



Nix and Tell (The Arun Nixes #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Chlo

I've spent my life fitting in, a tailor who can't touch iron or steel, a Nix who avoids the river she was born to swim in. Making clothes instead of dragging people to the deep. But the river goddess Trisantonah thinks I need love in my life, thinks it'll be the one thing that will bring me back to her river. And she's picked Violet, the one woman I can't resist...

Welcome to the Godstouched Universe, where the Gods interfere in the lives of mortals, magic leaks back into our world, and love conquers all.

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Chlo

It doesn't really matter what season it is, whether it rains or shines, how cold it is outside. None of that matters when the sun sets in Wyrten Bridge. In the depths of December, I'll time my appointments so that I can pop outside, or even just open the window of my shop to lean out and watch the sun setting over the River Arun.

Sunsets are always beautiful, but this isn't just about the sunset.

It's six o'clock on a Friday afternoon, and I'm done with clients for today, so I walk outside Suited and lean against the doorframe to watch.

The sky—clearer tonight than it's been for a while—has turned into a canvas, coloured with warm pinks and reds and oranges. As I watch, it sinks behind the church on the bridge. Whoever built the old church managed to line up the windows perfectly, and at each sunset, a riot of colour shines through the stained-glass and paints the road and river before it.

And then she walks behind the window and the light cuts out and the velvet night spreads across the sky.

No human could be that tall.

She isn't human. Trisantona, Goddess of the River Arun, returned to this mortal world for the last five years. My fingers itch and I look at where starwort carpets the

riverbank. The plants are moving on the river, dancing even, and I long to go and pluck them, to see what my needle could make of their strong stems and textured leaves. But they belong to the river.

And I don't fuck with the river.

Turning abruptly, I head back into my shop and pick up a needle. Fire scalds my fingertips and I drop it, swearing beneath my breath.

I haven't been that careless in a while.

Most needles are made of steel, plated in nickel, and I can't touch those without burning myself, for obvious reasons. Most of mine are plated with gold, which just about holds the pain at bay. Where in the Gods did this one come from?

I crouch, leaning as close as I dare, before my eyes start to water. It's a new needle, and when I look at the box, I realise that my supplier has sent the wrong ones. And they know about my metal allergy.

There's something to be said for science; a metal allergy is just another type of ACD—allergic contact dermatitis—and though it's not common, it's common enough around here that most people are aware of it.

Half the residents of Wyrten Bridge have a metal allergy.

Well, technically it's an iron allergy, but steel triggers an allergic reaction in much the same way, being an iron alloy. Round here, people think it's genetic, and it kind of is. If you're fae.

There are two kinds of fae: the Tuatha Dé Dannan, who are so close to Godhood that when the Veil descended, they were dragged behind it; and the rest of us, whose

mortality is such that we didn't have enough magic to be eradicated from the world with the rest of the Gods.

No, we were left behind with inexplicable metal allergies whilst magic lay dormant in the world. That doesn't mean that I was around when the Veil fell—that was a good few centuries ago, and I've only just turned thirty-one—but my ancestors were. Nixes who can't fulfil their purpose get a little rage-y, occasionally murderous, and never move away from their river.

I make a note to call my supplier and get my gold-plated needles sent. I might see if someone else in the Riverbed Shops wants the ones that are sat on my counter, staring at me. Anger rises suddenly, swelling in my breast and it's all I can do to stop myself from picking the box up and flinging it at the window. It wouldn't solve anything, and it would be an absolute fucker to clean up, but that doesn't calm the ignited passion inside me.

Quick to anger, that's the temperament of a nix, even if you have nothing to do with the river.

And I want nothing to do with the river, nothing to do with our legacy of drowned sacrifices. I don't care how it helps power swell; I want none of it.

There's only one thing that calm me as quickly as my anger rises, and I head there immediately, opening the door and entering my stockroom.

I'm all wrong for a river nix. I should be drawn to water, instead of repelled by it. And though I can't bring myself to leave the river Arun behind me completely, I refuse to swim in it, the way my family does. The way that other nixes do. Even the Goddess tries to persuade me to come back to her river, that she can make me whole again.

But I'm not broken.

It's just that I've never felt magic in the river, the way that I do in plants.

I reach out and run my fingers across the shelved material in my stockroom. All-natural fibres. No polyester or nylon here. Cotton, hemp, silk, wool... They've each got their own feel, their own call, and they ground me the way that water never can. I've got a theory about that. Water's always rushing by, constantly moving, making for impatient magic users; whereas plants are grounded—literally rooted in soil that's dank and dark and earthy.

I like dank and dark and earthy.

Give me roots over upheaval any day.

The front door opens, bell jangling, and I sigh, rolling my eyes and exit the storeroom. A good business owner would be welcoming, cheerful even. I'm brusque, forthright, and have absolutely no qualms about kicking people out of my shop if they annoy me. I'm not sure that Violet even knows the meaning of the word brusque.

"Hi Chlo!" Her voice is chirpy, words like trills of a songbird. It should annoy me. In anyone else it would annoy me, but in Violet...

"Vi."

She bounds over to me, the hem of her short black skirt flying up in a way that I studiously avoid looking at. But looking upwards doesn't help much, not with her tits framed between sheer lace and a double belt that's almost a harness. I can feel my face flush, and I reach out and ruffle her hair.

I'm awkward. Clumsy. The furthest thing from suave that I could ever be, and it

never fazes her; she just grins up at me and shakes her blond hair back into some sense of order.

“Finn’s hosting this evening; you coming?”

“I’ll be there.”

She looks at the clock pointedly, and she has a point, we were supposed to be at the bakery by six.

I grab my suit jacket—got to be repping the brand—and open the door for her.

Beaming, Violet floats through, and turns right towards Knead Cake?

I take a breath, send a petition up to Trisantona for the recovery of my composure, and follow.

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Violet

I shouldn't tease her.

It's been a year since I opened Spellbound, the shop directly next to Chlo's queer tailors, and she's as awkward around me now as she was that very first day. And I still can't help teasing her.

It helps that I don't think she realises that I'm doing it. I'm fairly certain that she sees me as some kind of bubbly innocent, and so my machinations always pass her by.

She looks hot tonight, though she always looks hot. Impeccably dressed in a bespoke tailored suit, with braces, a tie and a blazer that makes me wish that I could pull off a suit like that.

It's not that I'm too curvy for a suit, just that I'm too curvy for a suit off the rack, and too broke to have one tailored for me. Besides, I think I rock my little goth girl style. Black boots, short black dresses with entirely too much leather and lace for a respectable woman in her thirties. Perfect for me.

It's not exactly a long walk to Finn's bakery, considering all the shops are housed in the same building. It was a mill at some point, or so Hazel said once, and now it's split up into a quartet of equally niche businesses. Chlo's queer tailors; Finn's vegan bakery; Hazel's art studio; and my beloved Spellbound.

The bakery is warm and smells amazing as we walk in. Finn's laid out a selection of baked goods for us, and I dive for them, mumbling greetings around a mouthful of flaky pastry.

Hazel's there already, tucked into the smallest corner she possibly can, her eyes devouring the food the way my mouth is. Finn puts a doughnut on a plate and places it in front of her without a word. She peeks up, nods her thanks, and then takes a bite.

I'm still standing, hopping from foot to foot as I eat, humming in pleasure and doing my little happy food dance. The three of them are used to me by now, and no one makes a snarky comment, or tells me to shut up. Food stims are the best stims and I'm so glad that I don't have to mask after a full day in the shop. Customers are great, especially when they ask questions and buy things so I can pay my rent, but it's also exhausting to be on .

A chair is pulled out by the table, and a shoulder gently nudges me towards it. Sitting down, I grin at helpful Chlo, whose face is completely blank.

How does she do it? I'm always impressed that no matter what happens, those stoic looks are forever on her face. The only way I can tell that I've thrown her is when she ruffles my hair. I close my eyes for a second. I know the others will think it's because of the food, but it's not. It's because I'm remembering the touch of her fingers, accidentally grazing my cheek as she pulls back from messing with my hair.

"So," says Finn, and my eyes fly open. That's a clear 'I'm starting the meeting now' voice. "Winter business hasn't been too bad, but I was thinking that we should really do a social media push this spring. The Spring Equinox is three weeks away—on a Saturday, no less—and I think it'd be the perfect opportunity to maybe make a day of it. 'A Day At Riverside', or something."

"Works for me," I say. "I could open up my equinox ritual to outsiders; do it on the

riverbank during the day.”

“Yes,” said Finn, warming to the idea. “I can sell themed spring vegetable tartlets, and lemon cakes, and we could speak to Kit about the pub having mead-based cocktails on the menu.”

Chlo and Hazel looked at each other at the mention of Kit’s name. “I’m not really sure...” began Hazel hesitantly. “Kit’s quite private.”

“She’ll come if Marla comes.” Finn seemed certain.

The other two didn’t exactly disagree, but neither of them looked convinced.

“I can do a live painting of the river,” suggested Hazel. “And maybe people might be interested in ordering prints?”

“They definitely would,” I said. “Your artwork is beautiful, Hazel.”

She blushed, tucking a long strand of pink hair behind her ear. “It’s all the river.” I don’t know that I could be so modest about my talents if I were Hazel; her art is stunning. Somehow the river feels truly alive in her work.

There was a pause, and then we all looked at Chlo.

“It’s a smart idea,” she said. “I’ll think of some way for Suited to get involved.”

“Excellent!” said Finn. “Let me know what you land on, Chlo, and I’ll start working on the social media graphics. Another meeting to finalise details this time next week? Whose turn is it to host?”

“Mine, though I can’t promise anything as delicious as this,” I say, wagging my

eyebrows at Finn.

“Yeah, yeah,” she says. “I’ll bring food.”

After the last crumbs of baked deliciousness have been polished off, we all head out.

It’s a Friday evening and as much as I love my new home, Wyrten Bridge isn’t exactly buzzing with choices for an evening’s entertainment. But The Arun Arms does some really good food, and has a surprisingly good variety of drinks for a village pub. Besides, I figure that there’s no time like the present for persuading Kit to join our plans.

Chlo follows me as I head up and over the bridge, her eyes flickering to the stained-glass windows of the church and back as we pass it.

“I think Finn’s right, Kit’ll come around if we can persuade Marla.”

“Finn doesn’t know how much Kit hates magic.”

That makes me stop. “What?”

“Kit hates magic, and I can pretty much guarantee that if it’s got anything to do with a feast day or a ritual, she’ll be having none of it.”

“That’s foolish,” I argue, fighting to keep my tone light. “She does things for Christmas, and that’s just Yule dressed up in Christian clothing.”

Chlo doesn’t say anything else, but I’m uneasy now. I’ve liked going to the pub on occasion, and the idea that Kit hates magic has thrown me off-kilter. Spellbound is my home, and it felt like all the locals had embraced my weird pagan shop with gusto. Now I’m second guessing myself, wondering whether I should really be here

at all. Whether I'm going to—

“Shit.” Chlo’s voice is far closer than I’d expected, lost in my own thoughts and I jump backwards and almost trip over. She reaches out and catches me before I can fall, pulling me upright.

If she’d tugged me just an inch closer, I’d be up against her right now.

Damn her spatial awareness.

“I didn’t mean to make you jump.”

“That’s okay—”

“And I definitely didn’t mean to make you nervous about Kit.” She looks down, and her fingers fiddle with her tie. “Kit’s not an asshole, and she definitely doesn’t have a problem with Spellbound, it’s just that she’s been burnt by... well by some dodgy shit in the past, and it makes her wary of anything magic-adjacent.”

I blink.

“So you really shouldn’t worry, I promise.” She looks up from her tie then, and her eyes are a dark green, so dark they could almost be black.

I force my face into a smile, but she’s having none of it. Her thumb goes beneath my chin, and she makes me keep looking up, at her.

“It’s fine, Violet. Seriously.”

I nod and she steps back, and it feels like she’s taken all the oxygen in the evening air with her. Fingers dance by my sides and I don’t quite know what to do now, torn

between wanting to go to the pub, and wanting to go home and hide under my covers forever.

A sudden sigh, and she's taking my hand and marching us both towards the pub.

I guess we're going to the pub after all.

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Chlo

It's testament to the British way of life that even in a tiny village, there's still a pub, and The Arun Arms pretty much the centre of what little socialising goes on in Wyrten.

As we walk in, Violet's hand is in mine, and I'm trying desperately not to let it show how it's affecting me.

Her hand is small, delicately warm, and she half skips along as she tries to keep up with me.

Behind the bar, Kit raises an eyebrow. I almost step away, but then Violet is standing right next to me, doing her little wiggle so vigorously that I can feel her brush back and forth against me.

It's so fucking cute .

I stare back at Kit, my face blank, as I help Violet off with her coat. When that dress comes into view, Kit's eyes dip for just a second to Vi's delightful cleavage, and then flick back up to me.

I'm not entirely sure what she sees, there, but she gives a low chuckle. "Vi, Chlo, what brings you to my humble establishment?"

“We’ve got a proposition for you,” says Violet, and bounces up onto one of the stools by the bar. There’s the slightest of pauses, which Violet clocks and then she flushes pinker than I think I’ve ever seen her go. “Oh, not that kind of proposition.”

“Oh no?” Kit teases. “You’re breaking Chlo’s heart here.”

