



Prince, Charmed (Cauldrons and Kisses)

Author: *Duckie Mack*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Malachi is a prince and next in line for the throne, but as his coronation gets closer, strange things keep happening to him.

Florian grew up in the palace alongside the prince. The two were always together until it was discovered that Florian had magic.

The young witch was torn away from his friend and cast out from the only home he'd known. Despite the turn his life had taken, he has worked hard to build a reputation for helping people.

When Malachi realizes his problems are magical, he seeks out his childhood friend. As Florian works to undo the charms controlling the prince, that bond they once had comes back even stronger than before.

Total Pages (Source): 11

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:54 am

“We're live on the steps of the palace, awaiting the announcement we've been promised. Many have rumored what Her Majesty will say, but they remain rumors until we hear from the queen herself. Oh, Queen Adira is now approaching the podium with Prince Malachi following behind.” The reporter spoke in a hushed tone as the camera swung away from her to focus on the podium centered in front of the large gold-accented doors.

“Turn it off, Jules,” I called out from across the pub before taking another swig of ale.

The pub was mostly empty. Everyone had hurried home to watch the queen's address for whatever big news she was supposed to share. There were a couple of people passed out drunk in the corner, a madam looking for customers, Jules, the pub's owner, and me.

I was currently trying to hide from the news that seemed to move through the town like the plague. Everywhere I went, folks were all atwitter about the queen. I'd been hoping to drown out the name in alcohol, but hearing the TV blaring in the one place I thought I would be safe had my eye twitching and my glass emptying faster than I intended.

“Sorry, my friend, but I really want to hear this. If you don't, I suggest you settle your tab and head home.”

“Fine!” I threw some money on the table and stumbled off the stool. Perhaps I'd had enough anyway.

“Let me call you a ride, at least,” Jules offered.

I waved him off. “No, thanks. I'd rather walk.”

The cool night air would do me some good, and chances were the announcement would be playing on the radio of whatever vehicle I would ride in. I knew the path from the pub to my cottage well enough that I didn't bother with directions on my phone. I spent a lot of time there, though not usually getting as plastered as I currently was. The pub served as a place to feel connected, even if on a shallow level.

I didn't go into the main part of town if I could help it, and the pub was as far away from the Purlieu I ventured. Most of the people I interacted with came to me, but it was never for a friendly visit, always because they needed something. I didn't mind helping. I liked it, generally, but folks were leery of me. As much as they were grateful for my services, it never went beyond transactional encounters.

It wasn't just the people in the town I avoided. It was the billboards and LED screens and guards and the projection of perfection. The royal family were everywhere and you couldn't miss them. Each image of the queen or the prince felt like a dagger in my chest. It was surreal to feel so far apart from the very people I used to consider my family. Twenty years had passed and I hadn't heard a word from either of them since I left the palace. Or anyone, for that matter. There one day, gone the next.

I was only a kid when I had to figure out what to do or where to go. At thirteen, I'd lost my home, my best mate, the only family I'd known, all while trying to understand what was happening to me. Losing Mal had been the hardest of it all.

We had been raised together, maybe not as equals, but we'd had a tight bond, together as much as his position allowed. He never cared that I was below his station . With no other kids around, it was just us, playing through the palace and being boys. He would even sneak me into his room at night, and we would share his bed, with me slipping out before his steward would come in to prepare him for his lessons.

There were nights I would still wake up and feel for him, even all this time later, only to feel the crushing disappointment as reality set in. Mal wasn't there. He never was. When the former king had kicked me out, I held onto the hope that he would find me. That Mal would show up and save me from the streets I found myself on. He didn't. I knew it wasn't his fault, but knowing that didn't make it hurt any less.

My humble cottage came into sight, sitting at the edge of the forest, just beyond the reach of the city lights. I looked up at the stars, finally able to see them without the pollution of the LEDs that filled the city. With the wide expanse of sky above me, I breathed deeply, letting the cool air settle in my lungs and wash through me.

Settling in the Purlieu, the region that was set at the edge of the forest, hadn't been my choice, but now I found it soothing. The rustle of leaves from the trees, the clean air, the quiet away from the bustling noise of the over-populated capitol, it was serene and refreshing. More than that, really. I'd discovered that my magic recharged when I was closer to nature.

