



Prey It Ain't So (Apex Academy Capers)

Author: *Cassandra Featherstone*

Category: Fantasy

Description: ***This is a 4.5 novella that fits between book four and five.***

Five fated mates. One gargoyle-shaped elephant in the room—what could possibly go wrong?

Some girls get a summer fling—I got exes, espionage, and estranged family drama.

Quelle surprise.

With the Pred Games arena in ruins and rebel Fae on the move, my five fated professors and I are hopping trains across Europe to dig up answers.

Our first stop?

Renard hasn't seen his family since they banished him after his first love was executed. He's been mourning his role in her death ever since—but that's about to change.

We don't think she died in that shallow grave.

If we're right, we have to dodge my enemies from the shifters and survive Renard's ex seeking vengeance. Add in the fact that both sides seem to be obsessed with getting their hands on me?

No matter how you look at it, our little getaway is a disaster waiting to happen and we're just along for the ride.

This trip comes with excess baggage—and I don't mean suitcases.

If you're a fan of gripping tales like *Zodiac Academy*, *Dark Blood Academy*, *Fortune Academy*, *Fate Hollow Academy*, and *Royals of Villain Academy*, get ready to be captivated by *Apex Academy Capers*. Step into a world where danger lurks in every corner, and follow the journey of a brave bunny named Delores as she navigates the treacherous path among the elite.

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Home Sweet Home

Delores

It's been two weeks since the Fae rebels attacked the arena at l'Academie .

The revelation I had about Abel went over poorly, and once the guys had time to process—read as ‘tear shit up for hours’—we could gather our entire crew in one place.

Farley and the badgers returned, then the Captain and his crew joined us.

I had to tell as much of the story as I was comfortable with, but I knew they weren't fooled.

Raina, in particular, looked ready to unleash her bow on the world, and Farley wasn't much better.

Sometimes, you build the family you need, rather than being born into it.

I pushed aside my inner turmoil over the new trauma to watch Chess start a new board to plot out the broad connections between events.

He's very good at this—keeping us all organized and on track—which is surprising because I know it's something he struggles with himself.

That much has always been evident from the minute I saw his studio on the tour of

Apex.

The cheetah has developed routines and minor fixes to his own neurospicyness—things he can use to function better—all on his own.

As we sit in the living room that Raina and her guys put back together after the rampage, I look over at the quiet shifter with a fond smile.

We're knitting together with the TV on a familiar show that we've watched to keep the anxiety levels low.

His needles are flying, and that makes me frown in confusion. "Chessie?"

"Yes, Angel?" he murmurs as he continues working without even looking.

I lick my lips, nervous to ask, but I'm too curious to ignore the incongruity. "You told Aubrey you were learning to knit, too."

"Mmmhmmm."

Arching a brow, I pause my clumsy but improving row. "Your hands are running at the speed your legs do in kitty form."

That makes his face turn bright red, and he ducks his head.

When he says nothing, I simply wait for him to gather his thoughts.

He finally coughs and mutters, "I do know how, but... I wanted to learn along with everyone, especially Fitzzy. He would have been so frustrated if most people focused better and picked it up faster than him, as would Felix, so... I sort of fibbed."

I knew it! I remember knitting in his damn studio, but I thought I'd made that up in my head.

“Chessie... you don't have to pretend to be less to make anyone feel better.

That's a lesson I learned the extremely hard way with the Heathers.

” I cluck my tongue as I scoot a little closer.

“They weren't struggling with a spectrum issue, but I consistently had to make myself small enough to avoid Heather E's wrath.

It didn't feel good to discount myself, and it felt even worse to know I did it when they showed their true colors because I think... ”

He looks up at me expectantly. “I think I was starting to believe it.”

“Angel...”

“No, no, I don't now . But...” I pause, knowing this will irritate him, but I want him to know I empathize with his plight.

“After I got stuck with Rockland and she went off the rails? There were moments, both big and small, where I fell back into that pattern because of shit she said. The dismissive and cruel way she spoke about my skills, my relationships, my intelligence, and just about everything I was working to accomplish? It activated something I'd been avoiding from the Heathers, Todd, and Lucille.

So, very quietly, my progress and confidence would slip back a few steps after every stupid session. ”

“That’s why you seemed so unsure at times and very confident at others,” he marvels as he blinks at me. “Damn, Angel, you should have told at least one of us. We would have listened.”

This time, it’s me looking away. “She spent a good deal of time telling me that anything positive in my life wasn’t earned.

It was because of other people’s influence and other reductive shit.

Her goal was to keep me from ever seeing my true potential, I think.

I don’t know how that benefitted her, but I know in my soul that she was keeping her claws on my neck to make herself feel better. ”

Chess sighs, putting down his knitting, and gesturing for me to do the same. “Come here, Angel. I think we need to have a hard conversation.”

I blink. “Harder than admitting that ? I don’t know, baby. I may not be well enough for?—”

He puts his finger to my lips, his smile gentle. “Shhh. My turn, okay?”

I nod, swallowing past a lump in my throat as I climb into his arms. “Okay,”

“I’ve lived most of my life in the twins’ shadows. That’s fine with me, as it kept me from getting the terrible shit their father lashed out at them with. However, you’re right... I made sure I stayed small, not because they’d be upset with me shining. No, it was to keep the Raj’s eyes off of me.”

Biting my lower lip, I nod.

“Once we were exiled—and I say that because Fitz and I would never have let Felix go alone—we came here. They were both so broken up over the situation, that I couldn’t actually say how happy I was that we were out of that hellhole.

It felt like I was betraying them not to be angry and upset.

Obviously, I was angry about Felix’s pain, and upset that they lost something they’d been planning to completely revamp to help their people.

But just for me? I was ecstatic that those assholes couldn’t hurt any of us anymore. ”

I blink, processing that for a moment before I murmur, “That’s a valid emotion, Chessie. I don’t think they would have been mad at all. Fitz, especially, would have understood.”

“Maybe?” He scratches his chin, shrugging.

“I’ll never know now, but I spent the years before you arrived staying small, so nothing I did would grab focus from their desperate need to heal from that betrayal.

I probably fucked up, and didn’t help them a whit—evidenced by how cracked they were when you roared onto campus like a tornado of fury and spunk. ”

That makes me blush and I duck my head. “Well, I’d had three months to work up a frothing fury over my ex-friends, my ex-fiance, and my shithead parents.

The decree that I had to go to Apex just to get killed didn’t sit well with me, either, and no amount of kindness the folks at Luc’s showed me could fix that wound. ”

“Exactly,” he says as he pulls my chin up to look into my eyes. “So you get how I’m fighting a trauma response born of care for my mate and my brother, right?”

I give him a lop-sided grin. “I do.”

“But?”

Snorting, I shake my head. “You’re going to have to come clean, buster.

Aubrey doesn’t hide that he reads like lightning, nor does Rennie hide that he’s musical anymore.

Fitzy is proudly, if not clumsily, learning every damn thing he can now that he knows how to wrangle his brain.

I don’t know what Felix has under the hood that he isn’t revealing, but you are next to admit what you kept back. ”

Chess tilts his head at me with a knowing look. “And what are you hiding?”

“I told you. I’m hiding that I spent a year ‘faking it ‘till I made it’ as best I could, and I still have intrusive thoughts. It’s worse when I have to see that fucking bitch, but I’m getting better at not letting the bad things get their claws in.

” I pause for a moment and then add, “Oh, and I think Cori and Zhenga are totally a thing and they won’t admit it. But that’s speculation and instinct.”

“Oh, totally. I think that, too.” I beam as he leans in.

“They might have a thing for that alicorn lady, too. I saw them exchange numbers when you were conked out. I don’t know if anyone else noticed because they were freaking the fuck out.

But I saw it.” My cheetah looks proud of himself, and it makes me grin wider.

“Chester Khan, you gossipy old biddy!”

His laugh rumbles in his chest, and I sigh happily. Seeing him lighter makes me feel good—especially since I was so damn worried about all of them after the attack. “Hey, I’ve been reading that stuff you’ve got Fitz and Ren hooked on, too. I know you appreciate a good gossip sesh.”

“That’s with Ru-Ru and Coco, Chessie, not my boyfriend .”

His brow arches. “Not true. You’ve been using Fitz to fix up your friends since Cappie. He gets to be in on the fun. Why not me?”

I giggle when he bats his lashes at me and pouts, my heart full of love for this adorable man. “Okay, fine. But you asked for it; Fitz is absolutely shameless with girl talk. He almost gives Rufus a run for his money.”

“I like a challenge. Fire away.” The cheetah looks determined, and it makes him even cuter.

How am I supposed to focus now?

“Um, well... Rufus and the triplets are into sexual LARP’ing, as he calls it.” I wrinkle my nose and whisper, “I’m not exactly sure what that means, but it sounded like role play for sexy times with costumes .”

Chess is laughing hysterically before I can go on, and I look at him with a stern expression. Once he stops gasping for breath, he shakes his head. “Angel, that does not surprise me in the slightest . I think you’re spot on with the definition, though.”

I squint at him curiously, tilting my head. “You don’t seem... appalled, either.”

His face turns beet red, and he coughs again, clearing his throat. “I can’t say I’d object to some fun little role plays. I doubt we’d be as involved as I imagine that dramatic fuck is, but I’m pretty sure Fitzzy would be down, too.”

My eyes narrow, zeroing in on his face as I ask, “What is it? Tell me. I know you have something—a boyhood thing, maybe, or... I don’t know.

Some porn thing you guys watched as teens?

That’s where Rufus says people get ideas for his little kink.

He said men always have some ‘fantasy’ they’ve kept buried because you have to really trust someone to say you want them to dress as like... Superman or whatever.”

“Um....” Chess squirms a bit, and I use my ass to hold him firmly in place. “Damn it, Angel, your friend is right, but...”

“Tell. Me.”

“It’s too silly.”

“Tell me or I’ll use my feminine wiles to get it and whatever the others are hiding out of you, Chester Khan. Then you’ll be in big trouble, I bet.” My grin is wicked and his jaw drops.

“Angel, that’s diabolical!”

Bobbing my brows, I shrug. “Fitz has taught me well, mmm?”

“That isn’t Fitz. This shit is all Felix,” he mutters. “The future Raj knows exactly how to get what he wants in every situation. You’re taking cues from him.”

“Po-tay-to, Po-tah-to,” I reply, as I wiggle a bit. “They’re both going to get you French fried by a dragon if you don’t give it up.”

“Evil woman,” he gasps, and I feel his dick rise to the occasion. “Fine; I’ll spill mine. But only mine, got it? You have to bribe or torture your answers from the others on your own.”

“Deal.”

What he whispers to me isn’t surprising at all, and now I know what I want to make happen when I make him mine—his deepest fantasy that he didn’t even want to admit.

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Baby, I Love Your Way

Chess

After Dolly hears my embarrassing, geeky secret, we settle back in with our knitting.

We're both making tiny gifts for Raina and her crew, though she's moving slower than me.

I'll probably end up doing more than one, but honestly?

She's catching on fairly quickly, unlike my brothers and the gargoyle.

I like that we're all sharing hobbies now; this family unit stuff is much healthier than the Khan boys were when my angel arrived.

It's good for grumpy old ancients, too, because they isolate far less.

Dolly Drew may have healed herself piece by piece, but she's also healing the broken spots in us as well.

“ Raawwwwwwwr! ”

My angel shrieks and I jump about a foot in the air, almost stabbing the intruder who came up stealthily behind us has to be our mate. “ Holy. Goddamn. Fuck!”

Lowering the knitting needles, I look at Fitz reproachfully as he gives us his best

psycho grin. “You realize this is supposed to be our ‘safe place’, you dickhead. Look what you did to our girl.”

His eyes dart to Dolly as she heaves a long, slow sigh, probably trying to calm down her bunny. “Aw, Baby Girl... I didn’t mean to really spook you. How can I make it up to you? I’m game for anything you want.”

Dolly’s eyes go from wide to wicked in a blink, despite her racing pulse. “I might forgive you if you help me with something. I can’t tell you now , obviously, but... you have to agree to it, no matter what.”

That’s dangerous as hell. Fitz would be crazy to ? —

“Anything means anything, Baby Girl. You’re on.” He gives me an even crazier grin, and I groan inwardly. The two of them are practically unmanageable when they’re together, especially if it rises to a challenge.

I clear my throat and say, “If it’s dangerous, Felix and Aubrey will lose their shit. You realize that, right? I mean, we all care, but those two are... particular about keeping everyone safe.”

“Ah, but they don’t own me, Chessie. No one ever will again, so as the Queen of Anarchy under this roof, I decree that Fitz and I are scheming.

” She presses her lips together, her eyes sparkling with mischief as she wiggles in her seat a bit.

“But... to make your heart stop thudding, I promise it’s not dangerous. It’ll be fun, I think. Is that better?”

Fitz ruffles my hair, messing up the careful topknot. “Sure it is, D. Chessie is cautious

by nature and he's always been a peacemaker. You know exactly how to get him calmed down... and riled up."

His brows bob and I crack my neck as I try not to let his implication affect me.

The rest of the guys will be here soon, and there is much to discuss.

Our mini 'conclave' with the others led to decisions about how we would all contribute to hunting down clues once the Council lifted the ban on leaving campus.

We're allowed to leave in two days, which means I have to wrangle my less organized family members into getting ready.

Everyone has their assignments, and as soon as we confirm ours, we have to skedaddle.

"Stop that," I grumble as he leaps over the back of the couch to wiggle in between us and put his arms around our shoulders. "You are not always the main character, my love."

That gets a snort out of him that is hard enough to hurt. "Of course not, baby. She is; weren't you listening?" Fitz taps his ear playfully, pretending to be put upon. "Baby Girl, I think he needs his ears checked. You should use your tongue."

Dolly socks him in the thigh, even as she giggles. "Fitz, you are extra horny today, which is making you impossible. We can't drop everything to fuck all the time; it's ridiculous and impractical. Sometimes, we have to focus on the tasks at hand."

"People in your dirty books don't seem to think so," he pouts, batting his lashes. "I think my mates aren't nearly as accommodating as the ones we read about. They get to fuck in the middle of battles, and in classrooms, and on camera... I'm being

persecuted for my needs. That's what it is."

"Fitz, between the six of us, we have enough sex to breed a fucking herd of cattle." Winking at our girl, I shake my head.

"My angel is right; there's a time and place for everything.

Right now, it's time to get our shit together so we can leave for our part of the summer sleuthing.

If it makes you feel better, we can fuck on the train? "

His eyes light up and Dolly squeals, too. They share a manic grin as they both say, "I've never done it on a train before."

When they realize they just 'twin talked', they high-five, then dissolve into laughter.

Aye-yi-yi... they're going to be a handful on a wacky European road trip—I can feel it in my bones.

"The Captain and his crew will leave early in the morning on Monday. They're headed for the remote isle where the puffin elder and his clan live when they are not traveling." Renard is draped over his chair, his tail swishing like a cat's as he looks at our family.

"Good," Felix replies before he sips his whiskey.

"I think using them as proxies will make the prey shifters feel more comfortable than if we'd gone ourselves.

The Princess is an odd mixture of both, but they would have been able to sense the

pred in her.

I'm not sure we would have gotten as much information with their natural instincts telling them to run from us. ”

Aubrey snorts, arching a brow as amusement crosses his face. “You’re probably right, Raj. I don’t know the makeup of their motley crew, but given Raina claimed it’s a circus? They probably have a wide variety of species, many too small to withstand extended visits from apex preds.”

“Farley said he and the badgers are digging in Paris. He wants to find out more about the cult we stole from, and the Council connections of the staff here.” I push my glasses up as I look up from my tablet, waiting for someone to jump in. “That only leaves your friends, Angel.”

Dolly sits up, grinning broadly. “Rufus, Cori, the triplets, and Coach Z are heading to Oxford to meet with the big guy’s colleagues.

Ru-Ru is out of his mind excited because West End theater is incredible, but the real reason is to have the Kavarits get them access to archives at the college and the British Museum.

Their connections will help them get to documents we might need to piece everything together and stop a war. ”

“They won’t be able to read them,” Aubrey grumbles. “Fucking sphinxes are useless with translation, and none of them know Fae like Rennie.”

The gargoyle in question winks at him. “Don’t respond; you have no idea how much complaining he’s done in private about missing that brief journey. I’ve done my best to soothe it, but I hope like hell your friends and Z can get scans and pictures for us to

examine or he'll never shut up."

"Research isn't Zheng's forte, but wrangling stubborn, privileged preds is part of her skill set.

She'll keep them on task and ensure the trip isn't wasted time, Aubrey.

"Felix shoots him a stern look before he continues.

"We have to delegate, even if you hate it. There's too much to do, too many people involved, and the result of failure is not one we can afford. "

"True," I say as I beam my screen on the TV.

"Which is why we are waiting for the response so we can book our train tickets and accommodations to the eastern part of the continent. The trip from our destination to where the gargoyles are hiding will take some time, and we have no idea how that's going to go.

That's why we can't pivot and do this other shit ourselves. You know that, Aubrey."

"Fine," the dragon huffs, rolling his eyes as he does the closest thing to a pout I've seen on him yet.

I wonder if he's been taking lessons from Fitz? No matter.

"Oh!"

Everyone turns to look at our mate and she gives Aubrey a positively evil grin.

"You can stop being grumpy about the dusty old books because Chessie reminded

Fitz and me that we can have sex on a train . That's a new one for the list and we have a long ass trip to the launch point for the gargoyle hunt. Isn't that fabulous?"

Aubrey's jaw drops, Felix groans, and I cover my chuckle as she bounces on the couch excitedly.

Fitz just leans back, looking smug as he soaks in our reactions.

When the dragon finally gets his shit together, he huffs a few smoke rings, then nods.

He looks mollified as he grumbles, "Okay, that helps. Thanks, lunchable."

"See? I told you they'd be happy when you said that, Baby Girl. Old Briquette Balls is pretending to be mildly interested, but the nose knows , gentleman. You all like that plan, and we'll rock the fucking car like it's an earthquake when it happens."

"For fuck's sake, Fitz!" Felix growls as he shakes his head. "You have to cool down or we won't get anything done. Stop acting like we're fifteen again and it's your first boner."

Dolly rises, automatically sensing our need for soothing.

She walks over to Felix and drops onto his lap, her hand cupping his face.

"I know you're worried about this because it might hurt Rennie, but we have to face our pasts to move on.

You and Fitz will have to do the same with your father, I will with Lucille, and Aubrey may have to do it with his parents. "

"They said 'okay', by the way." Renard's casual interjection makes us all turn to look

at the languid gargoyle in surprise, even Aubrey.

“Well, to be precise, la famille royale ? 1 extended an invitation to visit their lands for myself and my ‘clutch’. I doubt they wrote the letter themselves, as it was very stilted and formal. That’s the work of some underling, I’m sure. ”

I don’t believe his laissez-faire ? 2 attitude for a second. “Ren, you don’t have to pretend like it didn’t hurt you. We’re your actual family ; you can be pissed in front of us.”

The gargoyle sighs, not looking at me as he shrugs.

“Chester, mon ami , I have spent centuries knowing that no one in my community wished to mend fences. Even though the ‘danger’ was gone when they supposedly killed and buried her, they chose to send me away and leave me in exile. I had no illusions that contacting them would fix this rift. I simply did so, because we need their connections to the magicals. If anyone knows where they have settled after the Veil closed, it is the gargoyle network.”

“That doesn’t mean their cold, pat response didn’t upset you,” Aubrey rumbles. “I expect much the same from my clash and it will hurt. I can’t avoid it, obviously, but knowing that tradition and punishment outweigh blood is never easy to swallow.”

My angel tilts her head as she looks at her other fully bonded mate.

“And I , like the big guy, can feel how it wounded you. So there’s no need to put on a mask in front of everyone.

We are here for you, Rennie—no matter what.

If your damn ex-family won’t share, we’ll fuck right off to the next thing. ”

“We can’t leave without their information, ma petite .”

“Bet me. We will exit stage right with swift fury if they so much as give you the stink-eye when we arrive. I won’t put up with anyone abusing my mates.

There’s nothing they could offer me to allow it.

” Dolly crosses her arms over her chest and sticks her chin out.

“And know this... all of you. If one fucking person lays a finger on any of you, I will rip their head off and eat it, too, because that seems like the only effective way to get rid of people anymore.”

I blink, then the laughter takes me. Within a few moments, the others join in as our girl stubbornly holds her ground.

Looks like the gargoyles better mind their Ps and Qs or they’re going to be on the menu for a feral rabbit.

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Let It Be

Delores

We spent the rest of the night chatting about the trip.

Chessie did his damndest to get Fitz and Rennie to behave, while Aubrey and Felix stubbornly set limits on every wild ass idea the two threw out.

I, however, let them squabble affectionately so I could have a minor freak out about something I've never had to do before: pack for a 'vacation'.

Lucille and Bruno went off together, on their own, and with others, but I was always left at home with Mattie.

While my friends and my men have taken me on dates or out to concerts, outside of packing up to come to the different schools, I don't have a damn bit of knowledge about how this works.

At least, none that isn't from books or movies.

By the next morning, I was on edge. I ate with the guys and we all split up to do various chores to prepare for our train ride—which seems a lot less sexy now.

Don't get me wrong—I'm still going to have a blast with that, but I'm stressing out over the logistics.

I just have to figure out what the hell I'm doing or I won't be able to relax enough to enjoy anything.

Sighing, I look at Jinx as my eyes coast over the shit strewn about my room.

"I'm a bit of a mess, aren't I?" The small mew makes me smile, and I pick up my sand cat to rub my nose against its cold one.

"You're going to stay with Auntie Clarice while I'm gone.

She and her friends assured me you'll be lavished with attention.

But you have to be good, or Argyle will be grumpy. Got it?"

Raina arranged the short-term kitty care for me without being asked, and I was grateful as hell when she told me.

I didn't even consider it, which probably makes me a bad mama, but that's also why I'm definitely not in the place to even consider babies.

I haven't had enough life experiences to be responsible for anyone but myself yet, and no matter what the guys tell me about how good I'd be...

I have doubts. Not a single one of us had stable, consistent parenting that we could emulate.

In fact, we all had shitty examples or none at all.

"But a kitty is enough for me, and you're perfect," I tell Jinx before placing her on the ground. "Besides, I have five damn men to keep in line—that's more than a handful, even when they're being docile."

As she trots away to her tree, I rake my hands over my hair and blow out a long breath.

I don't want to admit that I feel a bit overwhelmed by trying to pack a suitcase.

That's ridiculous, right? I have blue magic.

I'm a shifter. People are trying to kill me...

but I'm crashing out over folding clothes.

It feels silly as fuck, and even though I'm struggling, I can't bring myself to tell anyone.

My eyes drift over the piles of stuff again and the anxiety of fucking up fills my veins.

Damn it. Why can't I be normal just once?

"Okay, Dolly," I mutter as I drop on the bed with a huff. "Get it together. There has to be stuff online about this. You can use the Pred-Net, right? You can learn to do anything if you just look for tutorials."

I unlock my screen, heading straight for SnootTube to find videos.

As I scroll through the insane amount of titles, my stomach knots more and more.

Not only is there a fuck ton of videos about how to pack, but also ones on what to pack, what travel accessories I need, and all the emergency crap I should be bringing.

This might be worse than knowing diddly shit—now I've seen how much the world

thinks I should know about travel.

At times like this, I want to travel back in time and murder both of my bio donors before classes even started at Apex.

“Bite size?” The quiet knock on the doorframe followed by Aubrey’s deep rumble makes my head snap up and my face heat with shame. He’s looking at the mess that was once my neat bedroom in surprise. “What is going on here?”

“Um... nothing.” My cheery response doesn’t fool him, so I stand, brushing off my pants. “I’m just, uh, deciding what I’m taking. You know, girl stuff.”

The dragon arches a brow, glancing at the chaos again before he says, “I see. Are you planning on packing the entire closet or...?”

“No!” I huff, crossing my arms over my chest as I stomp over to him. “Of course not.”

“Then why does this place look like a tornado hit it?”

“Because... because...” I frown as I struggle to find the right answer that will allow me to keep my inexperience a secret. “You shouldn’t give a woman shit about what she’s packing. It’s a rule; I’m sure of it.”

“I don’t think so,” he chuckles, stepping into the room and shutting the door quietly. “Why don’t you tell me what’s really wrong, mm?”

Deflated, I let my shoulders fall as I kick a shoe.

“I don’t know how to pack for a vacation.

I mean, I know how to pack up for school, obviously, but that's different.

My stupid parents never took me with them out of town or across the world, so I just...

I can't seem to get a grip on what I should do. ”

I feel him move closer, even though I'm looking at the carpet. His large hands land on my shoulders right before his lips brush my ear. “Delores Drew, you have an entire house full of mates who would be happy to help. Why didn't you come find any of us?”

“Because I hate all this normal stuff I don't know about; you know that.” I sniff haughtily, but lean back into his touch to let it soothe my jagged edges. “I know you guys don't think less of me—how could I help not being taught—but my brain won't listen to logic. It makes me feel stupid.”

Aubrey spins me in his arms, his eyes gentle as he looks down at me. “I know how that is, actually.”

“You do?”

He nods, his lips curving up. “I am aware of how intelligent I am. However, I struggle like hell with technology, and every time I have to get Fitz to help, it makes me want to stab myself in the eye. Of course, some of that is because it's Fitz...”

Laughing softly, I reach up to cup his jaw. “He teases you because he loves you. You know that, right?”

“Perhaps,” he grumbles, making me giggle again.

“But it’s difficult for me to admit I don’t know things or can’t teach myself some things.

Until Rennie, I was on my own for a very long time and because I was so smart, I could survive.

Admitting things are out of my wheelhouse rankles my dragon and my pride. ”

“Same,” I say. “I mean, Mattie helped me a lot, but there were limits to what she could get away with teaching me. My friends... Well, you’ve met them.

They weren’t exactly eager to help me come out of my na?ve bubble.

So I also got used to figuring things out by myself because no one else was there to help. ”

“I shouldn’t ask; it’s going to piss me off.” I arch a brow at him, and Aubrey sighs. “You probably got in trouble for asking questions, and punished if you did things wrong, too, right?”

My eyes widen, and I pull back to stare at him. “Yes.”

The fire flickers in his gaze for a second, then fades. “Well, that’s not how it is with us, snack size. All of us... including that psycho tiger... love to help you. In fact, doing things for our mate, even when not fully mated yet, makes our animals extremely happy.”

“So if I ask you to teach me this, would it be a good thing? ‘Cause the internet actually made me feel worse.”

Smoke rings escape his nose as he snorts. “I believe that there isn’t a damn thing the

internet doesn't make worse, but yes. I'm probably not the most skilled in this arena—that would be Chess, I believe—but I would be honored to teach you.”

“Honored is a bit much, isn't it?” I wrinkle my nose as my flush grows for a different reason. “I'm just a sheltered bunny who needs to fold clothes, Aubrey.”

“No, you're my mate, and I get to share things with you I never thought I would. Honored is right, no matter what we're doing.” He steps back, his smile making my insides melt. “Now, let's get started, shall we?”

“Sir, yes, sir!” I tease and he rolls his eyes.

If I'm going to admit I'm clueless about something and let him teach me, I might as well have fun doing it.

After Aubrey leads me through the process of organizing my daily needs, the packing goes faster than I would have expected.

I just didn't know where to start or how to decide what was necessary.

The dragon said he wasn't the best teacher for this, but he actually did a perfect job.

He was patient but playful, letting me make mistakes without criticizing.

He even let me figure out what I'd done wrong and find a solution on my own.

It's a shame he never gets to be in a classroom; he has a way of guiding you without it feeling like he's breathing down your neck that's very reassuring.

“Okay, so I have enough outfit pieces to mix and match for at least two weeks. I whittled down the shoes to one pair of a few styles that will cover a bunch of

situations. Now, I have to accessorize.”

He blinks, tilting his head. “What kind of accessories?”

Chuckling, I shrug at him. “I need toiletries to keep me looking and smelling good. Probably some jewelry and stuff, in case I have to look less casual. And I’ll need stuff that is more functional, too. Books, my tech, cords... you know. The backpack type stuff is what I saw when I peeked online.”

“Ohhh. You need girly shit.”

I give him an unimpressed look. “Are you telling me you didn’t pack ties or socks or books or glasses cleaner or that fussy hair stuff you use?”

This time, he turns red. “Well, I...”

“Exactly, big guy. We all have our little quirks. Rennie will want his Frenchie cologne, Felix and Fitz will have Chess pack a ton of hair ties for them all...”

Aubrey grins broadly. “I love that you know poor Chester is doing it all while the Raj barks commands and Fitz bounces off the damn walls.”

“And probably tosses weapons and sex toys in,” I mutter.

His laugh echoes off the walls as he strides closer to tug me into his arms again. “You’re definitely right, lunchable. And I don’t hear you complaining, either.”

I make a face at him, and he laughs again. “It would be stupid to complain about things that will make our big train voyage infinitely more fun.”

“And we’ve established that neither of us is stupid, so we’ll finish up your packing,

then go check in on our mate. He's chaotic as fuck when he's doing shit like this, which is why I came to see you."

"Rennie chaotic? Never," I reply snarkily. "I don't believe you."

Aubrey harrumphs and points his finger at the bathroom sternly. "Go. If you don't bring out everything you think you need so we can pare it down, we'll never get done."

"This might be frustrating," I sing-song as I head in the direction he ordered. "I won't be able to live without my industrial strength hair dryer."

"We have got to limit the amount of TV you watch with that tiger."

He can say that all he wants, but I'm hysterical and he knew exactly what I was talking about.

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Wrecking Ball

Aubrey

I wasn't lying when I said assisting my mate gave my dragon immense satisfaction.

He preened the entire time we worked on her packing, despite it being such a little thing.

Rennie is much less amenable to that sort of thing, and his frenetic vibes were exactly why I sought our adorable bunny.

She soothes him differently than the gargoyle, which I needed after watching him zip around muttering in French while ignoring my very useful commentary.

It might have been snarky, but it was still helpful—a fact he did not appreciate fully.

“Are we going to see if Rennie is done now?”

Dolly looks over her shoulder at me, the long rainbow ponytail bouncing just above her curvy ass.

I adore that she's not breakable—even more so since she's embraced her body healthily.

When she first stepped into our lives almost three years ago, it was plain to see her mother and friends had bullied her into hating damn near everything about herself.

Mentally and physically, her self-esteem was decimated, even as she put on airs that she was fine.

Now, she's so confident that she wears whatever she wants, does what she wants, and stands up for herself, not just others.

The transition has been absolutely stunning to witness.

My proud thoughts make the dragon rumble happily again, and I have to clear my head so I can answer rather than focus on that damn swinging hair I want to yank.

"Uh... Yes. I mean, we definitely should check in on him and the others. Since you and I are so efficiently taken care of, it would be selfish not to see if they also would like us to help."

Her brows furrow as I fumble over my words.

After she sets the last bits of the things she packed for Jinx's mini-vacation with the nurses, she comes over, standing in front of me.

I'm sitting on the bed so she's looking down at me for once, combing her hands through my annoyingly lengthening hair.

"You know, just because the others grew their hair out doesn't mean you have to.

It seems to irritate the hell out of you, big guy. "

I give her an unimpressed look. "Bite size, I don't do a damn thing I don't want to, and you know it. I like that you enjoy longer hair and as such, I am committed to getting mine in line with that. Do you not wear things we like or groom yourself in ways that we enjoy?"

Her face turns bright red at that statement, and I grin wickedly as she sputters. “I-I... Well, I do. I mean, of course I do. You all have different quirks and no one asked me, but I?—”

Reaching up, I bop her nose with a fingertip.

“Exactly. You’ve let your hair get even longer because some like to wrap it around their fist. You buy underwear in bulk because everyone enjoys destroying it.

You wear things to show off your delectable ass, especially when you’re feeling saucy and let your cottontail out. ”

“Stahhhhp,” she groans as her flush spreads to her neck and shoulders. “Okay, okay, I give up! I just didn’t want you to do something you hated because of me.”

I wink at her playfully. “It’s in the ‘grow out’ stage, lunchable. Rennie tells me this will pass once it’s past the point of being longer than the tops of my ears. Not too much longer now, I think.”

The beautiful bunny steps back, holding her hand out. “Well, I love it no matter what length it is.”

“That’s not something any male wants to hear from their mate,” I grumble as I stand.

She blinks, her hand flying to her mouth as she giggles. “Aubrey! That is not what I meant. Oh, my fucking goddess!”

Her amusement makes me grin even when the point of humor rankles the dragon’s pride. “I couldn’t help myself. It was a perfect opening, as Fitz would say.”

“Fitz says that about a lot of things,” she counters with a smirk. “However, I don’t

think any of my mates need to worry about my opinions on that. You're all more than above average."

Snorting, I grab her hand to tug her to the door. "And you haven't even gone full dragon yet, you know."

Dolly stops, turning to look at me with a shocked face. "Um... full.. you guys are planning to... uh..."

Oh, fuck. Her damn friends and Zhenga haven't touched on that situation .

I face her, cupping her cheeks as I look into her blue eyes. "Many shifters do actually do that, yes, snack size. Full shift, half-shift, humanoid... it's all the same, especially with your mate. I guess your class with Zhenga didn't get that far, mm?"

"Our time at Apex was fraught with distractions and cut short, so no." Dolly dips her chin, mumbling. "And I didn't have that class at Cappie, plus Cori and Rufus got really focused on their dating life, and..."

"Mmmhmm." I smile fondly, lifting her chin so she's looking at me again. "Packing isn't the only thing I—or the others—can teach you. Fitz and Felix have been doing so for a while, yes?"

"Yes." Her response is breathy as she smiles shyly. "And I trust all my mates to show me new things that I will love. It's worked out every time so far."

"But if it doesn't, you know what to do?"

"Say the word and everything stops," she says without thinking.

I chuckle softly, kissing her lips lightly before I let go so we can leave her room.

“Very good, lunchable. The tigers have done an excellent job.”

And I take advantage of it far less than I should—something I will remedy on our vacation, I believe.

“ Mais mes amours ? 1 , I cannot travel that distance without enough entertainment,” Rennie says mournfully as Dolly pulls two more books out of his bag. “This is impossible!”

How am I the one least angry about not being able to take an entire library with me?

“Rennie,” our mate says cajolingly. “We have my e-reader, plus Aubrey and I packed a few print copies. If he’s trimming the load so we can be less weighted down, you can, too.”

“She’s not wrong.” I add my two cents as I stride past them to re-fold the pile of clothes he’s definitely taking into smaller, manageable squares.

“And our brilliant bunny pointed out that if we need more, we can buy them at stores in stations, then donate them to someone rather than carry them once we’re done.

We have options, even if giving away books makes my dragon want to rage. ”

“Aubrey, mon cher , your dragon hates giving away anything .”

“Not to me,” our girl sing-songs as she prances over to the closet to hang up discarded clothes. “I get to pick whatever I want.”

“A fact I’m still salty about.” Rennie pouts and I stop my task to walk over and kiss the lip sticking out. “You don’t take me to pick fun hoard gifts.”

“ You don’t need anything from them.” I smile at him fondly. “Everything you want is bought and delivered by a crew of adoring prey animals. The lunchable barely even admits she needs things, much less goes on shopping sprees.”

Dolly turns around, putting her hands on her hips. “How did this become about me? This is about him insisting on taking half his worldly possessions on our trip. More than I wanted to, even!”

The gargoyle turns red at her words and I let go of him to go back to fixing his outfits. “It is not fair for you to gang up on me, you know. I much prefer it the other way around.”

“When we torture Aubrey?” she chirps cheerily as she eyes his shoes thoughtfully. “That’s fun, too.”

“Somehow, I believe our mate has kept herself out of the ring,” I say as I smirk at Renard. “We should attend to that this summer, eh?”

He doesn’t answer as he heads for the bathroom to retrieve his toiletries. This will be much easier than the clothing part; he shares most of them with me, so what we need is already in my bags. When he comes out with an armful of things, my eyes widen. “Rennie, what the hell?”

“ C’est nécessaire ? 2 ! ” His tone is plaintive and I curse internally. I must have ignored a glut of new shit in our bathroom, which made me think we wouldn’t have to fight him on this shit.

“Help?” I look at Dolly hopefully.

She walks over to our mate, looking at the pile of stuff he just dumped on the bed. Her foot taps as she turns over bottles and various things, then she sighs. “Rennie, I

hate to tell you this, but... half of this stuff is a dark-colored duplicate of things I'm bringing with a woodsy scent."

I frown in confusion. "What?"

"Just like girls have things we say have a 'pink tax', men are marketed women's shit—or really, non-gendered products given an artificial gender by packaging and scents.

" Dolly grins and holds up a navy colored bottle with a weird nozzle.

"See this? It's fucking mousse. Your bottle is 'boy' colored and smells like 'eagle spirit'—which is not a thing—and my bottle is pink and purple with a floral scent. You're being scammed."

Rennie and I look at one another, then back at her before he says, "You will have things that are the same, then?"

"I have over half the things you just dumped here in my bags. As long as you can deal with them smelling girly...."

Our mate snorts, shaking his head. " Ma cherie , I am French. Don't be ridiculous."

Breathing a sigh of relief, I nod at Dolly. "Remove anything you packed and put it back in the bathroom. Ren, you need to decide on shoes from the pile she set out for you—only from those."

"Don't let him choose over three pairs!" The shout over her shoulder makes me grin. My lessons seem to have taken well, and that means we'll be much more streamlined when we set out for the trip into the mountains.

His eyes narrowed, my mate looks at me for a moment, studying my expression. “This is your influence, Flames. I feel it in my bones. You’ve put her through your travel boot camp and now she’s acting like the ‘spark joy’ woman. I’ll get you for this, mon ami .”

“Love, we’re going to head into the mountains after the train trip. Yes, we’ll be in a hotel beforehand, but can we trust anything left in the room not to be tampered with? No, we cannot. So it all has to come with us, and that limits what can be taken.”

“Yes, yes...” he sighs as he flops on the bed and looks up at the ceiling in grumpy annoyance. “It’s the fault of my relatives for hiding so far in the countryside. I’m aware.”

Dolly leans out of the bathroom. “That’s not why. Aubrey says we have to be honest about this stuff. Say the real reason, Rennie.”

I arch a brow, pride swelling in my chest. “The bite size bunny is correct.”

He throws up his hands, covering his face as he growls loudly.

“Okay, okay! I’m pissed that my actual parents didn’t even take a moment to respond.

They didn’t dictate a personal missive, either.

They tasked someone with telling me, and I know that’s because no one gives a rat’s ass that I’ve been gone for centuries. ”

“Better!” Dolly calls from the bathroom. “I mean, Lucille doesn’t give a shit if I live or die, Rennie. I know how you feel. It’s okay to be angry about it.”