Violet glances at me over my shoulder and I start to plot a myriad of ways to murder Kit. The butch landlord does not look even the slightest bit ashamed, and she knows . She knows exactly what she’s doing.

Is it my fault that I have a soft spot for the sweetest girl in the village?

Obviously not. I blame her cheery good nature.

But Kit and I both know that you don’t fuck with mortals. It’s pretty much the only reason why Kit and Marla still have this we’re-best-friends-and-totally-not-in-love-with-each-other thing going on, and aren’t shackled up living their adorable little sapphic happy ever after already.

Kit may not want anything to do with her nix heritage, but that doesn’t mean that she’s about to marry a mortal. That way chaos lies.

And sometimes drownings.

“Actually, us in the Riverside Shops are doing a promotional day for the Spring Equinox. I’m going to be opening up my ritual; Finn’s going to bake speciality pastries; Hazel’s going to paint; and Chlo...” Her voice trails off. “What are you going to do, Chlo?”

“Stand at the side, glowering at anyone who comes close?” suggests Kit. Her tone is light, jokey, but there’s a wariness in her eyes that I recognise.

“Something like that,” I say.

The look Violet turns on me is all wide-eyed horror. “Oh, Chlo! It’s got to be worth it for you too, otherwise it simply isn’t fair.”

Her eyes are the softest grey, and I swear when she pleads, they double in size, like she’s some kind of chibi, come to life. “I’m joking,” I reassure her. “I think I might see if I can get some floral harnesses, the kind that slip over a shirt nicely.”

She nods, placated for the moment. “Acceptable. And so, Kit, we come to you.”

Kit starts intensely cleaning out a glass.

“Do you really hate magic that much?”

She pauses what she’s doing, looking up at me and then back at Violet.

I know what that look is. It’s a what-have-you-done look. And the truth is that I’ve done nothing, absolutely nothing. Violet still doesn’t know that the ritualised magic she does, I could do with a snap of my fingers. That Kit could. That half the villagers could.

She thinks that we’ve been so welcoming of her pagan ways because we’re just nice people, when it’s because we know the truth of magic, and hers is the least threatening we’ve ever encountered.

“Finn had an idea that you guys make some mead-based cocktails, and I explained to Violet that you’re not big on all the ritual stuff.”

Violet turns those pleading eyes on Kit and Kit barks a laugh. “Save those for Chlo; they won’t work on me, Vi.” She looks thoughtful. “I really don’t usually—”

“Finn thought that Marla would like it,” interjected Violet, with a careless wave of her hand. She’s trying a little too hard for casual, but Kit doesn’t seem to notice, a dimple suddenly showing in her cheek.

“Marla does like a party.”

“And you wouldn’t have to be part of the ritual—I would never ask anyone to witness something they feel uncomfortable around—but we could have a mini menu and send people across for refreshments. It could be good business.”

“That it would,” said Kit. “And I’m not uncomfortable around you, petal. You’re just fine; it’s asshole manipulators that I... Yeah.” She shakes her head as if clearing her thoughts, and I think of her estranged father and brother, funeral directors who I avoid if I can. “I’ll pull together a menu for you guys; one cocktail, one mocktail and maybe a speciality ale?”

“Perfect!” says Violet, and she leans to the side, to have a look at the gins on the shelf behind Kit, almost toppling off the stool as she does so.

I move ever so slightly to the left, so that she can lean on me, and her answering smile is worth it all.

“Gin and lemonade please, barkeep!” she sings out. “Because I could never be sweet enough.”

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Violet

I 've never been much of a drinker. My dad was a little too fond of his beer, so I've never really overindulged myself, but I do enjoy a suitably sweet concoction every now and then. Something fruity, which'll make me smile and feel as if spring is right around the corner.

Which I suppose it is.

Chlo doesn't drink, but she sits with me anyway, sipping at a non-alcoholic beer, and insists on covering both our drinks. I try to protest, but she's quicker with her card, making it to the contactless machine before I've even had the chance to get mine out of my bag.

I just have the one drink, which Kit makes as sugary as she knows I like, and then realise how very very tired I am.

Work was good today, a low hum of customers coming in and out consistently, and I'm only just now realising how much energy it's sapped from me.

It's easy for me to get distracted if I'm not careful—even at work—and so I make sure that I am 'on' all day. That way I don't miss anything, sales or otherwise. But it does mean that I use up a lot of my energy pretty damn fast. I'm about to say something to Chlo when I realise that she's standing, holding my coat up for me to slip on.

“How did you...?”

She shrugs, not answering the question, but her consideration warms me. I’ve only been here a year, but somehow Chlo knows me better than I know myself.

“We’re off,” I call to Kit, as we exit the door. She shouts a goodbye after us, and then we’re in the cool night air, wind whipping at our cheeks.

I shiver, and pull my coat closer around me, hands shoved in pockets, and smile at Chlo. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow then.” She lives on this side of the river, in a tiny cottage near her parents’; I’m back over the bridge, in a small apartment above Spellbound.

“I’ll walk you home,” she says.

“It’s less than a five-minute walk,” I say, protesting. “I can see the shop from here.” I’m not lying; crystals twinkle in Spellbound’s windows, and I know that I’ll be home in an instant.

She just looks at me, and I roll my eyes.

“Fine, but I just want to point out that you’re being ridiculous. This is Wyrten. Nothing ever happens here.”

That’s not entirely true though, and I know it.

For all that Wyrten Bridge is idyllic, there’s a reason that there’s a funeral home in a place this small. More people drown in the river than I care to think about.

“You coming?” She’s stepped onto the bridge, and for a moment I see a shadow behind Chlo, as if there’s something or someone hovering over her, watching her. But

when I try to look at it directly, it floats away.

I walk to join her, and tuck my hand into the crook of her elbow. We walk in companionable silence past the church, across the bridge, and finish up by my front door.

“Come in for a second?”

She pauses, even as she’s turning to go. “Come in?”

“Yeah, I’ve got something I want to give you.”

Chlo doesn’t argue, merely ducks her head as she walks into the shop. Just the fairy lights are on, and it makes it feel even more magical than usual; the room lit by a soft glow.

I hurry over to one of the cabinets, fumble for the key, and retrieve a small bracelet. “For you.”

“What is it?” She looks at it, not taking it from me right away.

“Onyx. It’s good for protection.”

“Protection?” Her eyebrows raise and I can tell that she’s amused. “What do I need protecting from, Violet?”

There’s a gruffness in her voice that has my fingers all trembly, and I fumble the bracelet, catching it just before it hits the ground. I’m on my knees, glad that I caught it, but when I look up at her, Chlo’s staring intently at me. I’ve never seen her from this angle before, and it makes me want to sink back onto my heels and lure her into doing whatever she likes with me.

Neither of us say anything for a long moment, and then her hand reaches down towards me.

I take it, and allow her to pull me up to standing again.

“Like I need protecting from anything else.”

“It’s just—” I stumble over my words, because if I’m perfectly honest, I don’t know what she needs protecting from. I just know that she needs protection. I think of that shadow on the bridge, but it’s a shadow at night. Nothing untoward about that at all. “It’s just in case.”

She doesn’t dismiss it out of hand, her face curious. As she picks it up, she runs the beads through her fingers, much the same way I do when I’m stimming, and I realise that she’s learning the beads. Feeling each one individually, until she’s completed the circuit, and slips it onto her wrist.

“Thank you,” Chlo says, and when she leaves the shop, I sigh in relief. I just feel better knowing that she has something on her. Something that’ll ward off any bad vibes that may accost her on the short walk home.

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Chlo

I don't know what it is was that Violet was sensing, but I clearly needed the onyx beads encircling my wrist, because instead of turning right, I turn left and head onto the bridge. And when Trisantona steps out of the shadow of the church, I find myself more than grateful for them.

“There you are, my child.”

Ah.

Usually, I'm able to avoid the Goddess—she doesn't usually come out during the day, and I'm not usually on the bridge late at night—but just my luck that she's bored this evening.

At least, that's what I assume. Who the fuck knows why Trisantona does anything.

I might not be a practicing follower, but like all the nixes connected to the River Arun, disobeying her feels... uncomfortable . She hasn't given me an order yet, couched in a request, but I know one is coming.

“Won't you come into my temple?”

There it is. A question that isn't really a question. I incline my head and follow her back into the abandoned church that she's taken for her own.

I don't know if I remember it ever being used for its original purpose—the people of Wyrten Bridge aren't exactly the good Christian types—but we were all content with it being the kind of building that made tourists go “ahhhh” and snap photos. None of us expected it to be turned into a temple.

A flick of her wrist and I hear the locks turn by themselves, before the doors creak open. Inside is nothing like any church I've ever visited.

The walls are completely overgrown with starwort, doing surprisingly well for a plant that usually only flourishes when partly submerged, and it makes me wonder about how much of the church is usually filled with the heartbeat of the river when us nixes aren't inside.

The columns are covered in murals; languid brush strokes that dance up and up, and I realise that Hazel has been working here a lot more than usual. One of the Goddess' acolytes, worshipping Trisantona through her art, in return for protection.

Protection.

My hand slides down to the bracelet Violet gave me and I'm taken aback when Trisantona whirls around, her eyes going straight to it.

“A present? From your beau?”

“From my... no, no. This is just from V—” I cut off, unsure whether I really want to tell the Goddess Violet's name.

“From whom?” Her interest feels like pressure, and I find myself complete frozen, caught between fight and flight. “Clodagh, answer me .”

“Violet.” The use of my full name compels the sounds from my lips, and I glare at

her. “Stop it. I don’t like that.”

Her laugh is full of gaiety, and when she steps forward, the light from the moon illuminates her.

Our river Goddess is full figured, as if the water was poured into a silhouette, and then just kept going. Rounded breasts and stomach and thighs that don’t fill me with desire in any way. She is abundance itself, just as a water gives life, so she does, and there’s a part of me that wants to fling myself into the river below us and drag as many souls to the deep as I can in her honour.

Trisantona has never asked that of us, but she doesn’t need to. It’s in our nature. And she’s never asked nixes not to murder innocent mortals.

“You’re afraid of me.”

I can’t lie, so I don’t speak. I just watch her warily.

“And you don’t like my river.” There’s a deep sorrow in her words, and I can’t tell if I actually want to soothe her concerns, or whether that’s just her magic.

“I don’t dislike your river; I just like plants better.”

She’s suddenly surprisingly close, her eyes peering at mine. I try not to think anything and stay perfectly still.

“You should court this Violet. Maybe she’d bring you back to me.”

Well, that’s not happening.

I don’t speak, but the refusal in my eyes must shine, because she laughs again and

pats my cheek with something akin to affection.

“Oh look at you. You’re so independent .” She says the word as if it’s alien to her, and it does sound wrong on her tongue. “And you come from such a good family, as well.” My parents are exactly the kind of followers that all nixes should be. They work in the ecology centre, a good, water-focused job. They bring weekly offerings for the Goddess; though my family aren’t part of the drowning contingent, I’m glad to say. And they do as she bids without even the slightest murmur.

I murmur.

I murmur a whole damn lot.

“How about this?” She jumps up onto the stone altar, and as her arse touches the stone, water flows from her, like a babbling brook at its source. “You start following those urges of yours, or I’ll start intervening.”

“Urges, what–” I feel a cool hand pressed against my forehead, and I’m back in Spellbound earlier that evening, looking down at where Violet is on her knees at my feet. My body responds instinctively, my nipples tightening and I can feel my cunt clench. Her grey eyes meet mine and...

“ Those urges.” Trisantona’s voice is harsh, and in it I hear the violence of rapids. “You may refuse to bring me tribute, Clodagh, but I feel your eyes on my temple each night as the sun sets. I want your offering, and if you won’t bring me yourself, then I want the energy that longs to be set free.”

I don’t know what to say to that. I know what she’s asking for.

Sex.

More specifically, sex magic.

There's energy in sex, more than just the kind that reportedly burns calories. There's power in desire, and offering that up to a deity is supposed to be quite the tribute.

Only I don't want to do that with Violet.

Not the sex bit—I'd love to feel her tight about my fingers—but taking her energy without her consent? It's shitty. It's unethical.

“You think your little witch has no power of her own?” Trisantona's voice is echoing in the church, and the water at her feet ripples as if a giant is walking close by. “She has magic enough for a mortal. Speak to her if you must. Share of your nature. But bring me my offering .”

As she speaks those final words, I feel a compulsion settle over me, and with my next inbreath it is fixed.

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Violet

Saturday mornings are usually busy, but this morning it's dead.

It's almost ten o'clock when the door first opens, and it's not a customer, but Chlo, who looks dishevelled.

Chlo never looks dishevelled.

She's always so immaculately put together, her Marcel waves slicked back, her suit pressed. Only today they're all askew, and she looks as if she hasn't slept a wink.

"What's up with you?" I ask, but she's not paying attention to me, looking back and forth from the door like something's after her. "Chlo?"

She looks at me then and her eyes aren't the dark green they usually are, they're wild. Sparking in a manner that's simply not possible. I blink a couple of times and look again. Yup. Still sparking.

"Do you need to sit down, Chlo?"

She looks like she's about to speak, but then the door opens for the second time today and Hazel pops her pink head around. "Oh good; you're here, Chlo."

Chlo glares at her with a ferocity that makes me take a step back. I have absolutely no

idea what's going on, but Hazel is one of the shyest people I've ever met. I can't possibly imagine her doing anything that warrants that kind of look.