The fact that it added to the mystery and intrigue for my customers didn't hurt either, and the isolation served me fine. Most of the time. When loneliness crept in, I would go to the pub if simply to watch others interact and feel somewhat connected to society again.

My doorknob turned before I reached it, though the door stuttered slightly before opening. Maybe I'd had more to drink than I thought. I bounced against the door frame as I made my way into my house, which doubled as my shop.

The front room was for show. I had a long wooden bar with stools in front of a wall of cabinets. Under the bar, I had a variety of glass jars and vials, mixing bowls, and a pestle and mortar to grind up ingredients. The glass cabinets were full of herbs, dried flowers, mushrooms, oils, and other natural items, all non-toxic. No newt's eye for me, I refused to use animal parts. I was a humane witch. Not that I needed the

ingredients anyway, but my customers didn't know that. They were all placebos.

Bypassing the front room, I went to the small bedroom that was hidden behind a curtain. I could have put a door in, but the curtain added mystique, and sometimes I would make more of a show out of stepping into my back room to add a secret ingredient, as if I were afraid of revealing my secrets. People loved mystery, it made the placebo even stronger, and was sure to do the job. Belief was a powerful tool, one nearly as strong as the magic that hummed within me.

The sleepless night before, dreading today's announcement, and the alcohol swimming through my body made me feel fuzzy. I collapsed onto my bed, not bothering to remove my heeled boots or my long velvety cloak. The clothes I wore added another layer to the full package. If people wanted a witch, they didn't want to come to someone who wore clothes you could buy at the big box stores. They wanted a person who looked like the legends of old. Which was fine by me, I was happy to play the part. Besides, I liked my velvet. It felt amazing on my skin, and I looked good in it. Thankfully, sleep overtook me easily, the buzz from the alcohol quieting the noise in my head.

When I woke the next morning, my head was pounding and the light streaming through the curtains made me wince. Unfortunately, the magic inside of me couldn't be turned inward, only outward. It was probably good that I couldn't use it for myself, who knew what kind of trouble an angry teen could have gotten himself into. Of course, this meant I would have to suffer through the hangover all on my own. I didn't mind though, because if I was focused on the ache, then it would keep my mind off the cause of it.

I slumped around, forcing myself to take a cold shower to try to shake myself free from the fog I was in. After brushing my long auburn hair, I braided the front strands into a crown on my head and the rest hung in loose waves. I love the feel of my long hair brushing against my shoulders, but the braid allowed it to stay out of my face.

And I fully embraced the otherness folks sought out when they came to me.

I pulled on a dark purple velvet long-sleeved shirt and topped it with a black corset that laced in the front, over black faux leather leggings. I would have stayed in bed and sulked, except I had an appointment this morning. Today was a fake-it-till-you-make-it kind of day. I looked in the mirror, ignoring my wince at the bright light, but overall satisfied with my appearance. For extra measure, I stuck a peacock feather into the braid, loving the pop of color against my reddish-brown hair.

In my small kitchen, I made some dark coffee and stirred some sugar into it. Even magic required a little caffeine boost, especially when fighting last night's bad decisions. I felt a shift in the air, and awareness shivered through my body as I sensed someone approaching. That was one of the benefits of being out here, too. The busyness and sounds of the city overwhelmed my senses and made it harder to key into the heightened instincts beneath the surface of my skin.

I chugged the coffee, before straightening my shoulders and fixing a smile on my face. Mystery and intrigue was one thing, scary and grumpy was another. I wanted people to feel safe enough to visit me. And truthfully, I craved the small moments of interaction.

A tentative knock sounded on my door. I walked across the small space, and inhaled deeply before opening the door.

"Welcome to Florian's Ferns & Flora Apothecary. Please come in." I bowed and held my arm open, inviting them in. It was all about the flare, creating an environment that helped the customers get into the mindset, ready to believe that I could help them. If there was doubt, it would be harder for the magic to work.

The young man, maybe around twenty, who'd called me to make the appointment took a cautious step into my home. His eyes glanced around, taking in all of the decor

and artifacts, before landing on me, returning my welcoming smile with a slight one of his own.

“Hi, I’m James. Um, thank you for meeting with me. I’m at a loss, and I heard that you were able to do things that others couldn’t.”