My gaze finds the mournful gargoyle again as she pops back into the bathroom.

“Wisdom from the youthful, my mate. But you know my clash doesn’t care, either, nor does the Khan patriarch.

You are not alone, nor should you hide being upset by the way this was handled.

They may not deserve our emotions, but that does not mean we can simply stop having them. ”

And that’s about the end of the advice I can give him that I’m not using myself—hopefully the others will have some to share, too.

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Purple Rain

Delores

I'm glad we got my broody mate to admit his parents hurt him.

Aubrey and I agreed that it would have made everything harder when we get to their clutch's settlement.

Seething with rage clouds your judgment—something we're both very aware of.

Rennie is mischievous and mopey at times, but usually he's not the one overflowing with anger.

Though... I suppose now that we know the story of the Fae princess and his orchid, the mopeyness makes more sense than it used to.

He was marinating in guilt over something that wasn't even true for centuries .

Once the big guy and I got him calmed down and his bags zipped, we brought my newest mate along to check in on the Khans.

Fitz was bopping around being his typical self, Felix was growling, and poor Chessie looked like he was going to tear his cute little topknot off his head.

Aubrey and I stepped in to help him while Rennie distracted the tigers, and eventually, that was done as well.

This will be the last dinner we're going to have here for a while—and for once, it's not because someone is pulling the strings to send me off to a new home.

Wiping my mouth, I look across the table at my adorable cheetah. “Chessie, this is delicious. What did you say it is, again?”

“Tocani?,” he says proudly. “It’s a stew made from meat and potatoes, and the bread is called M?m?lig?. I wanted to make Samale since it’s even more popular where we’re headed, but the packing took away from the time I would have needed to make the wraps.”

Fitz ladles another bowlful, licking his lips exaggeratedly. “It’s fucking delish, babe. Just what we need to get our energy back before our nighttime fun.”

I chuckle as he bobs his brows, reaching out to grab another piece of the cornmeal bread.

“We have to leave very early in the morning, Fitzy. I’m not sure it’s a good idea to stay up late getting freaky.

The car will be here just in time to speed us away to the train station, and I’ve been told they wait for no one.”

Felix looks torn as he leans back in his chair.

His strict ‘brunch daddy’ persona makes him want to tell us we have to go to bed and be ready for the early AF wake-up call.

The kinky tiger boyfriend side of him wants to play just as bad as his twin.

I wink at him, letting him know I can follow his thoughts like they’re being broadcast

into the air. “Well...”

“Having trouble deciding which you’d prefer?” Rennie says with a soft laugh. “You’re not alone, Raj. However, our petit lapin is correct about how jarring that alarm will be.”

Giving the elder twin a sour look, I shake my head. “Not for me and Mr. Morning Routine over there. He frequently has me running around before the sun is up. But I know the rest of you don’t have him dragging you out of bed to run laps with the bats, sooooo...”

The smug look on Felix’s face makes me want to rebel against his decision no matter what it is, and I know that’s probably counter-productive .

“I can’t help it, Princess. You’re booked to the gills during the school year, and we can’t slack on your training.

That’s why you were so fierce in your matches, remember?

” He pushes his longer, floppy hair out of his eyes with a slow grin.

“But you’re also cute when you’re pissed. It’s a win-win.”

That earns him a withering glare, and the others laugh as we have a mini-standoff over his anal retentive training rituals.

Chess finally coughs, then holds his hand up.

“I know you’re doing that stubborn thing you two love to do, but I have dessert.

It’s called papanasi, and I think you’ll all like it. ”

“Can I help you with the preparation, Chester?” Renard asks as he stands. “I’ll clear some plates while the others finish up.”

“That would be wonderful.”

As they work together, Felix and I continue to lock eyes.

His expression is patronizing, but not mean.

I know he’s trying to rile me up, and that’s so I decide that we all won’t be going to bed early.

If he gets me to demand it, then he isn’t the one giving in to the undisciplined lusty behavior.

I know exactly what my control freak tiger is hoping to achieve.

Unfortunately for him, I’m stubborn as fuck, and there’s no way I’m letting him claim victory this time.

“What did I say, Princess?”

My eyes flutter closed as I strain against the cuffs holding me to the headboard.

I’m trying not to disobey, but after the sexy sniping during dessert and the ten minutes he left me tied up alone?

It’s not exactly easy. My skin is on fire and with my ankles bound as well, I can’t even rub my thighs together for relief.

I’d glare at Felix defiantly, but I’m flat on my stomach facing away from where I

sense him in the doorway.

That motherfucker won, of course, and claimed me as his prize for tonight, but he hasn't laid a finger on me since he locked me down.

"You said I had to behave, Sir," I grit out as I wiggle a bit against the comforter. Anything would be welcome at the moment; I've been panting through the fury and arousal of his 'victory' treat for way too long. "And I am."

A loud crack splits the silence as leather hits my ass and I have to bite my lip to hold back the shriek.

Whatever that was hurt, but not so much that it wasn't also...

pleasurable. More wetness escapes my clenching pussy as the sting radiates from my left cheek, and I growl softly.

Felix has spanked me before, and despite the recently unearthed memory of being violated by Abel, I assured him that I was okay to play rougher tonight.

He went over our boundaries—as always—before he chained me in place with these extremely well-made lined cuffs and I agreed that light punishment was kosher.

I just didn't expect him to yeet out of the room and leave me wanting for an extended time while my body and brain sent me into overdrive.

Another smack on the right side brings me back to focus and I whimper as the matching marks make me arch my lower back in need.

I know he doesn't believe me simply because he used his toy again, and that makes me conflicted about whether I should be truthful this time or get more swats.

What can I say? I like it rough when I consent to it, and Felix is the best Dom in the house.

“You’re not. paying. attention!” He growls as he alternates between both of my ass cheeks with every word. “Focus on me, Princess, or we’ll be up all night, and you’ll never get what you want.”

“I... I...” Blowing out a slow, steady breath to calm my raging libido, I pause so I can speak. “I’m sorry; I’m focusing now.”

“Sorry what?” he asks as he runs the soft leather up the inside of my leg slowly. Felix stops shy of where I need the most attention and I make a frustrated sound that gets a deep chuckle out of him.

I swallow hard, then murmur breathily, “I’m sorry, Sir .”

“Much better,” he practically purrs as the toy creeps a wee bit higher. “Now, tell me the truth. Were you being a bad little bunny or not?”

“Mmmm... I... um. I was. I moved too much, trying to get relief. I’m sorry.”

The admission actually feels good and I have no idea why.

I enjoy irritating and fighting Felix most of the time, but right now?

My eyes close and my entire body relaxes as I do what he asked.

It’s like I’ve completely lost all the tension and all I can feel is the hot pain and tingles from the swats while the rest of my frame is filling with warm, liquid desire.

Damn, he’s fucking good at this shit.

“I’ll bet you were. You’re used to having so many hands and dicks and tongues that you get to come over and over whenever you want.

This deprivation has to be driving you crazy.

” I feel the bed dip, and within seconds, he’s close enough for me to feel his breath on me.

“Let’s see just how needy you are after being denied, shall we? ”

Whimpering again as he stays away from me, I have to bite the comforter to keep from shuddering when the featherlight touch of the leather brushes between my legs. I let go of it when it withdraws, panting softly. “Very needy, Sir.”

The low moan he lets out tells me that I’m right. “Fuck, you taste so sweet, even when it’s not first hand. Do you know how beautiful you look like this?”

Shaking my head slightly, I rasp, “No, sir. But I want to look good for you—always.”

“Oh, this is a fucking dream come true, my feisty little rabbit.” His scent fills the air as he leans over my back, careful not to touch me as he murmurs, “I love to hunt you, but I like this even more. Seeing you captive, by choice, and responding to my every whim like a good girl? That is making my tiger want to burst free to take you himself.”

My eyes widen. Aubrey mentioned something like this, but none of the others have expressed a desire to shift while we’re having sex.

I believe my dragon when he says they probably all have that kink, and my bunny has her own thoughts.

But it feels so dangerously taboo that I don't quite know how to parse it. "Is... Is that what you want?"

"At some point, Princess, but not tonight." Felix moves away, and losing the warmth emanating from his body makes me pout.

I want him to touch me; I need him to touch me.

But the point of this is letting him control the narrative, so I have to stay in this malleable state.

"Raise your hips off of the bed and put that delicious ass in the air."

Oh, now we're talking—fuck yeah.

I wiggle until I get enough leverage to do so despite my bonds, balancing on my knees and chest for him. "Yes, Sir."

"Your skin looks gorgeous with my marks on it," he says as he brushes a palm over the places he struck. "Would you like more?"

"Yesssss... Yes, pleaseeee, Sir," I hiss as I struggle not to push into his touch eagerly. I know he wants me to stay still unless told, and if I don't do what he says, he'll start at the beginning. Felix is nothing if not thorough—both inside and outside of the bedroom. "I want that."

"That's my girl," he murmurs before a sharp smack hits my wet lips and I jerk forward against my cuffs with a moan. "Look at that... so responsive. My crop is covered in your juices now."

The black leather is in front of my face within seconds, and I can see the evidence of

my arousal covering it, just like he says. My nostrils fill with my own scent and I arch back a bit more to encourage him to continue, but he laughs.

“No, no. Lick it off. Taste yourself,” he rumbles as his shadow falls over the bed. He’s closer now, obviously wanting to see me follow the order. I stick my tongue out, licking the end of the crop quickly to clean it off. “ Fuck, Princess . That’s so goddamn. hot .”

I’d love to disagree, but he’s right. Tasting myself is hot, and the sound of his voice as he watches me is even better.

Felix’s typical snarly, dominant timbre is laced with desire—more than ever—and it’s making me flood the bedspread with wetness.

My submission is turning him on so much that I think I’m tempting his steely control, and I love it.

“Since you were so well-behaved, you deserve a little reward.” Before I know it, the crop is gone and Felix is bent over me, thrusting two fingers into me hard enough to make me moan loudly.

Being filled after so much torturous withholding almost pushes me over the edge, but I hold on to the ecstasy as I know he prefers.

“There you go, baby. Squeeze them and feel how good it is.”

I know he’s happy with me now, but if he keeps talking like that and fingering me, I’m definitely in big fucking trouble.

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I Can't Get No Satisfaction

Felix

As my sexy little bunny does exactly what I tell her, I feel my cock twitch and leak pre-cum.

This is more submissive than she's ever been before, and though I love when she fights me, this is sublime.

The red welts on her ass, the sheen of sweat making her skin glow, and the writhing as she tries to keep from coming—it's so damn perfect I can barely hold myself back.

My tiger definitely doesn't want to, but I want to savor this.

This woman saved me from myself—and all my friends, too—and she did it while she was putting her own broken pieces together.

That's nothing short of amazing, yet she still struggles with believing in herself.

I refuse to let those thoughts take her; no, I'll be proving how precious she is to me for the rest of all our long ass lives.

And fuck if I will ever let any of the people gunning for her get their grubby hands on what's mine.

Delores Drew belongs to me, body and soul, and I'll burn the fucking planet to

cinders to keep her smiling.

“Felix... please...” she whines and I move my fingers back and forth, scissoring inside of her, although I should chastise her.

Her walls grip my digits hard, telling me she’s more than ready to be fucked.

But I just can’t let go of the picture in front of me yet, so I dip my head and bite her ass cheek with blunt teeth.

That earns me another plaintive sound that makes my balls tighten.

Our girl loves teeth and I can’t deny her when she’s so beautifully responsive.

“Princess...” I grit out in a husky voice. “You promised to behave.”

A visible shudder runs over her frame as my thumb brushes her clit and her breath skips.

It’s obvious that she’s working to control her responses to obey and damned if that doesn’t make it even harder for me to hold out.

I flick the sensitive spot again so I can watch her struggle valiantly, the flush on her skin and slickness on my fingers showing me how much she wants a release.

“Y-yes, S-sir.”

Fuck. Me.

That stammered assent hits me like a gut punch, and I can’t stop the growl my tiger pushes out of me. “Look at my good little bunny... you’re doing so well, Princess,

that I have to reward you again.”

“May I please come... please, Sir?” she breathes.

Thrusting two more fingers in, I fuck her in earnest as I reply. “Yes.”

Dolly moans gratefully, her hips rising to meet my hand as she rocks into it.

Clenching and writhing like she’s been denied for days rather than less than an hour, our girl rides my fingers eagerly as her walls grip me.

I stroke my cock with my free hand, needing a little relief of my own as I watch her push until she finally explodes with my name escaping in a squeal of pleasure.

The squirt of cum that coats my hand is hot as hell and I tip my head back to inhale the scent of her orgasm.

I have to squeeze my dick hard to keep my own climax from coming as she pants raggedly in the prone position.

“Holy hell, Princess. You needed that, didn’t you?”

Her rainbow head moves as she props her body up with her chest and shivers.

My lips curve up, enjoying that she isn’t moving from the position I told her to stay in despite being very languid at the moment.

Sub space has truly fallen over her now because she’s following the commands without realizing that she’s even doing it.

I have to look away for a moment to gather myself so I can continue; the satisfaction

I'm getting from her acceptance is making it impossible to think straight.

Once I'm steady again, I withdraw my fingers and she whines softly as they slip free of her warmth. "Shh, baby. It's okay."

"Soooo sensitive," she mumbles. "But I want more, Sir."

I smack her reddened ass cheek with my palm this time and she makes an adorable sound that fits somewhere between pain and pleasure.

I've never heard it from her before and now my tiger wants to absolutely devour her.

The fight inside of me is worse than I've ever felt in thirty-plus years, and I don't think I'm going to win if I don't slake my desire soon.

He will take over and I won't be able to ease her into the idea of our animals like she needs.

"You'll get more, beautiful girl. Stay put, and I'm going to give you exactly what you need."

Like magic, sub-space Dolly does what she's told without another word, and I roll my eyes at the ceiling when my dick jumps eagerly.

This will be rough, and though I was going to release her before I fucked her, I think she'll do better if she's left where she is this time.

The sensory deprivation and bondage have allowed her to really sink into this play and I don't want to jar her by changing the rules mid-stream.

But I am going to fuck the living shit out of her.

I crawl up the bed, grabbing her hips to position myself at her wet heat, and smack the other cheek to get her attention.

Her moan makes me smile; she definitely enjoys consensual impact play and I plan to erase that asshole Abel from her memory with enjoyable experiences.

“This is going to be rough, Princess. I want you to squeeze my cock and wring every drop of cum from my body until we collapse. Do you understand?”

“Yes... Sir....”

Once she agrees, I slam my dick into her hard enough to rattle our bones.

A loud roar of dominance echoes off the walls as my tiger escapes my grasp and I piston in and out of her quickly.

I’m trying to outpace him, letting the deep thrusts and her walls milking me push me towards the edge.

If I come before he takes control, I’ll?—

Fuuuuuuck.

My fingers sprout claws as the peak rockets toward me and the idea of beating my animal to finish is gone in a blink.

Ferocious fangs emerge just enough to make my face shift slightly to accommodate them, and I drop to cover her back, rutting like the feline wants as I struggle not to bite her in the same manner.

“S-Sir... I feel that... you can—I’m ready, Felix,” Dolly stutters, and when I look at

her bound wrists, I see the claws have emerged from her fingers as well.

Another bone-jarring thrust into her confirms a fluffy tail pressing against my pelvis, and I know this is the moment we've both been headed for since I met her three years ago.

This is when Delores Drew becomes my mate and the rightful Rajkumari of the Khan empire.

"I love you, Princess." I pant softly as my hips continue to pound into her, chasing the release as I confess my truth. "I think I loved you from the moment you showed up in my class and basically told me to go fuck myself."

"I did, and I meant it," she says in husky rasp. "I love you, too, Felix."

The minute the words escape her lips, my balls tighten and I dive for the spot on her that is the mirror opposite of my twin's bite.

My tiger knew exactly where to go; he's been waiting so long to claim what's his that he didn't trust me to do it without him.

My fangs tear in and she shrieks, so I balance on one arm, snaking my wrist in front of her face to give her a place to reciprocate.

The moment I feel her sharp teeth dig into my flesh, I roar with pleasure.

My orgasm slams into me like a ton of bricks, and her walls flutter, then grip me so hard it almost hurts.

As expected, the hook emerges inside of her, digging in as we growl and mark and rock together like the half-shifted wild animals we are.

But how long we have to stay like this doesn't matter this time... because now, after all these years, I have my fated mate and my family...forever.

“Hold still, my darling bunny rabbit,” I coo softly in her ear. “If you wiggle, I'll get excited again and I want it to go down so I can clean you up.”

Dolly yawns a little, mumbling against the sheet. “Why am I so sleepy, Felix? It was good, but I'm never this tired after once.”

I chuckle, brushing the hair off of her face.

She doesn't know about this yet—not really—and I want to explain, but I need my dick to be free of her pussy before I can.

Otherwise, I'm never going to get free and though I'd enjoy sleeping with her warming my cock, aftercare is necessary.

Plus, I don't want her to injure herself sleeping in the cuffs.

I'd be a shitty ass Dom if I let either of those things go, so I'm reciting Fitz's Pred Games stats in my head and thinking about people I hate naked.

It will work soon if she continues to stay still and behave .

“Your hooky things and their knots are very inconvenient, you know,” she grumbles. “Zhenga told us the basics, but she didn't mention how ridiculous it is to be stuck for this long.”

Ah, there we go. Z is a perfect example of someone I never desired in the first place and definitely don't now.

Our association was transactional on both sides, so I don't feel bad about using her as an 'unwanted' nude, especially since Dolly knows the story of our past. The hook finally goes down and I let out a sigh of relief as I'm able to slide out of my new mate slowly.

"Fuuuuuck," she growls as I move and I have to scramble backward off the bed to keep from responding the way I'd like to.

"Princess."

"Sorry, Sir."

This woman is going to be both the delight and death of me forever. I can't decide which will be better.

"Be good while I go grab the cloths to clean you up. We need to take care of you and let you sleep before the big day tomorrow." My voice is stern, and I know that right now, while she's still floating in subspace, she'll do as I asked.

That will help me control my desire to mate with her again and again for days when we don't have that kind of time at the moment.

I hurry to her bathroom, grabbing the arnica, warm cloth, and a brush with a hair tie on it.

When I get back, she's still laying perfectly still and quiet, which requires me to bite my tongue to prevent myself from falling victim to my trap.

Setting my supplies on the nightstand, I start by releasing her wrists, then move to her ankles.

I leave the cuffs dangling from their place for now, then walk to the edge of the bed to tap her hip lightly.

“Stay on your stomach, Princess. I’m going to rub the lotion on your cute little butt, then clean your pussy. Once that’s done, I’ll clean myself, grab some water, and then we’ll deal with the rat’s nest on your head. You just relax, close your eyes, and let me guide you. Okay?”

“Mmmmmhmm. Sounds good.”

Smiling, I squeeze the lotion out after she lies down, rubbing it gently into her skin to help with the bruising.

I enjoy seeing the marks now , but this will help her be comfortable later on.

She shivers a little, but that’s because she’s likely sensitive from head to toe from the orgasms and mating.

I finish my work quickly, then grab the cloth to get her swollen cunt, thighs, and legs done.

She makes a sound a lot like Chessie’s purr—which I’ve heard in our group sessions—and it makes my chest constrict with love.

I’m about to take the dirty stuff to the bathroom and handle myself when the door flies open, revealing my impatient looking twin.

“Thank fuck , bro. We were waiting for you to finish getting your freak on so we can go to bed. I mean, high marks for staying power and the sounds she made, but damn . Someone’s gonna have to clean that entire living room of all the spunk we all sprayed it with until we were almost dehydrated. ”

“Speaking of that...” Chess maneuvers in between my twin and the door frame to hold up two enormous glasses of water. “You both need this.”

“And I will hold on to snacks while Rennie changes the sheets,” Aubrey rumbles from behind them.

“Absolument! ? 1 No one is sleeping in a wet spot that big, mon ami. Get out of the way, Fitzgerald. We have things to do so we can rest.”

I had to mention how much I love my family, didn't I?

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Every Breath You Take

Delores

Beeep! Beeeeeeeep! Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeep! Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep!

The loud clatter that follows makes me start even though my eyes aren't open. I hear snickers, and my lips curve up as I ask, "Did my clock offend you, big guy?"

"The pitch was too high to be that close to my ears this early," he grumbles. "We will buy a new one when we return—one that does not make me want to set fire to the entire building."

"Bonne chance to you on that little trip," Rennie snarks as the pile of people move.

I open my eyes, smiling at the painted ceiling contentedly. My ass is throbbing, I notice, but Felix warned me about that. However, unlike that memory I was carrying, this is a pleasant ache that makes me feel loved and cherished.

How fucking weird is that shit?

It's something I'll have to discuss with Coco and Ru-Ru in private.

They'll understand when I tell them about my experience last night; I guarantee it.

My besties have been sexually active longer than me and their breadth of knowledge is often helpful.

Plus, it will be easier to let them tease me about it gently than to feel like a newb moron by bringing it to Chessie.

That's not his assessment, of course, but I just...

I think an outside perspective will make me feel less goofy.

"Princess, you need to hit the head first," Felix says sternly. "No sass. We don't need to visit doctor's offices in other countries."

Wrinkling my nose, I huff and consider not listening, but I know he's right about this. "Fine, but only because I was going to go pee anyway, bossy pants."

Fitz laughs, his hands squeezing my hips before he lets go so I can wiggle out of the jumble of arms and legs. "Aw, Baby Girl, don't be sour. It's morning, your ass is bruised, and we're going on the Orient Express! What could be better?"

Rennie's head pops up, his eyes wide. "Merde! Do not say that mon ami . I fear you will curse us for the train trip as one would by saying 'Macbeth' in a theater."

"The ghost of Agatha Christie will not follow us to the station and make trouble," Aubrey snickers as he rolls off the side of my bed to stand.

His gorgeous body is revealed as he stretches and I stop in place, forgetting where I was going.

"Bite size, I love the expression you're wearing, but alas, there is no time.

Go relieve yourself so we can get dressed. "

Damn his pragmatism—the display looked good enough to gobble up for breakfast.

Turning on my heel before giving in to my wanton inner animal, I stomp over to the bathroom and shut the door hard.

I'm not mad, but I like to pout occasionally, so they switch from cantankerous to solicitous to appease me.

It's probably not the most feminist thing in the world, but who the fuck cares what anyone else thinks?

I'm a woman on my terms and if I want to provoke my men until they baby me, I damn well will.

That doesn't change my support of women and their freedoms.

"Good job, Dolly," I whisper to myself as I take care of my morning needs quickly.

When I stand up, I turn on the shower, setting the temp to heat just so while I carefully arrange my self-care stuff next to the go-bag.

I need to moisturize and the like, but I also don't want to forget anything after Aubrey kindly helped me pack.

"You're doing great this morning. Just stay on track and you'll be on your way to your first real vacation—even if it is a sort of working one. "

Coaching myself out loud has worked since prom night, and I will not question success.

The guys have evacuated my room when I come out, and I roll my eyes.

They all went to the other bathrooms to get ready, but not until they were sure I did as

Felix said.

I love them to bits, but sometimes, I want to knee them in the balls.

Zhenga may not have gone over everything in that one semester, but she definitely mentioned how to avoid pregnancy and infections.

I should send her a ‘thank you’ text once I’m in the car.

She’s probably with Cori and Rufus and the triplets as they get ready for their assignments.

I really hit the lottery once I got to Apex in terms of building a real family full of amazing people.

I let out a long sigh, then I swing the wet braid over my shoulder so I can pick up my purse and the carry-on bags.

One of my mates will move the actual suitcase into the hallway once we have our breakfast. “Okay, Dolly. You have all the stuff you need to keep with you, and Felix has the documents and tickets. Time to move your ass to the table so you aren’t hangry on the trip. ”

Jinx looks up at me and I smile softly. “Don’t worry. Raina will be here when we leave and she’s going to take you to our friends. They’ll spoil you; I’m certain of it. Follow me out of here, though, because I want you to get to the food and water. Got it?”

I don’t know if the kitty noises she makes are actually agreement, but my sand cat follows me, nonetheless. Closing the door behind me, I look around for my men as I head to the kitchen. It’s quieter than I’d expect, especially since Fitz was already so

hyper. “Hellllo?”

Chessie and Rennie wave at me from the kitchen counter.

There’s a selection of pastries, fruits, and cheese on it for everyone to have a sort of continental meal.

My cheetah is packing a freezer bag with drinks and individually prepared snack boxes as the gargoyle heads for the coffee machine.

I sigh happily when I drop my stuff by the couch and head for the buffet eagerly.

“You two are amazing,” I say as I hop on the stool. “If we don’t tell you enough, we should. I mean, that’s crazy prepared, Chess. This place functions because you and Rennie keep us all going, you know.”

That makes them both look flustered, and I clap my hands in delight.

I don’t get to make any of them blush often and this feels like a win.

Before I can comment, Felix strides in like he’s hitting the battlefield.

He’s dressed in comfortable clothes, but they fit like a glove and his hair is pulled into a tight, sexy knot at his nape.

Woo-hoo, official Felix is here. It’s a thousand times hotter since last night—not that I’m ever going to tell him that.

“Eat, Princess. The car will be here in less than twenty minutes. We need to stay on schedule or we’ll miss the train.”

Chess laughs when I fill a plate, and Rennie joins him. I give them both dirty looks as I settle in, but that changes once my broody gargoyle hands me a coffee. “You know, I’m only listening to him this morning because he happens to be right.”

“Suuuuure,” Chess says with a smug grin. “It’s not remotely because he looks like a mercenary Ken doll or anything. Not a part of that in the slightest.”

“Plus her fanny stings. Don’t forget that,” Rennie says and I throw a grape at him, nailing him right in the nose. “Hey! No food fights, ma petite . We can’t make a mess before we go.”

Sniffing, I sip my coffee and ignore them both. They look good, too, but now I’m definitely not going to tell them. Three can play at their little game.

“Baby Girl, I am stoked for this trip!” Fitz bounces in with a frustrated-looking dragon in his wake. I bet he was helping the tiger check their things, so nothing gets forgotten. That had to be a task and a quick look at the cheetah pretending not to notice confirms my suspicion.

My hyper-active tiger is a lot for most people to handle, even his family—but we love him, anyway.

“Grab some food, baby. Your brother is very rigid this morning, and he’s going to explode if we don’t fall in line.” I wink at Felix to let him know I’m kidding, and he rolls his eyes indulgently. I bet no one else would have gotten away with saying that—score one for Dolly.

“Bro, you gotta loosen your sphincter. You won’t have an ounce of fun on our vacay if you’re sewn shut.” Fitz snaps and holds up a finger. “I could go get something to help with that. Worked for me?—”

“No, Fitz.”

Chess leans across the counter to whisper, “Was he going to get the?—”

The low growl coming from the elder tiger makes us both dissolve into laughter. Obviously, he believed his brother was running off to grab the damn strap-on they’re all so obsessed with. That’s definitely a way to loosen his ass, but I’m not sure Felix is quite ready for something like that.

He absolutely wouldn’t let me do it for sure—too much role reversal and he’s enjoying our dynamic.

“For fuck’s sake, Fitz,” Aubrey groans as he joins us, piling a plate high.

Renard grins. “We need t-shirts that say that. It could go on the family crest.”

I blink at him, then laugh again, this time clutching my gut. Felix snarls at us, his eyes narrowed, and I cough, straightening up with wide eyes. “What?”

“Would you all eat and stop making me feel like I should threaten to turn the fucking car around?” His irritated sneer is hysterical, especially since his arms are crossed over his chest like a petulant child. I cover my mouth, stifling the giggles as best I can so I don’t set him off again.

Fitz claps his twin on the shoulder. “Really, man. You gotta calm down. We’ll get there, do our thing, have some fun, and come home safe. Don’t be so...anal.”

With a strangled sound of frustration, Felix throws his hands in the air and stomps over to the sideboard to pour a hefty tumbler of scotch. “You’re going to be the death of me, brother. No matter how many times I say it, it never becomes less true.”

“It’s my job, bro. I have to keep you from being such a hardass.”

As the humor winds down, I go back to eating, hoping it will make my grumpy Dom find the calm he desperately needs.

The others munch on their breakfast as well, passing around the dishes until we finish everything.

That makes Chessie look proud and eventually gets Felix’s posture to relax a hair.

I hop off of my stool, heading for another cup of coffee, but the cheetah stops me.

“Don’t pour it in there. Rennie got you a special travel mug. Well, we picked one out for everyone, so we’ll all have them.”

I blink, watching Chess head to the cabinet and pull out a completely blinged out tumbler that has my Pred Games numbers and ‘Drew Fluffle’ on it. Smiling broadly, I throw my arms around him and squeeze tightly. “You got me one of those viral things and decorated it! It’s gorgeous, my knight!”

The gargoyle holds his fist out for a bump with Chess as I finish my hug and then I move to him as well. “Ma petite, you will always be the most sparkly bunny in the crowd. We simply like to help you shine.”

Oh, fuck. That damn poetic asshole is gonna make me cry.

“Hey, let her go, Frenchie,” Fitz says as he comes up behind me. “If you don’t quit being such a squishy old fart, our girl is going to ruin her face with tears. I feel it in the bond.”

Felix and Renard look at one another, then at me, as if they just realized Fitz is right.

The elder tiger rubs the back of his neck sheepishly, and Rennie smiles. “ Je m’excuse, mon amour ? 1 . I meant what I said, though.”

Shaking my head as Fitz tugs me into his embrace, I smile softly. “Never apologize for saying lovely things, Rennie. Before you guys, I had far too little encouragement. I’m happy with every single sweet thing you say, even if I make my mascara run.”

And that is the gospel truth.

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Two Tickets To Paradise

Renard

It has been many years since I've been off campus, much less a train in my ex-homeland.

I wish this was under different circumstances—I would like to have enjoyed a vacation with my new family simply so we could be together and experience new things.

But alas, until we can get the Council and the Fae and all the other despicable people out of our lives, that is not the case.

The excitement I feel about journeying together, however, has brought an important realization about how we were living prior to our mate's arrival.

We were wasting our long lives drowning in guilt, sorrow, drink, sex... whatever we could because our blood kin rejected us, but that was a mistake.

“What's making you frown so hard, Rennie?”

Ma petite's voice brings me out of my thoughts immediately and I tilt my head, smiling at her fondly.

“As you gave your approval before we left, I'm going to be honest. I was thinking about this trip and that it had been a very long time since I left Apex before you

came.

That goes for all of us, and it occurs to me that we were sort of marking time in our extended life times then.

But once you crashed into us, we started truly living again.

Thus, the travel and my opinion that we should vacation often after the baddies are dealt with. ”

She smiles back, her eyes bright. “I would love that! I want to see all the places with you guys. Maybe even sometimes with our friends, too. I’ve traveled more since I got to Apex than I have in my whole life, but it will never be enough.

Lucille and Bruno made me miss so much growing up just to be spiteful; my life with my mates will be the complete opposite. ”

“Hell, yeah, Baby Girl,” Fitz says as he leans back from the passenger seat. “I’m totally on board with touring the globe in between mad freaky bunny sex and whatever else we decide to do.”

I arch a brow at the tiger, curious about his wording. My first mate grunts, addressing it before I can ask. “What do you mean ‘whatever we decide to do’, Fitzgerald?”

Dolly leans forward, putting her face in her hands as she listens. “I agree with Aubrey. I want to know what you meant, too.”

Fitz rolls his eyes, sighing like we’re all trying his patience because we aren’t following his twisted thought line.

“Look... they’ll finish rebuilding Apex, eventually.

Depending on how this damn war thing shakes it out, we could be on the run forever or even branded traitors.

If it turns out in our favor, that means a huge reset of our government and maybe the world, yeah?

So do we go back to teaching the rich brats?

Do we sit on a Council? Does everyone have to deal with their own lands? Who knows, right?"

Everything in the huge SUV seems to freeze in place.

Felix continues driving, obviously, but it's like he's holding his breath, too.

I don't think any of us had considered what the hell was going to happen after we finally get our enemies to fuck off.

It's shocking that the one person who has is Fitz, but then, he's become so much more focused the last few years.

Dolly's methods have honed his sharp instincts—most of the time—and he's finally growing into the second-in-command I believe he was for his brother before the exile.

"You know... I never actually considered it, Fitzy." Dolly looks sheepish for a moment, but when she realizes the rest of us are just as clueless, her shoulders slump. "We've been so busy trying to stay ahead of the bullshit that the future has become sort of... nebulous."

Chess leans over the back of our seats from his spot in the next row.

“I enjoy teaching, but moving around so much means I’m not utilized properly because the other universities have to make room for me.

I wouldn’t mind being a visiting one or a permanent one...

but I don’t want to get stuck doing the stuff I have been doing at Cappie or here. ”

“I don’t blame you, baby,” Fitz says. “You’re being wasted and so am I. We’re fine with it so we can be with you , Baby Girl, but it’s not something we should put up with forever. Our talents are wasted by people who don’t appreciate us.”

Felix clears his throat, then says quietly, “ If we’re victorious, and the world doesn’t fall into chaos and they get Apex ready, I think we could make a good home there if we’re allowed to revamp everything.

Removing the bullshit the Council forced in and making it a proper place to learn would be a satisfying challenge, I think. ”

Actually, the Raj may be right about that.

“That could be quite enjoyable, oui .” I look at my mates, waiting for them to weigh in. “What do you think, mes amours ?”

Aubrey cracks his neck, turning it back and forth as he mulls.

“I could be enticed to assist with the rebuilding and upgrading of the Apex Library. It is my family’s namesake, after all.

But I would also be happy moving to another city and taking a head archivist or librarian position if it suited the lunchable’s job—whatever that may be. ”

We all nod, agreeing with him as Dolly fumbles a bit.

Our girl licks her lips, looking up at us nervously.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do yet. Music and dancing are very important to me, but until this stuff is over, I don’t know what that will look like.

What if there are no theaters or concerts?

What if we’re on the run? What if I get hurt and can’t do it professionally afterward?
”

The chill that comes over the car is immediate, and I wrap my arm around her, kissing the top of her pastel head.

“ Ma cherie , no matter what happens, we will all be together. Felix’s idea is satisfactory if you are injured, but also if you are not.

Aubrey’s thoughts are good either way as well.

The world is our oyster because you, ma petite , have five incredibly wealthy, devoted mates who don’t actually have to work.

We can do whatever we want that works for your needs and find something that we enjoy once we’re there. ”

Dolly flushes with pleasure, swatting my knee lightly. “You and this poetic nice shit today. I’m going to turn into a bunny tomato, Renard Laveaux.”

“You gave him permission, snack size. I know better,” Flames says with a smug grin.

“If you tell him he can spout Byron-esque platitudes all the time, you’ll spend eternity listening to verse and florid prose as he strokes your ego until it is too raw to even enjoy it. It’s in his nature, I believe.”

Fitz narrows his eyes at the dragon. “Exactly how did you learn that, mmm, Salty Salamander? Do tell.”

“Long before you and your feline cadre arrived, I fear. Once he finally wooed me—which took centuries—I felt cared for in a way I had not since my clash sent me away. I believe he felt able to give love to someone for the first time in a similarly extended time frame. Thus, we were intensely over-affectionate and co-dependent for a couple of decades. Then it chafed, and we had to adjust so we didn’t kill one another.

This is how relationships often go—ebbs and flows where you learn one another so thoroughly that you can warn others when they are about to hit a ‘bad idea’ button. ”

“Holy shit, Aubrey,” Chess says with a surprised expression. “You realize that’s more than you ever tell us, right?”

“Not me,” our mate sing-songs, and I chuckle.

“Okay, fine, he loves your warm soft pussy, so he tells you secrets, Baby Girl. That’s all of us. But Chessie’s right about the Lusty Lizard holding back from the rest of us. Hell, broody boy over there did, too, until we all got knocked on our ass at that match.”

Our bunny pats my knee, then pats Flames with her other hand.

“It’s okay, guys. I don’t think any of you were good at sharing before.

I mean, Felix can't judge; he was on the sauce while he banged people he didn't care about.

Fitzzy was drugged up and banging everything that moved.

And you, Chessie, were hiding in your studio and with Fitzzy when we came home.

It's not like you were talking about the things that happened on Bloodstone—or even have yet. ”

Daaaaaamn. That was brutally accurate while not being shitty; our girl is learning.

“Hey!” Fitz says, as he scrambles over the center console and kneels in front of her.

“I'll tell you anything you want to know, and then some. You're the other half to my mate sandwich, Baby Girl, and I'm an open book.”

Chess puts his chin on her shoulder, his lips brushing her cheek lightly as he murmurs, “Me, too, Angel. I'm not afraid to share painful things with you.”

“I think we've been holding back because there's so much already, Princess.

” Felix's low timbre rumbles back to us despite the moving SUV.

“How much you-or any of us—can handle day-to-day changes often because the world is imploding. It doesn't help to pile on shit that can't be changed or fixed.

Plus, I think we'll have plenty of time for that when no one is trying to kill us. ”

“If that ever happens,” she grumbles, and I laugh softly.

Her pout is adorable, and she only gets to make it for a split second before the four of

us surrounding her are kissing it away.

She giggles for a second, then shoos us gently before she adds, “Okay, okay. I won’t say gloom and doom stuff. You win.”

My lips curve up as I tuck a hair behind her ear.

“I think the overwhelming consensus is that we do not want to hear you knock yourself or our future. You don’t have to be an optimist, ma petite , but life is too hard to be a pessimist. Some hopefulness and faith that we will prevail helps us keep going, oui ? ”

“Exactly,” Fitz says from the floor. “That’s why I’ve been making all these diagrams about what we can do when this shit is over.

I have a whole ‘Crazy Rich Shifters’ notebook full of ideas and charts I’ve made for our possible futures.

I coded this program to run all the probabilities that we’d be happy with and I like to muddle over it sometimes. ”

Again, you could knock me over with a damn hippogriff feather.

“I’m impressed,” Flames says as he looks down at the tiger. “Fitzgerald, you are improving in leaps and bounds with your work with bite size. It’s quite shocking, I admit, but I will be the first to say I’m proud of you.”

Dolly puts her hands on his cheeks, smiling adoringly at her first mate. “I am, too. We didn’t know all the things you were working on—not even Chessie and me. Why have you been hiding it?”

The younger tiger twin shrugs. “Because I’m just experimenting with it for now. It’s not really done, not yet. The algorithm code, I mean. It’s still occasionally spitting out stupid shit and that will only make you laugh at it. But I will definitely show you when it’s less unpredictable.”