She doesn't shrink back though, rolling her eyes and quietly entering the store. "Are you really all that surprised? You knew you couldn't avoid her forever."

"I could have fucking tried." Chlo is spitting angry, but it's not entirely aimed at Hazel, it seems. "And now she's given me an order and Hazel, what the hell am I going to do?"

"Well, I don't think you should be letting anyone order you around, if it means you end up in a state like this." They both turn to stare at me, as if they'd forgotten that they were, after all, standing in my shop. "Now can someone please tell me what is happening?"

Hazel nudges Chlo forward, and Chlo buries her head in her hands and string of mumbled words stagger their way from behind her fingers. I can't decipher a single one of them.

"What?"

"So I'm supposed to have sex with you. As an offering. To a Goddess."

"You fucking what ?" I don't think Chlo's ever heard me swear before, because that makes her start even more than my tone of voice. She looks at me, all panicky, and her face crumples.

"Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit. I'm fucking it up. I'm—"

I cut her off and turn to Hazel, trying very hard to keep my cool. "I don't suppose coherence is on the cards for you? Because I'd quite like to be brought up to speed.

Now.”

Hazel winces. “It’s not Chlo’s fault, really. I’m surprised that she was able to hold back from telling you as long as she has, with a compulsion like that on her.”

Compulsions. Goddesses. These are words I know, that I’ve studied. I’m no fair-weather pagan; I know spellwork, and I know when something is being forced.

Looking at Chlo again, I take in the anguish in her eyes. A tear trails down one cheek, and I’m filled with the kind of anger that I left behind in my childhood.

“Where is she?” All I can tell from looking at these two women—at my friends—is that they are being propelled forward by a force outside of their own control. It stinks of coercion, and I’ll be damned if anyone fucks with my people like this. “Where?”

Hazel points wordlessly at the bridge, viewable through the open door, and as I follow her finger I realise that she’s not pointing at the bridge. She’s pointing at the church.

Pushing past them both, I storm out of Spellbound, heading for the abandoned building. I hear the door slam shut behind me, and then open and close twice more as Hazel and Chlo run after me. They’re talking to me, pleading with me to turn back, but I’m having none of it.

I thump on the door so hard I scrape my fists, and it’s only the trickle of pain that keeps me anchored in the moment, that stops me from losing my temper entirely. So when the lock turns and the door silently opens, I stalk in and, glaring at Chlo and Hazel, slam it shut in their faces.

The church is silent, oppressively so.

Everything in me is screaming to keep my damn mouth shut, and turn and leave this place, now, before something happens that I can't take back. But I've never been all that good at listening to the angel on my shoulder. People think that I'm all cute and adorable, because I smile politely and make gentle conversation, but I'm not really. Or rather, I am now .

Grow up with an alcoholic father, fond of swing his fists around, and see how sunshiny you are then. I'm so laid back now, because nothing could compare to that.

Only Chlo, my Chlo, is crying. And all that rage that I thought I'd shoved down deep inside, is bubbling up so fiercely I think it might swallow me whole.

"I'm waiting." My voice is curt, quiet, yet couldn't be clearer.

"I like you." The voice comes from a figure, hidden behind a column. "My goodness, I haven't felt anger like that in centuries. Delicious."

"Are you the Goddess Chlo spoke of?" I'm being blunt to the point of rudeness, I know, when I should be careful. Gods are known for being capricious, but the figure laughs, and it sounds like the river on a sunny day.

"I imagine so."

"Well, you can just drop the compulsion on her right now, thank you very much. I have no interest in sleeping with anyone who doesn't want to sleep with me." There's something that twists inside me as I say that. I don't have much space for any emotion other than fury right now, but there's a tiny droplet of sadness that I try to ignore.

"But she does want to sleep with you. Very much so."

“Not like this, she doesn’t. Stop interfering. It’s rude.”

The Goddess finally steps out from behind the column, and I try not to gasp at the pressure that overwhelms me. It’s a lot, a bit like the headache you get after staring at a lamp slightly too long. She doesn’t say anything, but her very presence is warning to me.

I swallow back my next words. Close my eyes, breathe, and try again. “Look, I don’t understand why you need to have sex with me so much. But if it happens, it’ll be happening on our terms—not yours.”

Her voice is thoughtful, as she flows around the columns, moving back and forth so swiftly that when I blink she’s ten metres away. “I wanted the energy from the sex, as a tribute. She won’t come to my waters, but I want an offering. I need an offering.”

I dust off one of the pews and sit. “Well, let’s talk it out then. But drop the compulsion. Now. Or you get nothing.”

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7

Chlo

Waiting feels like torture.

In no small part because the compulsion tugs at me constantly. The only thing that keeps me calm is running the onyx beads through my fingers.

“What’s that?” asks Hazel, curiously. She’s cast an illusion over the two of us, so that passers-by can’t see us sat, slumped against the door of the church.

“A bracelet Violet gave me.” I lift my wrist so she can have a look, but pull my arm back when she goes to take it off. “Please don’t. It’s the one thing that’s keeping me sane right now.”

Hazel looks impressed. “So your witch has more innate magic in her than we thought.”

“Huh?”

She has the good sense to look slightly guilty. “I might have mentioned her to Trisantona. Not—” she adds hurriedly “—because I thought anything like this would happen. She was just curious about you, and it seems like Violet is a big part of your life these days.”

“Yes, just as Finn is a big part of your life.”

Colour washes from her face and I instantly feel regret. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

“It’d serve me right if you did. I am sorry, Chlo. I didn’t think that...” Violet’s voice trails off when I start coughing. A hacking cough that threatens my lungs and my stomach and urgh .

“What is that? ”

It’s a piece of paper, screwed up tightly, and as I flatten it out, I see that it’s been torn off one of Hazel’s paintings. I just about make out the corner of Hazel’s studio by the river. It’s from a painting of the Riverside Shops.

Hazel’s shoulders hunch, but I’m not angry with her. I understand.

Not all families are as understanding as mine are, about wanting to work amongst humans. I’ve never seen Hazel’s parents acknowledge her existence since she set up in the Riverside Shops, creating art and selling paintings to mortals. She works with Trisantona, yes, but it feels symbiotic. Each painting is an act of worship to a goddess starved of such for centuries; and in return, as an acolyte, she’s protected from her family’s scorn.

They might not acknowledge her, but they can’t endanger her—not without pissing off Trisantona.

“She wanted a painting of Riverside Shops?”

Hazel nods. “I’m not sure what she does with them exactly, but... it’s tribute.” I join in with the last two words and we smile weakly at each other. “Is the compulsion gone?”

I stop playing with the onyx beads and blink rapidly. “Yeah.” The weight in my chest is lifted and I’m no longer having to fight an unwavering need to proposition Violet. Shit. Shit . “It’s gone.”

Any relief evaporates as my breathing shallows, and I struggle to my feet, pressing my fist tightly against my chest so hard I can almost sense the pain. The onyx beads fall to the floor, forgotten in my panic, as I hammer against the church door.

I’m aware of the irony, of the fact that Violet was here just minutes earlier, doing exactly the same thing, but I can’t have this happen.

What has she done?

What has she agreed ?

I open my mouth to shout and the door opens, Violet stepping deftly out and letting the door shut behind her.

“No need to shout Chlo, I’m right here.”

She doesn’t look different, doesn’t look like she’s sold her soul or promised terrible things or... or... If I’m perfectly honest, I don’t know what she could possibly have said to get Trisantonata to lift her compulsion; don’t know what a mortal could offer. But whatever it is, it’s big.

She looks thoughtful, blonde hair tucked neatly behind her ears, and not a strand out of place. To anyone else, Violet looks completely composed, but I know better. Her fingers are fluttering by her side—very slightly, but it’s enough to betray emotion.

Hazel is torn as she stands, looking between Violet and the door, until Vi smiles at her, a smile that is entirely too wide. “It’s okay, Hazel. She is waiting for you.”

There's something infused in that word that wasn't there before, a power of sorts and it throws me off-kilter.

Hazel just bobs her head, smiles apologetically at Violet, and slips into the church behind us.

“Vi?”

“Let's just... Let's go to Spellbound, okay?” Her tone is bright too, the way it is when she's dealing with customers, and it's as if a wall has been erected between us. My stomach clenches and my mouth dries. It's not until this moment that I realise quite how much I've come to rely on the relative stability of our friendship—of all of our friendships in the Riverside Shops—and this formal version of Violet, this ‘on’ version is freaking me out just a little bit.

The walk back to her shop couldn't be more different from the walk the night before. Neither of us are talking, and Violet still has that strange, fixed smile on her face as she greets passers-by.

When we walk into the shop, I open my mouth to speak, but she places her finger on my lips, silencing me in more ways than one. Even when she removes it, turning the shop's sign to ‘Closed’ and flitting about the room, I can still feel the imprint of her there, against my lips.

“Violet?”

“Wait.” Her voice is short to the point of curtness, and I don't know what's happening, don't know what's going on with her. But I wait.

I'd wait forever for her.

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8

Violet

I 've never felt quite so frenetic before.

Usually, when I'm doing rituals, I'm methodical. Each step done precisely, with an element of calm that I simply can't feel right now. But today? Today I am throwing every kind of protection spell at the entrance to my shop that I can possibly remember.

Salt. Crystals. Charms and enchantments, and scribbling Trisantona's name on a piece of paper and shoving it in a box in my freezer. I don't want to curse her—I'm not a foolish as to think anything I could do would work against a centuries old goddess—but I don't want her here .

This is my space.

She doesn't get to be here.

She doesn't get to listen in here.

She doesn't get to interfere here.

“Vi?” Chlo is looking more worried now. I don't think she's ever seen me frenetic before, and I try to reassure her.

“Just another minute!” I flash the grin that I usually reserve for customers, and she recoils enough for me to stutter to a stop. “What?”

“That’s your other people face,” she says. “You never aim your other people face at me.” She’s right, and I can feel the tension of holding that smile in face all through my jawline. It’s rigid.

I feel rigid.

“I’m... I don’t think I can drop it yet,” I say, the words coming more slowly than I’d expected. “If I drop it, I’ll have to stop, and I need to finish all of this first.”

“Okay,” she nods, her usually meticulous curls bobbing.

“Could you boil the kettle? I’m going to need a warming drink after this. And maybe some sugar.”

I can see the determination in Chlo’s face as soon as I set her the task. She feels useful now, like she can’t possibly belong here without a purpose. As if she needs utility to have worth. I want to drop everything and go hold her, look after her, do anything that will chase away the horror of that compulsion, but I can’t do so yet.

Protections first.

I’d usually use fresh river water to anoint my doors, but that would probably be more of an invitation here, so I run my finger along my shelf of spell ingredients until I find what I want.

Sand.

The very opposite of flowing water.

A thin line of superglue against every entry point: windows, doors, even the chimney breast. Upstairs and down. And then sand pressed up against it.

Chlo's finished with the kettle in the back office by the time I'm finishing off the last window, and she brings over a steaming mug.

"Hot chocolate," she says. "For the sugar and the virtual hug."

Nodding, I take the mug from her, cocooning it in my hands, and let myself breathe in the smell. It's a good choice—nothing's quite as comforting as thick hot chocolate, and mine is from Café Angelina in Paris. Thick, velvety and quite frankly, a hug in a mug.

"Come on," I say, and turn the main lights off in the shop. "Let's go upstairs."

Chlo's eyes widen, just a tiny bit, and I realise that for all the time we've spent together in the last year, she's never been in my little flat.

All of us Riverside Shop owners live above our shops, and I imagine that mine looks much the same as hers, but still. There's a slight fizz as she walks over the threshold, and her colour drains from her face.

"Ummm... Vi? I feel... weird."

It hadn't occurred to me that in trying to keep out Trisantona, there might be an adverse effect on other people in the village. Taking Chlo's hot chocolate from her, I drag her to the bathroom and splash water at her from the sink.

In a few moments, she looks much like her old self—if a little dishevelled.

"Shall we... shall we sit down?"

She nods, and I lead her into my cosy living room. Chlo perches awkwardly on the edge of my sofa, until I tug her backwards so that she's nestled into the l-shaped corner. "Why are you on edge?"

"Why am I... Vi, you made a deal with a goddess ." I try to protest, but she holds up a hand. "Don't try and deny it; that's the only way she'd have dropped the compulsion on me, and you know it. And now you know that there's magic."

"I've always known that there's magic. I own a spell shop," I point out. But she's right; it's not the same, and I know it.

"You sell crystals, and do rituals and that's lovely and all," she says, clearly trying to be polite, "but it's not the same as having so much power you could drown in it."

Impulsively, I reach out and take her hand. "Are you okay?"

"Am I...? Vi, have you not heard a word I've said? You've made a deal with a goddess!"

"I wasn't going to have her interfere with us." I flush as I say the words, but I'm emboldened by some sense of determination. "We were going along at a nice old pace, and then she tried to change things for her benefit. I don't want that. And I don't like that she fucked with you to do it."

There was a flicker of a smile when I swore, and Chlo sighed. "I know. I didn't want to speak to you like that. It wasn't... I wasn't..."

"It's not the way that either of us would have chosen to have that conversation."

"No."

“Okay, well, you’re not under a compulsion now. Let’s talk.”

“Talk?”

“About us.”

9

Chlo

I think I'd prefer to have another talk with Trisantona.

