each other for a few weeks. Maybe give it time before you make those kinds of jokes."

"Nuh-uh. I know you well, and I know my brother well. This is going to last, mark my words."

"Maybe he won't like dating a goddess," I said.

"Nah, he wouldn't date you if he wasn't willing to deal with that."

I looked over to where he was talking to a couple of people I didn't recognise, but I assumed must be part of their family. He smiled at me and I returned the gesture.

"You're smittttttttten. You're in love."

I cleared my throat. "You're drunk."

"Nah, I've only had one glass of champagne, you can't get drunk from that."

I raised an eyebrow. "Well, I think that your declarations of love are probably best left for your wife."

She sighed dreamily. "My wife. Eurgh, I'm never going to tire of saying that."

"Maybe go tell Nadia that," I encouraged her.

"All right, fine. But you should take my brother to the dance floor if I do that."

"Does he not get a say in that?"

"Nope."

I shook my head, knowing that it was best just to go with it so that she left me to actually interact with her brother on my own terms and not hers.

"I love ya, Tesha." She kissed my cheek. "And I really would be happy if you were my sister."

"You're already like a sister to me, Ella."

"Good."

"And I love you too," I said. "Now, seriously, go spend time with your wife, it's your wedding day, you need to be all loved up."

She sighed dramatically. "I guess I do, don't I?" She flitted away.

"Did I just hear you tell my sister you loved her?" Jacob asked.

I jumped, not realising how close he was. "She told me first."

He chuckled. "Would you like to dance with me?"

"That's exactly what Ella wants us to do," I said.

"Well, she is the bride, today is about her."

I laughed and put my hand in his, letting him lead me towards where loads of the guests were already dancing. I put my arms around his neck, enjoying when his hands came to rest on my waist.

"So, your sister is telling you that she loves you," he said. "Do I have competition?"

"Ella is not my type."

Amusement danced in his eyes. "I can see that."

"You've got nothing to worry about," I assured him, even though I didn't think he needed it. He knew how I felt.

Except that wasn't entirely true, because there was one thing he didn't know yet.

"Tessa?"

I took a deep breath. "I do though," I said.

"You've lost me."

"Love you," I said. "I know it's fast, or not, I don't know what's normal, but I do know how I feel.

And I've not felt like this about someone in a long time.

I feel safe with you, and like I want you to know my secrets.

So yes. That's it, I love you." My heart raced as I realised what I'd said out loud.

Keeping it inside wasn't going to change the way I felt.

His face softened and he pulled me closer. "I love you too," he responded.

It was impossible to constrain my smile, especially as he leaned in and gave me the sweetest kiss I could have imagined.

This wasn't where I expected things to go, but it felt better than I'd ever imagined to have someone who fully understood me, and I wasn't going to let that go if I could help it.

* * *

Thank you for reading Locking Down Qetesh , I hope you enjoyed it!