I frown at his choice of words. Somehow, I doubt his periodic failures are because of his ability to code correctly.

Even when Fitz was high and fucking around, he could do computer stuff that outpaced everyone we knew.

There are possibilities he doesn’t want us to consider; that’s why he’s skirting the truth about why he didn’t mention this side project.

“Well, once you do, I want to see everything,” Dolly says as she rubs her nose on his.

I exchange subtle looks with Aubrey and Chess as they simper at one another.

That’s a sentiment that the three of us share—but we don’t want to wait until he’s ready.

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World on Fire

Delores

I don't like the notion that Fitz sees mathematical outcomes that he isn't sharing with us.

My extroverted tiger loves to babble about any and everything, so it's easy to deduce that it's because they are extremely unfavorable.

He's protecting me and maybe the rest of guys by not bringing up whatever 'inaccuracies' he deems improbable.

It's commendable and very sweet, but I still don't like it.

Just because some damn code smashes statistics and probabilities doesn't mean it will happen and saying it out loud isn't guaranteeing a result, either.

However, my brain imagining what he's keeping to himself is a dangerous prospect because I have a wild imagination.

It makes my anxiety spike slightly as Felix pulls into the parking area for the train station, but that's replaced quickly by my awe at the sprawling hub.

I feel like I'm a total rube for being so slack-jawed at something most preds would consider normal.

How can I help it, though? My shitastic parents kept me tucked away at Drew Manor like I was deformed—not that it would be an excuse—and I missed out on regular people shit.

I've seen this kind of thing in movies or on TV, obviously, but that's not the same as stepping into the sunlight to hear, see, and smell the experience of mass transit.

Perhaps it seems like I'm romanticizing something that's annoying and grimy, but I'm not.

I'm just experiencing shit for the first time like a small child would, and I can't keep myself from grinning as I get to tick another thing off of my list. If I were with my ex-friends, people would mock me and act as though I'm a slaving moron, but luckily, that's not the case here.

"It's exciting, non ?" Rennie says as he takes my hand. "I remember the first time I was in a big city as a small pup, and I imagine this is a similar feeling for you."

Nodding, I look around, watching the people bustle about in fascination. "It's a lot, but invigorating is a good description. The energy is so high that it feels tangible."

"That's because this is a shared space, bite size. We will make our way to the part where our kind check-in, and once we have our tickets, we can settle in the lounge. Felix being a tight-ass paid off; we're early enough to have time to explain how this will work."

My expression is grateful as I listen to Aubrey calmly explaining this simple thing and once again making me feel less unsophisticated. "Thanks, big guy. I think that sounds perfect."

Felix hauls the last of our stuff out of the trunk with Chess and Fitz, grunting as he

sets the bags and cases on the ground. “Someone has over-packed.”

The way he looks around pointedly tells me it isn’t just one person, but I smile sweetly and take my shoulder bag and smaller rolling case. “Fitzy? Do you have the bigger ones?”

“On it, Baby Girl. Chessie, you get my emergency bag, yeah?” My cheetah nods, then winks at me as the hyper tiger extends the handles so he can roll both their and my suitcase simultaneously. “Ready to move, General Asshat!”

“For fuck’s sake, Fitz,” Felix mutters, almost to himself. “Get it under control until we board at least?”

I chuckle as Fitz makes faces at his brother, turning back to Rennie. “I guess I’m as ready as I’ll ever be. Let’s go in.”

Hopefully, I don’t make too much of a fool of myself gaping.

Standing in line amongst humans only increased the spiky vibes in our group.

Fitz was a little crazier, Felix sharper, Aubrey more sarcastic...

It was all their coping mechanisms, I know, but I kept Renard’s hand squeezed in mine tightly to help me regulate myself.

This is the third time I’ve been around humans in my entire life; it makes me jittery still, especially when everyone else seems to react with their version of my anxiety.

I could stay calmer in the small town near Apex with Aubrey because of the holiday allowing me to be a little bunny—rather than being afraid it will come out on its own—and being at the enormous library was easy because I feel safe in libraries.

I'm not sure if that's because of Aubrey making it my 'safe place' when I got to Apex or if my love of books makes that so.

But out in the open, in the middle of vast crowds, is not easy.

Being the child of a Council member who loves to babble on about her 'triumphs' when she's drunk—spoiler alert, that's all the damn time—I'm aware of what they do to preds who expose us to random humans.

It's not pretty or desirable, even if it's a minor infraction.

I refuse to give those motherfuckers a reason to lock me in a hole or kill me legally .

Dictators like Lucille are just slaving for an excuse to get their hands on their detractors; it's step one in every fascist blueprint in literature or the media.

"Don't worry, Baby Girl. You're doing great," Fitz says softly as he sidles up to my other shoulder. "Not a fluffy tail in sight and if I didn't know you, I wouldn't have a clue that you're so tense that you could launch into outer space with a fart,"

I turn to look at him in horror, my jaw dropping. "Fitzgerald Ulysses Castor Khan! That was rude !"

He grins wickedly, shrugging as he bats his lashes at me.

"Pretty fucking rude or not, I'm right. You've got your 'Mega Bitch Mom' look going on with those sunglasses and that face you're making.

I know you do that when you're trying to hide how nervous you are, so I distracted you. It worked like a charm."

Elbowing him in the gut hard, I make a pissy face as I toss my hair. “Bodily functions are not discussion material in public. It’s gross.” I try to keep myself in the haughty posture, but then Felix snickers. My jaw drops again, and I huff. “ You are supposed to be more mature than him, Sir !”

He shakes his head, laughing as he tries to respond. It takes him a moment to get control of his amusement and when he does, he just says, “The imagery was priceless, Princess, especially when you got even tenser as you puffed up in affront. I’m sorry, but... it was fucking hysterical.”

I swear to fuck, men never goddamn grow up even when they’re triple your damn age—all it takes is a fart joke to transport them back to middle school.

“So glad to be your amusement for the day,” I grumble as I look at Renard. “You mentioned a lounge now that we have the tickets? I’m suddenly feeling the need for a drink. This is probably how it starts, you know. Penises drive women to drink, and I don’t know if I can even argue about it anymore.”

Aubrey snorts, grabbing my free hand as he knocks Fitz out of the way. “Come, lunchable. Those of us who didn’t laugh at your rocket fuel flatulence will show you the way.”

That gets the felines, including Chess this time, to crack up as we walk away from the line.

My eyes are narrowed in slits of irritation as I glare at the dragon.

“You did that on purpose and if I wasn’t so annoyed with them, I’d kick your scaly butt to the curb, too.

Right now, Monsieur Broody Pants is the only one with a good chance of getting in

my pants anytime soon. ”

The grumpy dragon’s lips curve and he opens his mouth as if he’s going to comment. I glare harder, staring him down, and he backs off sheepishly. “Sorry, snack size. I’m just so used to shooting back quickly at Fitz and Rennie. It’s hard to stop once I start.”

“I probably wouldn’t be as touchy if I weren’t so out of my element,” I admit begrudgingly. “Much like the plane trip, I’m both eager and jumpy, especially with being in proximity to a bunch of people we have to hide our strengths around.”

Aubrey smiles softly. “Good on you for admitting that. It’s hard to show vulnerability in the face of difficulty.”

“ Especially when so many things are assaulting you with newness,” Rennie adds. “Very mature, ma petite . I was not so collected when I first had to walk amongst the costumes de viande . My parents were extremely certain that I would shift and get us banned from our duties, or worse.”

“Was it as... violent a punishment as it is now?” I murmur to him.

“I’ve heard Lucille ramble on about Council punishments for a lot of shit over the years.

I’m definitely not naïve about what much of them entail.

It’s gruesome to the point of cruelty and it’s all to prove a point—don’t break their rules or you’ll suffer. ”

Renard tilts his head as we walk toward wherever the hell we’re going.

“ Je ne sais pas ? 1 , Dolly. I assume the punishment was severe; my parents feared very little. Gargoyles have been guardians since they came into existence, and we’re raised to be unafraid of things that go bump in the night.

We are supposed to be the terrors of the starlight when necessary, so the fact that they worried about the Council even then speaks volumes about why the Treaty could occur.

It also gives context on why so many families and species groups exile their heirs and children to places like Apex so they do not offend those petty dictators. ”

I don’t think I ever considered it that way—that rather than just being assholes who don’t love their kids, exile might be the safest option for preds who don’t fit the mold.

“I doubt the Raj sent Felix away to keep him safe,” I say as I frown. “Lucille sure as fuck didn’t send me to Apex for a safe education. She hoped they’d kill me in the first week.”

“Ah, well. Not all parents are good people, and nothing is ever a monolith, petite lapin . We might discover that Flames’ or my parents were being more noble than we thought—or we may confirm that they were kowtowing to the more powerful group so they could stay hidden and off of their radar.

I do not expect the former, of course. The decision made about my youthful indiscretion showed me the true nature of those I was raised by... and not just my direct bloodline.”

“Rennie, they were wrong, and it wasn’t an indiscretion.

Falling in love isn’t a failing, even if it doesn’t follow some stupid rule someone made up.

” I bump his shoulder with mine, catching his eyes.

“It was okay to love her, okay to mourn, and yes, even okay to isolate when you were cast out. The only thing you did wrong was to nurse that unnecessary guilt for way too long and not allow the people who care to help you. But you’re doing it now—which is why we’re headed to the mountains. ”

“Point of fact, snack size. We’re there for intel, not to sing ‘kumbaya’. If we get anything out of them, I will consider it a success,” Aubrey grunts. “Otherwise, I would not be on board with risking them hurting him again.”

I wink at the dragon, as the pred flashes in my eyes.

“I know that, big guy, but like I said... That’s no longer an option for the gargoyles to do without paying the piper.

I’d prefer a quiet, fun, restful vacation, but I won’t hesitate to knock someone’s ass to the ground if need be.

I’m not playing with these motherfuckers anymore—not after that gas attack that scared a decade off my lifespan. ”

Rennie sighs as we approach a big, unmarked door in a hallway that looks like it’s employees only.

“I’m quite pleased with both of your bloodthirsty tendencies regarding my well-being, but we should probably cut down the murder chat in here.

Everyone can hear everyone in the pred lounges, so it’s not a safe place to discuss anything that matters. ”

Felix catches up to us, Fitz and Chess in tow, and gives the three of a stern look. “He told you the walls have ears, right?”

I nod, letting go of their hands to cross my arms over my chest and re-affect my ‘Lucille’ persona. “I’m ready for it, Sir. ”

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Keep On Lovin' You

Fitz

They don't appreciate how much I'm holding back the kinetic excitement flooding my entire system.

If they did, the Flying Frenchie wouldn't have suggested we hangout in this stuffed shirt, fancy pants lounge for money-grubbing assholes.

Not only do I have to be quiet here , but we can't feel up my girl or do anything fun at all.

The preds in here all look like they're walking around with their holes sewn shut, and I'd be surprised if they ever did anything but boring shit for their entire lives.

I'm ready to stab myself in the eyeball just to make sure I stay awake.

Well, except for the gut deep urge to bounce around like the tiger in the kids' books.

"Fitzy..."

Whipping my head around to look at her, I smile as not crazily as I can. "Yes, Baby Girl?"

"You feel really... confusing. In the bond, I mean."

My body hums with happiness when she admits to checking on me through our connection, which is both soothing and hypes me up simultaneously.

Dolly Drew is sharp as a tack because she nailed the competing dichotomy inside of me with just a few words.

“I’m having trouble with balancing my need to behave like Felix said and the crawling bugs in my veins and brain saying we should do the opposite.

You know, because it’s fun and you’re hot AF all the time. ”

Her smirk makes my stress worse, but I will not tell her that. “Aw, Fitzy. You’re so adorable when you pout; if I wasn’t trying like hell to rein in my anxiety, I’d be feeling the same way. This is all new for me, and being naked with you guys distracts me perfectly.”

Count backwards in Khan.... imagine gross things... bite my cheek... something has to help soon.

“Baby Girl, that was evil,” I grumble as my fingers thread with hers. “You know I want to jump your bones any chance I get. This damn room is one of the places I can’t, according to my twin, and my boner is grumpy about it.”

“Fitz...”

I whip my head around to look at my twin with a challenging glare, and Felix rolls his eyes to the ceiling in supplication. “Shut it, bro. This is painfully boring, and I don’t think we’re going to learn a damn thing. How long do we have to wait again?”

“Thirty minutes—which is five minutes shorter than the last time you asked,” Aubrey mutters from behind his newspaper. “Get a grip.”

“I would if she could help,” I shoot back as I slump in my chair. “Or even Chessie, but noooo. I have to behave .”

Dolly covers her mouth to prevent them from hearing the giggles that bubble up at my snooty, mocking tone on the last word.

She knows I’m trying not to be a jerk, but I’m definitely trapped in a version of Hell.

The broody gargoyle wanted us to be, among other preds, to make certain we don’t get in trouble, but he didn’t mention how insufferable this area would be.

It’s clearly only for the very wealthy, and the atmosphere is stiff and quiet.

It’s not m y vibe, and that’s making everything worse.

Maybe I could convince my bro to take Baby Girl on a little walkabout with us? Thirty minutes is plenty.

“Don’t even think about it,” Chessie whispers to me. “I know what that look means, baby.”

“Damn it,” I swear as I sink further into my chair. “I’m a big boy; I could take care of myself, you know. Everyone acting like I won’t gut a motherfucker for looking at me wrong....”

My beautiful bunny snuggles into my side, putting her chin on my shoulder as she looks at me. “We should get my Kindle out and go sit in a corner so we can read. You like when we read together, and it calms you down.”

Wrinkling my nose, I suck a deep breath in through my nose as I drown in her blue eyes.

It barely takes a moment before the love reflecting at me melts the frustration away.

My prior statement about being a 'big boy' feels a bit silly since I'm struggling not to be inappropriate in public while my fierce, younger mate is calmly offering to help me wrangle my errant brain.

I let the breath out slowly, then smile at her.

"Yes, Baby Girl, I would like that, if you're willing to baby-sit your fucked up mate when he's spiraling."

She frowns, giving me a pissy expression. "Don't you dare suggest there's anything wrong with you or accepting my help, Fitz Khan, or you're going on the 'no-fly zone' list for a week!"

Swallowing hard, I raise my hands in supplication. "I won't; I won't! I'm not missing train sex or any other freaky-fun nookie because I was being a mopey Mo. You made your point and I am one thousand percent on board with whatever you want, Baby Girl."

Aubrey makes a soft sound like a whip cracking and whirls to glare at the dragon. "Don't be mad, lunchable. It's just a novelty watching playboy Fitz turn into a squishy ball of jelly for you. His twin thinks it's funny, too, and so do the others, but I'm the only one with stones to admit it."

"Men are fucking ridiculous ," Dolly grumbles as she rises to her feet and holds her hand out to me. "Some days, I want to kiss you breathless and others, I'd be happy to sell you to a damn circus. Come on, Fitzy."

"I believe they call that 'love', ma petite ," Rennie says as he sips his wine and peeks out from behind his book. "Or so the songs say..."

“No. No. No!” Aubrey growls as his paper folds down again so he can make sure we know how annoyed he is. “Do not let him start the ‘many-splendored thing’ Moulin Rouge refrain. I know you just mated, but for all our sakes, walk away to read your dirty books with the hyper tiger.”

“But Flames, you love me, too,” the gargoyle coos as he bats his lashes.

I’d love to get in on aggravating him, but I’m worried that his assessment of the moody stone man turning into a poetry spouting tenor is probably accurate.

“Zip it—all of you.” Felix stabs a finger at me and our bunny, his expression serious. “The dragon is right; go occupy my brother while we keep the Frenchman from devolving into whatever flowery shit he thinks of next.”

“Sir, yes, Sir !” My mate salutes my twin, and he looks like he wants to paddle the shit out of her for the sass, but he goes back to his phone without another word.

She leans in, whispering in my ear. “I can’t help myself, you know.

I adore making him grumpy and growly as much as I enjoy getting you riled up. ”

If she thinks we don’t know that, she’s out of her adorable, whip-smart little mind.

Time goes quickly as Dolly and I curl up behind a large chair, away from prying eyes.

I like switching off back and forth as we read through the racy books she and the gargoyle love so much.

I doubt she could read them as much when she lived with her shithead parents, but between the broody Frenchman and the book-loving librarian, she’s really tearing

through shit now.

I have to go back and review stuff occasionally because she's gotten ahead of where we were, but that's okay.

I think it's a healthy way for her to explore things we might try in real life and not feel embarrassed about her inexperience.

Plus, she smells delightful when we read the steamy scenes and even though I can't do anything now, it's fucking baller to enjoy.

"Fitzy..."

I pause my low-toned reading of the chapter about the ingenue arriving at the mysterious magic school to look up. "Mmmmmhmm, Baby Girl?"

"Do you really think bad guys will attack while we're on the train? Like, with their being human cars, too?" Her eyes are wide and I know it's because even though most preds don't give a red, raring shit about the other species that inhabit the planet, our girl is softer than she wants to appear.

Thinking about it for a moment, I shrug.

"I don't think Fae rebels or magical misfits care about them, so maybe?"

Our pred enemies might pause at causing a big, nasty clean-up that will enrage the few parts of their government that have knowledge of our existence.

It'd be stupid for people like that bitchy counselor or my stupid cousin to do anything—that's for certain. "

“That’s not a ‘no’. It’s a ‘maybe, but it’d be dumb’, and I dislike that thought.

” She shakes her head, leaning back against the wall.

“I don’t have any attachment to them, obviously, but I’m not a fan of collateral damage.

I think when you stop caring about who else gets hurt in your quest for victory, you invite in a host of other moral quandaries that you will not consider, either. ”

This might be a bit high-brow for my taste, but if she wants to talk to me about it, I won’t complain.

“Well, I’m not a genius like the dragon or a philosopher like the Rockman...

But collateral damage is hard to avoid once the gears of war turn, you know?

I’m not saying that you have to ignore what lives are worth in the big picture to succeed, but hard decisions are impossible to duck if the other side is less ethical than you. ”

She blinks, tilting her head as she stares at me. “Have you been reading The Art of War again?”

I shrug, winking at her playfully. “I’ve been boning up on my ‘wartime strategy’ books now that I focus better, yeah.

I didn’t really comprehend the texts I had to read on Bloodstone because I wasn’t as...

able to translate them in my head as well as I can now.

But it is my job to protect my brother, my mates, and our family, so...

I listen to audiobooks sometimes when I'm running around doing my thing. "

"You might be more auditory than you realized," she says as she squeezes my knee. "I've noticed how much easier it is for you to grasp stuff when we're reading out loud. They probably never tried to teach you in any other way but visual or kinesthetic learning styles, so you struggled even harder."

"I think you're right, Baby Girl," I reply as I rack my brain for memories. "But you aren't entirely like that, right? You gotta see and do, too, yeah?"

She nods, her face bright as she says, "For music, I have to hear, then see, then do. Other things, I'm more visual.

It's a mixed bag, really, and that's probably because I taught myself so many things I wasn't supposed to learn.

I sort of made my own curriculum and adjusted when it wasn't working. "

"They didn't give you enough credit for so many things, Delores Drew, but your brain is the absolute biggest miss of all.

You're definitely as smart as the Scoville Salamander, and easily as talented as Lord Broody.

But all your stupid mother saw was competition and it would have been a big fucking tragedy for the world to lose out on what you have to offer. "

Her eyes shimmer and I wag my finger at her. "Now, don't you cry, woman. We're not supposed to be drawing attention over here and if you get all weepy, people will

notice when we get up because they called for boarding.”

Dolly gives me a watery smile, sniffing a bit, and I wait for her to shake off the huge swell of emotion I felt inside of our bond.

“Okay, Crazy pants. I’ll get it together if you keep reading me this chapter.

I feel a great kinship to this poor girl being sent somewhere that everyone is treating her like crap for reasons outside of her control. ”

I snort, my lips curving up knowingly. “I’ll just bet you do, Baby Girl. I’ll just bet you do.”

Tried to Rock'n Roll Me

Delores

By the time they call for us to board, Fitz and I have delved into my book far enough that I'm disappointed to have to stop. He jumps to his feet while I put my Kindle away, then holds his hand out to help me up. I dust myself off, rolling my eyes when he leers at my hands running over my ass.

"You're incorrigible, Fitz Khan," I mumble as I pick up my things. "Absolutely, completely incorrigible."

He mocks a bow, and I laugh, waiting for the other guys to join us. "Baby Girl, I'll be anything you want me to be, other than far away."

Aubrey reaches us just as I kiss the calmed tiger lightly. "You really are a miracle worker, lunchable. Fitzgerald is almost still compared to earlier, just in time for boarding."

"Hey! It's not just her," Fitz says as he socks the dragon in the arm. "I'm very invested in her scrappy heroine finding her power with a bunch of sexy dudes. It's fascinating."

My fiery boyfriend turns his head, looking at me with a smirk. "I can't say I blame you. That sounds very interesting indeed. Perhaps we should all read this book while we work on knitting. Does it have audio?"

My eyes widen and I turn bright red as I mutter, “We read it out loud to each other. I like that better than actors.”

Felix joins us, his head tilted. “Are you ready? We need to board. Let’s move. Chess and Renard are bringing up the rear.”

“They’re reading dirty books to one another, Raj. I feel left out; don’t you?” Aubrey waits for Chess and Rennie to catch up, then he moves to the door of the lounge, pulling it open.

“Now I do,” the older twin says with a frown.

“But we can discuss how we remedy that once we’re on the train and settled into our cabins.

The best we could do was two grand suites on the Venice Simplion , but they’re adjacent to one another, which means the Princess can flit between the two of them. ”

The gargoyle grins as he looks at me. “They are quite beautiful, ma petite . This leg of the trip will go overnight until we reach Vienna. Then we will have a short time to explore before we swap for the train to Budapest. It will be smaller since it is regional, but that’s only a couple of hours.

We’ll bed down for the evening, then take the longer jaunt to Bucharest.”

I think about the map, picturing the dotted line traveling from point to point like in a cartoon. “So we’d be in Transylvania, then?”

Our group moves out of the lounge, following the confident stride of Felix as he walks up to the boarding area for the supernatural cars. Aubrey answers my question before Rennie can respond. “You don’t have to worry about vampires just because

that's where we'll head into the mountains."

Snorting, I roll my eyes at his broad back. "I wasn't thinking that before, but I'm not fucking going anywhere near the baggage car and if I so much as see one speck of dirt on the carpet, I'm going to start whittling furniture legs."

Chessie laughs, moving up to flank my other side. "Except for the ones Ren thinks are still active near l'Academie, we don't even know that they aren't extinct, Angel."

"He and the Captain's crew didn't even find any live vamps on campus, so let's hope they've all had very bad luck and tripped onto fence posts.

Or if not, they do by the time we get back.

"I heft my bag up on my shoulder higher, trying not to look as uncomfortable as I am about a species I've never seen or read about.

"I haven't been to this part of the world for a very long time," Rennie says, changing the subject. "I doubt Flames has, either."

"You know I haven't," the dragon grumbles as we hit the platform. "I haven't left the area around Apex much since it was built. I take occasional trips to the hoard locations, but otherwise... you're well aware that I've been sedentary, love."

I grin wider, chirping, "That's why this vacation-slash-work trip was the best idea.

Sure, we could have people hunting us all along the route, but we also get to stretch our metaphorical wings as a family.

You guys haven't been here in forever, I have been nowhere, and the Khans get to go somewhere they aren't expected to kill someone. It's perfect."

Felix stops and we all pump our brakes so we don't run into his back. "Pay attention."

"Yeah, well, a little warning would be nice, bro," Fitz shoots back. "Baby Girl was telling us how much fun we're going to have ducking assassins and spies. I agree with her personally, but that's because it's been a while since I ripped a throat out."

Our beleaguered leader looks like he's going to clap his brother on the back of the head, so I move between them carefully. "Gimme my ticket, Sir . I want to hand it to the guy myself. I'm excited about the little things, even if it's silly."

"It's not silly," Chessie chides as Felix gives us the tickets. "You're adorable when you're eager, and it shows us regular things in a new light. Go ahead, Angel. Get your cute butt on the train and lead us to these fancy rooms Felix booked."

I grin again, snatching my ticket and striding over to the man at the doors to our car.

Even if I'm a little nerdy, this is still the best summer ever, and I'm going to savor every second.

"Is it normal to have a guy who takes us to the rooms?" I whisper to Fitz as we follow the bear shifter. "They don't show this in movies except maybe like old timey set ones."

Aubrey turns his head to give me a reproving look and I smile sheepishly. He huffs as we walk towards a set of doors to an adjoining car. "Watch it, snack size. The two of us were definitely alive when trains were conceived and our parts work just fine when you want to play."

Making the big guy huffy is becoming one of my favorite sports, and that's probably Fitz's fault.

“You and Rennie are not old... just aged finely for maximum enjoyment,” I reply as I bat my lashes prettily. “Experienced and skilled, too.”

“Niiiiice ego stroking,” Chessie says playfully. “That should do it.”

He’s right because both of the ancients preen a little and give the others a smug look before they return their focus to our journey.

Renard is looking around as we move, doing that weird ‘sensing’ thing he’s been on since the vampire nests at l’Academie .

My gargoyle is convinced they're walking among us, not just a small leftover of a forgotten time at that old ass school. I’m not sure what I believe because no one has seen any; he’s felt them and the crew witnessed what they believed to be an active living area.

It could be something created to distract us, or even a tiny, inconsequential trace of the past.

I’m hoping for the second, but my luck does not lean toward that direction.

“So, again, is this normal?”

“Not really,” Rennie says. “This is because we’re rich assholes who booked expensive rooms.”

I war with my need to grumble and my desire to have a comfortable sleeping space until the latter wins. “As much as I hate to say it, thank you for that, especially since we’re doubling up. I like a nice pile to sleep in, but I don’t want to be canned tuna or anything.”

Aubrey snorts as he tosses a glance over his shoulder. “You’re telling me, bite size. The poet and I together are more likely to be crammed than all four of you. Kitties are very bendy, they say.”

Fitz pumps his fist with a sound of victory. “Fuck, yeah, I am. Baby Girl has me doing advanced yoga poses and harder acrobatics. I’m going to make you cheese balls look stiff and creaky soon.”

“I could make you burnt and crispy instead,” the dragon mutters. “Watch your back, Fitzgerald.”

Our guide looks a bit concerned at their sniping, so I interject cheerily. “They’re just playing. Our family lives on snark and insults. It’s very Gen X, as the humans say. I suppose that’s because the cats sit right at the top end of that, hmm? Not me, though.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says, but I definitely think he’s still worried. “We’re almost at your accommodations.”

I nod, grateful for the update. This is an extensive train and even the pred section is pretty extensive.

I don’t know if this is actually how most of them are or not—but I’m assuming no.

Rennie alluded to this being super swank, and I bet that extends to the entire vehicle rather than solely our rooms. Even though I dislike being too showy, I bet this atmosphere will be calmer and easier to monitor because of the cost. That means it’s not only comfortable, but likely safer than a regular train.

The guys absolutely consider every angle and that’s why I trust them to arrange stuff without feeling too anxious to let go.

When the bear finally stops, he's in front of two sets of doors that are at opposite ends of a car with no other compartments.

This must literally be only our space because of the size of the two rooms. That makes everything fluttering in my gut feel much less active, and I let out a long sigh of relief.

We'll definitely know if someone is nearby, and I think I saw him wave a card at the connector doors to the car.

"The security seems really tight," I say to Felix. "It makes me feel better."

"I knew you would, Princess. You're not as safety conscious as the rest of us, but you've grown more sensitive to our concerns. I'm proud that you noticed." His hand reaches up to goose me lightly, and I have to swallow a squeal.

"Felix!" His grin is wicked and I pretend to huff as the valet bear opens the room doors.

The guy coughs when they slide open to get our attention. "Your other baggage will be along shortly, ma'am and sirs. Is there anything I can order from the bar for you as you settle in?"

"Five scotches and a Dr. Pupper," Felix replies as he prods me into the compartment. "Thank you...?"

"Blane, sir. I'll be the valet for your family during this trip."

"That's awesome, Blane," I reply quickly. "Maybe just bring ice and a bottle. They'll enjoy having it here, and then we'll be set for a bit."

“Of course.”

The guys raise their brows at me like they’ve been programmed to do so simultaneously, and I roll my eyes at them. “Don’t be ridiculous. Five dicks are more than enough—way more than enough. How many times do I have to say that?”

Fitz shrugs. “As many times as you want random flirty assholes not to die?”

Groaning, I flop onto the much smaller bed in a starfish as the cats join me in our room.

“If this is huge for a train, I’m so fucking glad we don’t travel this way often.

Or in the stupid planes. I need you all nearby, and this sucks ass.

No way can Rennie and Aubrey crush into here, so I’ll have to move between them. ”

“Baby Girl, this is only like twelve hours or something. Do you really think that’s necessary?”

Smacking his arm, I growl softly. “Yes, I do. You guys can’t hog me the entire ride. It’s not fair. Don’t be stingy, Fitzy.”

“ Fine ,” he pouts as he flings his bag down and leaps onto the bed with me. “But they get to wait their turn because I call dibs.”

Oh, that’s just fucking perfect; I’m the pot of gold at the end of their rainbow.

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Demons

Aubrey

Our room is more than adequate, but being locked in this soon-to-be rocketing metal box is not the method of travel I would have preferred. Rennie looks just as unthrilled as he fusses with our things, but we both acknowledge that this journey would not have been possible in the air.

Well, with us in the air—and our delectable bunny hates planes, so...

Taking the train was less cramped than other land vehicles, but my dragon does not enjoy being caged.

There's a reason species like Renard's and mine gravitate toward homes with towers and turrets and balconies.

We like to escape into the sky when indoors becomes too stifling.

The cats have no such worries; they're fine with lounging about on any structure that will support their weight.

I'm not saying that they do not relish the hunt, but for them, it's more functional than nourishing.

"I don't enjoy being trapped in a tin can for long stretches, either, Flames."

My long-time mate knows my moods better than anyone, and I smile at him as I shift in the armchair. “It’s not just the dragon’s natural instincts, you know. If either of us is required to shift in defense...”

“It’ll take the fucking roof off of this thing.

” The gargoyle arranges the toiletries we’ll want later on, then turns to me with a rueful expression.

“Especially you. But this was the best option for getting to our destination without flying quickly. You were there when we discussed all the routes.”

“Yes, yes,” I say, waving my hand dismissively.

“I know, but something about this has unsettled me. Besides you checking for bloodsuckers constantly and our woman vibrating with anxiety over all the new experiences coming at her, Felix is in general mode. Fitz is bouncing off the walls. And I know that’s all fairly normal at this point, but something is bothering my dragon. ”

Bothering him enough to make my grumpiness extra prickly.

“ Oui, mon amour ,” Renard agrees. He sits on the end of the bed, his handsome face full of fondness.

“I would never tell you to ignore your inner beast. He’s seldom wrong, despite his lack of grace in communicating his thoughts.

We were planning on being vigilant anyway, and I believe Felix’s choice of accommodations was wise. ”

“It’s moderately secure. We are isolated enough for it to feel a bit safer than we would be amongst a larger crowd of other preds.

” I rub my hand on my jaw, considering what the next move should be.

“But in order to gather information from the general populace, we will need to visit the dining car.”

A light knock on the door interrupts my thoughts and smoke rings escape my nose. Rennie laughs, rising to head to the door. “You forgot we ordered refreshments.”

He’s right, but the darkness of my dragon fills my gaze as I watch him slide the door open to accept the sealed bottle and glasses.

Once the tip is slipped to the valet and he gushes his thanks, my gargoyle pads back with a smirk that is infuriating.

I give him a pointed look as he examines the seal.

“You’re paying more attention to that than you did when you opened the door. ”

“Of course I am. I could smell his intense cologne through it. This bottle, however, is sealed with wax and I would like to make certain it will not poison us or our family if we imbibe.”

Poison has been an issue in the past, and it could have killed our mate if she wasn’t oddly immune.

“You don’t have magic or a chemistry set, so I’m curious how you plan to figure out if something’s wrong.” My dry statement simply makes him grin more as he heads to his carry-on, pulling a small vial from it and wiggling it back and forth. “What the

hell is that?”

“This is how I will figure it out. Watch closely, Flames.” He takes a tissue from the box on the dresser, putting it over the top of the now opened scotch and dumps a tiny bit of the alcohol on it.

With much more flair than is necessary, he opens the vial and puts a few drops of the liquid on top, then re-caps it.

“Our delectable Dolly made friends with the right ladies at Apex, and we were smart to allow them to follow. Argyle gave me quite a few of these to use to test our comestibles on the trip. Do not ask me how they work—that, I fear, is not my forte.”

I blink, then snort. “The nurses are all species who are resistant to poisons. I imagine this is some sort of concoction they crafted with...” I stop, my brow furrowing. “Well, I’m not a biochemist, either, but something in that realm.”

“Whatever it is, Argyle said it would not be one hundred percent effective, but could rule out the most common and dangerous things.” Rennie watches the tissue, focusing until the wet patch changes colors.

“And this passed so far. She also instructed me to smell things, looking for a variety of scents that might suggest toxins.”

Chuckling, I watch him hover his nose over the open bottle. “Everyone knows that cyanide smells like almonds, my love.”

“Yes, but other things as well.” He puts the bottle down and holds up a finger. “Arsenic smells like garlic, while things that are acrid smell a bit like pears. It’s not fool-proof, of course, but she passed on enough examples that I can at least try.”

Now that he seems satisfied, my unusually cautious mate pours a draught into two glasses.

His lips curl up as he brings me one, and I let him drop onto my lap.

My hand runs over his eternally mussed hair as we sit and sip together.

Finally, I say, “I didn’t know you consulted them.

You’re not... You don’t usually... This is very thorough of you. ”

“I cannot get the picture of the cats prone and our mate terrified out of my head.” Renard looks up for a moment, then sighs heavily.

“We all must take precautions because losing even one would shatter her delicate heart into pieces, mon amour . I will not allow that to happen to someone I love again.”

That’s when I realize this trip is about more than seeing his relatives or even snooping for clues—it’s the key to healing our gargoyle’s broken heart.

We stayed curled up for a little longer before we took the bottle next door.

As much as we tease my morose mate, he hasn’t been taking to the roof as much this past semester, but he also hasn’t been working out his various issues by talking them through.

I didn’t realize he was traumatized as badly by the attack on the stadium as he was, and he needed quiet time to just babble his way through the dark thoughts.

Stroking his hair and listening was the best thing I could do for Renard, and feeling

the subconscious tension drain from his frame was extremely satisfying.

He was hiding this fear extremely well—covering it with boneless poses and witty quips—and I missed it.

“Welcome to Khan land, Winged Worryworts!”

I arch my brow at Fitz, and Rennie just chuckles. “Let us in, you psycho. We brought the scotch. Any idea why the eager bear left it, but not snack size’s soda with us?”

He grins crazily. “I told him if he didn’t quit looking at my mate, I’d use the corkscrew over there to uncork his eyeballs, then feed them to her while I fucked her senseless.”

“For fuck’s sake, Fitz,” Felix says tiredly from inside of the room. “Let them in and stop terrorizing the populace.”

Renard shrugs as the tiger moves to allow him to pass. “It was fairly elegant, Raj, though I agree that alienating the staff is not a good plan.”

“She doesn’t eat eyeballs,” I grumble as I follow my mate in and immediately regret the choice. “The Abel thing was an exception. Even when we hunt?—”

“Now, now, boys,” Dolly calls as she hops up from where she was sprawled on the bed. “No chow talk in places we can’t verify are clean.”

I blink, then roll my eyes to the corners of the ceiling where she’s not-so-subtly darting her gaze. “Right. Well, it’s accurate, anyway.”

The rainbow-haired bunny comes over to kiss us both on our cheeks, looking excited again now that I shut up. “I know you brought the drinks, but I’d really like to

explore. You know, just see things, since this is one of the longer legs of the rail trip.”

“Of course we can wander around, Angel,” Chess says as he joins our tightly packed group in the small living area of the cabin. “We’ll avoid the human cars, I think, out of caution. But we should be able to peek at the others, right, Felix?”

Our self-proclaimed Queen won’t take ‘no’ for an answer, but it’s funny that Chess thinks the Raj is the one who decides.

“Princess, if we do that, you have to let us?—”

Dolly arches a brow at him, her smirk dark as she tilts her head. “I’m sorry, Sir, but I’m pretty certain the only things I have to do are breathe and die.”

Coughing to hide my laughter, I look at the ground as the tiger sputters.

Unfortunately for him, her recent submission in the bedroom does not equal such outside of that realm.

Her compliance so far today has been out of nervous energy and now that we’re here, she’s finding her groove again.

I love that Dolly is so adaptable and resilient, but I also adore her sass and spunk that doesn’t let anyone step on her neck after her past.

“The die part worries me,” Felix growls softly. “Too many assholes are trying to speed that part up and I’m almost getting paranoid about every damn being we don’t know and trust being within fifty feet of you.”

Renard clears his throat, raising his hand.

“I get that, actually. I’ve been very... quiet about how distressed I’ve been after the attack at the Games.

My little mental breakdown in our compartment earlier brought it to the surface and...

Je comprends ta peur ? 1 , Felix. I can't think of our mates and our family being in danger while we are helpless.”

“Oh, Rennie!” she says as she rushes over to wrap her arms around him and squeeze the gargoyle as tightly as she can. “I didn’t realize. I’m sorry.”

He shakes his head, running his palm over her head. “I did not know, either. Not really. It was a buried reaction, I think, and because I have been doing the broody belfry thing less, I missed it.”

Fitz grins, rubbing his hands together. “So you’re all on board with some creative enucleation, then? That’s fantastic because I think you’ll relish it once you get over the weird squishing part?—”

Felix pinches the bridge of his nose and Chess joins me in laughing, while Rennie makes a disgusted face.

Unsurprisingly, it doesn’t make our woman flinch in the slightest; no, she just turns to give him a stern look.

He grins like a serial killer and Dolly puts her hands on her hips in indignation.

“Fitzzy!” I grin as our mate bounces back to the tiger to actually wag her finger at him. “No removing eyeballs for kicks. It’s just rude.”

There's a sentence I never thought I'd hear—much less in complete seriousness.

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Snakes in the Grass

Delores

The guys have me surrounded as we walk through the corridor towards the dining car.

That was voted the best place to poke around first, and though I don't think I'd be comfortable eating anything there, I agree it will be full of preds and prey chatting freely.

I'm not sure exactly what the outside world is saying about the attack a few weeks ago, because Fitz is certain the Prednet at l'Academie was being throttled by some program he claims is damn near impossible to thwart.

He said we could deal with it if we got on site access to their servers, but no one seems to know where that is.