Vi's sitting there, all pretty and perky, and I'm in a complete state. My hair looks like shit, and I'm fairly certain that I've sweated through this shirt. Nothing about me shouts that I'm cool and sexy and I've got my shit together.

“Ummmm...”

I see it then, the slight panic in Violet's eyes, as if she's overplayed her hand, and if I don't say something soon, she's going to come to the entirely wrong conclusion.

“There's an us?” My voice is soft, jokey, but there's a thread of hope there.

“There's an us.” There's kindness in Violet's eyes, and I want to be kind to her, I want her to feel all the kindness in all the world, and then mix it up with pleasure until she feels nothing but how so fucking good the world can be.

“What did you promise... her?” I know it's not romantic, not sexy, and nothing to do with us, but I know I'll not be able to relax, to rest until I know.

She sighs, and takes another sip of hot chocolate. “She stays out of this, and I'll start talking about her in the shop. I'll set up an area dedicated to her and the river, and then every time people buy, it'll be a mini offering to her. Individually it'd be

negligible, but all together...”

“That could be a hell of a lot of magic.”

“Exactly.” She goes that fetching pink again, and adds, “And she gave my powers a boost, so every time I do a spell, she gets to siphon off a tiny bit of the energy.”

“And that’s it?”

“I do a lot of spells. I guess they’ll all be that much more potent now.”

It’s smart. It’ll give Trisantona energy on the regular, without interfering in Violet’s day to day life.

“In return, she leaves the both of us alone. And stays out of our sex life.”

I attempt to flirt. “Our sex life, eh?”

Violet leans forward until I can feel her breath buffeting against my lips. “Our sex life.”

Now it’s my turn to flush, as her eyes trace a route to my mouth. “I mean... I...”

A flash of a grin that’s more lopsided and real than that fake smile she had plastered on earlier. “No? I thought you liked me at your feet last night.”

My hand slips up and cups the back of her neck, pulling her so close to me that our noses kiss, and I’m delighted to see that her eyes widen, pupils dilating. “Why? You planning on kneeling at my feet again?”

The sound of her in-breath galvanises me. It’s heady, this feeling, and I could get

drunk off just this frisson of desire that sparks between us both.

“Only for a short while, my knees can’t take too long.” There’s laughter in Violet’s voice, and she leans forward so her forehead rests against mine. “So we’re doing this then? You sure, Chlo?”

I’ve never been surer of anything in my life, but the question gives me pause. What if she’s not? What if...

“I can hear you thinking.” She kisses my cheek at the touch of her lips makes me go weak-kneed. I’m grateful for the sofa. “I’m very sure. Are you?”

“Yes.”

“And tell me, Chlo, what is it that you like?” Her voice is sultry, the way you read about in books. It’s not even that different from normal, but there’s an undercurrent of promise that makes my cunt throb and my nipples tighten. “You liked me on my knees?”

Fuck yes, I liked her on her knees, but I’m not dominant, exactly. Most women I’ve been with see the suits and the masc attitude and think that I’m going to be the one in charge. And they’ve been disappointed when it hasn’t exactly worked like that.

Violet senses something, because she leans forward and nips my earlobe. The sharpness centres me and I groan, low and rumble for her. “Pay attention, Chlo. Do you want me on my knees?”

“Yes, but?—”

“But?”

“But I want you to be in charge.” I don’t want that control, don’t want to be the person making the decisions like that. What I want, is to make her feel good, make her feel like she’s the sentence of the universe.

“You’re a service top!” Violet sounds delighted, and when I sit back to look at her, she grins. “Oh that’s fucking perfect Chlo. I’m far too bossy to relinquish all control, but I love bottoming.”

I don’t quite know how we’ve gotten here, and I suppose in some ways I’ve got the goddess to thank for this, but I feel light. Relieved.

She cups my face in her hands then, and pauses right before her lips kiss mine. “May I?”

I nod, and then my whole world gets blown apart.

There’s magic in her kiss, both metaphorical and literal. Soft lips that entice murmurs of pleasure from mine, as Vi strokes my cheek with her hand. And something drawing us together, something magical that isn’t the goddess, and isn’t the river, but is purely us. It’s sparkles and vines and it wraps us in a virtual cocoon as we sit and kiss, and everything else falls away.

I shift so that I’m above her, pulling her closer to me, my tongue coaxing pleasure from her mouth. I could lose myself in her. I want to lose myself in her. And when we pull apart, we’re both breathing heavily.

“I guess we’re doing this then,” she says, but her eyes belie the lightness of her words. It’s hit her as hard as it has me.

“Have dinner with me,” I say. This intensity, I want to prolong it, to bask in it some more before it breaks and the feeling dissipates. “I don’t just want to... you know. I

want to date you. And that means dinner.”

She laughs then, and the sound fills my world with everything that’s been missing from it. “Dinner would be lovely.”

10

Violet

We can't spend the whole day making out on my sofa, as much as we'd like to, so Chlo gives me one last lingering kiss, and heads back to her shop, leaving me open-mouthed and starry-eyed.

I'm a romantic, always have been, and have u-hauled my way into more than one relationship, but I like that Chlo wants to date me. It feels like courting, in some ways, and it's utterly charming. As charming as the sound she made when I bit her earlobe.

A shiver runs through me at the remembrance and I can't wait to see where this goes.

I hear the shop's bell go, and I hurry downstairs, turning the lights on and flipping the sign as I go.

It's Hazel, and she makes no attempt to step over the threshold. "I don't suppose you could..."

I mutter some words under my breath, a little ditty that lessens the impact for those who wish me no harm, and she smiles.

"May I come in?"

"You may."

We're oddly formal, and when she enters, she winces.

"What's that about?" I ask, more blunt than usual.

"Huh?"

"The wince."

Her hair is falling in pink curtains about her face, and I get the impression that she's trying to use it to hide from me. "You've got a protection spell."

"Yeah, against her entering, not you. Though I suppose if you kind of work for her..."

"It's anti-river magic, and us nixes, we're part of the river."

"Nixes?"

Her eyes widen and she seems to realise something, the moment I do. "I mean?—"

"You're not?—"

We both pause, and there's an awkward silence. I don't like oppressive silences; I feel the need to fill them almost compulsively. It's the same kind of feeling I get when I know that something's wrong, and people won't tell me what. My autism hates it. I hate it. But this time I force myself into silence. This is her space to fill.

Walking over to the counter, I sit down, and wait for her to speak.

"What did Trisantonina tell you?"

“She explained some of it.” I thought back to those moments in the abandoned church—in her temple, as she called it—and shivered. “That she’d been shut off behind the Veil for centuries, and that when she returned to her river, the mortal world had all but forgotten her.”

“She’s quite well-remembered up in the Midlands, but they have the River Trent which was named after her. On the Arun, there’s nothing but a discovery of some old coins.” A shadow passes over Hazel’s face. “She needs energy to survive.”

“So she said; and she said that some families offer tributes, and that Chlo is from one of those families.”

There’s affection in the scoff that Hazel gives. “And she didn’t mention what sets those families apart. That’s pretty typical. I’m always amused by what she does and doesn’t clock as important. Those families are nixes. We’re... fae, of a sort. Not magic enough to be dragged behind the Veil with the Gods and the Tuatha de Danann, but magic enough that we’re... different.”

“Fae.” I wrack my brain, trying to dredge up what I know of the fae. “What kind of fae?”

She looks uncomfortable. “River demons.”

“River demons?! ”

“I mean, we’re not exactly kelpies, but I wouldn’t necessarily go swimming with one of us. Didn’t Chlo tell you?”

“No, Chlo didn’t tell me that she was a river demon. ”

“To be fair to her, you came out pretty au fait with Trisantona; I think she just

assumed that you'd been brought up to speed, the same way I did."

"That seems like a fair assumption to me. And we did get somewhat distracted." I don't mean to blush, but considering Hazel's answering chuckle, I clearly have.

"So that will explain why I winced walking in. The protections against Trisantona are keyed to her water magic, I assume, and so that's going to affect all of us nixes."

"Oh." That doesn't seem quite fair, and also not really a sound business decision. Preventing people from walking into my shop wouldn't exactly be good for sales. "I guess I can tweak it."

"Maybe have it set off an alarm, rather than prevent entry? I have a similar enchantment next door, keyed to my family and anyone with ill intentions."

Sighing, I nod. "That sounds like a good idea." I stare at her. "Is there anything else I'm missing?"

Hazel smiles at me, a quick secret smile that says I'm not wrong to assume that she hasn't told me everything. "You've had a power boost, why don't you have a go at working it out for yourself?"

My attitude to spellwork has always been minimalistic. I sell all the bells and whistles and the fancy cleansing tools—no white sage or palo santo, I run an ethical, non-First Nations exploitative shop, thank you very much—but my personal preference is towards subtlety.

I pop into the back office and pop the kettle on, and then head over to where potted herb plants and jars of dried herbs sit. I don't have any fresh agrimonia, but I have dried leaves. I grab a small jar, and head back to steep it in hot water to make a tea.

Hazel's watching, interested but not saying anything. I guess she's wondering what I'm up to.

Pouring it out, I whisper to the water, to the leaves, and as I stir it, I ask my magic to make the effects long lasting. Agrimonia isn't my favourite flavour, so I'd rather only have one mug of this a day.

It's a different feeling now, casting a spell. I can feel the magic move through me, in a shower of sparkles that settle over the teacup I've picked out. They're not there there, I know that instinctively, but there's certainly a glimmer at the edge of my sight.

I sip, and turn and look at Hazel. Nothing yet. It takes me drinking the entire cup before I see the difference.

She's got pointed ears. Like, properly pointed ears, pointier than Orlando Bloom's in the Lord of the Rings films. And then there are scales on her skin. Not all over, just small patches of iridescence scales in gorgeous shades of blue on her arms and up her neck.

Hazel notices where my eyes fall and she smiles. "How long will the effects of the tea last?"

"For twenty-four hours, I think."

"You're going to get a very unique insight into the Wyrten Bridge community, aren't you? If you don't want the rest of the nixes to know that you can see through their illusions—and I'd suggest that you don't—then don't look at their scales, and I'd fix the spell on the door."

"I shouldn't let them know?"

Her face shadows again. “Like I said, river demons.”

And I’m left with the slightly odd feeling that though I can see through her illusions,
I’m still missing something.

11

Chlo

S o I go a bit overboard with the cooking.

I like to cook, sure, but the prospect of cooking for Violet short circuits my brain and I find myself trialling and discarding any number of ideas. In the end, I decide to go simple, and make a hearty mac and cheese—complete with pancetta and four different types of cheese. I prep it ahead of time, and then pop it in the oven, on low, just before seven. That'll give us time to sit and chat before it's ready to be eaten.

All afternoon I've been distracted, and I suppose it's just as well it's been a quiet business day. Weekends are often quieter at Suited; people don't like to come to a tailor when there are lots of others around, especially when that suit needs a lot of bespoke tweaks. Adjusting jackets to make space for boobs—or sometimes the lack thereof, after top surgery or mastectomies—I've always found the process really satisfying.

Knowing that I'm a safe space where people can come and dress as their true selves has always felt important to me. Partly because finding a space like of my own has always felt tricky, even if it's due to the fact that I'm a nix, and less to do with my own queerness.

Violet's shop has always felt like a safe space, though.

The bell of the door rings and I look up.

She's standing in the doorway in some black mesh thing that makes my mouth dry out instantly. There's a slip underneath, just about, but the rest of it is sheer black lace, with a skirt that flares at her waist and sleeves that flare from the elbow. She looks delectable.

"Heya Chlo," she says, bouncing in as if she has no idea what impact the dress is having on me. But there's a twinkle in her eye that lets on that she's entirely aware of what she's doing.

I thank all the gods that I had the foresight to shower and change before she arrived. I'm wearing a suit myself—one of my ones—that looks very 1920s. My hair is back to its usual marcel waves, and I feel like I look pretty dapper.

From the way that she takes in my outfit, I'm fairly certain that Vi agrees as well.

"You look nice." My voice is more gruff than I'd like, but her face crinkles up in a smile. It's not my fault. Around anyone else I'm articulate—funny even—I just struggle function when I'm with her.

"Nice? That's it?" She grins so I'll know she's joking. "I guess I'll have to try harder in future."

I try incredibly hard to avoid thinking about what her trying harder might look like, but my traitorous brain conjures up images of curves barely contained in scraps of lace even sheerer than what she's wearing right now and I almost have a coughing fit.

"Take pity on me!" I beg. "I'm only human. Well..."

"Yes, about that... why didn't you tell me you're fae? Surely I should have heard about your river demon-ness before we kissed?"

What's she talking about? We had a whole conversation about Trisantona and...
“Wait, didn't Trisantona tell you about me?”

“We were very much concerned with her and her need for tribute.”

“Bloody goddesses. Always so self-involved.” I look at her apologetically. “I'm so sorry; I promise I wasn't trying to hide anything. I just assumed.”

Vi shrugs her shoulders, but her smile hasn't lessened. I think she's teasing me.
“Hazel explained everything. You don't need to panic, Chlo.”

Her hand on my arm centred me and the rising panic that had my heartbeat increasing retreats. “I'm not sure what she said, but I'm happy to answer any questions you may have. Why don't we head up to my apartment, and you can quiz me to your heart's content?”

Seeing my flat through Vi's eyes makes me slightly uncomfortable. It's not that it's nice, or that it's particularly, but there's very few personal touches dotted around. If anything, it feels like an extension of the shop down below. She doesn't criticise it, but there's something about how she takes in the piles of cloth and threads that makes me fidget.