“Sure, have a seat, and tell me what you’re looking for.” I led him to the wooden stools in front of the bar. Once he sat down, his eyes darting around once more, I walked around the bar to stand in front of him. His gaze returned to me, scanning over me, and lingering on the feather in my hair. I could see him relax, likely happy to see that there weren’t any carcasses or snakes creeping around. Humane, mystical, and friendly, that was how I tried to do things.

“Well, you see the thing is...I have this condition, and the doctors won’t help me. They say it’s cosmetic. Which...yeah, but it also makes me feel really self-conscious, and it makes it hard to be, um, well, intimate.”

I offered him a gentle smile, ignoring the twinge of pain in my head. “I understand, and I’m sorry that you haven’t been able to get the help you needed. How about you let me see what it is we’re dealing with, so I can figure out the best treatment for you?”

His cheeks pinked and his eyes turned downward. “It’s kind of awkward.”

I patted his hand to reassure him, he stiffened but didn't pull away. “This is a judgment-free space, alright? You came here for my help, but that help is limited unless I know what is needed.”

He gave a subtle nod before standing up. His fingers went to the zipper of his pants, but he froze, eyes darting to the front door.

“It's safe, James. I don't have anyone else scheduled, but I would know if anyone were to approach.”

He blew out a heavy breath. “Okay.”

While he unzipped his pants, I came around the bar and sat on the stool beside him. His cheeks flamed red, when he lowered his pants, revealing his briefs beneath.

At the edge of the underwear on his inner thigh was a dark area on his skin. I thought it was a mole at first until I noticed a pattern.

“Is it okay if I get a closer look?”

James mumbled “yes” and looked up at the ceiling while I knelt before him, clearly uncomfortable with the entire situation. I looked at the spot and saw...scales.

“Hmm.” I stood up again and put some distance between us to allow him to recover from the embarrassment. “You can fix your clothes.”

“Do you know what it is? Can you help me?” Desperation mixed with his discomfort as he asked.

I'd seen something similar. It was very rare, but it could become permanent or possibly grow. “Have you been in the Eastern woods?”

His eyes grew wide. “I have! My...friend and I went exploring.”

I simply nodded and began collecting jars from the glass cabinet. “The good news is I can help. But my suggestion would be to stay away from the bluish-brown toadstools near the stream.”

They typically clung to trees, but anything with a source of water would do, and humans contained a lot of water. As far as I knew there were no harmful side effects besides the cosmetic appearance, and clearly the medicine practitioners didn't know what to do with it. It sunk its roots deep into the skin, spreading like the long roots of giant trees, making removal nearly impossible. The only way to get it to leave was to ask it.

He watched me with pure fascination as I mixed several herbs and flowers into a potpourri. It didn't do anything but smell nice. From beneath the bar, I grabbed a vegan leather pouch and a length of cord, and poured the potpourri into it.

As I stirred, I closed my eyes and reached out with my magic. Invisible tendrils stretched between us and I willed them to the fungal growth. I focused hard and sent images of tall, healthy trees that would provide endless sustenance for the toadstool. I could feel the belief growing within James and that fueled the intent I sent, telling the toadstool that it would find a better home somewhere else. When I felt a little give from it, I knew my magic had reached it. I thanked the toadstool, as it was simply trying to survive.

When I opened my eyes, I offered him a smile. “Wear this around your neck for a week, and sleep with your legs exposed and it should go away. If it doesn't, come back and see me.”

The young man's eyes shone with hope. He took the pouch from me and hurriedly fastened it around his neck. Shaking my hand rapidly, he said, “Thank you ever so much! I can't tell you what this means to me. I've been with someone for a while and we've been, um...wanting to take things further, but I was too afraid of what she would think if she saw it.”

“Give it a little time and keep that pouch. But in the meantime, there are plenty of other fun ways to enjoy each other.” I gave him a wink.

His cheeks flushed bright pink again. “Um, right, well, thanks again.”

James paid me and left clutching the pouch to his chest. People liked something tangible, things they could touch or see, or have actual steps to take. They trusted that a lot more than what they couldn't see. Especially now with how far technology had advanced, magic was this mysterious thing of the past that didn't feel real to most. But home remedies, potions, balms, teas-these were things that made sense in the modern world.

I wiped down the bar and put the jars away. With no other clients planned for the day, I decided to work on inventorying my supplies. Most of the flowers and herbs I collected nearby, though I went deeper into the woods than most, so I could find more exotic-looking ingredients.