Yet another fucking item to add to our boards full of baddies and problems that keep piling up.

But being in the middle of a crowd of 'normal' shifters, despite the potential dangers, may help us find out what they were told.

Apex and Cappie's disasters were billed as attacks and explosions, but no one actually blocked our ability to really check what the world knew.

The Council, and by extension the mysterious Society, seems to be escalating their tight-fisted control over anyone who has witnessed the events that suggest we're headed for a war.

“What are you thinking so hard about, Baby Girl?” Fitz asks as he bumps my shoulder. His expression is worried and I can't help smiling fondly.

“The rest of our... people... or whatever? They don't know that this rebellion is gearing up for an all-out war.

Fae are still a long-forgotten story from the past to them, not a present danger.

Even if they find out—which they will when something big enough happens—it will be spun that they're evil and deserve to be cast out for eternity. ”

“Your sense of fairness and justice is one of the many reasons we love you, Angel.” Chess says as he grabs my hand to lace our fingers together.

“However, I don't believe that most preds are even aware of how terrible the Council is.

They've been handed the top rungs of the ladder in the shifter hierarchy for centuries, and that means they don't care if prey or Fae or anyone else is being oppressed—not really. ”

Blinking as Felix guides us to a fancy table in the back, I consider what my knight just told me.

I know that I've lived a very privileged life because of my parents, but...

How can people know others are suffering and just ignore it because they're

comfortable?

Sure, I was young and naïve for a long time.

I didn't understand because Lucille and Bruno made sure I knew almost nothing about the 'real' world.

But the bullshit going on around me since I first stepped foot on the Apex campus for the tour lifted that veil.

Working for Luc and seeing how lovely the relationship between him and the pangolins was changed everything for me.

And when I got to Apex, not being a fucking bigoted asshole saved my life .

I can't fathom others going about their days without once questioning how our stupid leaders are the actual bad guys.

That definitely includes Lucille, the Khans, and anyone else who is helping to uphold this bullshit.

I press my lips together, feeling an unexpected amount of rage from my bunny that floods my veins and heats my skin. "I hate this."

Fitz tugs me over to a chair, pulling it out for me and sitting down to look me in the eye. "You hate what, Baby Girl? What's wrong?"

Looking around, I lean forward and whisper, "I hate that people are complacent. I hate that prey suffer and so do lesser preds. I hate that our new... enemies... were unjustly exiled. This entire system is horrific, and I'm probably the wrong person to be outraged because of how I grew up.

But that doesn't matter ; my bunny is so damn angry .

If I didn't have rich parents or this whatever inside of me, I would definitely have been killed when I emerged.

How many shifters are killed for much less because of the laws put in place by our ancestors and upheld by our current families? ”

I duck my head, fighting the emotions threatening to come out through my tear ducts. A body takes the chair on my other side and I know by the scent that it's Felix. His hand reaches over, grasping my face to get me to look up at him. Soft eyes meet mine and he smiles softly as he stares at me.

“Princess, I know how you feel. I grew up at the feet of a vicious dictator, as did Chess and Fitz. My dream was to pretend as well as I could until it was time to take over for my father, then make genuine changes to free our people. The choices I made about love prevented me from doing that, and as a result, I was removed from the very thing that I could use to free everyone on Bloodstone. Abused as we were, my brothers and I were still privileged, but it didn't mean we couldn't do anything possible to make the world better. ”

“And being exiled doesn't mean that it still isn't the goal,” Fitz adds, as his hand drops to my knee.

“Meeting you, getting embroiled in the bigger picture by proxy? That means we now can help more people if we do this right. We're not perfect and we're definitely not where people expect the resistance to come from, Dolly, but we are in a position to facilitate change. ”

Chess leans over Fitz's shoulders with a lop-sided grin. “The fact that they came out of their holes and want to is all because of you, Angel. So anyone who gives you shit

about not being their idea of a rebel, can catch me outside. Got it?”

Be still, my heart. The Khan boys are really taking a page out of the stony poet’s book today.

Our recon mission to the dining car was more useful than I could have expected.

So far, we’ve been able to find out that the Council passed the attack at the stadium off as a gas leak in the boilers that slowly spread into the air.

All the injuries and casualties were written off as unavoidable because of the location of the school and the response time of the Parisian medical teams. People aren’t in the slightest bit curious about what gas or why it happened—we just heard off-hand comments about seeing it in the paper or on the news.

Pretty good cover-up they pulled off, despite the main governing body being in the US.

“I’m not surprised,” Renard says as he pretends to scroll on his phone.

“The European council is very subservient to their United States counterparts. It’s a balance shift that happened not long after the human revolutions over there; a lot of preds and prey emigrated to the new world because the opportunity was so great.

Of course, the families running it grabbed hold after the Treaty and now... ”

“Yeah, now they’re the top dogs,” I sigh as I fiddle with the linen-wrapped flatware in front of me. “My mother rules the roost, and her cronies helped our family dominate the whole damn thing centuries ago.”

“I’m not so sure about that, snack size.

” We all look at Aubrey, and he shrugs casually as he leans back in his chair.

He’s making sure his words are softer than many species can hear and his lips are barely moving.

“Yes, I think the families all conspired. But I think your mother’s family is the one who has been pulling a lot of the strings.

The bigger names were probably in on the mini-coup: Eriksons, Barrington, Khan, Charles, Hopewell, and a few more.

But many of their lines are from Europe originally, and taking over from across the pond was a strategic move to expand their power and wealth base. ”

I lean forward on the table, putting my face in my hands as his words sink in. “Every time I think we’ve delved deeply enough that we can possibly start eliminating pieces from our overcrowded board...”

“We’re working on some of them, ma petite .” Renard’s rumbling voice is comforting, but it doesn’t change the fact that we’re being overwhelmed.

“No matter how many allies we find, it’s still not enough,” I mumble into my palms. “Look at how far their reach goes. There were like... a zillion preds at that match. They saw what happened. But not a word of that has reached the regular people walking around doing their day-to-day shit.”

“That’s true, lunchable. They control the media, and a lot of other things that would make getting support easier.

” Aubrey pauses, and I know he’s gathering his thoughts as the table falls silent.

When he speaks again, his tone is confident.

“But you are an icon—or you’re becoming one.

The tigers are icons. Zhenga is an icon.

All that fame and infamy from your families and activities will help us curry favor.

Plus, as much as I hate to admit it, the Fae will do their own campaign to reveal the corruption of the Council. ”

I pick my words carefully as I respond. “You think the small group—the one we can’t find the information about—is made up of the prior suggestions, don’t you?”

The dragon’s smoke rings heat the air as they cross the table; I can feel it. “I do. I may not have identified all the parties exactly, but I believe the ones we discussed are part of the founders. Farther back, obviously, and spanning the globe.”

He means the elusive grandfather Lucille has always praised like some hero of the old country.

“Do you think... Bruno?” I ask hesitantly. “Is his family...”

“No way,” Fitz says with a snort. “We saw how your mother treated him, even in public. The accident was the most obvious thing in the entire universe and no one has questioned it. All that coverage we saw defined it as a crash from the second it happened with no investigation.”

“He’s right.” Chess looks at me seriously, his beautiful eyes wide.

“You didn’t hear a peep out of your grandmother on that side, and your mother has

mostly left you alone since it happened.

She arranged it when he was no longer necessary for the agenda she and her 'papa' are pursuing.

Their marriage was likely a gambit as well. ”

I never thought Lucille and Bruno loved one another; they could barely stand to be near one another sober.

Truthfully, I couldn't picture them drunk enough to have conceived me without killing one another.

The 'blue magic, maybe not his kid' discovery was rattling at first, but this?

It makes perfect sense. If Lucille was pushed to marry Bruno to solidify their control of the more powerful American council...

Yeah, that fits like a glove and explains why neither of them have ever liked me, even as a baby.

“Do you think...” I lick my lips, keeping my mouth covered as I dart my eyes between my men before I continue. “Do you think maybe Lucille went outside of their arranged thing because Bruno couldn't... make an heir happen? Maybe she purposefully sought something different on purpose?”

They all look shocked for a second and not one of my chatty mates seems capable of replying.

Aubrey and Rennie turn to look at one another, doing their eyebrow thing.

Fitz and Felix gape like cartoon characters, and Chess just stares blankly.

I may have broken them with my leap of intuition, but I read a lot of romance and, well...

Lucille is definitely a scheming villain who would try to goose her power and status by breaking the laws everyone else would be executed for violating.

She'd do it even harder if she thought the result of her criminal behavior would give her the advantage.

I don't know how to be the keystone to some evil plan that started before I was conceived; the pressure is too much.

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Dark Night, Bright Future

Chess

None of us expected her to say that .

I'm not saying it didn't occur to me or any of the other guys, but Dolly admitting that her mother is just evil enough to do something only talked about in rock ballads?

It wasn't on my bingo card—not that I doubt Lucille Drew is ambitious and desperate to control the entire world—because my angel doesn't look at the world the way the leopard does.

But here we are, staring at her in shock, and it's definitely not the time to be gentle with her feelings.

It's a turning point for Dolly, just as Felix, Fitz, and I had those moments on Bloodstone.

She's having a 'train wreck' style realization that will change her view of her family forever.

“Did... did you all know that was a possibility already?” she whispers.

I can't help it; I take the bullet. “I considered it, Angel. But it wasn't my place to suggest and?—”

Dolly whips her head around, looking at the others. “And you guys? Did you suspect that, too?”

Felix sighs, his arm going around her as he tugs her close to his side.

She lets him, but the silence hangs as our mate waits for answers.

“Once she killed the croc, I had suspicions. Lucille has been gunning for you since you were sent to Apex, and if he was your father, she’d need him to try again.

But... she didn’t try for a spare when you were a child, nor did she when you turned out to be a rabbit. It felt very likely.”

Her head falls to his shoulder and her eyes close, as if she’s trying to process his words.

Aubrey and Renard look at one another, then at me.

No one says anything while Dolly hums to herself softly, but her reaction worries me.

She’s had to deal with so much in her life—things no kid should have to.

And I absolutely know how that is, but I had Felix and Fitz and Grandma Khan to help protect me.

Dolly had a nervous, small pred employee with no power to clean her up after the bullshit went down.

Now she has two groups trying to kill or possess her; it’s just not fair.

“Baby Girl, these dickheads are too scared to say shit, but I will.” Fitz thumps his

hand on the table, his expression fierce.

“You will probably need time to get over this, but for now? Your abusive ‘paper’ dad is gone, and he’s not coming back.

You don’t have to be sad or conflicted about it anymore.

And your bitchtastic mother? She’s exactly who you feared she was and just because she gave you DNA doesn’t mean you owe her shit. ”

“Fitz...” Aubrey rumbles as he slaps his hand over his eyes.

Dolly lifts her head, her eyes opening to look at the tiger.

“No, he’s right. Bruno was nothing but an abusive bully who delighted in every bad thing that happened.

He was only hanging onto Lucille for wealth and power; he didn’t give a fuck about anyone but himself.

That hurt as a kid because I think I knew neither of them gave a damn, other than using me as an accessory. ”

Renard smiles at her softly. “ Oui, ma petite . Letting go of your guilt will make healing easier and the possibility that he is not your biological father has to be a relief. While none of us has that comfort, I am glad you might. As for your mother? She will be dealt with, eventually.”

Felix snarls as he squeezes Dolly close. “Oh, she definitely will be.”

“Hey! Our chaotic queen called first dibs, bro.” Fitz grins crazily, his eyes full of dark

promise. “I definitely cannot wait to watch my mate tear that cunt limb from limb. If I’m lucky, she’ll let me have a piece of the leftovers.”

Dolly’s face splits into a happy, yet slightly terrifying, grin as she nods at the tiger. “Of course I will, baby. I promise you’ll get your licks in, too. And anyone else who wants to kick her ass can have a piece when I’m done.”

“If there’s anything left...” Aubrey smirks as he looks at her. “I am quite certain your decades of pent-up rage may push your bunny to heights that are unexpected. You may not be able to keep that promise, and if not? That’s okay, too, snack size.”

I nod when she looks at me, and so does Felix. We’re definitely with the dragon on that statement. “Angel, I can’t say we’re going to be any less vicious with the Raj when the time comes. He’s evil to the core, just like your mother, and he will get what he deserves as well.”

She sucks in a long breath through her nose, then lets it out slowly. “Okay. Now that we’ve plotted vengeance and unraveled my fucked up conception...”

Fitz laughs as he snatches her from his twin, planting kisses all over her face.

Dolly giggles and when he pulls back, my mate beams with happiness.

“The murder part is my favorite, but I agree. We have to move on to other topics like what the Council gains by hiding the attacks. Wouldn’t terrorism make it easy to get all the preds whipped up in some ‘rah-rah’ frenzy? ”

That stops us again and Felix squints at his brother. “Rah-rah frenzy?”

“He’s talking about using war to evoke hyper-nationalism, like in dystopian novels.” Dolly beams proudly, while Fitz snaps his fingers as she gets it. “We read more than

spicy stuff, you know. He likes 1984 and I'm fond of The Parable of the Talents .”

Aubrey's jaw drops again, and Renard has to pat his hand. “If you don't stop surprising Flames, he's going to unhinge his own jaw. I don't know if I can handle him on a trip and injured. It would be torture.”

I cut my eyes to the laughing pair, then shake my head. “I don't know if I can help you with that, guys. These two seem determined to shock the boxers off of us every chance they get.”

And I will not complain for a second, even if it is weird as hell.

“Being in public is exhausting,” our mate says as she leans on Fitz and I. “Between wondering if anyone around us is reporting to the bad guys and feeling like I'm being paranoid. It's a full-time fixation. I can't turn off my hyper-awareness.”

“That's probably good, Angel,” I reply as Felix opens the door to our cabin.

The winged warriors wave as they head for their room, and I chuckle at the dragon grumbling as we usher Dolly inside with us.

She pulls away for a second, popping back out to kiss each of them, then comes back in.

“I wish we could stay together. But, c'est la vie , as Rennie would say.

Trains aren't meant for families like ours. ”

“They get you on the next train, Princess. The fiery grump is only making a thing of it to lure you into switching.”

My angel laughs as she stretches up to kiss Felix on his jaw. “Probably, but that doesn’t mean I can’t encourage his silliness. I enjoy all your antics; it makes me feel special and wanted.”

“You are definitely wanted,” Fitz says, as he tugs his shirt over his head and prowls toward her. “In fact, if I could figure out how, I’d keep you naked and wanted twenty-four-seven, Baby Girl. Alas...”

“Fitz, you do not want me naked all the time. What would the other people in the world say?”

He shrugs, flashing a fang playfully. “Not much once I poked their eyes out and cut out their tongues. You are not for their lusty gazes—only for our families.”

Felix grins and peels off his shirt as well, cocking his head at me. “Come on, Chessie. If those two weenies get our girl tomorrow, we should make the best of tonight.”

Dolly holds her hand up, her eyes bright as she faces the three of us advancing. “Hey, now. We only have like six or seven hours left on this train. If you start this, we’re going to be so tired when it’s time to disembark...”

“You’re the one who made the big deal about railway sex, Angel.” I grin at her playfully, enjoying that she backs up against the bed even though I’m the least intimidating cat in the room. “We’ve been waiting since we left the house.”

Her rainbow hair splays over the light colored linens as she flops back onto the bed to look at us. “You’re right, Chessie. I totally did, and I hate to disappoint you.”

Fitz springs forward in a flying leap, covering her with his body as his hands roam all over the curvy bunny. “Now, my vicious little fighter... the only question you need to answer right now is... who goes where?”

My lips curve up as she meets Fitz's smirk with a wickedly playful look of her own. "If I'm greedy and get everyone, I would have to say... Felix behind, Fitz in front and Chessie in my mouth. I love how you taste, my knight."

Her eyes flick to mine, and I shiver with anticipation. "You always get what you want, my queen."

"Good, because I also want to watch Fitz take you later on while Felix fucks me. I'd hate to waste even an inch of this expensive as fuck space he booked. I mean, there's lots of furniture to christen."

"Less talk, more naked!" Fitz declares as he lifts and tugs her shirt off as well.

His move reveals a sexy little purple lingerie set that I'm sure the dragon picked because it has shiny scales embedded in the lace.

"Oooh, I have to compliment the Lingerie Lizard on his taste... Chessie, look at this!"

The elder twin rounds the side of the bed, climbing up next to her as I take the opposite side. "I like this one, Princess. The dragon did well—even if he doesn't get to enjoy it."

"I'm sure you'll all tell him." She grins as she grabs the waistband of my pants. "But you're all way too dressed for this party. Off you go, slacks. Come on now."

Fitz cackles as he looks at me. "You heard the lady... get those pants off and that delicious cock in her mouth. She's hungry, and it's one of the few things we know isn't poisoned."

"Very nice gallows humor," Felix rumbles as he gives his twin a little shove. "Move

so she can roll on her side. That will make everything easier.”

As I undo my belt and wiggle out of my pants, Felix tugs Dolly’s down until she can kick them off. Fitz follows them, burying his face in her pussy immediately. Watching him get her ready makes my cock drip eagerly, so I rise to my knees so I can get closer to her mouth. “Ready, Angel?”

She doesn’t answer—she just lets out a low moan before wrapping her gorgeous pink lips around me to swallow me down. My eyes close as she works me over, and I inhale deeply. The scent of my two mates’ arousal blends with Felix’s, and I sink into the cocoon of pleasure without a second thought.

“Princess, I will not go full out in this tiny room, but you’re doing very well.”

Dolly hums when he praises her, and I have to grit my teeth. She loves that as much as I do when Fitz does it, and that makes me purr happily. “Angel, keep doing that... right there...”

I hear Fitz growling hungrily as he works our bunny toward a peak to get her nice and wet for his twin. The combination of that, her mouth, and Felix’s stream of dirty whispers is fucking amazing.

I’m going to be lucky if I last longer than her—at least for this first round.

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Mama Never Said

Delores

My mouth pops off of Chessie briefly to suck in deep gulps of air.

“Fitz... holy fuck ...” The gusto with which my enthusiastic mate is eating me out is making my damn brains melt in my skull.

He’s fucking amazing at this normally, but tonight?

I think he’s trying to outdo himself. After a few more moments, he has my pussy clenching hungrily and my skin sparkling with an impending orgasm.

Talk about trading up from my first time.

Felix’s lips brush my ear, his tone husky and his dick poking at my back as he whispers, “Don’t stop, Princess. Chess is getting closer; I can smell it and you.”

Making a whiny sound, I do as he says, swallowing my cheetah down until his moan reverberates off the walls.

My tongue works over the sensitive spots along his length, flicking a vein until his hips thrust faster and harder.

I don’t care if my eyes water and my jaw hurts; my knight is purring and mumbling in the most adorable, needy voice.

It makes me feel sexy as fuck, as does Fitz's snarls as he nips and licks me.

"She's almost there, brother," the elder tiger rumbles as his hands cup my breasts. They didn't rip the lingerie yet; Fitz is making use of the tiny underwear's lack of substance while Felix makes the lace scrape my aching nipples. "Once she comes, get the lube out of her bag."

My lashes flutter and my skin heats more when I realize he just knew I'd have some in an easy to find place.

I'm not ashamed that I expected my men to fuck me at some point in this trip, but it's hard to fight my natural reaction to his orders.

Sex isn't bad—no, it's goddamn amazing, and I'm allowed to want them for more than creating an heir.

We all have to shed our childhood bullshit, so sue me.

"Wherever your mind went just then, come back." Felix bites my earlobe between blunt teeth and tugs before he continues. "Stay here, in this moment, and enjoy us, Princess. Nothing else matters right now—only how good it feels."

His raspy words push away the bad, bringing me back to the shivering sensations coasting over me from Fitz's efforts.

I drop my hand, burying it in the younger twin's hair as I bob over Chessie faster.

The grunt he lets out makes me grin, and his hands come to rest on my cheeks as he really thrusts into my mouth.

"Gonna... Fitz... make her come..." Chessie breathes as he fucks my face.

It's barely a second before three fingers plow inside of me, making me cry out around the thick dick I'm sucking.

My walls clamp down on his digits, and I rock into his bites and nibbles until the lights burst behind my eyes and my body locks in place.

The orgasm slams into me hard just as Chess does, and I scream just before his cum shoots down my throat.

Fitz is rumbling darkly as my hips writhe and buck, then his teeth sink into my thigh.

"Perfect Princess," Felix says as his hips dry hump my ass and he twists my nipples hard. "You took them so well that you're going to have such a treat. Fitz is going to fuck you while I take your ass... and we'll see if you can make Chess come again. Clean him up while my brother grabs that lube."

My mouth lets go of the cheetah's dick for a moment, so I can gasp for air. Aftershocks are shuddering through me, and the hard cock at my ass is making me ramp up again. "I... holy shit, guys. Train sex is awesome."

Fitz snorts as he lifts his head and winks at me, before scrambling over to our stuff.

He goes digging through my bag to fish out the lube, doing a hilarious 'hard bobbing dick dance' before he returns.

Even Felix laughs for a second and my heart damn near explodes with how much I love these men.

Chess runs his hand over my hair, stroking gently as he comes down from the climax, until Fitz climbs back on the small bed.

“Angel, you’re so beautiful with tears streaking your face like that.” His expression is soft, hungry, and I know he means it because I was sucking him off. He’s far too gentle a soul to mean it in any sadistic way, so I smile up at him hazily.

Felix arches a brow as he grinds into me. “What are you supposed to do?”

My lips curve up as I turn to bat my lashes at him. “I was waiting for Fitzy. Then I’ll work on my white knight again, Sir .”

That word, said with the usual sass, has his cock jumping against me and I grin wider. He tries to frown, but can’t, so he barks, “Get moving, Fitz. Our mate needs to sleep, too. We need to fuck her into a coma, so we can all rest.”

“Aye, aye, Captain Tight-Ass!” Fitz crows, as he crawls up between Chess and me to position his dick at my entrance. “Take your slip and slide while I get to work.”

I snort when he tosses the lube, and it hits Felix in the chest. The elder tiger fumbles with it on a growl of irritation, but I’m distracted by Fitz slamming into my pussy up to the hilt in one stroke. Moaning low, I arch up to him, rubbing against his pelvis eagerly. “Do it, baby. Take me.”

He grins in that crazy Fitz fashion, then pulls my thigh over his hip. “I will, Baby Girl, but we have to get in the right position. Now, slide that leg up more so Felix has access to stretch you good.”

I whimper as he stays still inside of me until I get my leg under his arm. It leaves me exposed for his brother, and I fucking love it. “Felix... please...”

His fingers are there, coated in cherry scented lube that permeates the air as he works two into me.

The burn is brief; they've been fucking me in every way imaginable for a while, so it's not like it was at first. I remember how that felt, but this?

This is so much better. Felix is scissoring the digits back and forth when Fitz moves, so I feel full.

But not full enough—not yet.

As if he's reading my mind, Chess's cock is at my lips again and I take the head in to suckle it gently. He's semi-hard now, but I can work him up to the moment. I nibble and suck, playing with his piercing as he squirms. "Damn, Angel. I'm still sensitive and that's—oooooh."

"That's my good girl," Felix growls as his fingers stretch me deliciously. He's up to three now, and my eyelashes flutter with the shivers running over my skin. "Suck him down and ride Fitz's dick. I'll give you what you need as soon as your greedy hole is ready for me."

Fitz chuckles, the noise vibrating against my chest. "Damn, bro! Your dirty talk is on point tonight. I may have to up my game." His hips swivel, and he hits the spot that makes my cunt squeeze him harder with ridiculous accuracy.

"There we go. Grip me, Baby Girl. Just like that. Show me whose dick you want to ride."

Silly tiger, the answer is all of them.

But I can't say that with my mouth full of Chessie, so I just moan in response. My cheetah is definitely hard now, and I go back to blowing him eagerly. The thought of all three of us getting off together is exciting as hell, so I up the pace until he's growling again.

“Felix, stop fucking around. Fuck her now.”

“Oooh, that was almost dominant, baby,” Fitz coos as he pounds into me. “I kinda liked it. And to the king while you’re at it. Hot. As. Fuck.”

I agree, but I can’t say it. I just keep sucking on Chess while drool escapes the corners of my mouth, then I raise my leg a bit more to entice the elder Khan.

That must do it, because his fingers recede and I feel the broad head of his cock probing for a brief second before he’s pushing into my ass with a loud groan.

“There we go, Baby Girl. Feel that? Now you’re full as hell and damn near airtight. That’s how it should be.”

Fitz is definitely vying with his twin for the dirty talk Olympics now.

But it’s okay, because my body is on fire with lust as they all fuck me.

I hum and groan and make whatever noises I can, so it vibrates over the thrusting dick in my mouth.

Wriggling a hand free, I reach up and cup his balls, loving how tight they feel.

He’s almost there again, and by the way the twins are alternating pelvis rattling thrusts into me, they’re getting there, too.

Just a little longer until I ? —

The second orgasm crashes into me when I feel a finger flick over my clit, rocketing my system into overdrive as I topple over the edge.

Felix and Fitz let out strangled sounds simultaneously as I clench around them, pushing in as deeply as they can manage with my body gripping hard.

A few short pumps later, the room is filled with sounds of preds hitting their peak, and my eyes fly open when hot cum is filling me in every hole.

The last thing that goes through my mind as I let out my own garbled scream is that I really need to make sure I don't choke—and then, it's nothing but sparkling pleasure.

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Bittersweet

Felix

The morning came faster than I would have preferred, and I had to peel the other three occupants of our cabin off the bed one by one.

Once they headed to the showers and got dressed, I walked over to the cabin next door to bang on the door.

Renard answered with a grumpy, tired look, but promised to get the dragon moving.

Satisfied, I went back to my compartment to find Chess packing things up neatly while Fitz and Dolly finished their morning routine.

By the time they were done with yoga stretches, I knew the others would be ready to eat.

“We don’t have a lot of time to eat before we get close to our stop.

This will be a fast-paced, coordinated effort since there’s several of us.

Have coffee and something filling as we won’t have time to grab anything else in our dash to the next leg of the trip.

Everyone takes what they came in with,” I say as we head for the dining car.

Dolly groans, rubbing her face as she stumbles behind me. “Morning Felix is not the vibe today. I need caffeine or I’m gonna die.”

“You four look like you’ve been run through a thresher,” Aubrey notes as he stomps to her side. “Perhaps being more cognizant of the time would have been prudent?”

Fitz sniggers as he skips on Dolly’s other side, and I have to mentally count to ten to keep myself from chastising him.

He’s going to be hyper as fuck because he got laid and there’s a lot going on.

“Would that I could, Chili Chameleon, but I can’t be bothered when I’m buried to the hilt in our sweet girl’s pussy. You’ll just have to deal with us.”

“Fitz!” My Princess flings her hand to the side to smack him as she glares. “Not so loud in public. This is not an adults-only space, and it’s rude .”

Blinking, my twin looks around to see the same car full of preds of various ages and backgrounds. His chagrined expression surprises me, but then, anything Dolly says goes with him. “Aw, Baby Girl, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be naughty in public. I’ll do better; cross my heart.”

“Will wonders never cease...” The gargoyle smirks at me and I shrug.

I’ve never been able to predict my brother and now that we’re sharing a mate, he’s even more of a wild card.

“Don’t be mean to him when he’s behaving.” Dolly swats her hand at Ren and me, her adorable pout in full force. “Be glad Fitz listens to someone and pick a table.”

“Angel is tired,” Chessie says as he catches up. “You don’t want to be on the wrong

side of her temper when she's cranky."

I don't wait for her retort—I make a beeline for a table at the other end, where we can watch the occupants and the other entrance without obstruction. "Have a seat on the inside, Princess. We'll get you fed and caffeinated before we have to get our stuff ready to disembark."

"You'd better," she mumbles as she slides into the booth. "I could eat a fucking hippo."

Scarily enough, I believe she could.

Breakfast passes without incident, and I'm able to corral my family efficiently enough to get off of the train without losing anything.

Vienna is beautiful, and I'd love to roam around here, but that is a return trip activity.

For now, we have to navigate Wien Hauptbahnhof to the platform where our Rail jet to Budapest will leave in less than an hour.

We're sitting in business class, which is as comfortable as we could get for an express that will only take a bit over three hours.

"Come on, Princess. We gotta hoof it." I grab her hand, tugging her along as I look at the electronic screens. "The rest of you keep up! I want to make sure we get on in time. The next leg is a tight transfer as well, and we don't want to miss it. They don't run the line we booked every day."

Renard and Chess helped me book the trains, making sure we're on the best lines with the most luxurious cabins.

While I like that sort of thing, I know Dolly feels weird about enjoying some of the trappings of our wealth.

I would have been a little less flamboyant, but the ancients are big even when not shifted.

They need to have enough space to move around without killing themselves, too.

Chess pointed that out as we searched for the reservations, and I reluctantly agreed.

The Frenchman, however, is fairly okay with the fancy shit, and he was jubilant about the selections.

My Princess won't complain to him once because she loves him, and with that, comes accepting quirks.

“Felix, why the fuck didn't we just stay over if it would be this close?

” Aubrey huffs as he and the gargoyle bear the cases with the most weight, but I know he's exaggerating.

He can deadlift shit that I wouldn't dream of trying without breaking a sweat—he just wants Dolly to fawn over him when we sit down.

Sighing as I zip around the crowded station, I leave his question to someone less likely to snarl at him.

As predicted, Chess picks up the thread for me so I can keep my temper even.

“When we looked at what trains and paths we should take, we stayed with the most expensive to ensure the spaces were big enough for you two. The last leg is a long

trip from Budapest to Istanbul with several steps... It doesn't run daily. We're going to slip away with our shit at Sighisoara versus staying on board the entire time."

"That seems very convoluted," Fitz says. "Why there?"

"Because it's a good place to hire locals to get us to the mountains nearby to journey to my clutch.

"Renard takes up where the cheetah left off, though he sounds more glum than informational.

"The humans have tales about a legendary man from that area, but... obviously, the tales are more true than they know. We will need to stock up on specific weaponry to move from there to the gargoyles, if my suspicions at l'Academie are true."

Dolly tugs on my hand, as if she wants to stop, but I don't let her. "Damn it, Felix! Is he saying we're going to vampire HQ? We're going to need a bunch of stakes?"

"That's right, my little 'Bunny the Vampire Slayer'." Fitz looks excited as hell and I groan. He's going to milk that for all it's worth for... who knows how long. "The pouty poet is convinced we're gonna finally run into some fangy fuckers to poof into the aether."

"We won't need stakes or anything else if we don't get there." I give them a stern look as I speed up my gait. "There's two more train rides before that becomes applicable. Hustle up."

That gets a snicker out of the dragon as he complies. "You know, I think there's a librarian in that show who's older. Isn't there, Fitzgerald?"

"Kill me now."

My muttered pleas don't stop my mate or my brother.

Fitz makes a sound of victory, then answers.

“Fuck yeah, there is. And a handsome psychotic devil who loves her, plus some silly friends. There's also a darker, broodier librarian type...

and an artsy dude who shifts. It's a wolf, but we can ignore that, right, Chessie? ”

“Right, baby.” Chess is trying not to laugh as Fitz gets even bouncier as we rush downstairs and over another platform full of people.

He knows I can't lose my temper because it's likely a mix of humans and preds, which requires me to hold in my frustration.

“You know, there's a sour-pussed sort of brother guy to the handsome devil that might fit you, Felix. ”

“We are not fancasting a TV show with our life,” I shoot back as I lead Dolly around an enormous family in the middle of the road. “Don't be ridiculous. Focus on the task at hand.”

To be fair, I don't actually care if they're doing that as much as it's distracting them and slowing us down.

This game could be played just as well once we're in the place we need to be, waiting for the train with a safe margin.

They're simply annoying me on purpose now, and it's something I can't deal with while we move through the mixed crowds of a train station.

“Calm down, bro,” Fitz says, as he catches up with me. “You’re wiggling out and look... There’s the damn place we need to be. It’s all good, man.”

Sighing in relief, I guide Dolly and the others to bench by the car we’re boarding.

We can sit and chat about anything they want now that I’m sure we won’t miss our train.

“I know I’m uptight at the moment, but our route is tenuous.

I want to have as much time as possible to get to our final destination.

That gives us time to spare if they won’t answer what we need to know from the start.
”

Renard flops on the bench next to our mate, his hand running over her hair.

“That will probably be the case, if I am being honest with you. Gargoyles are not wont to give up secrets, and they will not want to discuss my past. Since it all ties together in this grand scheme, we will have to convince the leaders to let go of tradition to save everyone. It will not be easy or quick.”

“Exactly why I don’t want to dawdle and miss trains,” I reply firmly. “If we get what we need, we can leave and take a leisurely trip back. As long as we return to campus before school begins, we’ll be fine. But I don’t want to come back without getting what we need.”

“Don’t you dare say it would be a waste,” Dolly says as she narrows her eyes at me. “Taking me on a vacation is not a waste.”

Chess walks up, tilting her chin so she looks up at him. “Of course not, Angel. But

we can take vacations whenever we want. This summer, unfortunately, has to be about gathering as much info as we can to help us this coming year. Shit's bound to heat up in a big way."

"Yes, it will. The Council has covered up the previous attacks, but with each one, the spectacle is bigger. There will be a point at which they cannot manage the fallout." Aubrey looks around the platform before he murmurs, "And that will be when everything gets infinitely more dangerous."

"I don't think either side cares about collateral damage." My Princess's face is sad when she mumbles her addition, and I want to hug her, comfort her... yet I know I can't. She's absolutely correct, and the casualties will pile up as this ancient rivalry continues to build.

I run a hand over my jaw, then I nod. "They are only concerned with furthering their aims, so yes. There will be deaths, injuries, and more missing students around the world if that's how the Fae are 'fueling' their campaign.

The Council will strike too quickly and hit the wrong people.

It's like every other war in history, but with magic involved? I don't know what it will look like."

"We're going to find out what your people know, Broody Batman, because I am not fucking around.

" Everyone turns to look at Fitz, who crosses his arms over his chest with a determined expression.

"If I have to hang the entire lot of them from their fucking toes and use hot pokers, they will tell us. You need to get right with that before we step a single paw on their

land.”

“I understand,” Ren says as he slumps on the bench. “My ties to them are based in nostalgia, so other than my direct relatives, that shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Your parents might be an issue,” I warn him with a dark look. “But they sent you off and killed the woman you loved; it seems like you’d be able to separate who they are now from who they were before.”

Of course, unlike my brothers and I, he didn’t live through a childhood filled with torture and horror, so that won’t be as easy as it sounds.

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What's Up?

Delores

The middle train is what I've pictured 'business' trains people take to work being like.

We had a nice private compartment, but it was just seats and racks where we all sat together while we did various things to pass the couple of hours.

Nothing exciting, though I'm sure the 'regular' pred compartments would have been a lot smaller and less calm.

Felix led us off quickly in Budapest, and I looked around the big station wistfully as I imagined all the pretty things outside we don't have time to look at.

We are definitely taking sight-seeing trips all over the world once this Fae bullshit is over.

As we board the Golden Eagle Danube , I smile to myself.

This might be the most luxurious one yet, and while I should complain, I'm also touched that the guys went to this much trouble to ensure that we could all travel without being jammed into tiny seats and beds.

The staff helps us with our bags and I almost squeal when we arrived at the adjoining 'Superior Deluxe Class' cabins.

They have their own en suites, with daytime seating that is turned into king-sized beds at night.

Felix bristles a little at the thought of people in our space, but the safe and Fitz's subtle nod make him relax, eventually.

"These are amazing," I whisper to Chess. "I wish we were taking the six-day tour instead of jumping ship on day two."

The cheetah smiles as he reaches up to brush a hair out of my face. "We'll either do it on the way home via boarding in Istanbul or come back when things settle down, Angel. Our return trips won't get booked until we see how long we need to remain with the clutch."

Sighing, I look at the little guide the valet gave me. "It has a bar and lounge car with a piano player and a restaurant car with gourmet food. This is beyond spoiling me, and I shudder to imagine what it cost."

Renard reaches over, grabbing my hand to raise to his lips.

"Don't fret over it, ma petite . We can most certainly afford it, and the increased security and comfort are worth it to us.

I know you've been trained by your parents to 'earn' whatever they spent on you, but that is not how our family works. "

"Good, because I can't imagine what the hell I'd have to do to work this shit off," I joke, as I give him a crooked smile. "Much less that damn tiara Aubrey likes me to wear."

Aubrey harrumphs as he tilts his head at their cabin door. "Come, lunchable. You're

with us on this leg, and I suspect it will be extremely entertaining. Kiss the kitties goodbye so we can settle in, then we'll meet up once the train is moving to explore the lounge if you wish."

Giggling, I let go so I can get a kiss from each of the Khans, including the poutiest Fitz ever. My hands cup his face as I smile fondly. "You know how to share, baby. Don't be a puffy-lipped whiner. We'll be together in the bar before you know it."

"Plus, I can keep you entertained," Chess says with a wink.

Felix groans, clapping his hand over eyes. "Not in the middle of the day, you won't. Fitz, let go of the princess so we can get our shit inside."

The younger tiger kisses me again and lets go, so I turn back to the dragon and gargoyle with a rueful look. His voice is full of sexy rasp when he adds, "Oh, Baby Girl... you know I hate to see you go..."

"...but you love to watch me leave. I know, baby." I call over my shoulder as the winged mythicals tug me into our cabin quickly. As I look at the space, I shake my head. "It's no ritzy hotel, but I bet it's one of the best train compartments we could have. It'll do for two days."

"It's suitable, yes," Aubrey replies as he lays the cases flat on the ground to pull out a change of clothes for himself and Rennie. "I prefer to let the wrinkles fall out for the next day, but as you love to point out, I'm a bit fussy."

I snort. "That's putting it lightly. But I'm used to you and Frenchie McSonnet over there, babe. You don't have to explain your quirks."

The dragon flushes, and Rennie winks at me. "I suppose it's a reflex that's hard to ditch, isn't it, lapin?"

“For real,” I mutter in agreement. “I still apologize for stuff you and our friends don’t mind because Lucille made everything I did a crime against preds worldwide. Nothing was ever good enough, and I couldn’t perform to her specs to save my life.”

The gargoyle walks over and sweeps me off of my feet, setting me on the couch with him gently.

“Delores Diamond Drew, no one is perfect. But if they were? You would be the epitome of perfection for us. The Khans think so, too, so you never have to worry that we find anything you do less than adorable—including the flatulence you were so blushy about in the first station.”

I swat his chest, nose wrinkling as I scowl.

“Renard Laveaux! There is nothing weird about thinking it’s inappropriate to discuss bodily functions in loud tones in public places.