“I have to check on dinner.” I go to the kitchen, needing a moment to myself. She follows me, and says nothing. There's nothing to actually check really—dinner won't be done for another twenty minutes—but I make a show of opening the oven and peering in.

“Chlo.”

I don't say much, just turn sheepishly. “Yes?”

Vi steps sharply up to me, and takes a hold of my braces firmly, tugging me until I'm close enough to her to count each individual eyelash. Her eyes are searching my face, and she nods decisively. "Something's the matter. I don't know what it is, of course. Damn my autism. But you need to talk to me please. I don't like that you look upset."

"Your flat is all cosy and lovely and so very you. And mine is... not."

Her brow furrows and she looks incredibly confused. "Wait, what?" Looking back towards the lounge she shakes her head. "What are you talking about?"

I follow her gaze, and see a workroom. "It's just filled with material; I clearly don't have a very good work-life balance."

Violet barks a laugh and I startle. "Chlo, that's not news, to me or to anyone who knows you at all. You're very dedicated to your work. Which makes this flat totally you. I like you, not some weird version of you, and that means that I'm not surprised by your flat, but also neither am I disappointed. I'm just psyched that you're sharing another part of your life with me."

It's sweet of her for sure, but my doubt must show in my eyes because she leans forward and nips my lip.

"None of that. I'm telling you the truth, so you gotta believe me."

The sudden sting of pain makes me blink and I nod before I'm entirely cognisant of what I'm doing.

She pats my cheek approvingly. "Good girl."

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12

Violet

Chlo is unbelievably adorable. If I liked the gruff exterior that I'd gotten to know over the last year, this slightly awkward subby side was more than a little endearing. She was melty goo, wrapped up in a deliciously masc package.

"You're all good, sweetheart. Now, what's for dinner?"

The question gives her a purpose and Chlo chats to me about the recipe she's chosen as she sets the table. By the time the mac and cheese is ready to come out of the oven, she's lit some candles and I'm sat with a beautifully delicate serviette on my lap.

She walks over, smiling shyly as she places the dish on the table. The top is a crispy cheese pancake, and the whole thing smells delicious.

"How much would you like?"

"As much as you can fit on my plate!"

It's steaming and so damn cheesy, with bursts of salty flavour coming through from the pancetta. We eat in silence, because something this delicious deserves my full attention.

Chlo's lost her deer in headlights look by this point. She even laughs when I make an appreciative fuck-this-is-good-food sound.

“What do you fancy for dessert?” she asks, and then flushes in that delicious way when I look at her pointedly. “Not chocolate?”

“I mean, they’re not mutually exclusive...” If I didn’t know any better, I’d have said that Chlo was on the verge of giggling. “No, no, you’re right. Covering me in chocolate and then licking it off me would be a terrible terrible thing.”

She blinks rapidly, and the how-the-hell-do-I-process-that look descends. I’m rather fond of that look. My immaculately presented masc thrown completely off kilter by sweet, little old me.

“Covering you in chocolate would be fun, but–” Her voice cuts off and I’m instantly intrigued.

“Go on.”

“We haven’t really done any kind of negotiations.”

She’s right, of course, and I should know better. “Cut the mood lighting, and we can go sit down and talk negotiations.”

“Shit, did I break it?”

“What?” I swear, there are a myriad of ways in which Chlo’s brain immediately jumps to panic. It’s strange to watch, because I’m usually the one freaking out. “Break what?”

“The sexy flirty vibes...”

“My dear nix, if you think I’m incapable of being both flirty and sexy during a negotiation, then I’ve seriously let myself down. I thought I had more game than

that.”

This time she does giggle, a low sound that would be a chuckle, if not for the inflection. “You know that you’ve got game, Vi.”

It’s true, I do know that, but I also know that I need to tone it down whilst we negotiate.

Her sofa is smaller than mine, so we’re sat a little closer together when we move there. The light is as unflattering as it can get, and that’s kind of perfect. I don’t want her going all melty over me right now. I need her to focus.

“So Chlo, tell me what it is that you like.”

She sends me a pleading look, but I shake my head sternly even as a part of me wants to shout for joy. Whatever our friendship is outside of the bedroom, this dynamic promises to be just delightful.

“Okay, well, I’m usually a top, but not really a toppy top.”

“A toppy top?” I’m teasing her gently, to help her relax.

It works; she rolls her eyes at me and shifts until she’s more comfortable on the couch. “I’m a service top. I like to wear a strap, give all the pleasure, do rigging play as well. But I don’t want to be in charge.”

“Well that suits me just fine.”

“It does?” She sounds surprised, as if she’s had a lifetime of people telling her that she’s doing subbing wrong.

“I mean, oh no! How will I cope with you showering me with time and attention and pleasure? That sounds horrendous .”

Her laugh then is so loud that it surprises us both. “And rope? You’d be okay with rope play?”

“Chlo, I’d be more than just ‘okay’ with rope play.” I meet her eyes, and their dark green feels so lush and full of promise. “Why don’t we do an opt in for tonight?”

She nods.

“Rope play?”

“Yes.”

“Kissing?”

“Yes.”

“Caressing?”

“Yes.”

“Cunnilingus?”

“ Yes .” That comes out as a moan, which is nice to note.

“Giving or receiving?”

“Yes.”

Now it's my turn to laugh. "And penetration?"

"I have a strap that I think you might like?"

Oh the precious thing. "That sounds pretty much perfect. Orgasms?"

"Given and received please."

"Of course, and anything else you'd like to ask for, for tonight?"

"I liked it when you bit me." Chlo's voice is so quiet, so shy, that I have to lean forward to hear her. "And I'd quite like it if you used your nails on my back."

I glance down at my very short nails. "They're cut back because, well, you know. I'd have to dig them in."

"Fuck, yes please."

"And after?"

"Hold me, until we fall asleep."

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13

Chlo

After establishing safewords Violet stands up. “Come undress me then,” she whispers and I all but fall to my knees in worship.

Her dress comes off with a shimmy and a wriggle, and the slip she’s wearing beneath it is silken, and moves with her body. I can see each curve as if the material is painted on.

Where’s my rope?

With a flick of my fingers, I catch at the material. It’s cupro, a type of fabric that’s made from cotton, which means that it’s ever so susceptible to my kind of magic. Another flick and the slip flies up and over her head, and folds itself neatly on the sofa.

“That’s cheating,” she says, in a voice that’s suddenly husky. “What happens if you cheat, Chlo?”

I don’t reply, just wait for her judgement.

“If you cheat, you have to wait to come.”

“I can do that,” I say, but as she fills my arms I’m not sure if I’m going to keep my word. She’s luscious, melding against me as she kisses me. I’m drunk on her, on the

sight and sound and the touch of her. Gods, the touch of her . She's as silken as the cupro I've just put aside.

“You going to rope me up, or what?”

There's a bang as the wood of the toy chest in my bedroom swings open, and knocks against the bedframe, and then rope snakes its way towards us.

I pick it up and wind it around my arm until I get to the bight, the middle part. The rug on my floor doubles as a mat, and even though I've never brought a lover home here, I've practiced ties on myself many a time. It'll be comfortable for Vi, without having too much give to it.

Seating her between my legs, I run the rope across her arm, all the way down until it reaches her fingertips. “This is jute. It's been used as rope for thousands of years, and it responds particularly well to me.”

The rope is as familiar as my own skin; I've been using it for so long that I know exactly how it reacts in any given situation.

I run it through my fingers, and at the sound Violet goes still.

Completely still.

“Where are you at?”

“Green,” she whispers. “Green. It's just that there's nothing like the sound of rope to calm me.”

“I can see that,” I say, leaning forward and kissing her shoulder. I'm fully dressed, completely contrasting with her nakedness. I use the material of my clothes a bit like

I use the rope, to brush against her skin and heighten the sensations that she's experiencing.

"You're taking your time," she murmurs, but her words are without sting. They're soft and caressing and she's definitely heading towards that lovely place that rope can send you.

It's the same place her nips and bites send me.

The first column tie I do, is around her wrist, so that I can move it and manipulate it as I like, and then I give into an urge that I've had since forever, and half move, half enchant the rope to move.

"More cheating?"

"Only if you like."

"Oh I like, my sweet girl, I most definitely like." And even though her wrists are tied, and one arm is wrapped about her chest, holding her bust up so her breasts don't pull on her back... despite all of that she manages to tug at the rope until I lean forward to kiss her. "Much better," she says, and bites my lower lip, pulling it into her mouth with an intense suction that makes my head almost explode.

I moan and continue moaning as I move her body this way and that, trying different pressures out. Her body was made for rope; the way it frames her beauty, a masterpiece of art. And as we move together, it feels almost hypnotic.

I'm technically in charge, technically the one with all the 'doing' actions, but I'm paying such close attention to her, to her reactions, that it's as if she's silently directing the scene herself.

The rope is tight against her skin now, and when I let the jute run down between her legs, I let the magic dissipate, taking it in my hands.

“No cheating here?” she whispers.

“I want to touch you before the rope does,” I explain. My fingertips brush against downy curls and she moans now, the first proper moan she’s emitted and it’s electrifying. I want to hear it again. Need to hear it again. Beneath her curls is her clit, and when I stroke it she moans and her body jerks in the rope.

“Again,” she orders, and I stroke again and again, my fingers becoming slick with her desire.

I pause for a moment, to tie a knot in the rope that will kiss her just there, and she growls in frustration.

She. Actually. Growls.

“Did I tell you stop?” she demands, and I can’t tell if I want to brat her until she makes me beg mercy, or just fall at her feet and worship now.

I offer her the knot in the rope and she grumbles at me. “Okay, yes, that is very acceptable, but hurry up please. I would like to feel that now.”

I’m careful as I tuck it beneath her legs, and then roll her onto her side, so that she can grind against it as I move the rope back and forth in tiny, miniscule details.

“Look at me,” she says, and I position myself so I can watch her pleasure, and see her face at the same time. “Look at what you do to me Chlo.”

Her whole body is flushed pink, nipples rosy and cheeks flushed. Her breathing is

more erratic and she's close, I can tell that she's close.

“Come here.”

I come so close that I can feel her eyelashes flutter against my skin, and then she's nudging my head to one side and fuck .

She bites my neck as she comes.

14

Violet

I can see why Trisantona wanted us to offer up sex magic to her. This is powerful.

This is everything.

Chlo makes the most adorable noise when I bite her, but I'm not done yet. I want another orgasm, and I want to tease her until she comes apart beneath my hands.

"Rope off?" I ask her quietly, and damn if the ropes don't just fall off me in an instant. That's a very handy party trick.

"One of these days, I say to her, you're going to tie yourself up for me, and then I'm going to play with you as much as I want."

She emits another of those delicious noises, and then I'm clambering over to her, wresting her jacket from her person.

"You do know that I can just magic my clothes off," she says, offhand.

"Where's the fun in that?" I ask, taking my time with the buttons of her shirt. Flicking each one open with a deft wrist, I savour the shiver that runs through her. It's compounded when I take my index finger, and run the nail down between her breastbone. It leaves a stark red line, and the hiss she makes is so delightfully pleasing.

“You want to undress me?” she asks.

“Want to? Chlo, I’m dying to see where those beautiful scales of yours are hiding.” There are some on her neck—not the side I bit, I wasn’t sure if that would harm her—and more are revealed as I peel off her clothes. Some over her left breast, some on her arms, a shimmering patch of violet on her inner thigh that make her gasp as I run my fingers over them.

I hope she’s as sensitive everywhere else as she is here.

Undressing Chlo is a treat, pert breasts that are the perfect mouthful for me. I lean down and just when my mouth is mere millimetres from her nipple, I pull back. “What do you want?”

“Huh?”

“Tell me what you want, Chlo. I want you to say exactly what you want to happen.”

She closes her eyes, as if in an attempt to compose herself, and she swallows. In the quiet, I hear the sound, and wait.

I don’t mind waiting.

“I want you—” Her voice cracks and she breaks off, shaking her head, before trying again. “I want you to take my nipples in your mouth please.”

I reward her by rolling tongue around the aroused tip, and then coax it into my mouth, allowing my teeth to graze the edges of Chlo’s hard nipple.

“Fuck, that . Please, Vi, please please please more of that.”

I laugh and this time I take her nipple between my teeth, and tug gently. “Like that?”

“Uh huh,” she nods vigorously.

“Would you like me to nibble you like this, all over, until you come?”

Her nods are getting more frenetic.

“But you cheated, Chlo. Should I really reward cheating?”

The strangled groan she makes is hotter than nearly anything else, and it almost undoes me completely. “The strap, Chlo, where’s your strap?”

She blinks at me, lust clouding her gaze, until she focuses on what I’ve just said. “My strap?”

“You’re going to fuck me, my sweet girl. How does that sound?”

“It sounds like heaven.” Simple words, but I hear the truth in them. “Wait here.”

And then she’s scrambling up, running into her bedroom to get the toy.

When she returns, Chlo positions herself on the sofa, and beckons me towards her. “Ride me,” she says, and from anyone else it would be an order. From her, it’s a plea.

When I nod, she reaches for the bottle of lube that she brought with her, but I shake my head. The toy isn’t huge and I’m soaked. “Touch me,” I say, and her fingers stroke across my folds. Her eyes widen. “Exactly. That’s what you do to me, baby. Now fuck me.”