Of course, I know that ‘everybody poops’ or farts or pees or vomits—that doesn’t mean I want to subject the entire world to a discussion about it. ”

“Not going to be one of your kinks, hmmm?” Aubrey smirks and my eyes widen.

“Absolutely not , Aubrey Draconis!” I can’t even fathom what a pile of dragon shit would look like in real life—though the dinosaur poo scene from Jurassic Park flits to mind immediately—and I sure as fuck will not think about it on me . “You—You... you’re going to make me kink shame and that’s bad.”

Renard laughs as he tweaks my nose playfully. “Drawing boundaries about what you find attractive isn’t kink shaming, petite . Judging people who do like that sort of thing is what you’d have to do. And I think your revulsion is based on your desires, not anyone else’s.”

I don't know what to say, so I just sputter incoherently.

These men are going to give me an aneurism at twenty-one, I swear to fuck.

Once the train has been on its way for a bit, Aubrey stands and holds his hand out. "Time to get the cats so we can wander a little, snack size."

I grin broadly, dropping my tablet on the couch as I spring to my feet. "Yay! I'm curious to see what happens on this fancy ass line when they have mixed cars. It might help to hear what's being said from the non-preds, you know?"

"We know the prey animals are concerned. That is what the Captain found out from the tribal leader." Rennie stretches lazily, his lithe body sprawled where we were sitting. "That should be enough, non ?"

"Nope," I reply with a shake of my head.

"I think we ignore humans too much. Think about how this will play on the bigger world stage. Previous big events have been covered up, but with magic involved? It could get hard to control quickly, I think. I mean, there's only so much weird shit those gullible folks will buy. "

Aubrey looks thoughtful, then nods. "I agree. Times have changed since the last big war. Tech and science will make it a lot more difficult to convince them they did not see or record what they thought they did."

"So let's try to mingle and hear what they're talking about." Dolly crosses her arms over her chest, looking pleased. "Because that was a big ass mess at the Pred Games match, and there has to be some tin-foil hat people talking about it somewhere . "

Renard rolls up to join us, his grin wide and mischievous. "I can get behind snooping

with the meat puppets. Let's do it."

"You'll have to watch Fitzgerald," my dragon says as we head into the corridor. "He is a lot for preds, much less those beings. And if he gets excited, he might forget himself."

Scoffing, I knock on their door. "Fitz can behave when he needs to. I'll stay with him, but I don't think he'll be a problem."

The cabin door opens to reveal my crazy tiger, and he tugs me into his arms to squeeze me tightly. "Baby Girl! I'm so glad you're here. Big bro is being a tight-ass and I'm raring to go explore before I burst into a thousand pieces from boredom."

I laugh, taking his hand in mine. "Okay, crazy pants. Let's go burn off some of that energy. We can get a snack, have a drink... do normal people stuff while we spy on the humans."

"Spy on the humans?" Felix asks as he and Chess follow Fitz out of their room. "Did I miss something?"

"We decided that seeing what they are gossiping about might lead to other viewpoints on things like the Games debacle or who knows what else. Since we were focused on what was happening at l'Academie, it might give us insight into things we should be aware of on the rest of the continent."

Chess nods at Aubrey, his eyes sparkling. "Very nice. I think it's a great plan. Preds and prey rarely pay much attention to them, so we may glean some intel. It will have to be interpreted, but it's a good bet we'll hear something useful."

"As long as I don't have to sit with them," Fitz mumbles.

“The ones back home are so fucking boring . I can’t imagine living your life completely out of the loop with reality because you’re so easily led.

All that tech the Saucy Skink is talking about hasn’t gotten them the real deal about the world yet somehow, and that feels purposefully ignorant. ”

My lips quirk as he and I lead the pack down the hall towards the connectors to the next car. “Fitz, there’s a lot of people preventing that from happening—or so we’re told. It’s not entirely their fault as a species.”

Felix coughs, and I feel his eyes on my back. “Perhaps not, Princess, but they are dangerously intolerant—which is saying something given how preds have treated prey and magicals, yet they do not trust humans.”

He’s probably right, but it just feels so wrong to write off entire swaths of people for the actions of a small percentage.

“Do bunnies have some weird, overdeveloped sense of justice?” I ask abruptly.

“I know you’re preds and that’s not your area of expertise but...

It really bothers her that shit is so skewed and unfair.

Every time we talk about stuff like this, or fucking rich people or...

whatever, I get this burning need to fix things inside. ”

“I don’t... think so?” Aubrey says after a moment. “I can text some of my colleagues, and perhaps Rennie can contact the crew to ask if they know. It might simply be that you are a good person, nibblet. I know we don’t meet a lot of them, but... empathy is supposed to be common.”

I frown, considering that before I reply.

“I don’t think it’s just empathy, big guy.

This is like... righteous fury or something.

I want to go out and slay things to make it right.

I feel like the drive has been getting stronger over time; I didn’t realize it until I was directly thinking about it, though. ”

“The Fae are very concerned with truth and lies, right and wrong...” Rennie murmurs softly. “It’s one of their defining traits. They can lie, unlike the legends say, but only if their reasoning is just. Justice is quite important to their species—all of them.”

Well, that’s a slap in the face I didn’t need today—but it would explain a lot about why everyone is after me.

Fitz

Normally, I just don't pay attention to the walking meat bags.

It's not that I dislike them—they're simply not part of my life in any significant way.

Felix and I have sheltered at Apex for so long that I almost forgot about them until Baby Girl, and they sure as fuck weren't around on Bloodstone.

The only time they mattered in my past was touring for Pred Games—and barely then.

I only had to make sure I wasn't on their turf doing shit that would end up in a tabloid or on the internet.

But today, I have to mingle with them purposefully while traveling and now to snoop.

“Bunch of Minotaur shit is what it is,” I mutter as we enter the lounge car. “They should separate these, too. Alcohol and secrets never mix, you know?”

Felix gives me a reproachful look. “Watch the booze until we're done with our tasks, brother.”

“How am I supposed to pretend they're interesting if I'm sober?” I whine, but he's not listening. My twin is peeling off with Chessie to follow his own orders like a good soldier. I turn to my mate and sigh. “It's a valid question.”

“We’ve watched so many movies and shows, Fitzy. You know what they talk about—weather, the news, celebrities, fads. You just can’t mention pred stuff.” Dolly grins as she smooths my frown with her fingers. “And no scowling, growling, or snarling. It will make them wary and we need them open.”

“Good luck with getting the Airborne Ancients to comply with that edict,” I snicker. “The Caliente Chameleon practically communicates through those noises with people he doesn’t know. Emo boy is gonna have a real bad time.”

“Be nicer,” she says, smacking my arm playfully. “Rennie and Aubrey are letting us in and being vulnerable now. Just because it’s comfortable for you doesn’t mean it’s easy for others. Even Felix is slowly coming around. You just have to exercise the same patience with them as you have with me.”

I snort, then wink at her. “But I’m not fucking them, Baby Girl. That makes it imminently harder to extend that limited courtesy.”

She slaps me again, frowning as she leads me over to the bar. “Don’t be a pig, baby. I know you better than that BS line. You’re a good man, Fitzgerald Kahn, and you’ll never convince me otherwise.”

To my family and those I care for? Definitely. With people who threaten that? Absolutely not.

“Okay, okay,” I say as I place my hands on the bar, squinting at the shelves behind it to see what they have in stock. “What would you like to drink? I’ll do my best to follow big bro’s stupid directions, but that doesn’t mean no alcohol. That’s as far as I can compromise.”

“Mmmm. A Dr. Pupper, please. You know I hate drinking in public.” Her eyes are shadowed and I have to grit my jaw to keep from growling low. That fear of letting

go comes from her evil bio donors and it makes me want to kill the ugly reptile again for his part in it.

Hailing the bartender, I order her drink and a double scotch for myself.

This isn't enough to affect a shifter, especially one of my level.

It will take the edge off a bit, so I'm not bouncing all over and alienating the people we're supposed to chat up.

Once we have our glasses, I tilt my head at the tall tables by the piano where people are gathered. "Over there, you think?"

"Looks good, baby," she replies as she takes the arm I offer. "Let's go."

As we move to the corner, I note Felix and Chess talking to a couple that I think humans consider middle age.

Their expressions are animated, and my brother is doing an admirable job of not looking bored as fuck.

Across the bar, Aubrey is listening as the gargoyle talks to an old ass guy in a fedora.

The dragon seems marginally interested, so Broody McPoetryPants must be blabbing about something he's interested in.

Okay, Fitz, if they can do this shit, so can you. Turn on the charm.

"I don't understand why they keep closing everything. It's just so inconvenient!"

I have to look away from the bubbly brunette my girl is talking to for a moment

before my eyes pop out of my head.

We approached her and what turned out to be her fiancé because they were a younger looking age group than the others' marks.

However, once Veronica and Butch really got to talking, I quickly realized that we made an error.

Not only are they the least self-aware people I've ever met, they're also fake as fuck.

There's this veneer of falsehood about them that makes my tiger want to snap their heads off because it grates on me.

"I can see how that would be upsetting," Baby Girl says as she nods sympathetically.

"It's frustrating when businesses and governments do things that don't benefit you directly.

Having those locations closed for repairs as you're touring on your vacation seems like they're targeting you. How incredibly outrageous."

That comment has me holding my breath for a moment, so the laughter doesn't escape.

Dolly's tone is as full of fake emotion as their perfectly symmetrical surgery enhanced faces are silicone.

Yet, the two tools from the States are eating it up.

I suppose she learned to do this from her shithead mom, but I'm consistently amazed at how much control our mate has over herself.

She's been listening to these two idiots whine about everything from the current topic to people who won't speak English, to everything being too small for them to feel comfortable.

Not once has she faltered as she pretended to agree with their self-centered tripe.

"Exactly! I mean, it's like the Europeans don't even want us to spend our money and support their economies. And they need it!" That blink-worthy statement is made by Butch the bitch, and I have no idea how anyone is supposed to respond to such blatant nonsense.

But Baby Girl nods, pausing for a moment before she sighs. "I prefer to shop local, but some people make it hard. I'll never understand why they don't get how the real business world works."

Damn, that was a good answer. She was definitely listening to her parents' shit as a kid.

"Exactly!" Veronica claps, her face alight with snooty joy. "If you make people of our calibre wait, you'll lose us entirely. Why should we bother to wait when so many others are dying to serve us?"

A slight tightening at the corners of her mouth is the only hint that Dolly gives this wacko, that she might not agree with her point of view.

But that's gone as quickly as it appeared as she lifts her drinks to lips, nodding.

"Yes, it's very annoying when others don't recognize our worth as ambassadors.

However, I suppose renovations in those places must be planned well in advance, no?

Perhaps they lack the sense to warn their customers of the inconvenience. ”

Butch rolls his eyes. “Absolutely not, my dear. Our brokers checked the places we intended to visit prior to scheduling this jaunt. Everything should have been available—in fact, we were supposed to get VIP tours. Yet we arrived to find things closed up and draped with ugly tarps. Very unsatisfying.”

“That seems odd, doesn’t it? If your staff booked things and double-checked before you got there, why would...

whatever it was... suddenly getting repairs?

” My mate tilts her head, pretending to look confused, but I know she’s zeroed in on something important.

“What were you trying to tour, anyway? I want to make sure it’s not on our list.”

“Excellent plan, love,” I say as I focus on the insufferable snobs now that they’re saying something useful. “I’ll relay the information to our guides.”

Veronica huffs, then sips her martini before she replies.

“It’s been a nightmare all across our path.

First, we were in Ireland and they had some sort of ecological problem with the Hill of Tara—I couldn’t get my Scarlett on.

Then the Faerie Bridges and Loughcrew Cairns were roped off for some ridiculous reason.

We got upset and left early for Paris, and when we arrived, we had no trouble at all

there.

At least they have their shit together.”

Scoffing, Butch tosses back the rest of his whiskey as he sneers.

“Too bad they can’t win a war. But we headed down through the Lorraine region into Germany, which went well.

Then we hit Poland and the Underground Museum was shut down.

I told Ronnie we just needed to leave so we could catch this train for our tour of Romania via Budapest. I can’t believe half the things we were interested in went up in smoke.

It had better not be that way when we arrive in Sighi?oara tomorrow. ”

I have no idea why these humans are so angry, though I guess their short life spans make everything seem immediate.

They obviously have the money to go back to whatever they missed, but they’re too busy being indignant about the world not catering to their whims. I note the places they mentioned quickly on my phone to show the ancients, then mock a sigh. “You can’t depend on anyone anymore.”

“Very true,” Veronica says as she looks at her extremely expensive gold watch. “But if we can tour the castles on this leg, I suppose all will not be a complete loss.”

Oh, their precious trip around the country is a write-off if they’re told ‘no’ more than once; these people are just awful.

My eyes cut to my girl, hoping she'll let me tell them off or maybe even kill them, but she shakes her head.

Frowning, I look at my phone again, trying not to make irritated noises.

Dolly clears her throat, then smiles at the couple broadly.

“It’s been a joy getting to know you both, but I think my companion needs a refill.

I hope you enjoy the rest of your trip—especially because of your hardships until now. ”

The woman leans forward, air-kissing with my mate, and I keep my eyes on the male to warn him off.

Obviously, Dolly wouldn’t be interested in that empty-headed twat, but I don’t want him anywhere near her lips.

He wisely extends a hand for me to shake, which I grip hard to amuse myself when he winces.

“What a shake you have there. Well, as you said, I hope you enjoy your vacation, too.”

Dolly nods, her fake expression still in place as she takes my arm and lets me lead her back to the bar. When we get there, she hisses, “Fitz! You could have broken his hand and then someone definitely would have noticed.”

I shrug. “I’m sorry, Baby Girl, but those two were the least tolerable people I’ve met in a long fucking time. I had to imagine ripping their heads off just to get through that shit. No wonder we don’t mingle with their kind much.”

“I think the idle rich thing made it worse,” she replies, her eyes sparkling. “They were pretty terrible, and I grew up with a lot of awful people. However...”

“However, what?” I ask as I gesture for the bartender to come over again.

“They might be useful. It’s pretty weird that Fae sites are being blocked off to humans at the last minute with flimsy excuses when we’re having a Fae-related revolution, mmm?” Dolly grins as she hands her glass to the guy, and I push mine to him as well.

Nodding, I wait for the guy to leave before I respond. “It seems very coincidental. I wonder what the things they’re seeing in Poland or Romania have to do with it? I’m not familiar with the Underground Museum, unfortunately, but we know someone who will be.”

“Yes, we do.”

Now we have to wait for those two grumpy assholes to pry themselves away from that old man so we can ask what they think of our intel.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:58 pm

Dumb Blonde

Delores

Fitz and I hung out until the others slowly returned to the group.

Both sets of guys had a pained expression on their faces, but it appeared we might all have been successful.

The call for dinner came not long after, so we filed into the dinner car together.

Felix playfully announced that our meal was off-limits for gossip; he didn't need to say anything else to keep everyone's mouths shut about our secret mission.

The food was fancy as hell, but delicious, and even Chessie looked pleased.

By the time we finished, the sun had set outside, and we headed back to our small but luxurious rooms to discuss the fruits of our earlier labor.

“Get comfy, then meet us in ours,” I say to the cats as they open their door. “We’ll discuss this nonsense once we’re together. Oh, and someone order drinks? That will probably make it easier.”

Felix eyes me for a moment, but then nods. “Okay, Princess. But you have to make sure you will not distract anyone. Got it?”

That won't be easy given the shit we packed for nighttime, but alright.

Aubrey chuckles as he opens the door to our room, waiting for Rennie and me to enter before he joins us. “The Raj doesn’t get that it won’t matter what you’re wearing, mm?”

“It will because you had me pack tiny stuff, you big ninny,” I hiss back playfully. “It’s not lingerie, but it doesn’t cover a lot, either.”

Rennie peels his shirt off, heading for the suitcases with a shrug. “I believe that was a wise idea, Flames. There’s no reason for her to be covered like a nun in our rooms, and she won’t be going anywhere in those skimpy PJs.”

“Men,” I mutter with a shake of my head. “Always an excuse to ogle, even when they need to be aware of what the fuck is going on.”

“We are who we are, nibblet.” Aubrey winks as he goes to change as well. “No sense pretending we’re not animals through and through.”

I tilt my head, smiling a little as they make quick work of their outfits.

Watching them is just as fun for me as it is for them in reverse.

Plus, I love that Aubrey is making peace with his dragon more often than he fights it now.

It’s made his temper and control better, and as a side benefit, he’s much less grumpy than he was when I arrived at Apex.

That’s part of who he is, but the edge of isolation and anger is gone.

I can’t take credit for all of that, but it warms my heart to know that he’s happy.

I'm happy and that's all because of their acceptance and support.

"You're thinking awfully hard for us being naked," Rennie jokes. "Is there something you wish to add to our frames?"

Blinking, I blush hard as I fumble for words. "No! I mean, you're both hot as fuck, but... um. Truthfully, I was kinda lost in my head, but also...I noticed those tattoo thingies have changed on the people I finished the bond with? Is that normal?"

Aubrey bends to find his pants, and I have to stop myself from licking my lips. His ass is fucking stellar, and I don't even have many to compare it to. I just know. "Since I have not been with dragons since I was too young for the mating talks, I am uncertain. Did the tigers say so?"

"I was old enough to have some of the talk when they exiled me, but... I do not know about cross-species or multiple matings." Rennie frowns as he tugs his silk PJ pants on and then heads over to gather his hair in a scrunchie.

"Gargoyle marks were more visible in our stony forms rather than our human."

"Fuck knows, I haven't met predatory bunnies, so that's out the window." My grumbles make them laugh, but I'm serious. With their new theory about Fae blood, it's not my only concern. "I hate to ask something touchy..."

"Just do it." Aubrey pulls on sweats, standing up as he looks at me seriously. "Honesty is the best thing, remember?"

I blow out a long breath and nod. "Rennie, what do you know about Fae mating? You know... because of reasons."

The gargoyle turns to face me, his smile sad. "Not much, unfortunately. We were..."

not at that point yet. The hurdle of speaking to our parents was the first step to commitment, and that went poorly, as you know. Our discussions about logistics had not happened yet, when she was supposedly killed.”

“Just fucking great,” I mutter as I stomp to my suitcase.

“Who the hell are we going to ask? Z knew about biological mating basics, but she won’t know this shit.

The Councils have hidden or destroyed most of the Fae's documentation to support their stupid exile. How will we know if things are even done correctly? Maybe the tats have stayed hidden in public because I did the animal thing right, but not the Fae thing right. If I’m actually part of their species, of course. ”

They looked both puzzled and regretful, which only makes me more frustrated.

I have one man left to mate—ostensibly—and now I don’t know if it’s really done.

This secretive bullshit is going to send me right over the deep end, I swear to Hera’s peckish peacocks.

Growling as I yank my PJ set out, I rip off my clothes and toss them to get the angry energy out of my body.

“Snack size... You know we consider it done, even if whatever else has to be completed once we know what it is. Right?” Aubrey frowns as he walks over to help me button my top with a soft tsk’ing sound. “Stop, stop. It’s okay. Calm down.”

Rennie comes up behind me, his fingers running through my loose hair and I tilt my head back as he separates it.

He works on braiding it slowly, making my blood pressure slow as he methodically gets the long strands under control and out of my face.

“Ma petite, I know there are a lot of questions we cannot answer and even more we do not know to ask. But between the six of us and our merry crew? We will find the solutions to our problems and help you learn your heritage. It will require patience, though, because of the obstacles in our path.”

He’s right; I’m losing my shit like a kid and I have to not let this get to me when it comes up.

“If it upsets me now, it will also be in public. Our enemies are many and they have enough weapons,” I whisper to myself. Aubrey smiles at me, his fingers brushing my collarbone as I talk to myself.

“That is very true. We must keep them from discovering sore spots other than the ones everyone is aware of. Emotional manipulation is just as painful and disarming as physical violence.” The dragon looks proud, and that makes my stomach flutter happily. “Why help them do more harm?”

“Yeah. I know.” I say as I continue to lean into them both, soaking up their relaxing presence. “Sometimes my Fitz-like temper is less helpful than others. I’m working on it.”

A knock sounds at the door and we all turn as a voice calls, “But I like your me-like temper, Baby Girl!”

“Of course he does,” Aubrey snorts as he lets go of me. “Let them in, Rennie. We should get this over with, so we have time to enjoy our train night with the lunchable.”

The gargoyle smirks, then heads for the door to open it, allowing my other mates to clamber in.

This should be good.

“So we figured out that a bunch of tourist-y human things that sort of connect to legends and tales of Fae and other things have been closed down without notice. Our humans were insufferable, but they gave us a pretty good list that trails from Ireland to this region,” I finish as they all listen.

“And I kept Fitz from killing them for being boring, so that was a win.”

“Ugh, no wonder we avoid them like the fucking shifter pox,” Fitz says, as he tucks Chessie into his side. “I can’t imagine working in the capitals or places where I’d have to endure that shit day after day. That would make me ready for fucking rubber rooms.”

Aubrey and Rennie laugh, both looking amused as hell by our difficult choice of targets. Felix sighs, rolling his eyes to the ceiling, and when he looks at me again, there’s a serious look in his gaze. “Who thinks that the other ‘sides’ are doing a little thieving like we did in that vamp museum?”

I blink, the dots connecting quickly as I consider it. “That would make sense. Maybe some of the ‘human’ landmarks have private collections of books or artifacts that the Fae want back. It could be a need or a want, but it tracks.”

“The last place? The Underground?” Chess looks up from his phone with a grimace. “It’s in Poland, which isn’t far, but...”

“But what, Chester?” Rennie says curiously. “Go on.”

The cheetah frowns as he responds, “It’s a historic underground site with seven hundred years of Krakow’s dead and artifacts.

At the time, people believed you could prevent vampires from rising by tying their hands, cutting off their heads, and placing them at their feet.

Many of the remains are lying in just that fashion. ”

“Not those motherfuckers again,” I groan as I lean against Aubrey. “Is this what the... clan... from school is doing? Running around Europe stealing from vampire tourist traps?”

“They could be, petite lapin ,” Rennie murmurs. “If the Fae are gathering objects or texts to increase power, it follows that their partners in this would be as well. Did your humans mention any other site that could be linked to them?”

“No, but we’re literally pulling into bloodsucker central tomorrow morning, bro.

” Fitz gives the gargoyle a look that screams ‘duh’.

“I mean, the damn brochures I read earlier say this town we’re hopping off at...

Sighisoara? Is where Vlad the Impaler was born.

Every stop on this train line is associated with them from his castle to the church where his kid was buried to the Bram Stoker castle, man. How did you not know?”

“I knew, I sort of... forgot how close my clutch is settled near to the place people ascribe to the origin story of their kind. We protected people from them when I was young, but my direct experience was nil. The older gargoyles did some of those things, and I merely heard the tales of victory in celebration.” Renard looks irritated

by his mistake, but Aubrey puts his hand on his knee.

“You’ve spent centuries blocking out your life before Apex. You have tucked away details and facts that were part of it, so that you did not have to feel the pain of rejection. Stop beating yourself up.” The big guy grins, and I reach over him to pat Rennie comfortingly as well.

“This makes our voyage to your family a bit dicier, I’m afraid,” Felix muses as he strokes his chin. “We will have to ensure that we are armed very well as we travel and that our night time accommodations are secure before we sleep.”

“I believe they’re back—or some never left and have come out of hiding,” Renard says seriously. “So finding the right supplies for our travel up the mountains is a good plan. I know we haven’t seen any yet, but this robbery makes no sense for the Fae.”

Aubrey holds his hand up. “I know we’re trying to be cautious, but keep in mind that we don’t know for certain that it was a robbery at any of the places.

Your humans simply said they were closed for renovations, but that doesn’t mean it wasn’t run-of-the-mill vandalism versus destroying things to find shit.”

“True,” I reply. “What did your old man say?”

“He was a historian from Le Louvre traveling to a conference!” Rennie’s voice is excited as he sits up again. “We got nothing too interesting from him, except that...” The gargoyle stops and I can see the wheels turning in his mind as something sparks.

Aubrey groans as he slaps his hand on his eyes.

“Pierre mentioned that several minor artifacts have disappeared from museums in France and Britain. His colleagues have been abuzz about them because they could

not fathom who would bypass all that security and not steal the most valuable items, but rather things that are not even on display most of the time.”

“Shit,” I mutter as my scowl deepens. “They’re definitely shopping for stuff, and we have no idea what because all of these institutions are keeping it under wraps.”

Too bad the whole ‘no press is bad press’ doesn’t apply to academia, apparently.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:58 pm

Get Up, Get Out, Get On

Renard

It is difficult to describe the myriad of emotions running through me since we embarked on the journey to the last homeland I had prior to exile.

Writing for permission to visit was hard, receiving a form letter in response was worse, and connecting the dots about why my clutch re-settled from Paris to these lands is worse.

Yes, we needed to get away from the teeming city full of humans we could not risk being seen by, but also, my gut is saying that the proximity to this land of vampire lore was part of it as well.

I was too young for any elders to confide in me when we moved, but as an adult, this connection is undeniable.

Perhaps my clutch was even contracted to monitor those lands by the Council; I was exiled as a teen, shortly before the Treaty.

My frown deepens as I consider all the possibilities innate in that line of thought.

It was a time of amazing technological advances for humans, which spread to shifters.

Whether those were edged along with the help of magicals or not, it gave the oldest

elite families incredible opportunities to extend their wealth and heritage into the future—as long as no one was vying for dominance.

That might have been why inter-mingling became taboo, and eventually why the magicals and the vampires were shuffled through the Veil forever.

Get rid of the competition and the predators would rule indefinitely—the prey animals could never fight the combination of brute strength, instinct, and technology, even with larger numbers.

“Merde ? 1 ,” I mutter as I lean my head back and look up at the fancy chandelier on our ceiling.

The twinkles hypnotize me for a moment, and I say nothing else until Felix clears his throat.

Coming back to reality, I sigh. “It is possible the migration of my gargoyle group from Paris to the Carpathians was contracted when I was young. The elders always said it was because the city was too populated and the risk of being seen was great. But that never rang true, and knowing about the concentration of vampiric sites in the area means that I am speculating about what our real purpose was. We moved a little over a decade before the Treaty, you see.”

“You think your clutch was hired to keep watch on the main nests and clans?” Felix asks as he scratches his jaw.

“That’s possible. I’d assume other mythicals across the globe were similarly contracted to keep tabs on magicals and such as well.

That might have been the first step in setting up the circumstances that lead to the Treaty. ”

Aubrey's brow furrows as he thinks about it.

“That would fit. There was quite a bit of turmoil during that timeframe in both the human and the supernatural worlds. It would have been easy to hide a secret war against anyone they lumped in with the magic users and have it blamed on the humans fighting. When they proved their point, they could bring those folks to the table in defeat and offer them the choice of continued genocide or escaping to Faerie to live safely forever.”

“Brutal dictators and aggressors often make false promises to those they plan to subjugate,” Chess says as he gives me a knowing look.

“Their deals with mythicals likely included the ability to live in their own spaces and not be bothered by the Council or Society or whoever in trade for the information. They probably didn't even know what it was for—it would be easy to pretend it had to do with something banal, like a census, if they concealed the killings under the guise of human bullshit. ”

I smile ruefully, shaking my head. “I have hope for that race, Chester, but it's possible that any species of mythical would choose money and power over ethics and morals—just like the humans or other preds and prey.

We all have dark natures that we either feed or suppress depending on our core values; no creature is necessarily all evil or good.

As much as I do not want to admit it because of how I was raised...

it is possible the vampires were not in the wrong and my family was.

Another difficult poison to swallow and I hope I come through without scarring, I suppose. ”

Ma petite stands, coming over to sit on my lap this time.

“Rennie, if your people did bad things for good reasons, we will deal with it. If they did shitty things for shitty reasons, we’ll get through it.

Very few of us can claim to have come from shifters who are not the bad guys in this damn war they all started.

Chessie, perhaps, and Aubrey, maybe—but the rest of us?

We have actively fuckwad bio donors. Don’t let it imbalance your world; they don’t deserve to live rent-free in your head when they sent you packing from theirs. ”

Flames chuckles, reaching over to put his hand on mine.

“The nibblet is spot on, my mate. I’m not eager to reconnect with my clash for fear of finding out they bowed down to the whims of those psycho families once my grandmother retired to Asia.

It’s possible, and we won’t know for certain until we end up visiting.

But it is a concern, and I understand why you’re struggling. ”

“They sent me away, which I didn’t agree with, but it was a law and I broke it.

I’ve always rationalized it in that way,” I mutter as Dolly lays her head on my shoulder.

“I shouldn’t have, because while I wallowed in that and her death, I ignored the world spinning around me.

At least, until I came to Apex, and then I spent years trying to get the dragon to speak. ”

Felix laughs, his eyes dancing. “I know I shouldn’t find it amusing, but the story about sign language is so very ‘Aubrey’ to me. Your dedication to communicating was better than my desire to drink myself to death when I arrived.”

“Or mine to screw Chessie and everyone I could while I was high enough to leave the stratosphere, so I could forget my anger.” Fitz rolls his eyes when everyone, but the petite lapin stares at him.

“Oh, come on, dudes! You all had to know I was just numbing myself, right? I mean, sure, it helped with the hyperactivity at times, but it was because I was so angry that I couldn’t put my big bro on the throne where he belonged rather than run away like a coward. ”

“Fitzy, you know it wasn’t the time.” Chess snuggles closer to the younger tiger. “We didn’t have the power or the backing to take back your home. We will eventually, and we’ll stop all the terrible shit. Right, Felix?”

“Fuck yes. The way my father uses and abuses everyone on Bloodstone will be a thing of the past when I get rid of him. I promise, bro.” Felix’s expression hardens and I smile fondly. He really is a good man, especially now that he’s climbed out of the hole he was living in before our mate.

“Okay, well, this is very touching, but...” Dolly lifts her head with a small grin.

“We’re way ahead of ourselves again. We can’t shift to the Raj until we rewind all the way back to now, where we need to figure out what the fucking Fae and vamps or whoever have stolen from all those sites.

Obviously, they're hiding it, so how do we find out? ”

“I can do some light online work tonight,” Fitz says with a yawn. “I won't have the computing power to do my usual amazing feats of derring-do, though.”

I think for a moment, then hold up a finger.

“I can text the Captain. He and the crew should be in the area of the Fae sites—or within a travel-able distance—since they were going to visit that tribal leader over there. Perhaps they can also stop by the ones in their vicinity to rummage around until they find out what's missing. ”

“That's a good idea,” Dolly says as she smiles at me. “Very nice delegation.”

Aubrey snorts and shifts in his seat. “I suppose I can email museum colleagues to poke around rumors of thefts on the continent. That might yield something.”

“Oh!” Our mate grins as she pulls out her phone, swiping it open before her fingers fly over the screen like lightning.

“I'm texting Rufus, Cori, and that group to see if any of them can split off from Paris to investigate any other suspicious closures they can dig up along the route from the Emerald Coast to this area.

Our humans might not have known everything, because they only focus on themselves. ”

Felix snaps his fingers. “Excellent idea, Princess. That will give us an extended network to gather info while we get off the train, arm ourselves, and get the guides into the mountains.”

“The weapons part is my favorite,” Fitz says with a dreamy look. “I’d love to find things to kill on our way up; it’s been so long since I could unleash.”

Considering that for a moment, I’m surprised to find that the younger twin is not exaggerating.

He hasn’t been able to really let go at the past two schools because they didn’t have staff Pred Games.

The guy is probably so pent-up with rage, that he’s damn near ready to burst. “Fitzgerald, it occurs to me that no one has praised your precise control in not killing anyone since we were at Apex. You have had poor substitutes for your anger management, yet you remain fairly sane and sober. It is quite impressive.”

The other guys look at me in shock, and ma petite hugs me tightly.

She clearly noticed, and has been working to wrangle that instinct that was formed in both nature and nurture on Bloodstone.

All the hobbies and books and yoga have been part of helping him maintain without the poisons or doing something that would bring eyes on us.

She’s so fucking smart about this shit and I can’t believe we all missed it—even Chess.

“Thanks, Frenchie,” Fitz says with a proud grin.

“Baby Girl and I have been working on that since we first got to Cappie. They didn’t have the staff stuff and with the amount of work Z and I had to do for the teams?

It was a lot not to hop in the ring and beat the snot out of some rich morons.

But it worked until the damn Yule battle—which was rockin’ for getting it out of my system. ”

“Then came summer, and you guys were isolated in an empty campus, so it kept you from doing much besides waiting,” Dolly says. “They moved us to a better school for me—major-wise, at least—but it also had an even worse program and zero staff that would help Fitzzy deal with his shit.”

Chess ponders for a moment, then chuckles. “Sex can’t be the answer all the time, or no one would be able to walk.”

“Right-o, baby,” Fitz says as he taps the cheetah’s nose.

“So again, more distractions so I could tamp my bullshit down. I mean, Felix has always been expected to be the smooth diplomat and powerful leader. He was always taught to control shit, whereas I... was meant to be the hammer of Khan, so to speak. Always ready to protect and destroy, you know? It’s fine ‘cause I love that shit, but not being able to get it out of my system has been a bitch .”

Inhaling deeply, I look at my family. We are far from perfect, nor are we shining examples to be held up for others to emulate.

However, we are survivors—each of our own traumas—and we are trying our damndest to put our shit on hold until we help stop the war that could tear our world apart.

It’s honorable, even if our initial motivation was to keep everyone from harming the girl we all love.

I suppose a band of somewhat good people who are doing the best they can in a world full of pain and hate is all one can ask for in the end.

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Firecracker

Delores

Much to the chagrin of my cabin-mates, we spent the better part of the evening doing our tasks and sharing the responses.

We were together, sipping drinks, and snacking, but my winged mates did not get to experience the ‘train sex’ they were promised.

I snuggled in with them to sleep before dawn, but as we woke up, their grumbles were much louder.

I had to promise they got the first night on our return trip, and that I’d be as loud as possible to taunt the others.

That’s not something that I can control very well anyway, so it felt like a fair trade.

“We will pull into Sighisoara in a few hours,” Aubrey says as he carefully re-packs their case with the dirty laundry. “Once we’re there, we should find a guide to the trails as soon as possible.”

Renard hands me my things and I bend to pack up my stuff as well.

“Scouting the right offerings will be key. It will need to be a supernatural on good terms with the clan to know the winding roads and paths they use to access their roost on foot. Being able to fly means they have fortified their position over time, and will

fiercely guard the secrets of entry from the bi-pedal beings to protect themselves.”

I frown as I muddle that out. “You mean they fly down and back normally, but there’s probably a secret way to get in if you don’t?”

“Exactly,” Rennie says as he boops my nose. “The clutch would need that for deliveries and supplies. It’s not uncommon for my kind to leave loopholes, just in case. Gargoyle had to move a lot as humans expanded their reach in various ages, so it became second nature to create other escape routes.”

“Bounty hunter, too, right?” I ask with a sad frown. “Lucille always said that human and shifter bounty hunters are always after mythical shifters.”

Aubrey snorts. “Not dragons, that’s for sure. Many of the stories humans tell about us have been flipped to give them the winning valor, but it’s not true. We’re the least defeated mythicals in all of history.”

Rennie rolls his eyes. “Yes, we move to get away from them, and they send people after us. I think you’ll find that many species are thriving more than the Council and their cronies want the public to believe.

Also, it is widely assumed that the shifter bounty hunters are actually being contracted by the elite families.

Getting rid of the most powerful creatures would open a lot of doors for dominance and close ones for possible rebellion. ”

“I mean....” I huff as I stand, my suitcase finished and zipped up for our departure. “Is there anything evil those motherfuckers aren’t part of? It feels like they’ve been playing this really long game over time, hoping to just conquer the goddamn planet.”

“No one is saying they have, snack size.” Aubrey gives me a sheepish grin, and I stomp my foot in anger. “Sorry.”

“I’m not mad at you; I’m just pissed that I come from their ‘stock’, so to speak.

” My expression is rueful, but I walk over to hug the big guy.

“Truthfully, it makes me feel guilty all the time. It’s not why I’m fighting all this shit—not entirely—but that guilt informs a lot of stuff. I can’t help it, you know?”

“Again, ma petite , where you come from does not guarantee who you will be. We’re all proof of that.

” Rennie walks over, dropping a kiss on my head and joins the hug with a sigh of happiness.

“No one would have predicted this little circle of love, eh? But here we are, and we will be joined by the rest of our compatriots for breakfast once we scoot out of this car. Non? ”

I smile widely, squeezing them both before I pull away. “Alright, then, sweet talkers. Feed me, baby.”

The hungry looks they give me almost cause us to be late, but luckily, I’m a paragon of self-control—for now.

“The Captain has added his new destinations to their itinerary,” Rennie says as he looks at the buzzing phone on the table.

“He also says that Raina wishes you to know that Jinx is doing fine with our prey medical staff. Argyle has not sprayed her yet, and Bettina believes she actually enjoys

the company.”

I sigh in relief. Argyle is the most contentious of their little group and I was worried that she’d get completely bonkers about my sand kitten staying with them.

“Good. Jinx is well-behaved, but I worried a bit. Thank him for me, and Raina, too. It takes a tiny piece of pressure off of my plate to know that.”

Aubrey reaches for the eggs, scooping another pile onto my plate. “More protein, snack size. I’m sure your trainers agree, but we will burn a lot of energy as we ascend to the gargoyles’ nest. I want to ensure that you have the right amount of fuel.”

“Absolutely spot fucking on, Anal Anole,” Fitz crows as he grabs some bacon and sausage. He adds a bit to my china setting just like Aubrey, then shoves the rest in his mouth. I frown at him, looking around the elegant car to make sure no one saw. “Relax, Baby Girl..”

Felix huffs at his unrefined manners and I chuckle as he elbows the younger tiger. “Behave, Fitz. We don’t want to appear to be uncouth in front of all these eyes. If someone recognizes us...”

“Fuck, I hope not,” I mutter as I take another big bite of eggs. Once I chew, I revel in the buttery goodness of less healthy food for a second, then shake my head. “I don’t want our journey tracked on social or mainstream media. We have enough problems to work around, you know?”

“Word.” Fitz holds his fist up to bump, grinning. “If we don’t have cameras on us, I have to watch my ass a lot less. That means we can breathe easily. Well, easier than normal—the whole ‘exiled royalty’ thing is a drag, plus we’d like to avoid your raging cunt mother.”

I blow out a breath, then take a sip of my juice. He's definitely right about that. "Amen, baby. I don't know what connections she has in this part of the world and I don't want to know, especially given how close it is to her homeland."

"I almost forgot about that!" Chess frowns as he looks up from his phone. "Being this close to where Lucille came from has to be a bit nerve-wracking. I should have asked, Angel."

I wave my hand dismissively. "Honestly, I'd put it out of my mind until now."

I didn't want to chicken out on supporting Rennie.

He needs us to be with him on this trip and we need to get as much intel as possible.

We don't have contacts here and well... like I said.

I didn't bring it up because it's scary.

She's always made him seem like some omniscient deity ruling an entire continent from his velvet sofa. "

"Yeah, our dad is a bit like that." Felix gives me a knowing look.

"He does little for himself since ascending to the throne, has wildly unpredictable mood swings, and somehow, still keeps an iron grip on the entire continent plus some of the nearby countries. All of that is from a tiny island full of criminals, outcasts, and rejects from the families of the wealthy who wish they were dead rather than be there. It's confounding, honestly. "

"No, it's not, bro." Fitz rolls his eyes as he leans forward on his forearms. He motions for me to eat more and I make a face but obey as he continues.

“The current dickbag in the chair has the same infrastructure as the Council and your grandpappy and even your mom. Layers of people who know only what is needed to achieve their goals. If they seem shaky, they’re eliminated and replaced.

No one but him has all the info. He trusts almost no one and uses every psycho he can gather to run territories for him.

It’s like... he runs his criminal shit like a corporation. ”

“I don’t know that other things should ever be run like businesses, except businesses,” I mutter around a bite of bacon. “It feels like a misapplication of the concepts.”

“Well, a government definitely shouldn’t be or you get sociopathic tyrants ruining everything and everyone he touches,” Felix grumbles. “That’s definitely why Bloodstone is its own thing, separate from oversight.”

“And when people get sent to do that... they die,” Chess says softly. “I’m one of the few to make it out alive and it’s only because of Fitz and Felix.”

“Hey! I would have jumped the lazy fucker himself if someone tried to hurt you,” Fitz says with a snarl. “Even before I knew why you were important, I couldn’t let the weird shit they did to us happen to you, baby.”

My brows furrow and I cut my gaze to the gargoyle and the dragon.

It’s not the first time one of the cats has mentioned bad things happening to the twins as kids.

They never continue and I’m starting to believe that whatever it is may be so egregious that we’re all going to lose our shit.

They're clearly too damaged to admit to it yet, so I won't push.

But that fuckwad father of theirs had better be ready for what happens when our family finds out—he's going to writhe in agony so profoundly that someone will write fucking songs about it.

“Well, Bloodstone is on the list, but I don't think we should aim for that until we have a lot more shit under control,” I reply. “It sounds like your dad has it set up like a goddamn cult compound surrounded by miles of ocean.”

“That's... pretty accurate,” Fitz says, as he rubs the back of his neck.

“I mean, it's very Jurassic Park there. All wild and defended by miles of jungle full of crazy fucking preds who were punished for their sins by being set loose.

The reform school rejects who are too much to handle, either get promoted to his goon squad or released into the wild as part of the island's defenses.

It's insane, Baby Girl. He has cameras all over so he can watch preds and the occasional prey get hunted until they're killed or eaten. There's a gambling economy around it.”

“That's where the bets come from,” I mutter as I take all that in. It's a shit ton more info about their home than they've given in the past, but I'm tucking it away in my brain. I look over at Aubrey, who nods. “You just grew up around it.”

Felix nods slowly, then says, “Our history is very painful, but that's because our father turned Bloodstone into an evil villain lair after our grandmother moved away.

He didn't have anyone to say ‘no’ anymore, and everything went super dark very quickly.

He recruited cat shifters of all kinds to fill his ranks—not just tigers like us.

And then... it just kept sinking into the ugly place it is now. ”

“I’m sure my mother and her fucking rich asshats helped with that.

She made sure I knew that Bloodstone was the place every disobedient, imperfect child was sent to be ‘reformed’.

It was the boogeyman story for everyone I’ve known—even Mattie, who’s probably about your age.

I guess that was part of their controlling horseshit. ”

Aubrey clears his throat, looking at something over my shoulder.

“We should finish eating. I dislike how the couple across the car is trying not to look at us. It feels as though we’re either being spied on or someone has connected us with public personas.

Either way, I think we should head back to the cabins to stay out of sight. ”

I nod, quickly shoveling the food they’d filled my plate with as we talked. Rennie laughs, watching me chew and swallow quickly, then tosses his drink back. Fitz holds a finger up, calling the server over as I try to get it all down without choking.

“Wrap all this up to go for us, man. I don’t want my mate choking on anything but my dick, and she’s trying to inhale it all so we can go relax.”

Felix and Aubrey groan, Chess chuckles, and I have to put my napkin over my mouth so I don’t spit my food all over the table.

I love that fucking tiger so damn much, but I will get back at him for that.

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From Here to the Moon And Back

Chess

The rest of that train ride was fairly calm, despite Aubrey's ominous declaration.

We took the boxed up food and some drinks to our car, then met in one cabin again until we arrived in Sighisoara.

Between the five of us, we coaxed Dolly to eat more and turned our attention to our devices so we could monitor social media.

Nothing popped up while we were checking, but we'll have to continue watching as we travel to Ren's people.

When the train finally came into the station, Felix ran the off-load again, and that's how we ended up looking at the quaint village with our bags at our feet.

"The clock tower is right up your alley," the dragon says to Renard. He's hoping to ease the tension in the gargoyle's frame, but that's probably not going to happen until we're firmly within the territory of his kind.

Maybe not even then, given the circumstances of his exile.

"There are many guilds in the city and they maintained nine of the original fourteen watchtowers throughout the city. Gargoyles are members of them specifically, to ensure perfect places for us to perch unnoticed at night."

“What hotel are we staying in tonight?” my angel says as she looks down the colorful Strada Tamplarilor . It’s a main street and there are lots of people milling about, so we don’t look completely ridiculous hanging out.

Felix sniffs, his eyes darting around the area before he hails a car. “We need to go to Strada Morii . Our hotel for the night is Casa Savri .”

Once we’re on our way, I let out a sigh of relief.

I’m not as paranoid as the others for certain, but something about the people on the train and being in the middle of a historic town whose tourist business centers on the supposed ‘first vampire’ is a bit too close to the bone for me.

It’s an old, semi-medieval looking part of the city where we’re staying, and I just don’t like the amount of open spaces and perches.

I’m sure it’s extremely fucking gargoyle friendly, though, and I don’t know if I think that’s bad or good, either.

“Chessie, you’re sitting like you have a rocket shoved up your ass,” Fitz says with a frown.

I roll my eyes at him, even though I’m pleased he noticed my discomfort.

He’s been light years better about realizing there are other people in the world since our mate entered the scene, and that’s extended to actually seeing when emotions change. “What’s got your tail in a knot?”

The others turn their attention to me and I think about what I want to say in this very not-secure vehicle.

“The town is quite lovely—there’s a lot of old-style towers and open-air spaces that are popular with tourists, I imagine.

Lots of room for visitors to mill around and really absorb the history, you know?

You can see everything around you because it’s not a crowded, skyscraper filled big city. ”

Dolly snaps her fingers, her eyes dancing as she looks at me. “Nowhere to hide and lots of places to get lost at the same time, yes?”

“ Exactly ,” I reply with a proud smile. “I think I’ll enjoy exploring such an unusual slice of history once we’ve settled in, obviously. I just didn’t want to be caught unawares and miss something.”

Whew. What I’d really like is not to be in this cab anymore, so I don’t have to translate my every word.

“You know, I really would like to see the sights at some point,” Dolly says as she looks out the window. “It’s a little kitsch, obviously, but I bet we’d have fun.”

“We will,” Aubrey rumbles from his spot next to the stonily silent gargoyle. “On the way back, if we have time, we will visit anything you want, lunchable.”

Our excited bunny beams at him, and I chuckle softly.

She really doesn’t ask for much and it’s incredibly easy to give it all to her.

“Good. Travel is definitely going on our bucket list for later, even if I’m scared as fuck about certain kinds.

Once it's all over, I'm gonna conquer that dumb fear, anyway. ”

“Of course you will,” Felix says smoothly. “We’ll be there to help you, Princess.”

“Duh,” she says. “But I want to do it myself . I like to stand on my two thumpers first, okay?”

Fitz leans into her, sniffing her neck like a weirdo before he says, “Baby Girl, you can thump anything your heart desires. I’ll hold big bro back if he’s being a super dick again. Failure is how we learn, right?”

She snorts as her hand buries in his messy locks, tugging it up to look into his eyes. “It is, baby. But also, be nice to your brother. He’s just doing the ‘aggressive protector guy’ thing. In the end, we always meet in the middle because he loves me. Though it might be kind of fun to see...”

“Though... what?” I ask curiously. “I’d like to hear the end of that sentence.”

“Me, too,” Felix says wryly.

“Ew, don’t be weird ,” she practically shrieks. Aubrey and even Ren snickers across from us, and the tigers keep their eyes trained on her as she makes a face. “I meant I’d enjoy someone getting Mr. Dominant tied down so I can have my wicked way with him, not you , Fitzy!”

Our crazy mate bursts into growly guffaws that eventually tip his elder twin into similar ones.

They are definitely playing her, and I haven’t seen the two of them prank someone like that in a long time.

It makes my heart swell to see them getting along without needing copious amounts of alcohol and drugs to dull the memories of the past.

It's about time they allowed themselves to let go of Felix's error and move on with life—especially together.

The hotel is small and definitely a 'boutique' experience—everything is rustic yet obviously restored to give the experience of old world charm.

Lots of exposed wooden beams and stone, with information in our check-in packet about the wine cellar and terrace.

If we actually come back through here on the way home, I think we'd have a great time doing tastings and shopping in the markets in town.

It's the kind of experience the academic in me—and certainly the older mythicals—would bask in.

I'll have to make sure I mention it to Felix for consideration.

Why can't vacation be fun and a learning experience, after all?

As we follow the hostess to our rooms, I sigh in relief when they are next to one another.

Most places we're going to stay throughout this journey aren't made for a large group like us, but that's fine as long as we can remain close together.

For safety and access sake, adjoining rooms or suites are the best way for us to feel like we will not be separated and exposed.

I wish that wasn't such a big fucking deal, but honestly?

The more enemies we pick up, the worse that fear gets in my gut and I'm sure it's occurred to the others.

"Okay, last night was you guys, so I'll be with the brothers tonight," Dolly says as we face the doors. "That feels fair, and it means I don't really have to choose as much as alternate."

Felix nods, looking at the ancients for confirmation. Aubrey and Renard pause to give her kisses on either cheek before they step back. "That's very true, Princess. You're being quite balanced."

"If only everything wasn't damn small," the dragon grumbles. "It's all made for fucking tiny ass humans, it seems."

"We didn't look for shifter lodgings because we wanted to get to the settlement faster," I remind him. "Doing this another way might have yielded better accommodations, but it would have made the trip take a lot longer."

"I know; I know."

Renard gives him the ghost of a smile as he claps his hand on Aubrey's shoulder. "You'll have to make do with only moi , my love. Hopefully, that won't be too onerous."

"Don't be ridiculous," Aubrey grumbles as he picks up their things. "You miss her as much as I do, and that doesn't have a damn thing to do with us."

"Guys ," my angel says as she puts her hand on the handle to our door with a pout.

“You’ll make me sad, and I hate being sad.

If I thought we’d all fit, that’s what we’d be doing.

Plus, we’re going to have dinner and get the travel arranged for tomorrow, then hit the sack.

It will be a boring as fuck night, anyway.

We have to get up early as hell to head into the mountains. ”

“That’s true,” Ren chimes in. “In fact, once I put my stuff down, you and I are headed down to do the arranging.”

Aubrey sighs dramatically—his attitude more playful than I’ve ever seen—as he yanks their door open. “ Fine. But it goes on record that I am most definitely the bigger person.”

“In every way,” Dolly says with a wicked smirk. “Now, shoo. I want to get settled, so we can go back to surfing the web for posts. Your intuition on the train has me really freaked out, big guy.”

The two winged warriors exeunt to their chambers and we follow our brave bunny into the room we’ll be sharing for the night. She drops her things on the first surface she can, then throws herself on the bed with a sigh.

“I hate being separated, too, and have determined that we have been very spoiled by our quarters at the schools.” She starfishes on the bed, looking up at the ceiling as Felix and Fitz arrange our bags.

“But Chessie was right—we can’t control everything when we travel, unless we make

plans way ahead of time.

That's a luxury we didn't have when we decided to make this trek.

We're limited by what's available, close, and works best for getting to our ultimate destination. ”

I pad over to the side of the bed, peering down at her. “You're being very compliant so far, Angel. That has to mean you're worried, but I'd like to know what specifically has you so malleable.”

“Me, too,” Felix adds as he walks around the room, scrutinizing it. “I enjoy the change, but I've wondered why you're not putting up much of a fight about most things.”

Dolly rolls her eyes, her head moving as she gets comfortable.

“Guys, I am so out of my element. I mean, Aubrey had to teach me to pack, I've never been on a train, I don't know anything about all this travel shit, and we're running on a hope and a prayer that no one figures out who or where we are.

There's so much bullshit to process that I can't possibly get my back up about shit.

Being able to trust that you're making good decisions is how I'm keeping my anxiety about all this new shit under control, you know? ”

It's an excellent point, and I sit on the edge of the bed as I lay my hand on her leg. “Very astute, Angel. I didn't consider it from your point of view—at least, not in that sense. You're always so good with change and adapting when weird shit happens at home.”

“I am good at changing and adapting, but everyone has a breaking point. There’s too many people out to get me and so much new information being thrown at me that I have to let go of something .

If I don’t, I’ll lose my shit.” Her lips curve up as she props herself up on her elbows to look at me seriously.

“It’s difficult for me to do, mind you, because I spent so long being controlled by my parents and my friends.

Coming to Apex alone was how I broke free, even though it scared the fuck out of me.

Letting my mates run the show for a bit should tell you how much I trust you not to abuse that privilege. Duh.”

Duh, she says, like she didn’t just make my heart—and probably my brothers’—explode with happiness with a single sentence.

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We'll Get Ahead Someday

Delores

I slept fitfully—mostly because being trapped in this caravan led by someone Aubrey and Ren hired last night makes my bunny extremely irritable.

We packed up hiking bags with the items we needed most and locked up our suitcases in a contracted vault room in a local bank.

That was Felix's idea, and we had to scramble to get it done first thing when the place opened so we could meet the guides on time.

Once our civilized trappings were secured, we grabbed the food and weaponry supplies Aubrey ordered, then trudged to the edge of town.

When we arrive, I look around, scanning the area in my aviators to see the paths ahead.

It looks challenging, and I'm glad I ate a good breakfast, as the guys insisted.

I'm certainly in good enough shape to hike this now, but I wouldn't have been when I started at Apex or even Cappie.

Felix, Fitz, and Coach Z have pushed me to excel for two years for the Games, but I'm reaping the benefits now.

This trek will be strenuous for all of us, especially the big guys, and they could easily fly if they chose.

They'll mostly stay on the ground for me, and I will have to show my appreciation for that later.

“Princess, we gave you and Chess the lightest loads because your frames are built for speed rather than bulk. However, if you need help or a break, say something. We want to get to the rendezvous point quickly, but not at the expense of your health or safety.”

I salute the bossy tiger with a cheeky grin. “Sir, yes, Sir!”

He rolls his eyes and swats my ass as he heads over to talk to Chess.

I know Felix takes responsibility for all of us, and it's a wonderful thing, but I'm sure as fuck not going to overexert or dehydrate myself on a mountain hiking path miles south of butt fuck Transylvania with some rando we just met.

I will absolutely tell them when I need shit out here, even if it makes my soul ache with frustration.

There's a time and a place for being a brat just to tweak my stern Dom, and this isn't one of them.

“Welcome, new friends,” a deep rumbling voice says in heavily accented English.

I turn to face the newcomer. My nose twitches briefly, identifying the guide as a brown bear, but his bulk isn't that impressive.

Frowning at my assessment, I remind myself that others would definitely think this

guy is built like a tank.

Though my gargoyle is lithe in his humanoid form, I know without a doubt that he'd dwarf the ursine shifter in his onyx form.

My scale must be drifting a bit off course as I get used to being in the company of the mythicals.

Felix smiles tightly, nodding at the man. "We followed the advice that will work for us, and I appreciate your candor with my friend last night. I believe we are ready to ascend now."

The bear squints at him, adjusting his wide sport sunglasses as he looks at me. "You are certain the female can handle this journey? It will be difficult to simply turn back once we are far enough into it, plus your fee will increase with every failed attempt."

"Don't worry about Baby Girl," Fitz says as he stands next to me with a puffed chest. "She's got more in her than you can imagine."

I sense the desire to murder our guide for even suggesting I'm not capable of hiking with him, but he's holding back.

Felix had to have discussed what was acceptable and what wasn't when I was getting ready.

Narrowing my eyes at the bear, I arch a brow and adopt my 'Lucille' persona.

"I wouldn't be questioning my fitness, Ursa.

You're the one still working off your hibernation bulk, it seems."

Inwardly, I cringe. I would prefer not to suggest anything about his body because it's bullshit, but since I have next to nothing to work with, my scathing retort had to be bear-focused.

That was the best I could come up with on short notice, so I'll have to make amends to the universe for my transgression later.

Maybe I'll send clothes to a charity or...

"Ha! Look at her. She smells like prey and cannot keep her attention on me even to insult me."

His snarky words awaken the bunny and the blue sparkling power inside of me within a second and before I know it, I'm gripping the large man by the neck as he struggles wildly.

Toes barely dangling off the ground as I lift him just enough to be terrifying, I snarl in a low, deep tone I don't recognize. "Watch. Your. Mouth. Yogi."

The guide gapes at me, his arms flailing as he gasps for air.

The surge of power in my veins makes me squeeze tighter and I watch his face go from red to purple to blue with a gut-deep satisfaction that feeds the fury.

A light tap on my shoulder makes me whirl around with another growl, but I see Fitz grinning at me proudly, and it stops.

"This is hot as fuck and I'd love to go to Poundtown right here, Baby Girl, but... Big bro says we can't kill the best shifter guide in the area because he's a dick. At least, not until we get where we're going."

His voice breaks through the primal instinct, and I turn back to the stupid bear. “Never let me catch you talking about me again or I’ll rip your lips off and feed them to the first taker.”

Head bobbling in agreement, the bear chokes as I finally release my grip fractionally and I sneer at him to make a point before letting go so he drops to the ground like a sack of flour.

When I spin around, every single one of my men is eyeing me like a flank steak, and as much as I’d love to indulge in that game, we have to go.

“No time for fun, boys. We have to get moving, so we get to the spot before our special emissary does.”

If we’re lucky, whatever just happened to me won’t come back again if the guide or anyone decides to fuck with me—because I don’t have a clue why or how it manifested.

The hike into the mountains is not for beginners, and I get why the guide was worried about whether I could handle it.

Signs of civilization have gotten fewer and farther between as we ascend, and the flora and fauna increased exponentially with every degree of altitude.

Each predator I see is a potential shifter, but between the six of us, we’ve been able to silently communicate concerns as we make our way to the coordinates Rennie received.

I found out the guide who almost died has a name—Marius—but I haven’t used it.

Not speaking to the misogynistic dickwaffle is for the best; I’d rather not re-awaken

that part of me unless I'm in a safe place.

Not because I give a damn if I kill a shithead like that, but because I can't allow anyone to witness the blue, possibly Fae magic and live to tell the tale.

"Have more water," Fitz grunts as he hands me a canteen. "You look a bit pale, Baby Girl."

I snort, rolling my eyes. "Fitzy, we've been locked up for the winter in a French school where I barely get time to go outside. Of course I'm pale; I'm always pale right now. That's why I put on a bunch of sunscreen before we left. I should get a nice base color by the end of the day."

He wrinkles his nose, looking at me critically. "This is the first summer I get to be around you twenty-four-seven, so I guess I didn't notice. I'm surprised you don't burn to a crisp now that you mention it. You are pretty light-skinned, my sexy little bunny rabbit."

Rolling my eyes, I reach over to sock him in the arm. "We can't all be that gorgeously bronze color you three kitty cats from the jungle are year round, babe. Rennie is paler than me, you know."

The tiger looks up to the sky where the two giant mythicals are scouting ahead a bit as they stretch their wings.

"Ah, but the big man is from the same continent. He gets a lovely shade of bronze when we can bait him out of his stacks into the light. I suppose that means, as usual, you fall right in the middle of our divide, hmm?"

"Almost like it was Fate to stick me right in the middle of you miscreants," I reply with a grin.

Putting my hand up to my forehead, I look up at my two flying mates, wishing I could soar for a bit with Aubrey, but they aren't fully shifted.

He could definitely hold my weight, but that would be a bigger draw on his reserves and we still have a half day's walk to go before we find our destination.

Fitz chuckles as he meets my gaze. "I know. I'd love to be up there, too, but that's reserved for extreme needs. Felix says Aubrey can't waste the energy unless someone is really hurt or struggling. He's probably right—big bro often is about that shit—so I'm reserving my complaints for later on."

"How very kind of you," I reply drolly and my crazy tiger shrugs.

"I guess it makes sense that we keep anything that sucks up a lot of energy and stamina for emergencies, so we don't end up having to stop too often.

Since we didn't fly, we lost a decent amount of time on the land journey and we have no idea how stubborn these stupid gargoyles will be.

We could be here for weeks trying to pry shit out of them. "

"I always thought that even though the Spicy Salamander and EmoBatman got exiled, their parents did it because of... like, traditions they couldn't fight, you know?

Somehow, I made that less shitty than our father and his blood-soaked bullshit because neither of them talked about it.

But... now that they are talking a little? "

I tilt my head, interested in where he's going with this philosophical conversation. "Now that they're not quiet, what's changed?"

Chess huffs as he catches up, looking between us with a frown. “You look very serious. What’s the topic?”

“The winged weenies,” Fitz says, then turns back to me.

“I was searching for the words, but all I can come up with is that it’s bullshit.

Like, the Raj is a fucking sociopath and a sadist—of course he did the shit he did so Felix couldn’t gain the throne and make shit better.

Someone probably ratted on us and figuring out who told our asshole cousins is pretty high on my ‘there will be blood’ lists.

But their parents had choices because, as far as I know, they aren’t like him.

They could have left with him, they could have changed laws, they could have told the world to go fuck itself... but they chose the cowardly way out.”

“It’s disappointing, for sure.” I look up again, frowning with the sadness at the young royals they were. “Aubrey was especially young and left to figure out the entire world on his own. I dislike his clash more than Rennie’s, I think.”

“Yeah, I’m not eager to visit wherever they’re living now,” Chessie says with a sigh.

“Dragons are notorious for being in hard to reach places, meaner than rabid animals with intruders, and they hold grudges worse than any other species. Even if they don’t tell Aubrey to fuck off, it will be much worse than this trek. ”

Wiping my brow with the bandana from my pocket, I groan. “That’s the second reason I want to avoid them at all costs, I suppose.”

“What’s the first?” Fitz grins at me, looking smug. “Afraid of giant piles of dragon shit? ‘Cause I sort of am.”

Nope—I’m afraid I might get myself arrested when I get my goddamn hands on the people who sent an underage mythical off to die on his own for a childish mistake.

But I just wink at my mate playfully. “That’s for me to know and you guys to find out later. Come on, guys. Let’s catch up to Felix and that asshole before someone makes a comment I can’t ignore.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:58 pm

Hit Me With Your Best Shot

Aubrey

As we inch closer to sunset, I keep my eyes on the terrain below.

Rennie and I are in the sky again, as we have been every few hours to allow us to have time to rest while we check out the path ahead for those below.

A loud beeping comes from my mate's pocket and I bank right to get closer as he fumbles for the device to check it.

"We're less than a mile from the spot where we are supposed to meet the emissary," he says gravely.

Renard has always been gloomy about his past, and because that was the theme we have shared for so long, I didn't worry about it.

However, now that we are about to face the people who broke his heart and cast him aside, he's more introverted than normal.

I understand his trepidation—fear, shame, anger, and hurt carried for as long as we have been burdened with it is hard to manage.

But he's put on a mostly brave face about the trip, hoping that it won't cause an international incident when the family he's chosen has to meet the one who did not choose him.

We are not calm preds, and our mate is volatile as fuck right now.

I can't blame him for fretting about what will happen when the past and the future collide.

"I don't see anyone. Are you sure?" I ask as my eyes scan the outcroppings and the land carefully. "How will they know when we have arrived?"

No one asked that question earlier, and I curse under my breath for not thinking of it until now.

I suppose I assumed there would be a gargoyle standing there, waiting, until we trudged up this damn mountain path.

Given the heat, that probably was a dumb thing to assume, and I roll my eyes at my na?veté inwardly.

I'm smarter than that, but I've been so distracted by worrying about attacks or stupid, vapid bints on some internet website that I missed a key part of the planning.

I can only hope his answer isn't 'they'll show up at some point'.

"They will know the moment I step foot over the boundary of their territory."

I squint at my mate as he glides through the air, pretending he isn't tense from head to toe. His flight is different when he's stressed, but he likely doesn't realize it. I can tell how nervous he is even without seeing him close-up. "How does that work, exactly?"

"I don't know."

That doesn't help me feel less concerned at all.

“Why don’t you know? Isn’t territory protection something they teach your young?” I’m remembering my lessons as a child, and dragons make that shit clear from the moment we can walk on two feet.

Renard changes course, coming closer so he can chat without yelling.

“Because they do not train the young—especially the important ones—in the ways of protecting our clutch or our contracts until they are over a certain age. I was sent packing not long before the birthday where I would have been put into that training. Thus, I know what every child or teen knows: no supernatural being can set foot in our lands without our knowledge.”

I stay silent as I mull that over because it very much sounds like gargoyles had magicals enchant their borders.

Their sense of smell is good, but not that good, and they don’t connect with nature like some shifters.

There’s simply no other way besides having guards spaced around the periphery that could be possible.

I don’t believe the sentry idea is viable at all—not according to the numbers Rennie has stated clutches live in.

It has to be via another source of power, and if it is?

That means his exile was about something entirely other than inter-marriage between species.

Did he accidentally break a treaty or provision in a deal with the Fae?

Looking over at his sad expression, I'd love to share that there's hope for his family yet, but I cannot.

I don't want to get his hopes up, nor do I want to hurt him again if they really are as stupid as we assumed.

However, my little theory would explain why a person is supposed to appear out of nowhere to greet us when we were given no specific dates or times to be here.

In fact, it might explain a lot of things that I plan to work on weaseling out of anyone in that clutch that I can get to talk.

"A historian or elder is what I need," I mumble to myself.

People with jobs like mine—maintaining books and artifacts and records—love to discuss our positions and our obsessions.

Locating whoever is in charge of that duty within his people might lead me to more answers than the others poking around blindly.

"We should hit the ground and bring them up to speed," Rennie says as he flexes his wings to catch a draft. "I don't want them to cross the line first and end up in some sort of battle."

Pressing my lips together, I nod, gesturing to a spot just a little bit ahead of the walking crew. "Let's come down there and we can stop them. We should definitely enter your people's land as a group, not split in half."

I pin my wings back, angling myself for descent as my mate nods in agreement.

He moves to do the same and we move toward our family quickly, using the down

drafts to slow our speed until our feet touch the ground.

Once we're on terra firma, I let out a long breath, watching Felix and the ursine guide crest a hill to hike in our direction.

The tiger sees me, picking up the pace until the entire group is standing within feet of Renard and me.

"The device said we are close, and we should cross the border together," I say firmly. "That's why we came down."

Renard looks at Dolly, his expression serious.

"Do not mention personal details until I tell you it's time.

I would like to make certain there isn't a trap awaiting us.

I don't believe that to be the case, but giving them more information than they need is not smart.

They are cunning and capable of mimicking social behavior with outsiders when they choose—it's part of the skill set they learn when they are ready to join the contract team. "

"Now I know why you don't have it," I mutter playfully, and he shoots me a dirty look.

The closer we get to this damn nest, the more I wish we would have decided against coming here, I swear to Anubis's wagging tail.

We followed the beeping sat phone until it indicates that we're in the exact spot we

were told to come to. It's the highest peak, and we can look out to see a beautiful vista as everyone pants and passes around the canteens.

"This is where I leave you," Marius says.

"You do not have camping equipment, and this area is full of protected wildlife. I suggest you do whatever it is you came for and leave before the darkest night comes upon you. There are... many dangerous things that roam the Carpathians after the sun goes down."

"No shit," Fitz says, as he adjusts his topknot. "That's why we're fucking here instead of in air conditioning. Fuck off."

Dolly blinks at him, covering her mouth so she doesn't spit out her water. Once she's swallowed, she strides over to the tiger, pushing up on her toes to whisper in his ear. He laughs crazily, and I turn to Felix with an expectant look.

"He's been paid, right? Your twin is right; he needs to get lost." I guarantee whatever is going to happen won't if we have an extra shifter hanging around out of some professional pride. "We'll be fine without you, Ursa. Toddle back home."

The bear finally grunts and waves his hand at us as if to say we're insane, then trudges slowly back the way we came.

I monitor him while the others pull out jerky and energy bars to build up their reserves again before our gargoyle guide gets here.

I wait until the bear is far out of my view before I turn back to my family with a sigh of relief.

"Finally," Rennie says as he shakes his head. "I thought he was going to insist on

waiting forever.”

“Well, who can blame him?” Snack size asks as she squints at the peak. “There’s nothing here and no one to take the fall if we disappear off the face of the earth but him.”

Renard shakes his head, pointing to a spot farther down the cliff. “We need to move along the edge until someone comes. They will lead us to the nests and to my parents.”

Great, more vague shit that he doesn’t even know how it works or if it will fail.

“Okay,” Felix says as he tucks away his wrapper and grabs Dolly’s hand. “Let’s wander around the death-defying edge of the world until someone appears out of thin air.”

Chuckling at his dry wit, I wave at Chess and Fitz. “The Raj is right. We have to follow our broody poet; this is his area of the world, after all.”

They make annoyed faces but join us, and we all stroll together quietly.

A hawk cries in the distance and I hear local wildlife rustling somewhere nearby, but it’s quiet enough to hear a pin drop.

Rennie’s eyes dart over the landscape across the divide, sighing as he heads towards the sun.

“This is the right way to go, then we’ll circle back. ”

Our journey goes on for what feels like forever, but eventually, we stop when we get back to the place we started. The sun is just sinking below the horizon, and the

sounds of nature are getting louder as time passes.

“Perhaps it isn’t working?” I offer gently.

I don’t want to suggest that his former clutch set him up, but it’s feeling like it could be the case.

The red color of the sun is beautiful and makes the landscape even more rustic, but we didn’t bring what we needed to be out here all night—something that fucking bear pointed out.

I’m going to be pretty goddamn furious if he turns out to be right.

“Give it some more time,” Renard says softly as he stares into the sky. “It’s coming.”

“Baby, I know you want to believe that they wouldn’t trick you, but—” Dolly’s words are cut off when she gasps.

I follow her gaze to the ridges across from the peak we’re standing on to see two huge gargoyles gliding through the air towards us.

The dim light of the sun catches their forms, and I notice one is a shiny, metallic gray-ish black, and the other is a deep green with crystalline accents.

They’re obviously looking for us, but until they come close enough to say that, I stand at the ready.

My dragon rumbles inside, letting me know that he’ll take over and blow them out of the sky if they so much as breathe wrong.

“That’s probably the emissary and a guard,” Rennie murmurs softly. “The guards are

often from the lineage that shift into darker colored hard forms like me.”

“Uh, not to be distracting, but does anyone wish we’d made him tell us more about fucking gargoyles before we got here?” Fitz says ruefully. “I’m suddenly feeling extremely stupid because I thought you fuckers were all made of stone.”

Our mate chuckles, nodding at him. “Me, too. I mean, Rennie is shiny, but I guess... I didn’t really consider asking why. It’s just who he is, you know?”

“Gargoyles from various lines and heritages have rocky forms of lots of different minerals and stones. The one on the right has a jade form, so he must have come from the east to join the clutch. Some younger gargoyles leave their homes to visit clutches around the globe, to see if they would be a better fit than their original home.”

Looks like we’re all going to learn a whole fucking lot about his species—more than I ever thought I’d get to know—and it will be first hand.

Free Bird

Delores

The two giant sparkling gargoyles land with a thud that makes me stumble a bit, and Aubrey grabs my arm to steady me.

Fitz and Felix move in front of us in an instant, their bodies tense with readiness.

I can't help but stare at the newcomers as they glisten in the waning light.

Fitz was right about not knowing shit about Rennie's kind, though I'm comforted because other than my onyx hued mate, the others are in the dark, too.

"We have come to meet the exiled one," the green one says, his voice stiff and formal. "By royal decree of the King and Queen of the Carpathians, you are officially deemed guests of our clutch."

"Thank you for extending your hospitality," Renard says as he bows to them. His expression is bland, but I can sense the roiling emotions warring inside of him through our bond. "We will honor the laws of your territory, leaving without taking more than we give."

That makes me shoot a look at Aubrey, but he doesn't react.

I decide that my 'meeting stuck-up fuckwits' act is needed yet again , so I affect a haughty gaze as I raise my chin.

My eyes meet those of the silent guard and his charge with confidence I don't feel, as I channel my bitchy mother once more.

I didn't know this would be such a tool as I was growing up, but I almost feel like I should send her a goddamn 'thank you' given how often I mimic her icy cruelty.

I said 'almost'; don't worry.

"Very well. I am Vasile, and my companion is Matei." The jade gargoyle looks at the surrounding terrain for a moment, then nods to the guard. "He will now grant you entrance to our lands, guests of the exiled. Remember the oath he gave as you enjoy the fruits of our people."

"Uh... some of us don't fly?" I mutter, and the two sparkling creatures laugh.

That doesn't seem like a funny statement, though I suppose if all four of the winged preds carried someone, we could make it across the deadly gap to the area they came from.

Aubrey will be pissed, but he'll get over it as long as he gets to take me.

"You don't need to," Vasile says as he waves his hand. "Behold."

Matei walks over to a spot on the ground near us, then raises his fist high in the air.

Before I can question it, he slams it into the ground, shaking the earth below us briefly before the air pops and an enormous stone bridge appears in the place where nothing but air was before.

My jaw drops and I have to reach up to shut my mouth because I'm too fucking shocked to even make a noise.

“Holy. Fuck.” Fitz breathes as his posture slumps a bit. “Holy. Goddamn. Son of a bitching. Fuck.”

Aubrey makes a dissatisfied sound, and I look at him in confusion. He shakes his head slightly before going back to staring at the very solid, very visible structure that now exists in a formerly empty gap. “You first, emissaries.”

Oh. Well, that’s a good idea—we definitely shouldn’t cross the damn thing without confirming that it’s not some sort of fancy illusion.

“You are far smarter than you appear,” Matei says, his voice a stony rumble. “We will, of course, guide you to the gateway. Once we are on gargoyle land, your oath holds firm and punishment for breaking it is severe.”

All Rennie said is that we’d honor their laws and be equals, but they’ve mentioned it twice.

I fear that means something more than what the simple words convey, and they will not explain it.

We will have to be very careful not to upset anyone or touch anything until he can tell what exactly his oath meant.

I suck in a slow breath, then twine my arm in Aubrey’s as I look at the two stony sentinels.

“Let’s go then. I’m tired as hell from this hike, and I’d like to find out where we’re going to be staying before I drop.”

The look on our hosts’ face doesn’t comfort me, but then, not much about this obviously magical presentation does.

The walk to the other side of the peak makes my stomach churn with fear, but I keep my features schooled just like the others.

I refuse to let these damn silent dudes know that I'm freaked out by having to rely on magic to get to their—whatever they call it.

I know they call their home a nest and their group a clutch, but I have no idea what the hell term they use for the collective group of homes.

Town, city, village... Whatever it is, I'm not scared to go into it as much as to find out how they have this capability.

If they are aligned with the Fae again and Rennie wasn't told, we're going to be royally fucking screwed.

"This is beautiful country," Chessie says absently, and I have to hide my smile.

He's such a good man. Despite the undercurrent of mistrust flowing between us as we watch the two gargoyles like hawks, he's trying to make pleasant conversation, so the tension eases a bit.

"I haven't been to Eastern Europe before, so I'm enjoying our journey.

Outside of the hike, of course. That was brutal. "

"Those who are not our kind must earn their entrance to the Rookery."

Ah, there it is.

"Earn it?" I ask carefully. "Even though we came with.... Renard?"

My mate gives me an approving glance when I don't mention his title.

I guess he's not allowed to use it anymore?

I don't know, but he's happy that I caught myself.

He clears his throat, then says, "Even with me, non-gargoyles must be admitted through the accepted trial set by the royals of the clutch. This is not what I remember, but it has been many years since I was here."

Vasile's shoulders tighten before he says, "That was by your own choice, young Laveaux."

I open my mouth to protest, but Rennie shakes his head again and I grit my jaw.

It's not fair to claim that he left on his own, nor that he has never come back because he just didn't want to.

They kicked him to the curb for a teenage mistake that he couldn't possibly have controlled, much like me, and he was left to fend for himself.

Their casual treatment of that is bullshit, and if everyone in this damn rookery place acts like this, we are going to have major problems.

I don't care who the fuck they are, no one treats my mates like used tissues.

Huffing as we continue to the end of the bridge, I tuck my fury away for something worth causing trouble for.

The emissary's comment was irritating, but Renard's reaction was fair.

There's no use upsetting the entire pot just because a little bit boiled over.

I have to be patient, and play the games the way they want, until we get what we came for.

As we walk onto the opposite ledge of the gap, I feel a burst of energy hit me and I stop short as it crawls over my body.

My eyes widen in panic, but Rennie seems fine, and the others only stopped because I did.

“What the fuck?” I mutter as I try to brush the tingling sensations off my arms and shoulder. “Is this place infested or something? It better not be fleas or I’m going to?—”

Matei looks at Rennie, his expression furious. “You did not mention this! That is a breach of protocol, and could threaten our status.”

His grin is slow and I recognize it—he didn’t tell them whatever it is on purpose and this has confirmed suspicions. “It is not a breach because I did not know. No one knew, Emissary, and they will all confirm it if asked.”

Vasile looks at him, then watches me, trying not to freak out as I squirm. His expression hardens, and he growls, “ ?ncheia?i alerta. ? 1 ”

My skin ceases to crawl and I let out a breath of relief as I can focus again. “Thank fucking Hermes stinky shoes! It felt like I was being eaten alive, for fuck’s sake.”

“What was that supposed to prove?” Felix growls as he looks me over carefully. “Your stupid oath said nothing about a test we could pass or fail. Maybe it’s you who is in breach, gargoyle. We’ve come in peace and in the spirit of family connections.”