She arches up fills me in one single stroke, and then with her hands on her hips,

coaxes me all the way down. I roll my hips forward and the strap hits me in that spot I need it to, and then her fingers are on my clit and good grief this is everything .

Dark green eyes are fixed on, drinking in every movement, every moment. I lean down to kiss her, and then brace myself on her legs behind me and ride. My tits bounce wildly, and I'm beyond caring how I look; I need more of this sensation, more more more.

But the thing that tips me over the edge, is her. "You're incredible," she whispers, and as our eyes meet, I'm coming so hard that my body shudders, feeling it in every single atom of my being.

I think she expects me to roll over and ask for cuddles after that; she doesn't expect me to strip the strap from her thighs, and bury my face between her legs.

"What? I—fuck—Vi? You don't have to?"

"I know," I say. "Count down from ten, Chlo."

"Wha—?" Her voice is trembly, and she's so wet, so creamy for me that I can't resist running my tongue from her glistening entrance to her clit.

"You've been so so good to me. So now you get your reward."

Her counting is shaky, and I run my fingernails down her sides, as my tongue laps at her clit. I'm saving the best for last. When she says one, I take her clit between my teeth and pull. Not hard; that would have required further negotiation, but a little tug and she falls apart. Screaming out incoherently as she comes under my mouth.

When I climb up her body to kiss her, she presses herself against my side and clings on for dear life.

“I’m so proud of you,” I say. “You did amazing.”

“Thank you, Vi,” she mumbles, and I kiss her forehead, and try not to cry from how trembly and overwhelmed and cherished I feel.

15

Chlo

The world feels different in the morning. The sky is bluer, birdsong more melodic, and the pastries from Finn's bakery seem extra delicious.

The Riverside Shops are usually all closed on a Sunday morning, but I'd messaged Finn the previous day to ask about being able to pick up some fresh pastries, and she'd acquiesced with only the slightest bout of teasing.

I pack up a picnic basket, and try and hold onto patience, whilst Violet slumbers.

Slumbers makes it sound peaceful, but good grief the woman has a pair of lungs on her. Even so, I wouldn't have swapped out sleeping next to her for anything. Having her warm body pressed against my own, turning me into the little spoon for the very first time, helped release any of the tension that I had left in my body. I'd slept soundly.

Not quite as soundly as her, apparently. When she finally raised her head, hair mussed beyond belief, I'd showered and dressed, and was absent-mindedly spinning some wool.

"Morning lovely! Isn't it a gorgeous day?" She laughed when I raised an eyebrow at her perkiness. "Yes, I wake up this cheerful. Gods I slept like the deep. How did you sleep?"

“Pretty well. Get dressed; we’re going out for breakfast... brunch.”

“Ooooo... that’s exciting. What’s the plan?” My refusal to answer doesn’t dim her spirits in the slightest, and she dances out of bed and across the room in front of me, completely starkers. “Chlo... Chlo ...”

My self-control only works for so long. If I thought her breasts bounced in her gothic skater dresses, that’s nothing to how much they bounce about as I watch her pirouette freely across the room.

“Chlo Chlo Chlo! Tell meeeeeeeee .”

“You are brattier than any Domme has right to be.”

“Don’t you know that Dommies are just brats with power?” She pauses to lean down towards me, and I swear I could die happy right now, smothered by her breasts. “I could order you...”

“You could, but then it wouldn’t be a surprise, and we both know that you’ll much prefer it to a be surprise in the long run.”

That makes her think for a moment. “In that case, I shall allow you to keep the surprise to yourself whilst I shower.”

“How magnanimous of you.” She stalks imperiously to the bathroom, and just as the door closes behind her, I hear her mutter “damn service subs”. There’s laughter in her voice though, and I know she’s not actually annoyed with me.

Besides, I want to surprise her. This is more than just sex or a good kink scene—so much so that I fought a goddess-drawn compulsion.

I want to take her down the river on a boat, though not here. There are too many fae eyes in Wyvern Bridge, specifically fae eyes that are far too fond of a capsized boat for me to trust my mortal on the river near them.

It's been years since I've allowed myself to give in to the lure of the river, and I suppose in some ways Trisantona is getting what she wanted after all.

It's still quiet when we leave the shop, and walk out of the village, only stopping at Spellbound for Violet to brew up some tea. "I like seeing your scales," she says. "It's like a secret between you and me." I've never considered my scales as anything more than something to hide, but the way that her eyes linger on them, like a caress, has me wanting show them off for her some more.

We follow the river walkway away from the village for about twenty minutes, until we come to where a rowboat is moored on the bank.

Violet looks a little wary. "Hazel said something about not going to a river with a river nix..."

"You're under the protection of Trisantona now; I'm not sure I could drown you even if I wanted to. Which I very much do not want to, for clarity. No drowning here. And we're far away enough from the village that we should be able to avoid any unwanted attention."

I don't say that there are some specific fae that I don't want to start paying attention to Violet, but there's a reason why Kit is completely estranged from her family. Running the funeral directors has worked brilliantly to help them cover up any not-so-accidental deaths.

She nods slowly, and allows me to help her into the boat carefully. I settle the picnic basket in the hull, and roll up my sleeves. Rowing in a gym can't compete with

rowing against the current of a river, and when we push off, I feel Trisantona's power reach out, as if trying to draw us back towards her.

"Stop it," I mutter. "I'm introducing her to the Arun, but we're keeping it lowkey."

That must have appeased her, because she loosens her hold, and off we go. With most nixes, it's the river that reaches out towards them, but for me it's the plants. Tendrils and fronds reach up as the boat passes on through, never quite catching us. When one particularly stubborn starwort plant refuses to let go, I pause my rowing to stroke it.

That might have been a mistake.

As soon as they sense me, they're all reaching out for me, trying to wind themselves round my fingers and up my arms.

"Who needs tattoos when you have plants?" Violet's voice trembles slightly, and I realise that she's unsure about how safe this is.

"They just miss me, is all," I explain. "I've always been a plant magic kind of fae; makes me a real oddity in the nix community."

Eventually I disentangle myself and we make our way to a key, where I'm able to pull up to the shore, and we can disembark.

It's quiet out here, warm for March, as if Belenus is smiling down on us himself. It's the perfect place for a picnic; farming land that's gone fallow for a season, with a clear area for me to place our picnic blanket. I pull out cushions—nothing but comfort for my Domme—and set out brunch for us both.

"I can see why you didn't want to spoil the surprise," says Violet. She's leaning up against me, sipping a Bellini, crumbs from a croissant all around her mouth and top. I

kiss them away, and then let my lips linger.

“It is very pretty here,” I agree. “My parents used to bring me down here when I was a kid, before the gods were back. We’d picnic and pretend that we weren’t weirdly different for reasons that none of us could quite comprehend.”

“You didn’t know you were fae?”

“Being fae didn’t mean anything when there was no magic in the world; we just had a weird allergy to metal, and short tempers. It’s not that I’m grumpy in general, I’m just quick to anger, and keeping conversations short means I’m less likely to lose my temper over something ridiculous.”

“What happens when you lose your temper?” asks Violet carefully. Her eyes shutter, as if remembering something that should have been left far in the past.

“Not a huge amount. I know better than to lose it around other people, although that does mean that I’m more self-critical than my mum likes. A healthy obsession usually helps dissipate the intensity of it all—most of us are obsessed with the river and swimming. For me it was clothing. Natural fibres resonate, and dampen the frustrations.”

There’s relief in her eyes. “I see. That makes sense.”

“Are you alright?” I’m blunt because I’m not sure how else to phrase it, and because I don’t want her to misunderstand my meaning. “Me talking about losing my temper... it felt like you were withdrawing for a moment.”

Her smile is strained. “I had an ex who had a bit of a temper. Nothing physical, just sharp words aimed to wound. I don’t like being reminded of that relationship much.”

16

Violet

It's been quite some time since I thought about my ex, and it's not something I wish to dwell on whilst on a date with Chlo.

She looks concerned, as if she's on the verge of triggering a PTSD response. I've done enough therapy that she's probably safe from that, unless she actually loses her temper and yells at me. But everything she's said tells me that she's aware of the impact on other people, and that she mitigates it as far as possible. I think that's all anyone can really do.

We all mess up sometimes; it's about learning from that, and not to do it again.

Even so, it makes me realise quite how much I appreciate her, appreciate this. I spent so much time being told that I had to be a sub because 'bottoms can't be Dommies', that I thought it was true. But sex and kink never look the same for every person, much as each individual needs and wants different things from a scene.

I want pleasure, but I also want to look after someone. Guiding Chlo through sex together the previous night brought me so much joy. Her submission is a gift, even as it ties me up with a beautiful bow. I'd never let anyone hurt her, the way I'd been hurt.

I'm struck by the fierceness of my emotions.

Pulling her down to kiss me, I swallow her concerns and kiss away her worries. I've got her and she's got me.

It's warm, for March, and she doesn't protest as I push her jacket from her shoulders, and she bares her neck for me, without me having to utter a single word.

"Do you want me to kiss you here?" I ask.

Chlo makes a noise that's half yes, half frustration.

"Come on," I tease. "Use your words."

She glowers at me, and I see the grumpy, gruff exterior that I've been so used to. "Do I have to?"

"How will I know what you want, if you don't tell me?"

She rolls her eyes, but she's not annoyed; it's all in play, and the joy that runs through me is one of pure happiness. I like that we can laugh and tease, all whilst turning each other on.

Her voice drops, and I have to lean forward to catch her words. "Mark me?"

"Pardon?"

"Mark me."

I'm about to tease her some more, when I see the naked longing on her face. I whisper my answer against her ear, and she shudders with each word. "If I mark you, Chlo, then you're mine."

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

She looks at me then, matching my fierceness with her own. “I’m yours, and you are mine. Mark me, Violet. Mark me so the whole world knows that I belong with you.”

I stroke her neck with my fingers, and her head falls back, her breath coming in short, sharp bursts. Leaning forward, I nuzzle and then dart my tongue across her skin, and huff my delight when she shudders. And then I bite, sucking at her skin, enticing the softest of moans from my Chlo, as she goes limp in my arms.

When I move back, the skin is red and raised, and she presses her fingers to it in something like wonderment. “Vi... I...” She kisses me, impetuously, and we fall back against the picnic blanket, kissing and stroking and curling up with each other.

This isn’t about sex, though it’s certainly sensual; it’s about us truly seeing each other.

We’ve been friends, from the moment we met, but this? This is something else entirely and I don’t think that I can let her go.

“You marked me,” she says, eyes shining. “You claimed me.”

“Thank you for letting me,” I say, but she isn’t finished speaking.

“No one’s ever really wanted to belong with me like that before. I spend too much time with mortals for nixes to really like or understand me; and I’m so standoffish that mortals always somehow sense that there’s something that’s not quite right. But you...” Her eyes well up, and I pull her close to me again. I can’t bear to see her cry. “You see me.”

“I see you,” I repeat, and kiss her as gently as I know how.

“And you want me.”

I waggle my eyebrows at her and she chuckles. “This is not how I thought I’d be spending my Sunday.”

“Me neither, but I’m so happy.”

17

Chlo

It's getting cold when we head back home, and I sling my jacket around Violet's shoulders as we make our way back into Wyrten Bridge, almost taking out Kit, who's walking past with Marla. They make the cutest non-couple couple.

"Where've you guys been?" asks Marla.

Vi grins at her and starts bubbling over with excitement, telling them both all about our date. Kit shoots me a look. She's used to me holding myself apart from most of the other nixes in town, but I've never dated anyone from the village.

I shrug and grin, but the worry in her eyes doesn't alleviate, especially when Violet's gaze catches on the shimmery green scales on her arm. I've always wondered about Kit's tats, and the way that the inked fish seem to swim behind and in front of the scales that are scattered across her body, just like mine.

Her eyes widen in panic, and she takes a step back.

"Kit?" Marla's confused and Vi's trying to hide her dismay. She must have forgotten what Hazel and I have impressed upon her.

"It's fine, Kit, I?—"

"It sounds like you had a nice date." Her words are loud enough to attract attention

from other people walking around, and there are more than a few nixes who start to shoot us odd looks. No one whom I'd be worried about, but I'll be getting a call from my parents this evening. If Trisantona's attempts at matchmaking were clumsy enough, Goddess only knew who my parents would try to set me up with. Probably some completely inoffensive fae with a career in river management who wouldn't arouse even the slightest desire in me.

Kit looks apologetic, and I realise that somehow, she's managed to keep her status as a nix complete secret from Marla.

Recovering quickly, Vi smiles at them both and makes a joke about rowboats and picnics.

"You took her on the river?" This time Kit sounds pissed. "You know how dangerous that is."

Marla's hand is tight on Kit's arm, and I remember that why Kit's estranged from her family. "You do have to be super careful around here, Violet. My brother died when we were kids. Drowned."

I've never seen Vi with anything other than rosy cheeks, but at Marla's cheeks she goes pale. "I'm... I'm so sorry, Marla."

"We went further downstream," I say. I know I'm being short, but I can't believe that Kit could imagine that I'd ever take part in some antiquated bullshit ritual. "Away from the village. Where the Arun is calmer."

Her answering nod is short, and her face looks strained. "Chlo's a good one. Not many like her." To Marla it sounds like she's talking about people in general, but the three of us know that she's warning Violet about nixes. "You ever need to talk to someone, you can pop into the Arms any time."

“Thank you.”

Violet stares after the two of them as they walk off, and she’s decidedly more sombre as we head back to her apartment. When we get into Spellbound, she sends me up to the living room whilst she finishes off something downstairs in the shop. I can hear her moving about, and the clink of glass jars.

She’s doing an enchantment, I guess, a protection spell. Remembering the look on Marla’s face, I don’t blame her. The summer her brother died, everything changed. Up until that point, all of the teenagers in Wyrten ran about together, nix and mortal. It was before the Veil had lifted and all that energy, all that frustrated potential, manifested itself in strange ways.

I’d been too nerdy to be much involved, but Kit and Marla and their friends spent all their time clambering around the South Downs, swimming in the Arun, being chaotically happy. That was what I remember of the few times I’d joined them. Cider and crisps and music played too loudly in the sun.

When Johnny drowned, shock rippled through the community.

Mortals started clustering together, spending less and less time with the nixes, their subconscious somehow warning them of the dangers. As for the nix community, it was riven in two. Half condemned the death of a child, and the other half sneered at the fragility of mortals, and claimed that only sacrifices would bring back the gods and our power.

Us kids didn’t care about any of that. We just cared that Johnny, who’d been beyond vivacious and full of life, was dead on a slab in the funeral home.

Kit walked out of her father’s home and never went back.

The sound of Violet's footsteps brought me back to the present, and I smiled tiredly at her as she entered.

"I just wanted to renew my wards; I've adjusted them so they don't hurt nixes in general."

"But?"

"But there's a nasty little surprise there for anyone who steps over my threshold whilst wishing me harm." She was still, almost as still as when I'd had her in my rope. "I don't know what happened to Marla's brother, but?—"

"Johnny," I interrupt. "His name was Johnny."

I'm still standing, because why would I sit, and she tugs me over to the sofa and I sink into the cushions without another word.

"Johnny." Her voice is gentle, and her hand strokes my hair, and I allow myself to be pulled close against her and she holds me. "It sounds awful."

"It was terrible," I say, the words spilling from me in a rush. "There were people who were pleased about his death, pleased because he was only a mortal and they weren't as important as bringing back the gods, and us nixes shouldn't be cavorting with humans anyhow and... and..." I taste saltiness on my lips, my tears surprising me.

Vi doesn't say anything else, just holds me tighter and rocks me in her arms.

"And then Kit looked at me on the bridge like I was going to do the same thing to you, and I swear Violet, I would never."

"I know baby, I know." She mumbles the words against her hair, and they loose a

dam inside me and all the tears that I've held back for years come tumbling forth. I cling onto Violet and sob.

18

Violet

It's impossible to hide the fact that Chlo and I are dating, especially now that the Spring Equinox plans are going ahead and we're spending so much time together. Finn and Hazel don't tease us much, but the rest of the village does, and I've noticed more and more nixes visiting the shop, to come stare at the mortal who got the goddess' blessing and snared a nix.

I've taken photos of the display I've set up for Trisantona, and she seemed pretty pleased with it. She wasn't overly happy about the fact that we're doing a ritual on the Spring Equinox, muttering about how Eostre doesn't need any more tributes, but we've found a middle ground. We'll still do the ritual on the Equinox, but I'll dedicate it to her and the River Arun. She's happy with that.

Or as happy as I think she can be. She's got a fortnight to change her mind and cause trouble.

It's pretty surreal, having had a curtain pulled back, and seeing everything magic as more concretely real than ever before. My own spells and enchantments have infinitely more power, and I can see their results in real time—rather than before where their results were often implied, or not viewable to my mortal eyes.

But having the goddess' blessing has done wonders for business. Spellbound is busy pretty much constantly, and tarot readings that I'd previously only done for friends, have become somewhat legendary.

The bell rings, and I raise my eyes as I see Kit walk through the door.

“Hey!”

“Hey.” She smiles, but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes, and I shuffle awkwardly on my stool. Kit’s usually perfectly cordial with me, but she avoids Chlo as much as possible and it makes me uncomfortable. “I... I heard you’re doing tarot readings.”

“That’s right.” I can’t work out what she’s thinking; I mean, I can’t usually read people—thanks autism—but I definitely can’t read her intentions.

“Can you do one for me?” She laughs at the surprise on my face. “I know I don’t go much in for—” She waves her hand to take in the very woo-woo esoteric wares that I sell. “—all of this, but you? You seem safe enough. And it’s been a while since anyone’s read my cards.”

It’s a big deal, or at least, that’s the impression I get, but I don’t want to make a fuss, so I just ask “You got a particular spread in mind?”

She shakes her head slowly. “Nah, I just need to know if I’m on the right track with something.”

“Okay.”

I pause before selecting The Tempest Tarot. Kit raises an eyebrow at the choice, but I shrug. There are many reasons why I might pick a particular deck to use for a reading, but in this case, it’s instinct. It’s a deck concerned with water, and Kit is a river nix—even if she’s estranged from the community—and it’s also concerned with growth and sadness and movement.

I shuffle the deck sharply and place it in front of her. “Split the deck.”

She does, and I don't bother talking her through the process; she knows what I'm doing.

I shuffle again, and then spread the cards out in a single swift movement. "Pick three cards."

Kit takes her time, selecting cards carefully, and she hands them to me with a wry smile. "I haven't told you what it's about. Do you need me to?"

I shake my head. "We'll go on instinct; I don't want you to influence my reading."

She nods, somewhat approvingly, and waits for me to turn them over.

The spread I'm using is one that I developed myself; it's usually for following your dreams readings, but it works with general "am I on the right path?" questions.

I turn the first card over. "'Why are you pursuing this?' and you've got the Knight of Wands." The line drawing on this card depicts a person at the top of a lighthouse, looking out to sea with a telescope. "Wands are about action, and this implies that you're not taking any—you're just standing and watching the rest of the world pass you by. Usually knights are super impetuous, but in this deck, this card usually suggests that you need to be more impetuous."

She doesn't say anything; just looks thoughtful.

"Next up we have 'What is in your way?' and you've pulled the Six of Cups. It's a card about childhood memories." I gesture towards where the two children are depicted, play-sword fighting. The room suddenly feels very awkward indeed. "Something from your childhood is holding you back."

Kit's laugh is bitter, and I remember Chlo telling me that the woman was estranged

from her family. I'm tempted to add a comment, but I don't know Kit well enough, or have the history with the nixes that she has."

"Finally we have 'what will help you get there?' and—" My voice breaks off and I stare silently at the card I've turned over. The High Priestess. A naked woman, submerged in water, moon above her, ball of magic in her hands. She bares a startling resemblance to Trisantona.

"Fuck," says Kit. "I don't think you need to translate that one for me."

I grimace. "If it helps, she hasn't influenced the cards; they're spelled against manipulation."

"So it's just the universe that's yelling at me then."

"If it helps, the cards yell at me on the regular. I can't count the number of times that I've pulled the Four of Swords."

"The Four of Swords?"

"The burnout card."

Kit chuckles, and some of the tension in her shoulders lessens. "The universe can get fucked. There's a reason I abandoned my family."

"Trisantona isn't your family, and from what I can gather, she's only been back five years." She doesn't respond straight away, and I jump to fill the silence. "Maybe it's not something you need to worry about now."

She pats my arm distractedly, and I know that she's still thinking on it all. "Thanks Vi. How much do I owe you?"

I shake my head, but Kit insists on paying.

As she heads out the door, she pauses for a moment and looks back. “Be careful, Vi. Chlo’s one of the good ones, but nixes are insidious, and a few too many of them have been paying rather close attention to you lately.”

“I’m fine,” I start, but she’s gone, and I’m left with a sinking feeling in my stomach.

19

Chlo

My parents are fine with me dating Violet. They're a bit weirded out by the whole mortal and a nix thing, I can tell, but they love me too much to protest. I've been lucky with Asher and Summer; they coped with my aversion to the river far better than most in our community would have, and when I went down the tailor route, they supported me unquestioningly.

Not all nix families are like that.

I pass Kit's father and brother in the village, and Archie—her brother—gives me a look of disgust. Theo doesn't even acknowledge me. He walks straight past me as if I don't exist.

I'm not scared of them, but their reaction—or lack thereof—does make me uneasy. I haven't seen them anywhere near Spellbound though, so I think Violet's probably okay. They're bigoted, not murderous.

The rest of the nix community seem to be torn. Some are happy to be led by Trisantona's example, and accept Violet quite happily; others are cautious around her. Either way, there's a lot of curiosity, and people visit her shop regularly.

It also means that I've taken on the security for our Spring Equinox celebrations. Finn looked completely nonplussed when I suggested it, but Hazel backed me up, and my Violet just looked slightly sad. We all know that we have to be careful, that a day out

by the river endangers mortals if the nix community decide to be difficult.

I'm finishing up some alterations on a waistcoat when the door to Suited is kicked open. Literally. The nixes who enter I know by face, not by name.

“ Chloooooo ...” My name is singsong in their mouths and I fight the rising anger inside me.

Taking a moment, I carefully finish off the stitching that I'm doing, before placing the waistcoat on my workbench and turning to face them. “How can I help?”

“You're fucking a mortal,” one of them spits.

“Yes. And?”

There's a pause. I don't think that they realised that I wouldn't deny it. I've let the wind out of their balloon—how are they going to beat the truth out of me if I'm upfront with them about it?

Not that anyone's going to be beating me up. My fingers twitch and I can feel every bolt of fabric in the shop as if they're a very extension of myself.

“People like you make me sick.” Their leader is a white woman, her scales a dark red against her neck. “You don't know what's best for you, what's best for our society.”

Actually, I'm pretty certain that the last thing any society needs is a group of vigilante bigots running around. I pick the waistcoat back up and resume my work. There's a scuffle amongst them, and I'm alert, waiting to see what their next move will be, all whilst serenely stitching.

Footsteps approach. I click my fingers. Footsteps stop.

There's muffled yelling, and when I look up, I'm pleased to see that what I'd planned has worked perfectly. Scales flare as the five nixes try to shout, the sounds strangled by the material in their mouths; their forward trajectory halted by the rope wound round and round their legs.

"Now it's my turn." For once in my life, I let myself feel the anger that's always below the surface bubble up and paint my voice with disdain. "I'm done pretending that I give a crap what any of you think. Stay away from me, stay away from Violet, and—fuck it—let's throw my family in there for good luck. Leave us be."

I let the material fall from their leader's mouth. "Or what?" she spits.

I don't answer. I just look at her.

As a rule, I'm pretty chilled out, but whatever she saw in my eyes frightened her. They left Suited without any of the bluster they'd had when they'd walked in.

I continued working on the waistcoat.

"Chlo?" Finn must have come in as they left, and she looked concerned. "What's going on?"

I consider lying to her, but instead choose a half-truth. "Some people are being weird about me and Violet dating."

"Seriously? I thought Wyrten was more progressive than that." She thinks I'm talking about homophobia. I let her; it's not like I can tell her about the secret community of river demons that she lives amongst. "It's not exactly like either of you present particularly straight. Well, maybe Vi, but you're a queer tailor. There's a progress flag in the window and everything!"

She looks worried, and I realise that Finn might be my friend. It's a surprising revelation, and the more I think on it, the more I realise that I actually have a whole host of friends now: Vi, Hazel, Finn, Marla, Kit—when she's not pissed at me—it's more friends than I ever truly expected to have.

“I don't think that it's something that we need to actively worry about; there are arseholes everywhere.” I'm attempting reassurance, but Finn is as visibly queer as Kit, and there's concern in her eyes that goes beyond being a good friend. “No one's coming after us; the village wouldn't have any of it Finn, I promise.”

Finn nods, running her hand through the lilac of her hair, fingers brushing against her fade. “Okay; you had me worried for a minute there.” She smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes, and I could kick myself. I wish I had said anything now; the last thing I want is to make someone else feel uncomfortable. It's bad enough that Vi's on edge at the moment.

The rest of the day passes in relative quiet. I book in a couple of appointments for the following week—a trans lad wanting to get a suit tailored for his mum's wedding, and a butch lesbian wanting to design a bespoke suit for her—and I try not to let my prickle of unease settle in under my skin. This is my home, my shop, and I'll be damned if I let anyone throw me off-kilter.

20

Violet

Shadows dog my steps when I head to the abandoned church on Thursday night. It's not Chlo, though I know she'd prefer it if I let her accompany me to Trisantona's 'temple', but I'm not a child and I won't be chased out of my home, especially when I haven't done anything wrong.

Besides, I doubt that anyone would truly come after me whilst I'm under Trisantona's protection. The most hostile nixes do is ignore me, or shoot me the occasional glare.

In return, I've given up pretending that I don't see their scales.

There's a myriad of colours, almost a progress flag's worth of shimmering scales that colour the skin of the fae in my small village. I don't stare—that'd be rude—but I'm not above a pointed glance if people seem a little too keen on jostling past me in the street. It freaks them out to know that I know their secret, and I can tell that they're wondering what other secrets I'm learning.

Remarkably little, would be the honest answer.

Chlo does little bits of magic around me, but it's usually confined to the bedroom, and it doesn't seem any more powerful than the supercharged spells that I can now cast myself.

Trisantona, though... she's fascinating. She's learning as much about this world as I

am, and having a mortal who can give her an insight into human ways seems to be a source of great fascination for her.