The guard frowns, looking offended. “We have done no such thing, tiger. Our emissary refers to the fact that this ex-member of our clutch brought Fae blood into our lands without notice. We could not have warned you if we tried. Your companion is the one who is playing us all for fools.”

If one more fucking person drops a giant bomb on me as if it’s no big deal, I’m going to lose my shit.

“Someone with Fae blood?! That’s what that was supposed to warn you about?

!!” My eyes cut to my mate and I glare daggers at him.

“No, we didn’t know , and he did not tell us this was something you might do.

He’s not lying about that , at least. What he did lie about was through omission, and to us, which he will pay for, I promise. ”

Rennie has the grace to look chagrined, and the two gargoyles nod as they see how angry I am.

Vasile sighs, shaking his head as he mutters, “Some men never learn, and for that, we are all poorer. Come with us to your lodgings so you might clean up. We cannot take you to meet our royals or their council if you are dirty and full of fury.”

“Yeah, I’d like to get the nasty trail off and check every inch of my body for bugs, so...

. lead away.” Sniffing in irritation, I tug the tigers along by their hands, following the gargoyles as I leave Rennie to deal with Chess and Aubrey.

He’s on my shit list for a bit, even though I think I know why he did this.

“Just because you have a good reason doesn’t mean you can lie,” Aubrey growls as they stomp behind us. “It’s a sore subject for so many reasons that I can’t count them all. Why did you ever think it was a good plan?”

“I didn’t think it was a good plan, Flames.

I decided it was the most expedient plan to confirm my suspicions, and I knew there would be consequences far less severe than other methods.

” Renard responds to him calmly, without a trace of regret, and I huff to myself as my hearing allows me to catch their words.

“You’re going to be in the stone dog house, you know,” Chess says seriously. “She would have agreed to it if you’d asked.”

“But if I asked then I would have been lying to them and that is a much worse result, trust me, mon ami .”

So he thinks.

“You can all stop discussing me like I’m not here and I can’t hear you, damn it.” I whip my head around, looking over my shoulder. “We can discuss this shit once I feel clean and get the creepy crawly feeling out of my head. Just... shut up for now so I can calm myself.”

That gets a chuckle out of the gargoyles leading us, and I glare at their backs, too.

“No one asked you clowns, either. Everyone be quiet or I swear to Hera, I will unleash on anything within striking distance.” Even the members of his ex-clutch fall silent at my hissed words and I smile to myself in satisfaction.

They should fear me, especially now that they know exactly what I am.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:58 pm

Stairway to Heaven

Felix

Vasile and Matei took us to an extensive structure shaped like a house built with gargoyles in mind.

They said it was a ‘visitor’ nest, and though the term made my eyebrow raise, I liked that it was at the end of their main street by itself.

A defensible location is important when you don’t trust your surroundings; that’s something I learned early in my life thanks to my father’s constant trials and training.

He was fond of sending Fitz and me deep into the wilds of Bloodstone, where he housed criminals and the most broken students who were sent to the ‘school’.

I say that lightly, of course, because the only thing his reform school did well was create more minions for his never-ending army of spies and assassins.

Well, that and corpses, I suppose.

Figuring out the best place to build a place to rest and operate from, was one thing Fitz and I learned quickly.

Otherwise, no one got to sleep during these little jaunts, because the goddamn psychos running around that jungle would attack relentlessly.

The Khan island jungle is teeming with fucked up preds who have been abandoned to live it and kill others to entertain the Raj and his court.

My twin and I were never caught, never failed, and definitely never gave him a reason to exile us to that wasteland for good.

“What’s wrong?” Dolly whispers to me as the two hosts show the others around the domicile. “You’re very tense suddenly.”

I press my lips together, then shake my head. “Memories, Princess. Nothing for now—but perhaps when we’re back at the school. Okay?”

She nods, her eyes sympathetic as she murmurs, “Sometimes I have these flashes of shit Bruno or Lucille did when something... bumps them? I guess that’s being triggered, but I see memories and I have to sort of fight out of it. Is it like that?”

Nodding, I take her hand and lace our fingers together. “Yes, like that. But you never mention them to us, which I feel is important.”

“If I mentioned every damn thing those fuckers did to me in eighteen years, we’d be sitting around drunk as skunks for months, Felix.

” I blink and she shrugs. “They weren’t always home, but when they were, it sucked a lot.

I have to deal with it as it comes, and work through my feelings like a big bunny.

That doesn’t always require someone else present; it just needs me to admit what happened. It’s the first step.”

I suck in an annoyed breath, looking at her critically. “I’m going to murder that

gargoyle if he doesn't quit letting you read psychology books. It's not healthy."

"Au contraire, mon ami !? 1 " Rennie comes over to us, his expression amused. "It is obviously quite healthy, and the evidence is in front of you. You should try it sometime. Or perhaps you can do a... what do your loud friends call it, petite ? A 'stitch-n-bitch' ... yes, that's it!"

Expression horrified, I blink at them both. "A... what? Fuck, no . I don't even know what it is and I'm not doing it."

Dolly chuckles, squeezing my palm as she leans into me. "We all bring things we're working on—sewing, knitting, crochet for Rufus, and we drink wine while we bitch about our trauma. It's very cathartic—even Fitz's come to one."

My head turns slowly to look at my hyper twin as he's doing his best to drive the gargoyles insane with questions about the high ceilings, dinnertime, and everything under the sun.

When we lived on the island, doing shit like that would have been tantamount to asking to be assigned to the female ambush section.

Yet here Fitz is embracing every damn thing our mate likes, from yoga to dancing to gossip pred sessions with her besties.

It's hard not to realize that going 'all in' with her has made his life better in every conceivable way.

He does whatever the fuck he wants now—no chemicals needed, and no fucks given.

I might be a little jealous.

“Uh, we’ll see about that... later,” I say, fumbling with the words as I force myself to get it together. “I think we need to save your people from Fitz before there’s some sort of incident.”

Our mate pouts for a moment, then lets go of me to kiss my cheek. “Okay, Sir.” That said, she skips to my twin to see what he’s going on about without looking back.

Renard laughs, giving me a knowing look as he heads back over to detach my twin. “If you say so, Raj.”

Aubrey rumbles a low laugh and I glare at him.

The dragon makes a ‘tsk,’ sound as he crosses his arms over his chest. “It makes your life richer to allow new things to take root and strangle the poisonous vines of our past, Felix. Rennie taught me that once I let him in, and though I was not always successful until the lunchable arrived, I am finding it very soothing now.”

“I love her, you giant busybody, and she knows it. We mated. I’m not holding shit back,” I retort. “You haven’t mated her yet, and neither of you winged assholes has given up all your bad shit. How am I any different?”

He arches a brow. “Because you have claimed the spot as the leader—or you believe you have. That means you have stricter parameters than us.”

A low growl echoes in my chest, but the lizard doesn’t even blink. I sigh, rolling my eyes to the ceiling before I say, “Fine. You might have a point. But now sure as fuck isn’t the time.”

“It isn’t? You’ve been having small ‘moments’ since we decided to travel here. Perhaps my mate’s forced reconciliation is bringing your scars to light. Think on it.” Aubrey claps his hand on my shoulder, then walks away to join the others.

Fucking smart ass dragon...

“Alright, that’s enough!” I call as Fitz bounces in place in front of the emissary. “Gentlemen, we need to get cleaned up and make ourselves ready for your elders. Thank you for obliging my brother for so long.”

The relieved look on Vasile’s face makes me want to snort, but I just wait for him and the guard to take their leave. Once they do, I look at my family curiously as they snicker amongst themselves.

“What the hell is so funny?”

Dolly winks at me. “We were hoping to make them actively not want to come knocking when we’re not supposed to meet with people. Fitz thought if he was a big enough pain in the ass, he could keep lookie-loos from spying on us when we think we’re alone.”

I’ll be damned—he was actually trying to do something smart, and it worked.

Each of us took turns washing the grime of the hike off, while the rest stayed downstairs in the living area.

The ‘nest’ has an extremely high ceiling with exposed beams I’d guess are strong enough to perch on over an open ground floor.

Our bathroom and the large, comfy piles of blankets and pillows that function as the bed area are loft spaces on either side of the vaulted room.

There’s a small kitchenette on one side of the large space, along with another giant ‘nest’ in the middle, and a desk and chair towards the front.

There are even high stools at an island similar to home where we can gather or eat.

It's not fucking bad for a 'guest' house for visitors that Ren makes it sound like they rarely admit.

I look over at the princess as she curls up on a pillow with her long, wet locks spilling over the linens. "Who's going to tell me what the damn test was when we came in? That has to be settled before we go out there amongst people we don't know."

Renard is lounging in the big blanket fort comfortably—not surprising given his bedrooms in the past—but he sits up at my question.

He rakes his hand through his hair, squeezing his eyes shut for a second before he blows out a breath.

"Mais oui , we should. I must apologize for my reticence about it as well. I had reasons for keeping it quiet and also reasons for not telling you, which you might not understand. I know that."

Fitz moves to criss-cross his legs, bending over them to put his elbows on the ground in a pretty impressive display of flexibility. "Alright, Perching Poet, lay it on us. We can't decide if you're busted until you spill it. So let's hear it."

My lips twitch, but I nod in agreement. "I agree. I can't make a judgment until I know the facts."

The gargoyle grabs a pillow and wraps his arms around it, his discomfort obvious.

"After our conversation about ma petite , I began putting a lot of pieces together in my mind. Memories, flashes of the past, things I hadn't thought about in so long that I was surprised I remembered at all.

Adding them up, it occurred to me that we had always lived near some sort of magical group before the Treaty.

In fact, the reason I could fall in love with my amour passé was because her ‘tizzy’ of fair folk were settled mere miles from our nests. ”

Dolly frowns, rolling to her side as she looks up at him. “So? What significance does that have?”

“A lot, mon amour . I had to lie awake thinking most of the night, but I also remembered that before the Treaty, many mythical groups had strong relationships with magic users—griffins were friendly with mages and witches, gargoyles with the Fae, chimera with djinn, dragons with wizards, unicorns with pixies, and so on. That all changed, obviously, but why were the rest of the preds and shifters so distant while the powerful mythicals were not?”

Chess snaps his fingers, grinning broadly. “Because something ties them together! Right?”

Ren nods, his expression serious. “ Oui , Chester. Perhaps the origins of those species are tied to both shifters and magicals? It made me remember the plant charts in the Charles vault and how they used genetic engineering to make Fae plants grow here, then cashed in. And of course, my imagination went wild, but... perhaps the mythicals have always resulted from inter-species breeding.”

“Holy shit, man.” The possibilities whirl through my mind and I look up to the loft where the dragon hasn’t come back from his shower yet.

“That would make sense, but... what does it have to do with the bridge? And why the fuck would the mythicals stay here rather than follow the others into the Veil?”

He shrugs. “That, I do not know. Perhaps the mysterious Society offered them something they could not refuse? Maybe the magicals had alienated them? I wasn’t quite old enough to be told the entire truth before I was exiled, as you’ve seen, nor was Flames.

However, my deceit on the bridge was my way of testing my theory. ”

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you testing on animals is wrong ?” Dolly grumbles at the gargoyle. “Especially fluffy, white bunnies who love you?”

The flush creeps up his neck, and Renard coughs.

“ Vraiment ? 2 , my mate. I feared that if I told you, and they could read it on any of your faces, we would violate their laws. But yes, I suspected that perhaps the way our clutch could hide from everyone, the amulets that allow our shifts without damaging our clothes... all the little things I grew up thinking were normal for gargoyles are normal because...”

“Because the Fae gave them those things,” I finish for him.

“That’s why you assumed that there would be some sort of alarm to let them know if they were entering their territory.

You think mythicals made deals with the shifters to fight alongside them and consorting with their old allies could get everyone killed.

Plus, I’d assume they weren’t sure if any slipped the hunts after the Treaty, so they’d leave those in place. ”

“ Oui .” He sighs as he shrugs. “Maybe there were rumblings about the tide turning before the Treaty. That could be why they were so against us dating or being in love.

It may be what saved the mythical shifters from getting caught in the middle for a bit—they limited the interactions even before the shifters lost their minds.”

“Um...”

We all look at the princess as she bites her lip and raises her hand like she’s in one of our classes. I laugh, waving at her to stop it. “What, Princess? Why are you looking so unsure all of a sudden?”

“Well, I get that the stupid bug thing means I have Fae blood. And we think maybe Lucille went off-book to have me because she needed an heir...”

“Right.” Fitz leans over further, putting his palms over hers. “Go on.”

“It leaves a lot of questions, Fitzzy.” Dolly sits up, mimicking his position as she looks at us.

“One, doesn’t that make me, like, illegal ?

Two, if so, does her pappy know and if he doesn’t, is that going to be a problem?

Three, is this why both sides seem to be after me?

Like, do they think I’m some mystical impossibility that can save the world? Four, can I opt out of that shit?”

Aubrey finally makes it downstairs, dropping to the ground with a thud as he pins her with a firm stare. “I could hear you all, you know. And to answer that torrent—probably, probably not, definitely, abso-fucking-lutely, maybe, and I’m afraid not.”

She sticks her tongue out, scrunching her features up brattily. “That was not helpful, big guy. If you’re right about all of it, then we have no other option than to fight this shit from the middle. Otherwise, one or both of the fucking zealots are going to kill me to prevent... something. Right?”

“I hate to say it, but I think we just figured out why everything in our world is so supremely fucked, and it’s not just rich people,” I drawl wryly. “It’s power-hungry wealthy eugenicists waging a species war in secret.”

And somehow, our mate is the key to everything.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:58 pm

Don't Let the Sun Go Down On Me

Delores

I have to say that I'm not super excited about feeling like I'm the 'Chosen One'.

My life has been planned and plotted meticulously by other people ever since I can remember, and when I left for Apex, I felt like I was grabbing my future by the balls to make it my own.

Sure, I wasn't completely unentangled from my grasping, shithead parents, but my fate was definitely being left up to me.

Live or die—only I could make a difference in that scenario, because they made certain I knew they wouldn't save me.

When Fitz and the guys came along, I made choices then, too.

Every person I let into my tiny circle was my decision.

As time went by, I built a real family from the ground up, and I've been spreading my metaphorical wings wider ever since.

But this? It feels like some corny fate that I can't escape and I don't like it.

Obviously, I can't actually refuse to help save people who aren't in the position I was with money and privilege behind me.

However, I also can't help but feel resentful that the mindful choices about my future have suddenly been made void by some stupid bullshit decided before I was conceived.

It's the cherry on top of a shit sundae that I've been forced to eat over and over since my bunny emerged.

Despite my snarky joke earlier, I realize that I can't simply reject this stuff.

If our test and speculation are accurate, I am the product of a well-orchestrated bio hack to some and a pawn in a bigger chess game to others.

Being pissed about it won't change that reality, nor will sulking about losing my freedom to choose yet again.

Even in this world where women hold positions of immense power like Lucille, the game is still played like it's been orchestrated by men.

My genetics weren't my choice, my future was planned without thought to my needs, and the people in charge see me as either a broodmare or a sacrifice.

Feminism really shot over their heads and landed at the feet of their own internalized misogyny, I guess.

"Princess, you look angry again. We can't go out there with emotions written on our features because it will?—"

"Give them weapons, I know," I sigh as I finish primping my hair. "Trust me, Felix. I lived with a self-centered narcissist and a sociopathic bully my entire life. You guys don't have to give me this pep talk every time, just because I have the only ovaries in the building."

He blinks, looking surprised. “That’s not why I said it. You being female has nothing to do with why I reminded you.”

I arch a brow at him, struggling to rein in my fury about the situation. He didn’t do this and I shouldn’t take my frustration out on him. “Oh?”

“I said it because you are the beating heart of our family, Delores Drew.” My cynicism must be plain to see because he chuckles.

“Well, yes, Ren and Chess are softer, as well, but you have more hope, more compassion, and less bitterness than all of us combined. You probably should be just as jaded due to your past, but somehow... you’re not.

That might be youth or it might simply be who you are, but your grain of optimism is worth saving.

It shines through when you’re pissed about things like what we discussed tonight not only for yourself, but for everyone else, too. ”

“I’m not a hero of the people,” I grumble. “I’m still a pale-skinned girl who grew up with lots more advantages than others, even if my parents were abusive as fuck.”

“True, but the differences between you and, say, your ex-friends, are as wide as the gap that bridge crossed.” The elder tiger sets his hands on my shoulders, looking in the mirror with me.

“You lost control of everything in one night and then spent an entire summer picking up the pieces. When you came to Apex, you’d shed all those nasty bits everyone tried to grind into you about who you should be, who was worthy, and what was right to form your own code of ethics. ”

“The old ones sucked and I sort of knew it before and didn’t do anything.”

The corner of his lips quirks as he says, “Thus go we all, Princess. None of your mates was using their influence, money, or power to help anyone before you crashed into our lives.”

That makes me give him a questioning look and he relents.

“Okay, the brooding stone man was helping the prey more than we realized. You have me there, but the rest of us were too lost in our applesauce to give a shit about anyone else. That’s where you brought out the best in us and demanded we be better men.

Plenty had tried at that point, including Z, but you figured out how to accept us for who we were while still challenging us to be more.

It’s not nothing, nor could just anyone have done it. ”

Chuckling, I rest my head against his shoulder, looking up at him instead of into the mirror.

“I wasn’t fishing for compliments, Felix.

I just... I guess I’m struggling with the fact that I broke free of the expectations and now I’m being reeled right back in.

Having the choice taken away again is bothering the fuck out of me. ”

“Is it really being taken away, though?”

I blink as Chess wanders in, his off-hand comment throwing me off. “I mean, I can’t

change this whole genetic anomaly thing, so yeah.”

“No, but you could choose to ignore it and run for the hills. We’d go with you and no one would judge you. Your friends would probably follow, too.” The cheetah grabs his brush, raking it through his curly locks carefully. “But that’s not what you’re doing, is it?”

Blanching, I bristle with affront. “Of course not! I can’t leave all these people to be killed or imprisoned or whatever their evil plans are.”

Fitz comes in, his handsome face full of smugness. “Ah, but you could , Baby Girl. Lots of preds would , especially ones with your resources. The money we all have means we could run and hide on beaches and shit forever, sipping little umbrella drinks while I try to avoid sand on my dick.”

“The difference is that you don’t even consider that as an option,” Felix rumbles against my back. “That’s why you’re bucking against this so hard; your heart has made that door non-existent, but it is there and you’re choosing not to go through it.”

I blink, turning back to the mirror to stare at our reflections again.

They’re right—I have other decisions I could make, but I’ve marked them as ‘not acceptable’, which is a choice in itself.

I’m not actually trapped in a destiny I have no say in; I had my say, and now I’m left with the remaining options for action.

Damn these assholes for being so fucking smart; I was whipping up a good funk.

“I hate you all,” I grumble as I give in. “I was gearing up for a good brood, you know.”

Rennie pokes his head into the doorway. “ Desolee , ma petite . That’s my schtick.”

I pick up my brush and throw it at him. “Out! There’s already too many big men in this damn bathroom. It’s not like at home where we have enough room for you guys to pile in and gape while I get ready.”

“I don’t gape, Baby Girl. I ogle. ” Fitz grins as he reaches past his twin to grab my ass. “It’s a different vibe.”

Chess laughs as he finishes gathering his hair into his preferred top knot. “And I just needed to get my hair under control, but I couldn’t help myself.”

“Speaking of that, Chessie,” Fitz says as he sits on the closed toilet. “Help me get this mane under control for our big dinner with the royalty. I’d hate to seem unrefined .”

“For fuck’s sake, Fitz,” Felix sighs as he exchanges a look with a smirking Rennie. “I don’t think the point of tonight is to impress anyone. We need them to fill in the gaps of our theories—nothing more.”

“Maybe more if?—”

My gargoyle mate shakes his head, his expression turning sad within seconds.

“It is not likely to be more, petite lapin . The elders, including my parents, are set in their ways and if we are right about the whys? Some extremely powerful shifters have been terrified enough that they acted against their own interest for centuries. Seeing me isn’t going to change that. ”

Walking to the doorway, I poke him in the chest hard.

He doesn’t flinch, but he meets my eyes.

“Stop being so damned self-pitying, Renard Laveaux. They should want to fix their enormous error in judgment, no matter what the consequences, and if they don’t, they do not deserve you.

If you let them make you feel less than even for a second, I’m going to kick your cute ass myself. Do you hear me?”

He flushes an adorable pink and I have to smother a grin when he nods. “Okay, my fierce little warrior. I will keep that in mind as we navigate the waves of my past.”

Felix practically purrs his praise after he drops a kiss on the top of my head. “Very nice, Princess. Strong and confident—that’s what you show them tonight. I know you like to use the guise of your mother when it gets tough, but maybe... add this Dolly into it, too?”

“Fuck yeah,” Fitz agrees from his perch. “Show them the badass bunny, not just the fake sociopath leopard. The bunny is hot as fuck, but she’s much smarter than that old bag.”

Lucille would slit his throat without blinking a false lash for that.

“I appreciate it, baby, but... make sure you don’t say anything like that in public, hmm? We don’t need it to get reported by her spies and draw my mother’s attention. We’re trying to stay under the radar, remember?” I wink at him, letting him know that I appreciate his sentiment, too.

~Our escorts have arrived. ~

I hear Aubrey in my head and Rennie nods at me to let me know he did as well. “We should go downstairs, guys. I think we’re being summoned to the royal grub hall or whatever.”

Felix nods, running his hand over his lengthening locks one more time before he strides out of the bathroom.

I give Chessie and Fitz a stern finger wag, warning them to hurry up, and follow in the tiger's footsteps to descend the loft stairs.

When I get to the bottom, I see Ren sitting next to Aubrey on the stools, two glasses of dark liquid nearby.

"I thought it was time to go?" My brow furrows and the gargoyle gestures for me to come closer. Once I'm there, he hands me one of the glasses. "Alcohol is never the answer to less anger and violence, Rennie."

"It's a tradition for the parties going to a negotiation to drink this.

I remembered the bottle from my childhood, and now that we are reexamining everything from then, I wondered if there was something in it.

You know, since the adults always had drinks before they left to obtain contracts with other groups. "

Oh, that's pretty brilliant of him.

"I agreed that we should partake. He has not been wrong about the customs from his youth being intrinsically entwined with the gargoyles' power.

" Aubrey picks up the glass, holding it up to the light and looking at it carefully.

"Do you have the test mixture the nurses gave you so we can check the liquor?"

I blink, the question making me realize I hadn't tucked a vial away on my person for

this dinner. “No! I mean, yes , I do. But I didn’t put any on me for tonight, which is a very rookie mistake. Thank you for reminding me, big guy.”

The dragon tilts his head as if waiting for something and I lean in to kiss his cheek. “That’s better, snack size. Now, scamper off and get that shit so we can make sure this isn’t poisoned before our hosts come barging in.”

“On it!” I reply as I give him a salute then scramble up the opposite stairs to the bedroom nest area.

One thing is for certain, tonight is going to change shit whether this stuff works or not—I can feel it deep in my gut.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:58 pm

I Hate Myself For Loving You

Renard

There were gargoyles peeping out of their nests the entire route to the chief residence.

I could feel their eyes on me as we walked with Vasile and Matei down the road.

I haven't been around so much as one of my kind in centuries; now, I'm being assaulted by the sensation of over a hundred in close proximity.

It's very odd, yet somehow soothing? I know simply being in their presence doesn't guarantee the feeling of 'home' that my inner being's instincts want to claim.

This is my clutch, but they haven't claimed me as one of theirs since long before most of my new family's ancestors were born.

I don't know how to parse the dissonance and it's making him very unsettled.

"Are you okay, Rennie?"

My rainbow-haired mate is often the most sensitive to changes in mood, and this is no exception.

Now that we suspect she has Fae origin, it makes even more sense than attributing it to being a child of abuse.

They are certainly very attuned to the surrounding people to prevent ire, but Dolly has seemed to notice more than I would have expected.

Felix also believed it was the prey animal, and that may also be true.

Her unique blood line makes her a triple threat, in my opinion, and she has no idea how incredibly useful that skill will be once she's able to consciously harness it.

"Yes..."

"But?" she presses stubbornly.

I can't lie to her, but we must be very cautious about what we say. "It has been lifetimes since I was here. That... brings up a lot of memories and emotions."

Her nod says more than words would have, and I wonder if that's how she felt walking into her home for summer break over the past two years.

It had to be like facing a firing squad you thought you'd outrun, and she had no choice.

Cursing mentally, I make a mental note to discuss that with the others at some point.

Our mate is never going back to that fucking place again, other than to retrieve belongings if she chooses.

Ripping open wounds to serve her mother's ego stops now.

"Now you feel determined and angry," she murmurs. "You're awfully volatile. This is more like Fitz's boomerangs than your steadiness."

Yep, one hundred percent the combo of her heritage and perhaps the mate bond—another note for later.

“Nothing to do with this moment, ma petite . I promise.” I give her a small smile and she returns it as Aubrey strides closer to us.

“What are you whispering about? The peeping Toms?” He looks amused as his eyes dart to the surrounding houses for a brief second then back to us. “You are indeed famous, my love.”

“Infamous, more like,” I grumble. “I don’t know how many of them were alive or part of our clutch when I was exiled. It is not uncommon for my kind to move about when they are grown, especially if they are not from the line of succession.”

“They’re like... shifter mercenaries, huh?” Dolly asks curiously. “Sort of moving about to other clutches if they are recruited or wish to serve certain things?”

“Very close.” My lips curve again and I shrug. “It’s not about money, though certainly we make more than enough. It’s hard to explain in the short time we have, but we will chat about it in depth sometime.”

Vasile clears his throat and our small caravan pauses when he does.

The large residence in front of us is so familiar that it makes my gut ache, and I put my hand on my chest absently as if to quell the spread.

It’s bigger than when I was cast out, though that’s to be expected over such a long span of time.

But this is still the nest I spent most of my formative years in after our move from Paris.

I didn't expect it to strike me this hard; I thought that the passage of years would make this easier.

But I was mistaken and I have no idea how I will make it through this without giving away the rioting emotions inside of me.

"Welcome to the royal nest, guests of the exiled," Vasile says. His eyes are focused on me as he continues. "Matei and I will guide you to the banquet hall, where you will be seated. Dinner will be served promptly."

I notice he doesn't mention my parents or who the hell is going to be at this banquet, but I nod. "We are grateful for your hospitality."

Once he turns and the guard follows, Fitz bops over with a frown.

"That dude has a serious stick up his ass. He was staring at you like you fucked his mom, man. Obviously, it's great they're not imprisoning us to make us fight some feral dick, like my pops probably would.

But I can't help wondering if this is worse, you know? "

"You are more perceptive than you let on, Fitzgerald," I murmur as we walk to the big door and wait for it to open.

"I don't remember either of them from my previous life here, so your analogy couldn't possibly be true.

That doesn't mean I am not being held accountable for something else I'm unaware of. "

"Grudges run deep along family lines in mythicals," Aubrey says. "Dragons do it, and

I assume your kin do as well.”

“So they’re ice cold because someone related to you did something shitty?

That’s fucking dumb.” The bunny narrows her eyes, a thread of fury rising within her.

“You weren’t here—not by your own choice, I might add—so you couldn’t do a damn thing about whatever this is.

Petty bullshit, just like the fucking Heathers and everyone else. Preds are so stupid.”

“Now, Princess,” Felix says with a chuckle. “Every species has annoying, petty people—preds, prey, Fae, magicals... whatever. You know that.”

She huffs as we follow the two gargoyles into the building after the door finally creaks open. “Maybe so, but I just hate this shit. So many things would be less painful if people were good to each other instead of hateful assholes. It’s frustrating as hell and it makes my bunny rabid.”

That’s new...like everything else on this goddamn trip.

“Hurry,” Matei says as they pick up their pace. “No dawdling, or we will hold up the dinner service.”

Rolling my eyes, I grab Dolly’s hand and increase my speed, leading the others in the small parade through the walls of my former home.

I can’t pay attention to it closely enough to note changes; my reaction at the front told me I need to focus on right now so I can keep myself under control.

But I wish I could linger to examine paintings and furniture, entertain memories of the good times or even inhale the scents of my family.

I can't, though, and remain detached enough to get through this evening successfully.

“Open for the guests of honor!”

I grunt as the emissary tells the staff at the new set of large doors what to do.

Formality has only increased since I left—that much I cannot ignore.

Though I suppose I wasn't entering events from the perspective of an outsider when I was younger.

Perhaps this is quite in line with tradition, but I was coming in from the other side of that doorway.

I rub my temple with my freehand, unsure why I feel so muzzy about the past when I know I remembered it clearly at one point.

“Welcome to our kingdom,” a strong, yet feminine voice calls from across the room.

My head jerks up to look in the direction of the tone and cadence my ears know so well.

Licking my lips, I have to consciously breathe as my mother comes into view.

She's standing in front of her throne, looking no different from when I last saw her, but for the intensity in her eyes.

My father is seated on his adjacent throne, but he has aged a bit more.

That happens to gargoyles who lead group contracts well into their second millennia, and he is no exception.

I can't even form words as I stare at them from beyond the long, regally decorated table.

"We are likewise honored by your invitation to your realm," Felix says smoothly. The tiger is saving me, and for that, I am very grateful. "Your graciousness is much appreciated, Your Majesties."

Of course, the heir to the Khan throne would know exactly what and how to address them, despite never meeting another of my kin.

He's walking to the front of our group now, Fitz in tow as they form a small physical barrier between me and the people who sent a grieving son into the world alone.

Aubrey reaches for my other hand, taking it in his larger one like Dolly is on my right.

Their touch is comforting, and before I know it, Chess is close behind me.

He's not touching me, but his purr is strong enough to vibrate the air between us, making me sag in relief.

"And who might you be, leader of our guests?" My mother's question is sharp, but full of amusement. She likely finds the tiger full of hubris for taking charge in my lands, but she also doesn't know who he is. It will make more sense when he's introduced us, and her demeanor will change.

Except a loud snort echoes through the lofty chamber and my eyes widen in panic.

“Who was that? Show yourself!”

“Son of a bitch,” Chess mutters as our mate lets go of my hand and stomps over to push her way through the tiger wall. “I knew it.”

“My name is Delores Diamond Drew, Your Majesties.” I watch helplessly as Dolly executes a perfect curtsy, then rises to stand ramrod straight for their scrutiny. “I am the leader of this group.”

“Despite coming from no royal blood?” The queen smirks down at her and I notice her amulet flashing a deep purple at the base of her throat.

Another suspicion flits through my mind, making me wish I could write all of this shit down so I don’t forget it.

“That is an audacious claim, even for someone of your family’s... stature.”

Dolly tosses her hair over her shoulder, not giving an inch as she replies, “Yes, well. If I judged everyone I met by their families’ behavior or heritage, I wouldn’t be standing here. Leadership cannot be inherited through blood or money, despite what most preds believe.”

I brace myself for the inevitable rage her statement is going to engender, my body tensing as my gargoyle rears his head. I don’t want to attack my family—not really—but I will if they try to harm a single hair on our insane little bunny rabbit’s pastel head.

But no one moves because my father bursts out laughing, the bass tone ringing off the stone walls of the hall like a klaxon. My mother turns toward him, her features creased in amusement as she says, “Oh, I like her, my darling. This one is absolutely delightful; don’t you think?”

What the fuck?

“I agree, my sapphire sweetheart,” he says as he rises from his chair.

“It has been far too long since we hosted anyone with a backbone—and she smells of such a heady combination of questions that beg for answers. I believe we should all find our seats to feast or I won’t be able to hold back long enough to feed. ”

My eyes widen again, both shocked by his statement, the nod my mother gives to the staff that sends them scurrying, and her fangy smile that faces my family when she returns her gaze to us.

“My mate is spot on, as usual. We will bring in the feast, the sacrifices, and the mead for our celebration. Afterward, everyone will disperse, so we might convene a conclave between our leaders and our guests.” She claps her hands, and chairs fly away from the table, indicating where we’re supposed to sit. “Be seated so we might break bread.”

Unfortunately, I have not shared the secrets of our nutrition with anyone but Dolly and Flames, so this is going to be fascinating indeed.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:58 pm

You're No Good

Delores

It's possible Fitz has rubbed off on me so much that I've lost my mind entirely.

I have no idea what got into me when I shoved my way through the twins to face the queen of the gargoyles.

The only thing I can say is that every fiber of my being screamed that I had to meet her on her terms to keep my men safe.

For once, the human-ish part of my brain, my predatory rabbit, and the zinging blue magic inside of me were completely in agreement—which I couldn't ignore.

So I did what they wanted, and surprisingly, now I'm sitting in a high-backed chair at the left hand of the female royal.

They made Renard sit on my other side, with Aubrey next to him.

Felix, followed by Fitz and then Chess, are across from us to the left of the king.

There's a flurry of staff bringing out silver lidded trays and tureens and an absolute shit ton of what I suppose is regular food.

I know how Rennie and Aubrey gain their nutrition, though, and this is a very puzzling state of affairs.

As the table is filled, more gargoyles filter in, led by two younger looking clutch members that I suppose are some sort of valets.

It's more stiff and formal than I expected from Rennie's kind, but that, too, may be for show.

The Queen certainly behaved with both regalness and a shimmer of normality once I threw down my gauntlet.

“ Bienvenue, ma chère famille! ”? 1 The queen says as she rises from her seat at the head with a glass of wine in her hand. “Since we have guests, I will say our blessing in English this evening.”

My eyes dart to the men across from me. Lucille and Bruno certainly were not religious, and despite colorful curses, Renard hasn't seemed such, either. I have no idea what to do right now and it's a lot scarier than facing this woman down.

“May the wind carry our wings to victory, may our troubles be far behind. May the strength of our stone protect us, and the warmth of our nests call us home. May Aine receive our prayers, and her children be given their land.”

The rest of the table repeats the strange poem, and I turn to look at Renard.

He's gobsmacked, completely silent as he stares at his mother.

I don't know why he's so shocked, but it's definitely a big deal.

So I wait for the queen to be seated, hoping I can distract her from her son's small breakdown.

She doesn't sit, though. Instead, she claps again to get everyone's attention.

“My kin, tonight’s feast is in honor of our guests, and therefore, the chef would like you to note that trays inlaid with rubies on the edge should only be consumed by gargoyles.

Anything else on the table will suit the palates of all shifters in the room. ”

Ah, there it is—her subtle way of nodding to the eating habits of their kind without spilling the beans.

Renard lets out a breath of relief at my side, and I give him a tiny grin. “You were worried, weren’t you?”

“A little bit, oui . I am not ready for that conversation just yet.”

My answer is cut off by the queen clearing her throat. I look back to see her holding a basket of fluffy looking rolls with a very suspicious grin. “Consoling my son, young leader?”

That’s the first time either of them have mentioned their relation to Rennie and he tenses again. I arch a brow as I take the basket, placing one on my butter plate, and shoot back, “Simply marveling that I’ve never been handed bread by a queen before.”

“Very smooth,” Felix mutters and I swear, the king he’s next to huffs in quiet laughter.

“Oh, darling, you needn’t dance around the obvious,” the queen says as I pass the basket along. “We will have a more private conversation once the meal has been cleared, but neither Mael nor I are fools. Your merry band is far more than a group of friends accompanying my errant child to our realm.”

What the hell am I supposed to say to that in mixed company?!

“Your Majesty,” Aubrey rumbles as he helps himself to things from the forbidden trays, then piles some on Rennie’s plate. “We do not seek to hide anything from you. It would be a massive breach of protocol between all our kinds, regardless of any status with those species.”

“Very diplomatic of you, Draconis,” the king says as he picks up something that looks like a gravy boat but is ringed with rubies.

The royal drizzles the sauce over his meat, then passes it to his wife nonchalantly.

“Dragons are always quite respectful of tradition, I find. They have a strong connection to the past that allows them to almost see into the future at times.”

“The world is full of repeating patterns; it’s true,” my biggest mate says carefully. “I am surprised you will share with someone from my clash, though.”

The queen sighs dramatically, then drops her fork. “Oh, I cannot stand this nonsense! Mael, the jig is up, my love. You win—I didn’t last the meal.”

“Ha! I knew it, Doireann,” the male gargoyle says, pointing at her as his expression turns giddy.

“I will have to think of something extremely appropriate for my prize.” When he turns to look at us, the king looks more joyful than he has the entire time we’ve been in this room.

“I bet her she could not hold this pretentious bullshit for a whole feast without breaking, and I won.”

“It helped that everyone here but for our guests was in on it, Mael.” The queen sighs again and gives us an apologetic look.

“I apologize for our silliness, Delores. We don’t get many visitors up here by design, and when our son wrote for the first time in hundreds of years, it inspired us to be a bit juvenile. ”

Wrinkling my nose, I marvel at their jolliness.

If they were normal parents who hadn’t exiled their only son for the infraction of teen love, I might join them in their frivolity.

But the icy letter from their scribe, the distance they purposefully created, and their happiness at tricking Rennie is downright cruel.

I’m uncertain if it’s deliberate cruelty or they're just fucking crazy, but no way am I letting this go.

“Perhaps you don’t get many visitors because your reputation for unnecessarily sadistic behavior has spread beyond these mountains.”

Mael stops laughing, tilting his head as he stares at me. “Excuse me? What sadistic behavior?”

“We are not like the rulers of your Council, young leader. I confess to being clueless about your accusation.” Doireann’s face falls and I hear a few soft snarls around me.

The guys know they’ve hurt Rennie, as well, and this will not end well if the damn rock heads don’t quit playing games.

“You exiled Renard for something ridiculous and have not spoken to him in a bazillion years!” They look at me, then the king nods once, and I throw up my hands.

“Instead of writing back, you delegated it and then set up an elaborate ruse of

formality and lies when he came home. You haven't even spoken to him directly to further service that stupid joke.

Do you not see how that could appear to be abusive and cold-hearted? ”

Doireann blinks, looking around the room for a moment before she yells, “Everyone but our guests, out!”

In a blink, the other gargoyles, staff included, book it out of the room as if they're on fire.

The royals look at me and my men for a moment, then the king reaches up to pull an amulet out of his collar.

It's bright red, but it glows as his fingers press it lightly.

A flash of light precludes a weird ‘pop’ in the air and then breathes a sigh of relief. “It's done, my love.”

“What's done?” I ask suspiciously. Mael and Doireann lean forward, their faces reflecting concern rather than anger. I feel Rennie's confusion as he stares back at them and it makes me impatient. “Go on, tell us. I'm tiring of the fucking bullshit.”

Doireann smiles again, but this time, it's not imperious, but genuine.