“You’re here!” she says impatiently as I enter the church. The floor seems to be moving, and I have to stop for a moment and close my eyes before it gives me vertigo. “What?”

“The floor , Trisantona,” I point out calmly. “I’m mortal, remember?”

“Urgh,” the goddess says, and I’m amused by how put out she sounds. “You humans miss out on so much.” But despite her complaining, there’s a shift in the atmosphere and when I open my eyes the floor is no longer moving, and I can make my way across to her.

“What would you like me to help with today?”

“What could you possibly help her with?” There’s deference to Trisantona in the voice of the woman who steps out from behind one of the columns.

Trisantona dismisses her questions with a wave of her hand, but the woman’s scales shimmer a dark, angry red, and she doesn’t retreat.

“I imagine that she’s as helpful as her dyke girlfriend.”

There’s confusion on Trisantona’s face. “What has Chlo got to do with embankments?”

“She’s using a slur,” I explain. “She’s trying to be insulting about the fact that Chlo and I are together.”

Trisantona’s confusion deepens. “But why?”

“I’m sure I don’t know; I quite like the word dyke, if I’m being honest.” I’m not lying; it’s been so long since I’ve heard it flung around as an insult. Most of my friends at university used it as a self-identifying label, and I don’t particularly like this woman’s attempt to sour the word.

One flick of the Trisantona’s hand, and the woman is dragged gasping out of the shadows to face her goddess. “Why are you like this?”

No matter how much I dislike her, I don’t enjoy seeing Trisantona compel the answer from the woman. It’s ripped from her lips with such reluctance that I want to turn my head away. “Why am I like this? We’re all like this. You left us . For centuries . We were left without magic in this world which actively tries to kill us. You say that your river has been abused? We’re river demons. A part of us has died every year since you left. Whole generations have been born, lived and died, without knowing who they were. Without knowing why we’re so angry, why we hurt so much all of the time .” Her voice breaks on those last words and I hurt for her. “And Chlo goes and picks up with some mortal who gets your blessing and what the fuck are we?” She is shouting now. “You’re supposed to look after us. And you didn’t. You couldn’t. But you could for her?” She spits in my direction, and I pull a face, but I understand her anger. I’d be pissed too.

There is a long silence, so long that I start to fear Trisantona’s response. I haven’t seen her demonstrate a particular affinity for patience, and this woman has been blunter than I think anyone has been with the goddess for years.

The woman stands, breathing heavily, and I almost forget the way that she spoke about Chlo.

Almost.

“I left you.” Trisantona’s voice is flat, and she huffs out a laugh that isn’t really a

laugh at all. “ I left you . I was dragged behind the Veil for centuries , never able to reach out to this world, never being able to feel the magic that once had been mine. And whilst I was gone, what did you do? You drowned people in my river. I can feel their souls ,” she says when the woman tries to speak, in a voice so terrible that I cringe away from her. “I never asked you for those sacrifices. I wanted joy, love, sex. Wanted my river to be awash with the vitality of life, and you ruined it.”

“Not me.”

A shadow passes across Trisantona’s face. “Maybe not you, but others like you. It’s not acceptable.” She remembers me, and looks towards me, and I can’t help but shrink back a bit. “Go, Violet. Spend time with your love. I will accept whatever joy the two of you wish to share with me. It is more than I’ll get from that pitiful creature.”

21

Chlo

“I want to do it,” Violet says as she bursts through the door.

“Do what?”

She doesn’t answer as she leans up to kiss me, pulling me towards her until I meld my body against hers. We fit together so perfectly that I forget my question. It’s kissed entirely out of my head.

“Yes,” she says again, as she pulls back. “I think we should.”

“Should what?”

“Do sex magic for Trisantona.”

Whatever I thought she might have been referring to, it wasn’t that. “Why?”

“Because she needs more joy in her life, and I think energy from our sex would give her exactly that. Don’t worry, I think I’ve worked out how to have boundaried sex.”

She catches sight of my face, and pauses. “You can safeword out of this if you want; we don’t have to. But we can talk about it.”

I take her hand and tug her over to the couch. “What’s the plan?”

It's a good plan, and one that I'm actually not adverse to. There are aspects of it that could go wrong, of course, but there always is when magic is involved. So that is how I find myself upstream from Wyrten Bridge, in the rowing boat I'd organised for our picnic.

Violet is wearing a two-part bathing suit, and the swell of her breasts and her stomach are almost too distracting. There are some near misses with bulrushes, and we get inexplicably tangled in starwort more than once.

When the oars are finally resting in the bottom of the boat, she looks at me, and I look at her.

"Spell first," I say. I don't want any nixes coming across us as we do this.

She nods, and takes out a bottle from her bag. "Basil oil for protection, orange juice for the sacral chakra, and forget-me-not petals for misdirection." Violet grins at the face I pull. "It'll cast a really nice 'don't look here' kind of spell. We shouldn't get any interruptions at all."

"What do I have to do? Drink it?"

"Gods no!" She laughs at that. "It's an ointment of sorts. Pop it on your neck, your wrists, ankles and naval."

Her eyes are hot as I strip down, pausing only a moment when I get to my bra. I can feel the plants in the liquid that she dabs gently on my skin, their magic calling to me. She strokes the oil across her own skin, and it glistens, mesmerising in the sun. Then tipping the bottle, she empties it into the river next to us.

"It's okay," Violet reassures me. "It's all plant based. Nothing in there would harm the Arun or Trisantona." And then she stands carefully in the boat, meeting my eyes

as she discards her suit. Her breasts hang, heavy, and I see damp curls between her legs. And in one swift movement, she dives into the river, her body arcing in a glorious curve.

The river water splashes me, and I find myself laughing, actually enjoying the touch of the river once more.

She emerges from the water like a goddess herself, hair plastered to her head, water streaming from her face, and when Violet holds her arms out towards me, I realise that I love this woman more than I knew was possible.

“Are you going to join me?” she asks, and I can hear the smile in her voice. How is that even possible?

“Yes,” I whisper, and jump into the water.

I haven’t been fully submerged in a body of water for a long time—showers don’t count—and the coldness of the river takes my breath away. But it also strips back all my defences and I can see and hear everything. Eyes wide open, I take in the river below the surface. The fish darting in between plants, the rocks submerged, and the plants—oh the plants—everywhere I look.

And I can feel her, Trisantona, in the river. There’s curiosity there, a questioning that tries to push at me a little too much, and I bat her back out of my head.

There’s a hand pulling at my arm, and when I stand up, Violet is looking at me, her eyes as wide as mine had been underwater. “You didn’t come up for air!”

“I’m a nix, darling,” I say. “I don’t need to come up for air,” and then I prove it again by kissing her for as long as she’ll let me.

Her lips are soft beneath mine, and she melts in my arms. We press against each other, shoulders submerged, hair wet, and not for the first time, I'm a little relieved that we both have shorter hair. It's easier to control in moments like this.

“We should do it now,” she whispers, and I nod my agreement. We're facing in the direction of Wyrten Bridge, in the direction of Trisantona and the church, and that's deliberate. Because we're about to have a conversation of sorts. “This is for you,” says Violet. Her words resonate, reverberate across the water, and the tide ripples away from us, until we're in the centre of hundreds of circles that stretch out as far as either of us can see. “This is for you Trisantona. Because you deserve your river to be a source of joy, not sadness.”

“This is for you,” I echo, before adding, “though that's not an invitation to come join us, or be some kind of voyeur. Just take the energy, please.”

That makes Violet laugh, but she presses a hard kiss against my lips. “You heard my girl, Trisantona. Take what we offer, but nothing more.”

There's a rush amongst the trees and all those circles collapse back inwards until it feels like we're in a whirlpool, being pulled together tighter and tighter. Thank you , the river seems to say.

She's heard us.

22

Violet

The water isn't as cold as I first thought, which I suspect may be Trisantona's doing. There's no point us dying of hyperthermia in her river and ruining this whole grand gesture thing. It feels warm, almost as if heated, and when I lean back and kick away from Chlo, she catches my ankle and hauls me back towards her.

My girl is so beautiful, standing her, in her element. The plants keep trying to cover her, to clothes her with their fronds, and I push them away with a stern "No."

"No?"

"No, Chlo. I want to see all of you." She flushes prettily at that, all the way down to her toes—which I know because I can see all of her. This river is clear as glass, and I don't know if it's Trisantona's magic, or the liquid that I've poured into it, but everything is vibrant.

I feel like Judy Garland in The Wizard of Oz . I'm gone over the rainbow and now I see the world in glorious technicolour.

Chlo's hair is short, but when it's wet like this, I can run my fingers through it, tightening them at the base of her skull until she hisses and her head falls to one side.

"That's it," I whisper. "Just like that, my good girl."

That makes her moan, and I lean down and bite her neck. This time I don't even bother with suction; it's a claiming, pure and simple, and she gives herself to me completely.

When I pull back, she meets my eyes and her pupils are the exact green of the starwort in the river around us. "More," she pleads, and my cunt clenches in response. "I need more."

With my hand, I guide her closer to me, floating through the water, and tug gently at her hair until she gets my hint and leans back. She floats atop the water, small ripples lapping over her body, over her belly, and I want to decorate her body with the prettiest pink bitemarks, from head to toe, but not now.

Now we have a purpose, this has a purpose, that goes beyond sex or kink.

"Are you ready, my love?" The endearment slips out before I can catch it, but it doesn't matter because I know that it is true, and she, too, hears the truth in it.

"Yes."

I run my hands across her body, teasing her nipples, and then trace a path to where water pools in her navel. One kiss there, and then lower and lower until I'm stroking the top of her mound.

"Spread your legs for me."

Her eyes are closed now, and she's drifting into subspace, just as she's drifting on the river. I've got her though.

I'm her anchor.

She spreads her legs silently, and I position myself between them. Her clit, pink and hard is peeking out from behind her dark curls, and as I caress her, she moans. “That’s it, I’ve got you.”

And then I’m stroking down towards her entrance and fuck she’s wet—and not just from the river. Two fingers slip inside her without the slightest bit of resistance, and then I add a third, and then a fourth until she’s so full I can feel her pussy clenching around my fingers.

She’s tight and hot and feels so good I groan myself, rubbing my thighs together for some sweet sweet friction.

“More,” she says, and I laugh.

“Sweet girl, there’s not much more that I can give you.”

“Yes there is,” she says, and there’s that pleading note in her voice again.

“There is?” I’m teasing her, but I want to hear her say the words, I want to hear her beg me for it.

“Please fill me up... completely. I can take your whole hand, I promise.”

I have another bottle of the basil oil concoction in the boat, and I lean over and grab it. Chlo makes a slight complaining noise as I leave her empty, but there’s a sigh of relief when she sees me coating my hand and arm with it.

“It’s olive oil, and it’s spelled for protection, so I think we’re good on skin irritation,” I say.

“I’ll be fine; basil’s a plant.”

I return to stroking her, filling her up with my four fingers until her pleading turns into begging.

“Please, Vi, please. I need it. I need you .”

It’s just as well my hands are small. I add a thumb to where my fingers are moving in and out of her, a simple rhythm so she can adjust. “You sure?”

“Oh fuck me already,” she growls, and I’m so surprised that I do. My hand is tightly coiled in a kind of gesticulating shape, all pointed, and I can’t quite believe it when I push firmly past the slight resistance, into her pussy.

I can feel her whole cunt clenching around my fist, and I try moving it from side to side and the sound she makes is almost like keening.

“Yes, just like that,” she gasps, and I start to stroke her clit with my other hand.

“You’re incredible,” I say. “Look at that, Chlo. You took all of it. I’m so so proud of you.” I’m not just saying it; I am so proud of her, for doing this, for being here with me, of giving of herself like this. I’d do anything for her. End the world in its entirety for this woman, here.

“I love you,” she says, and I can tell she’s close. “You know that, right?”

“Good,” I say. “Because I love you too.” And then I lean down and take her clit between my teeth—just the way she likes—and pull.

She shatters.

And the river shatters with her, a huge wave rolling beneath us, lifting us up, and it’s all I can do to hold on to her, pulling her close to me, and allowing her to ride her

orgasm as we ride this wave together.

In an instant, the river is still again, Chlo is still, and when she opens her eyes, they are filled with tears.

“May I kiss you?” I ask, and she nods, wincing slightly as I extricate myself, and then sighing against my lips in happiness.

“I didn’t think I’d ever find you,” she says, and her voice is gruff, like the very first day we met, and perhaps, just perhaps, I was in love with her from that moment.

“You’re mine now,” I say, nudging against the bitemark on her neck with my nose. “See?”

“We belong together.”

“Yes, my darling. Always.”

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Hazel

I feel the change in the river instantly.

That comes of working so closely with Trisantona, I suppose, and I'm delighted for Chlo and Vi. I know it's them; the plants are invigorated, and there's a weird, slightly mortal, flavour to Vi's magic.

I am happy for them, I really am, only...

Only I don't know if such a thing could be in the cards for me.

Looking around my studio, there are paintings everywhere, and they are all of the river. Beautiful landscapes that would make the most hard-hearted of art professors smile. But my work for Trisantona doesn't stop there.

Just as I capture the river as mortals see it, and the river as nixes see it, I paint the river as she sees it. Swirling, tormented, full of drowned souls that make my head ache. Nixes aren't mortals, but we're not as strong as other fae, not as built to accept godly visions.

I paint and I paint and I paint.

And one day, it may kill me.

The End