“Delores, there are so many things I wish we could have told Renard, and now you. We have precious little time a day to do so without fear of being heard, though. Mael can protect us for short bursts, but not at length like we could many years ago. I think you all know why that is, or you would not have come to us.”

Renard's voice is raspy as he asks, “Is it because of the Treaty?”

“Yes, son,” Mael says. He looks sad and regretful rather than the happy prankster he was a moment ago.

“Everyone in the mythical and magical communities knew what was coming several years before the wars that ended in the Treaty. We started adapting our cultures to fit in better with the shifters, so we could survive them—something our powerful friends understood. They knew not all of us could survive if they lost and did their best to help cover up the truth.”

“Which is what, exactly?” Felix demands. His eyes are golden with frustration as he looks at our hosts.

“Mythicals are and have always been the product of shifters and magical beings interbreeding.” Doireann shrugs, as if that’s not the biggest bomb in the room.

“Everyone knew that at one point, and they didn’t care.

It wasn’t a problem until a small group of wealthy shifters started loudly blaming every issue or problem on magic.

They claimed it was going to get us discovered by humans and we’d all be exterminated.

The movement picked up speed much more quickly than anyone expected. ”

“And we were at the peak of the hysteria when you came to us,” Mael whispers. “All four of us debated what we were going to do when we noticed you two were so obsessed with one another. We knew it could lead to our people being targeted.”

“How in the fuck was pretending to kill and bury her, then exiling me the best solution?” Renard spits his question angrily, sitting up straight for the first time since

we were seated. “ Mon dieu, maman, papa. J’étais à peine un homme! ? 2 ”

Fitz snorts, his lips curling up. “Barely a man now, too, broody boy. You did better than they expected, I suspect.”

The queen nods, her eyes shining with unshed tears. “It’s true, you were so young. And we did not want to lose you at all, but Fionola’s parents were convinced that you were both too stubborn to listen. We didn’t want a real life Romeo & Juliet situation, so we... faked one.”

Aubrey slams his fist on the table, then stands with a snarl. “I must move or I will do something we will all regret.”

I nod at the dragon, putting my hand on Rennie’s leg to comfort him.

Looking at his parents, I shake my head.

“I wasn’t there and I have no idea what kind of threat the shifters were.

But I can’t imagine putting your child through the unimaginable grief of seeing his first love be killed for the sin of loving him, then casting him out on his own.

It’s as farcical as a soap opera, and what’s more... ”

“What’s more?” the queen says, her head tilted in confusion.

“What’s more is that you failed so completely to fix anything.

” I stand now, too, feeling the energy inside of me rising with my anger.

“Renard was crushed and mourned in a pit for centuries. You’re all trapped in a

mountain fortress to stay safe from mythical hunters that I thought were funded by humans, but very likely are being paid by the Society to kill off all your species surreptitiously.

And most of all, whatever the Fae royals did to fake the damn funeral, they lost control of their girl.

She's currently implementing a fucking long game to implode the entire world, starting with the heirs of the shifter elite.

Obviously, her goal is a war to free her people. ”

The king and queen stare at me in horror, and Felix buries his face in his hand.

Chess and Fitz are trying to hide their smirks, and Aubrey is muttering to himself as he stomps around behind us.

Only Rennie has the guts to look at me, and he chuckles softly.

“I guess we're not holding our trump cards anymore, ma petite ? ”

We were due to spill the fucking beans at some point, and I could have done a much worse place than the gargoyles' goddamn banquet hall, I suppose.

Fitz

My Baby Girl has balls , and I am here for it.

No, really, she's brave as fuck and every time she busts our carefully laid plans to lay the smack down in some way, I fall for her all over again.

I know it makes my reined in bro and the careful dragon want to rip their hair, but I don't give a single, solitary fuck.

Delores Drew is a perfect combo of both brains and fearlessness in dealing with all the asshats in our sphere.

She's not quite so reckless in private sometimes, but when it counts?

Oh, yeah, she's a motherfucking queen in the making.

The grumpy gargoyle's parents are just staring at her now.

I love that, but I can feel how satisfied she is with the bomb she dropped.

It's emanating from my mate like arousal does when we're touching her—victory.

When they say nothing for a few more moments, she scoffs and tosses her hair again.

“Look, I know that came off too blunt, but if we don't have time, then politeness will not cut it.

You made a bad decision, everyone suffered for it, and now we're fucked.

That's reality now, and you have to make peace with it.

Otherwise, we can't move forward with a cohesive strategy. Capice ?"

"Fucking mob movies," Aubrey mutters and I bark a laugh.

That's my little Luca Brasi.

Dolly waves her hand at the dragon, moving on without addressing his constant irritation at our references.

"I'm right, and you all know it. They have to catch up quickly, and the rest of our time here needs to be spent learning more about the past, how things worked, and what this bitch is going to do to further their cause.

I'm not passing judgment on her fury, by the way, because I totally get it .

I'm simply wondering how we prevent the shifter assholes from clashing with her and coming out on top to basically install fascism or the magicals from winning and doing the same in revenge. "

Felix blinks as if it just occurred to him that we absolutely cannot let either side win this thing or everyone is going to suffer. "It's like a damn game where you hate both teams and wish they could both lose."

" Exactly, " our mate says as she taps her nose. "They're both in this for the wrong reasons at their core, which is why horrifying shit is happening. The real rebellion has to come from the people who want both sides to co-exist without suffering. So, the question is, how the fuck do we get that?"

Aubrey nods as he pulls off his glasses to clean them. That means he's in super serious mode, so I refrain from teasing him. It's better to let the neat freak dragon do his thing when he gets this way; he has his best ideas when he goes full-on brainiac. "That's why we need the prey as well, yes?"

"Because they have been subjected to the rule of the preds for so long and are relegated to inferior status," Renard says with a sad expression. "If they assist us as the Captain and the others are doing, we have a much larger number than the predators in charge, oui ?"

The queen finally shakes herself out of her stupor at his words.

"That is correct, my son. Mythicals never agreed with the subjugation of their kind, but we were fewer in number than those waging the war. Magical beings would not have created a servile race, either, but they could not save themselves, much less anyone else. The network of mythicals and the prey are key to preventing the major players in this aggression from succeeding."

Renard nods, then I see his throat bob before he says, "I spent several hundred years mourning over a magical fucking orchid, Mother. The responsibility I felt for her death ate me alive and probably would have consumed me completely, but for meeting my first mate, my friends, and now our shared mate. While this status is not common knowledge, I am telling you because I need to say it out loud in order to begin the healing process."

Damn, that was pretty fucking brave, too. Good for him.

"We deserve that anger, my little fox," the king says softly.

His face is etched with regret, but I don't feel bad for him in the slightest. That greater good shit always hurts people who are caught in the cross-fire, and no matter

what the two sets of parents thought they would achieve with their supernatural Romeo I was always the wrath of the god, so to speak.

My gaze cuts to the others, hoping someone will give me a clue if this is going well or not.

Dolly winks at me, and though I have no idea how much she saw in this vein at her evil mother's feet, I know she wants me to get that it's okay.

“Now that we've made promises, it's time to get down to business.

” She cuts her eyes to me again, warning me away from singing and I pout.

“We have colleagues who are discussing things with leaders in the prey world as we speak. There are others monitoring enemies we need to keep our eyes on in various locations. However, in our trip to your land, we kept our ears open for information from the one species I believe no one is paying attention to.”

“The humans,” the king says with a knowing look. “That's very smart, Delores.”

Baby Girl sighs, rolling her head on her neck until it cracks, then says, “You can call me Dolly. I guess if we're going to work together, it will suck less if I don't have to hear that damn name all the time.”

I snicker, understanding her dislike of her ‘government name’. Felix and I are similarly cursed by our father's bullshit; we much prefer the names we go by now. “Mind, most people have to earn that, and she's giving it to you for free.”

Yes, I know I shouldn't be baiting the royals, but I can't help myself—their poor son has been mourning a chick who was never even harmed, for fuck's sake!

In our ambush, death would be much preferable to that bullshit emotional torture.

It infuriates me to the core, and I didn't expect that.

My mate looks over at me, arching a brow before she puts her soft palm over mine.

“You must understand that we're all doing our best not to be provoking, so we can accomplish our shared goals.

There will be some outbursts occasionally because we love your son and have watched his suffering during our lives with him.

It's going to be an open wound for a long time. ”

Mael sighs, raking his hands through the raven hair that is much like the poet's. “It is fair to be angry, and we cannot blame you for protecting him when we did not.”

“I found my way, eventually,” Renard says with a shrug. “But yes, the people we focused on were the humans, and what we discovered was quite interesting.”

The royals hold a hand up, and the king reaches out to touch the bubble carefully. “I believe we have enough time if you make haste. Once it disappears, you will need to go back to speaking as we did before I touched my amulet.”

Nodding, Dolly continues for the gargoyle, “We found that a lot of historic sites across the continent and in the UK have been closed suddenly, ostensibly for repairs. However, they are all linked to Fae or vampires, which Rennie has sensed at our current institution. They have been away from the nest, he says, and we are wondering if they are helping the magicals loot specific items needed for something important. We have no idea what , of course.”

The queen's eyes widen, and she looks at us with a worried expression.

“You have less time than you think if they are gathering items and artifacts scattered throughout the globe, son. Many things were hidden to prevent anyone from re-opening the Veil in the future. If they locate everything they need, war is not only a foregone conclusion—it's imminent. ”

“Looks like we'll be staying here until we figure out what and where everything is,” Aubrey says with a deep sigh. “We'll have to contact the others with updates and hope they can keep everything under wraps, until we come home at the beginning of the semester.”

“Why is that?” I frown as I look at my family curiously. “What is so damn important here that ties us to Ren's clutch?”

Dolly grimaces as she answers, “We will need to use their archives to research every single bit of the history of the mythicals and the magicals, including things that have been left out of the libraries in our world, Fitz. If they open the Veil and let out everything that has been stewing in another realm for centuries without preparation—they'll burn everything to the ground before we stop them. ”

I guess I shouldn't be surprised that when Dolly Drew and fam take a vacation, it's a precursor to Armageddon, but somehow, I still am.

Happy Summer vacay, bitches.

The End...

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Killer Queen

Morgana

Looking around the campus with a critical eye, it isn't hard to notice the differences between the campus of Swallowtail and State U.

The major difference is age, of course, but even secondary schools overseas are unlike the blatant marketing machines that are American universities.

State U doesn't resemble the colleges I've seen in American movies or on TV, though much of that is the Society's doing.

However, banners, statues, plaques, signs, and even architecture are emblazoned with the school's motto— Honoris. Veritas. Potentia —as if constant reminders will enforce the virtues it extols. That differs from the places in Europe I attended or worked in.

“Getting used to the sales aspect of education here won't be your biggest challenge and you know it,” I mutter to myself.

When the outcome of my trial led to a guilty sentence, I didn't expect the punishment they handed down.

Instead of being jailed for the murder of my ex, they decreed I would replace him as the Dean at State U.

I wasn't the only one who disagreed with my purgatory—the vote on the High Council was split down the middle until a mysterious figure cast a vote in favor of my exile.

They summarily dismissed me from Swallowtail Academy and sent me home to pack my shit for a journey overseas to the nest of corruption created by the man I thought I would marry.

Not only am I the youngest Dean to ever hold the title, but I'm the only hybrid to head one of the Society's schools.

Placing me at the helm of the crown jewel of their American institutions made their unorthodox punishment even more bizarre, but I've never believed the group that guides our kind to be infallible.

The irony of replacing the being responsible for all the university's current issues with the fiancée who killed him hasn't eluded me.

It's like my penance for not blowing the whistle on him instead of taking my vengeance in blood.

They did not impress hard line elders with the eventual outcome, but that had to be expected.

Some supernaturals don't believe in the young being given positions of power, especially when that young candidate is also a woman and a hybrid.

Given that I believe Magnus had cronies at various levels of government he was paying off, some of them must be worried I'll expose them to prove I was right to remove him from this world.

Either way, the assholes who are screaming I'll ruin their precious programs and reputation haven't shut up since I left the trial chamber.

Let them whine about their outdated, elitist standards. I'll show them.

I turn away from the greenery of the campus, leaving the balcony to take a seat at the enormous desk in my overly plush office.

Knowing the way parents and donors behave in this country, I assume every inch of this space has been purchased not by the college, but by donors who had 'one little request' for my ex.

Magnus Corona was well-known in academic circles for milking the wealthy Americans until they ran dry, but his lack of ethics couldn't go on forever.

My greedy, dragon lover went on the lam after a series of scandals involving kickbacks, illegal sponsorships, sports, and sexual harassment.

The last one is why I hunted him down and eventually watched the last breaths he took on this planet with vengeful glee.

I'll start looking for a decorator immediately. If it's not in the budget, my trust fund will cover it.

Like most lost ones, they left me on the doorstep of a very talented witch and her gargoyle mate.

I never found my 'real' parents, but growing up on Swallowtail's campus was not a burden.

It was different when my adoptive parents were professors there—three hundred

years brings a lot of changes.

When I graduated, I attended Oxford and came back to work there in administration because I missed the old buildings and libraries.

That's the gargoyle in me, I know.

My adoptive mother is blind—except for the gift of future sight.

Being a beautiful, blind witch couldn't have been easy when she was teaching, but she met my father in college and they've been together ever since.

When they graduated, they came back to Swallowtail to teach.

Eventually, she became the head of the Witchcraft they were constructed to evoke the feeling of Oxford and he loves those old buildings.

I give the picture of them on my cherry wood desk a half smile and sigh when I realize it's going to be awhile before I can extend that invitation.

First, I have to figure out how to get this ship back on course.

Loyalty divides the staff; the students are due to arrive in two weeks, and I have a lot of house cleaning to do within these hallowed walls.

It's going to ruffle feathers to do the things that are necessary to keep our supernatural accreditation and our human sports certification.

I'll have to let some staff go, shuffle departments and assignments, and bring in new people to monitor certain aspects of the college's accounting to satisfy all the requirements we need to meet by the end of the semester.

State U has never been forced to toe the line quite as closely as we must now, and that is all because of Magnus Corona's lack of scruples and inability to think without his dick.

Not that any of his adoring fans will believe it for a second—and that is the rock I'll have to push up the hill for the foreseeable future.

“They'll have to get on board or get the fuck out,” I say as I compare the list of coaches, trainers, and support staff for the football team. “I don't have a choice and neither do they.”

When I finally finish going over the massive budget for the major boys' teams, my brain is damn near fried.

I cannot fathom how colleges here justify the expenditures of these programs compared to the paltry sums I saw on the balance sheets for academic programs. Americans truly have lost their focus on education, and it doesn't surprise me at all that Magnus could manipulate this to his advantage.

There's so many discretionary funds and black holes in the books that I'll have to find someone much more numerically inclined than myself to help me wade through this shit.

It's almost like it left room for loopholes and nefarious deeds.

Pushing to my feet, I rise from the high-backed leather chair and slip my shoes back on.

I've been at this for hours and because I don't have office staff, no one was there to remind me I should eat or take a break.

I had to fire everyone who worked in Magnus' immediate circle—both out of principle and necessity.

I can't prove they knew what he was doing, nor that any of them would try to harm me as retribution, but I'm also not stupid enough to let someone with loyalty to my ex pour my goddamn coffee.

Coffee .

The word makes my blood hum and I know it's time to find sustenance—particularly caffeine.

I locate my phone on the massive desk and slip it into the pocket of my suit pants.

My appearance has been a topic of gossip on campus since I arrived—social media is a terrible curse when you're in the spotlight, even if it's for the right reasons.

I've seen staff and alumni commenting on the 'uptight murdering bitch' strutting around campus dressed like someone from the Addams Family as if their vitriol isn't public when they post on Facebook.

My lips curve as I look down at the bespoke Tom Ford suit, Zegna tie, and Louboutin heels.

Dressing the part has always been a theme of mine, but Magnus preferred the 'rumpled academic' look.

He allowed the staff to run around looking like grad students and that will soon end.

If they hate me for looking sharp compared to my frumpy ex, they're going to hate the new dress code when it rolls out in a week.

I will not go as far as the Society schools did at home or in other countries, but I refuse to have the press haunting our grounds while taking pictures of grubby looking professors and coaches for their rags.

If this is the crown jewel, it needs more polishing than the Council realizes.

Before I go out, I shake my purple and black curls out of the messy bun, letting my hair settle over my shoulders.

A quick check with the selfie mode on my phone tells me my makeup doesn't need to be freshened—thank hell—so I close the camera and put on my sunglasses to keep my sensitive eyes from the waning sun.

I'll need the State U app to find a place that's out of the way.

I open it and cringe—the damn thing is hideous in form and function.

I make a mental note to interview app designers and web developers; the website has to be as poorly maintained as this bullshit.

Yet again, I marvel at the level of incompetence men can show without consequence.

It finally loads the map and I scroll around until I find a coffee shop on the edge of campus.

I don't want to go to a break room or the food court—there will be far too many eyes on me and I'd like to relax.

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Noting the landmarks around the shop, I walk out onto the balcony and touch the amulet at my neck.

My wings spring free, sprouting through the suit without a single tear, and I leap into the air.

Catching a wind shear, I glide to the far end of the commons, then bank to the right towards the arts building.

They nestled the little beanery I identified between the theater and the gallery, so I pull my wings back to descend slowly as I approach.

When I land, the magic of my mother's amulet helps me slip my appendages back in gracefully and walk towards the door without missing a beat.

I open the door, take off my sunglasses, and stride in with confidence.

I'm not here to throw my weight around, but I can't let anyone see me sweat, either.

I look at the menu board before I lower my gaze to see the barista behind the counter.

Holy. Mother. Forking. Shit.

The guy behind the counter is beautiful, and I don't say that lightly.

His long blond hair is pulled back in a ponytail, but somehow, it doesn't look douchey.

Paired with his patrician features and thin silver framed lenses, he projects the air of a student, but not a new one.

My guess is a grad or doctoral student and this is his side hustle.

The muscled forearms and powerful hands tell me he's not just a bookworm, so I ponder what discipline this lithe, gorgeous supe is studying.

When I finally drag my eyes back to his, the aqua color of his is mesmerizing.

"Can I take your order, ma'am?"

Yikes. That destroyed my brief fantasy.

"Um, yes, sorry. It's been a long day. I'd like a triple espresso and a club sandwich, please." I feel my cheeks heating not because I was staring—he's got to be used to it—but because I got caught checking out one of the students.

It's not forbidden at State U, but I am the murdering bitch with ice in her veins that's here to destroy everything the university stands for.

Or, so the article in the State U Review said last night.

There's no way this gorgeous coffee-serving man doesn't recognize me and I'm sure I'll get an earful about my evil ways once he's done making my order.

In fact, I should continue watching to make sure he doesn't mess with my food for revenge.

Yeah, that's why I want to watch him.

“I don’t blame you for coming here. It’s not one of the campus hot spots. Mostly we get professors, arts kids, and the occasional normie who wants to hide from the masses.”

I blink, realizing he’s nailed my reason for choosing this shop without even trying. “I think it’s rather cozy.”

“You don’t have to pretend, Dean LeCiel.

” His pretty eyes meet mine again and I feel that heat creeping up my spine.

“I’m aware of how contentious your appointment was.

It doesn’t bother me, honestly. I’ve been a student through much of your ex’s reign and since the music department was of little concern to him, I don’t have any allegiance to the former administration. ”

Definitely a doctoral candidate. His thesis is probably massive.

Covering my mouth as the unintended double meaning of my words occurs to me, I wait until the urge to giggle like a teenager fades.

It would be extremely unprofessional of me to comment on his...

attributes... especially since that kind of bullshit helped bring Magnus down.

Of course, that doesn’t mean I’m not wondering now...

“Dean? Hello?” The hot barista is waving his hand as he looks at me curiously.

“I’m sorry to be so rude. I didn’t catch your name?”

There we go. That sounded totally normal.

“I’m Slade,” he replies with a slow smile.

That doesn’t surprise me in the slightest, and I wonder if he might be part Fae. Not giving me his real name is part and parcel with them, and so is the ethereal beauty. “You may call me Morgana when I am here. I think titles are dreadfully stuffy, but...”

“Set boundaries early because you have mutinies to deal with.”

Frowning, I tilt my head. “You aren’t reading me with magic, are you, Slade? Even during my ex’s time, that kind of invasion of privacy wasn’t allowed.”

“No, no!” He stops making the sandwich and gives me a sheepish look.

“I inferred it. I mean, I don’t run with the undergrads or the popular crowds, but I hear things.

It wasn’t hard to figure out that you’re at the hole in the wall shop so you don’t have to be on stage while you eat or that you’re going to make big changes because of all the charges against the former dean. ”

I nod, observing him. “I believe you, though I probably shouldn’t. Betrayal hides in obvious places; I’m living proof of that.”

His features look sharper as he smirks. “There are those of us who don’t believe what you did was unjustified, Morgana. Living here at State U will provide you with plenty of evidence to give the Council that will mitigate your actions.”

“That’s both my desire and my deepest fear, Slade. There’s only so much bad PR this

place can take before the Council shuts it down and moves on.”

A coffee cup and a plate with my sandwich slide across the counter as he murmurs,
“You’ll have to decide if that’s what you want when the time comes.”

“I know.”

Loser

Kat

The little blue icon on my app has been glaring at me all day, but I'm too damn nervous to open it.

Everyone at Woodlawn High has been buzzing all day with their notifications and the squeals of joy and moans of despair were too much for me to take.

My anxiety is through the roof—this is the moment I've been waiting for since middle school, but I can't seem to force myself to bite the billet and check.

Maybe it's because I don't have the support system most of my classmates have?

That's probably true, given I've always been a loner and I don't fit into any specific 'caste' here. It's hard to make friends when you get shuffled from foster home to foster home over the years. I've rarely stayed anywhere long enough to make a friend, much less a group of them.

I'm not delinquent or anything—the families I've been placed with just return me like a pair of pants that doesn't fit after a year or so.

The caseworkers click their tongues sympathetically and hunt down a new placement, but I've never been given a reason why people don't want me around.

One lady said I must be born under a bad sign and hell if I knew what that meant

other than I'm not good enough to keep around.

It would be different, almost understandable, if I misbehaved or got bad grades.

But I don't—I'm always in the top five percent of my class and I do everything I'm asked.

I don't even lord my smarts over the other kids or adults.

Being presentable and unassuming was something I adapted long ago to improve my probability of staying in a home long term.

Unfortunately, it never worked and though I should be a shoo-in for scholarships and acceptances galore, I can't bring myself to be rejected yet again.

So I wait for the last bell of the day, slinging my bag over my shoulder and trudging home to the latest in my temporary housing.

I can't even contemplate looking at the possible heartache waiting for me in the college application system WHS insisted we use.

The fear is too great and despite knowing I'll be on my own for good at the end of this year, I'm unable to risk the pain.

I hate being this way.

My court mandated therapist says it's some sort of attachment disorder that's common in foster kids, but I think that's bullshit.

The problem isn't me not forming attachments; it's asshole adults not forming one to me.

Being left at a safe haven in a fucking basket as a baby wasn't because I did anything wrong—again, fucking adults couldn't handle their commitments.

As usual, I arrive home to an empty house.

There are two other kids who live here—Bryce and Blake—but they're at football practice.

Of course, the Jamesons love them; they get to strut around at games because their strays are the stars of the team.

I'm not mistreated, but I'm definitely an afterthought.

Both of my 'parents' are still at work, so I drop my bag on the couch and head for the kitchen to get a snack.

Don't get me wrong. I could have been placed in far worse homes than any of the seven I've been in since elementary school. None of the ex-fosters starved, beat, molested, or abused me. They were all decent folks with jobs and houses that weren't hellholes, but they never liked me.

I have no idea why. I tried to be everything they wanted.

But when the end of each school year came, I was handed in like a textbook and off I went to some group home until the next contestant stepped up. It baffled everyone, not just me, but that's what happened every single time.

Sighing, I pull some fruit out of the fridge and grab a soda.

I have homework to do and if I want to have time to work on my stories, I'll need to get it done before the house is full of people at dinner time.

Bryce and Blake will have gotten messages about their applications, too, and I'd bet my pinkie toe those idiots got into some big sports school.

Brett and Allison will be oozing happiness for them and I don't know if I'll be able to keep food down if I have to admit my failure when they ask.

Being eighteen sucks ass.

After I grab my books and tablet, I head down to the den.

I have to give my current parents credit; they set up a very nice workspace for us to study in the converted basement.

By the time they took me in, the Jamesons created a cozy room down here where the three of us could relax and do our work for school without being interrupted.

It might have been more for the boys than me, but I appreciated it all the same.

Desks, a couch, big chairs, and bookshelves fill the space, making it almost seem like our mini-library.

They even put a small fridge for drinks and snacks in case we had to be up late to cram.

It's my favorite place in the entire house and I spend most of my time here.

I sink into the huge armchair, putting my drink and snack on the side table.

It only takes a few minutes to arrange myself in the soft cushions and I pause to tug my headphones out of my pocket.

Music always soothes my jagged edges and I need it to stay focused on the bullshit AP Calculus I need to keep my average up in.

My course load is heavy, but I applied to tough colleges.

I wouldn't have a chance to get in, especially on a scholarship, if I wasn't taking equally challenging classes in comparison to all the prep school kids.

As always, the sounds of Vivaldi carry me away as I scrawl equations on my screen and before long, thoughts of the blue notification completely fade away.

“Kat!”

The shouts barely register as I continue working on the problem set, gnawing on my lower lip in concentration.

“Jesus fuck, where is she? I could eat a hippo!”

“Kat!”

Thumping followed by what could pass for a stampede of elephants jerks me out of my math filled trance when Bryce and Blake come down the stairs.

They smell as bad as the aforementioned pachyderm's cage, so they must have rushed home right after practice.

The blond twins glare at me as if I'm the offending element despite being sweaty and covered in dirt and grass stains.

This doesn't bode well.

Usually, they're tired and hungry after practices so I'm used to cranky ass boys, but tonight, there's a light to their faces.

That had to mean they've gotten their letters and dinner will be a gush fest in honor of their perfection.

I'm going to need all of my strength to fake smile and nod as Brett and Allison fawn over them.

I don't begrudge them their success—not really.

They work hard and play even harder on the field.

It's not their fault they're the American dream teens and I'm the nerdy basement troll no one wants.

But it's awfully hard living in the shadow of their bright light, especially when I'm no less intelligent or talented.

"I'm finishing the AP Calc, guys. What do you want?"

They roll their eyes at me before Blake scoffs. "It's not due until Monday. You're so hyper."

Duh. I take anxiety meds, douchebag; of course I'm ?hyper.?

"I can only be who I am, Blake." That earns me a snort from Bryce and I know it's because he thinks that's the problem. "Is dinner ready?"

"Almost. Get upstairs and set the table so we can shower—Brett's orders." Blake grins smugly.

The two of them seem to always arrange it so chores get passed to me for some half-assed reason and this is no exception.

Sighing, I put my stuff aside, fully intending to hide down here after the dinner mess is cleaned up.

Likely by me, but like I said, I could definitely live in worse foster homes so I let it go.

Doing some chores isn't worth risking the group home for the last few months of my high school career.

They take off running up the stairs and I wait for them to disappear before I follow suit.

My phone is tucked in my pocket and I feel like it's a stone of shame I have to bear.

I know once the adults make over the twins' success, they will remember me, and I'll be forced to find out what disappointment lies in wait for me.

The dread weighs on me, but I head into the sunny kitchen and pick up the pre-prepared pile of plates, silverware, and napkins on the counter.

Allison looks up from the stove and gives me a half-smile, nodding as I take the dishes into the dining room.

Like I said, no one is mean or horrid, they just seem...

obligated. After a while, it makes it hard to waste time trying to be bright and sunny.

Being reserved makes it a hell of a lot easier not to feel rebuffed when they don't pay

attention to you regardless.

“Make sure you include champagne glasses for your dad and I!” she calls from the other room.

The twins definitely got acceptance somewhere big. Brett must have gotten the bubbly on the way home.

Once I set the table, I return to help Allison bring out the roast and sides.

I’m a little amazed at her efficiency when it comes to getting the housework done while working full time, but I suppose it’s something people with real parents get taught as they grow up.

My home life has been so fractured that I haven’t learned how to cook more than very basic shit from YouTube videos.

That may be a problem after graduation, but I’ve never felt comfortable enough to ask Allison if she’d teach me.

I’m sure she would try, but it doesn’t feel right.

“How was school, Kat?”

I look over my shoulder, seeing Brett in the entry to the dining room. He’s already changed from work and smiling, but I see the distraction in his eyes. He’s waiting for the boys to come down. “It was fine. I’ve got a Calc test at the end of the week. I’ll be studying a lot to get ready.”

“Good, good. No matter what happens with applications, keeping your grades up will ensure no one pulls any offers,” he says.

Those words aren't for me. They are for the two wet haired boys who just appeared behind him.

"Kat's too much of a geek to ever let her grades slip, Dad," Blake says as he pushes past his brother and drops into his usual chair at the table. "Grab me a Powerade since you're in the kitchen, mouse!"

Both Brett and Bryce stare at me and I turn around, heading to the fridge despite the fact that I was not closer than the other twin.

Out of habit, I take two of the drinks and a soda for myself.

I've been here long enough to know Bryce will send me back to get him one as well.

It would feel like typical sibling stuff, but for some reason, I just know they do it to fuck with me.

I have no idea why I feel that way, but trusting my gut has been the one thing that helped me get through all the upheaval in my life over the years.

It's a good gauge for knowing when I'll get booted or if people are being earnest in their reactions.

The therapist says that's some sort of trauma induced early trigger warning shit, by the way.

After I hand out the drinks, I sit down on my side of the table and we wait for Allison to come out.

Brett is at his seat at the far end of the table and the twins are punching each other as they look at something on their phones.

I know where this is all going but I drop my gaze to the table, swallowing the coppery taste of fear as it courses through my body.

I'm going to be exposed and there's nothing I can do to stop it.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:58 pm

Every Day is Monday

Sydney

“Jesus fucking Christ,” I mutter as I slog through the streets of Tempest Seven. “Just because they locked us up like animals doesn’t mean we have to live like them.”

Pausing in my walk to the education center, I look around myself in abject disgust. The inhabitants of this end of Tempest Seven aren’t the bottom of the proverbial barrel, but outside of the ‘lockdown losers’, people stuck here never seem to get out of the cycle of poverty and despair.

I don’t think it means we have to throw garbage everywhere and give the drones nice shots to prove to the humans that we’re as unworthy as the leaders of this stupid country say we are.

What would it hurt to tidy up, even if we don’t have much?

Honestly, I believe it’s only a third rooted in laziness.

I think the other parts are exhaustion and hopelessness.

Since the First Infected Being Sweep of 2020, supernaturals all over this country were tracked, catalogued, reassigned, and declared property of the government.

By the time they ran the second through fourth sweeps, the population of some supernatural species dropped by fifty percent.

The rules on how to track us down and receive your bounty were infuriatingly vague, which gave the most violent psychopaths in the world a free license to kill, maim, rape, and disappear anyone caught on the 'Non-Human Watchlist'.

I was a baby when my mother left, but my father taught me everything I needed to know about being a shifter.

Unfortunately, he was one of the people who ended up on that list and was killed in the Second Infected Being Sweep of 2020.

That sweep was brutal, and since I was a 'half-breed' orphan, I was placed in the orphanage in Tempest Seven.

From the moment every child and teen arrived, they were forced to attend the Federal Enrichment Assimilation the temptation to gain things your family or group needs is too high.

A random person would dime me out for a week's supply of crackers and I can't blame them.

Food and drink are rationed, our clothes are drab and provided, and the world is dimmer since the Sweeps.

They force us to stay small so they're in control, and we have to live with it because of the fucking Markers.

My hand flies to the back of my neck, grunting in irritation as I scratch at the tattoo that covers the skin where the implant is located.

These were the second step on the path to the current tyranny of our 'benevolent' government.

That spray tanned fuck won the election because the humans here were that goddamn stupid, and then the virus hit.

COVID brought America to its knees and like all good con artists, President Taterman used the distraction to funnel money into secret programs under DARPA.

Men who stare at goats my skinny ass.

They released a widely contested study that blamed the virus on the 'infected'.

Unfortunately, they defined that as beings living in our country that had paranormal capabilities.

The rest of the world laughed at the senile old fuck until the media hype was so huge that the various species around the world convened a leadership meeting.

With so many cameras and videos everywhere, it was only a matter of time until a random human caught one of us doing something and bam!

A viral TikTok would expose all of us whether we were ready or not.

The vote was close, but the supernatural community decided to come out of hiding to protest their innocence.

'The Unveiling' was the most watched TV event in decades, and the consensus was our leaders had done the right thing.

At least, until the next study was released.

This one made Taterman damn near salivate as he screamed into the TV cameras about the 'unclean' liars and thieves who have been hiding in plain sight, taking our jobs, and stealing the lives humans should have.

It quickly devolved into a mass panic and our kind were left scrambling.

We'd told them who and where we were, like a bunch of fools.

Thus, the evil assholes at the top started their mission to protect the humans from us and reclaim their country.

Supernaturals in other nations were fine, but the atmosphere here became dangerous within the blink of an eye.

Taterman stacked his own deck in the courts and the legislature by fear-mongering, especially since the world was still reeling from a pandemic.

Eventually, he was able to get the support he needed for the first Sweep.

Secret Supernatural Enforcement Agents used databases, social media, DNA websites, immigration records, and everything they could to gather the biggest dragnet of personal information ever assembled.

Civil rights advocates and other world leaders were vocally opposed to such violations, but nothing could stop the juggernaut of hatred.

Once they identified every supe in the nation—to the best of their ability—that's when they stripped our citizenship, robbed us blind, and re-assigned every single one to the sectors they'd been building in secret.

Let's be honest—they're supe prison camps.

But the humans felt safe once more because while we were all being shuffled all over like cattle, the rest of the scientific community worldwide started to get COVID under control.

Taterman crowed about the United States' involvement, taking credit for slowing the spread by locking up the infected beings.

No one but his nutty followers believed him, but at that point, it didn't matter.

So when they came to implant the Markers, no one spoke up.

We all have them, and depending on what you are and how powerful you are, they are different.

But resting above the spot where they cut us open to shove in the controller, there's a matching tattoo of the logo that is now on the flag of the Federated Human States of America... but that came much, much later.

Democracy dies in the dark, the old slogan said... and here lies her rotted corpse.

"Hey, Syd. It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood, huh?"

My brooding gets interrupted by the arrival of Thad, my friend since we got placed here four years ago.

He's a bear shifter and the size of a small SUV, but it doesn't bother me.

I survived the sector version of high school partially because we stuck together.

My brains and his bulk were a good match and it kept us from getting cornered by the gangs and cliques.

Okay, fine, it kept me from getting cornered. Obviously, Thad held his own without me.

"That sentiment hasn't been applicable for half a decade, man.

” I toss my braid over my shoulder and wait for him to catch up.

It’s our second week at the F.E.A.R. Academy’s college level program and being late is more than frowned upon.

I have to give us extra time every morning because Thad lumbers out of bed like his animal—slow and grumpy. “We gotta get moving.”

The dark haired shifter looks at me, scratching the piratical scruff he’s usually sporting. “You’re ridiculously concerned about rules for someone with such a rebel spirit.”

“Rebels die, Thad. I’m very aware of that.” Turning on my heel, I head toward the huge building at the end of the main drag with a heavy heart. Losing Dad was hard and I’ll never forgive him for assuming humans are anything but ignorant beasts that barely rise above their simian relatives.

We continue walking in silence until we reach the steps.

The line is stretched down them as the guards run the wand over each student to check for weapons.

After that, we put our bags on the conveyor belt for the magical detection while the security mages in government issued loyalty collars scan us for anything the wands wouldn’t catch.

It’s not quick, but it keeps fights in the schools non-lethal most of the time.

That’s the official reason, but the real purpose is to allow the staff to abuse students if they step out of line.

The Markers not only brand and track us, but they siphon energy and power in small

bits to keep us all weak enough to be controlled.

Weapons would even the score and the humans who run these stupid ass brainwashing cults would be at risk.

“Look who’s last at the trough again.” The wry voice of the only demon in Tempest Seven gets my attention. Huck Monroe saunters up, tilting his worn black cowboy hat back as he smirks at me. “Y’all are just cruisin’ for a bruisin’. I swear, you don’t have the sense that the Devil gave a goose.”

My eyes narrow at him briefly, then I turn forward and shuffle along as the line moves. “You don’t have to hang out with us, Huck. In fact, it’d be great if you fucked off and stayed there.”

Thad laughs, bumping his shoulder against the annoying fear demon’s and I sigh. Huck was sent here during the First Sweep, like us, and he’s been a Southern bramble in my side ever since. It’s my bad luck that Thad enjoys his folksy charm and it means he sticks to us like glue during school hours.

“Sometimes you’re meaner than a wet panther shifter, Sydney Jolie. I should take you at your word and mosey off, but I like your boy.”

Huck’s pitch black eyes are hidden by his Ray-Bans, but I know they’re sparkling with amusement.

He finds my dislike funny, and I don’t get why.

But then, I don’t get a fucking thing about men, especially supes, nor do I want to.

Life in our sector is hard enough without having to consider birth control or babies or even finding privacy.

I'll save that for the day when I get the fuck out of here.

"I heard they're bringing in a new group of students today.

"Thad changes the subject quickly, knowing I'll continue to needle Huck and vice versa until one of us loses their temper.

"The rumors say the shipment has vamps, losers, and traitors. I'm worried this sector is turning into a dumping ground for psychos. "

It wouldn't surprise me if the humans started segregating the camps by species, value, or even criminality.

Even after they corralled us into the sectors, the leaders have continued to exert their influence and power over us.

The Markers were first, then the lockdowns for the ones they deemed dangerous, and now they're shuffling people weekly at random.

I've often wondered if all of this is covering up something like what went on in the 1940s among the humans, but I haven't seen any proof.

Our media is monitored and curated, so unless you know someone with a highly illegal device, you have no idea what's happening outside of the FHSA.

"Next! Keep it moving, you little shits," the yell from the front of the line brings me back to reality again.

"Wicker is the fucking worst," Thad mumbles as we ascend the steps to stand behind the person being inspected. "Watch his hands, Syd."

"I'm aware." Despite thinking we're the scum of the earth, some of the human staff

and enforcement in the sectors are fucking creeps. Some supes are willing to trade sex for perks, but that doesn't stop the predators from being creeps to those who don't. "I'll let you go first so Bishop gets me."

"Got it," he says as he muscles in front of me. "Huck, stay behind her."

"Why, I'd be delighted, Thaddeus."

I guess he's useful sometimes, but he'd better not let it go to his head.