When I was working through my second cabinet, I felt a strange stirring within me. Someone was near, but it wasn't the usual sensation I felt. There was a tug deep in my heart, practically knocking the wind out of me.

The light knock on the door pounded in my chest like a marching band. I was frozen in place, unable to step toward the door to greet whoever was there.

“Yes?” I squeaked out. Forcing a cough to clear my throat, I tried again, louder. “Yes? Who is it?”

A deep, muffled voice sounded through the door. “I'd rather not say, but I need your help.”

Reaching out, I tested the intention of the man at the door. I didn't sense any ill will, but I felt uncertainty, wariness, fear, and something strangely familiar that paralyzed me.

“Come in!” I shouted, with my hands braced on the bar for support. I tried to force a smile past the headache and the unsteadiness I felt.

The door opened carefully and a tall figure stepped through the door, face concealed by the hood of his coat. My heart raced in my aching chest. After the door closed, he pushed the hood off his face, and I felt all the oxygen leave my body, and with it a name I hadn’t said in twenty years. “Mal?”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:54 am

Getting out of the palace had been a Herculean feat. It would have been difficult any time, but especially after the announcement that was made yesterday. I'd known it was coming, but now that it was here, I felt this weight pushing down on me. Though I'd spent my entire life preparing for this moment, it suddenly became real.

On top of the pressure I felt, there was something insidious lurking, too. At first, I thought it was simply anxiety over the changes ahead of me, but that anxiety started manifesting into situations that happened, and kept happening, that were out of my control. It wasn't only in my head, but if I tried to tell someone, it would sound superficial or ludicrous. Whatever was happening to me was getting worse. Finding someone to approach about it had been a conundrum.

One name surfaced, though. A name from my past. A name that brought longing and sadness. Florian . I'd heard the name mentioned in whispers as a healer who lived in the Purlieu region . Was it the same I'd known as a child? The same I'd played with and shared secrets with?

The name played through my head, the past tumbling along with it, bringing back the loss I felt when he disappeared from my life. He was the one thing I had that let me feel like a regular person. Someone who could laugh and have fun and share in the quiet of the dark with. And then he was gone, the light that shone from him ripped from my life. It left a hole that was never repaired.

One of my personal guards had become like a friend, but it wasn't the same. Oscar toed the line between his duty to protect me and trying to allow me some sort of autonomy, as much as an heir to a throne could have, which was almost none. I trusted him, though, and when I told him I had a confidential task, he made me wear a

tracker, and promised to come after me with the full force of the guard if I wasn't back at a certain time. It was the best I could hope for. I knew there was a lot of risk in going out unprotected.

Not everyone loved the royal family. If I were to end up in the wrong person's sights, it could put the entire future of our rule in jeopardy. No pressure .

I wore plain clothes and a hooded coat, keeping my head down. I'd taken a taxi to the edge of the city and from there followed the directions to a local pub where I was told the healer frequented. At the pub, I was given directions to his cottage.

His location wasn't a secret, but everything on my phone was monitored, and I didn't want to invite any questions I preferred not to answer. I'd left my phone at home, too. The tracker in my pocket was the only thing I'd brought. That and some money in case I needed it. It felt strange to carry paper money. It wasn't something I ever had on me. Never had a need for it, really.

With years spent learning to speak in public or conversationally, I had prepared what I would say, but everything fell out of my head when I heard my nickname hiss out of him. I stared, eyes locked on a face that was familiar and not at the same time. Time and maturity had changed it, sharpening the features.

His green eyes were the same I remembered, but his cheeks thinner and jaw more square than the young, childlike face I'd shared a pillow with. His hair was long, hanging down past his shoulders. The light of the lamps in his cottage made the red strands glow against the brown, his hair a lovely contrast against his fair skin. He wore a braid wrapped around his crown, making him look more of a royal than I felt. And the feather in his hair was the perfect accent. I let my eyes slide down to see the cinched waist of the corset creating an enticing shape as it flared up to a flat chest. Crowns , he was gorgeous.

Florian's expression changed, a mask sliding into place. He coughed and cleared his throat before dipping his head. "How can I help you, Your Royal Highness?"

I shook my head and forced words through my tight throat. "You don't have to do that. Please."

Taking careful steps, I closed the distance between us, as longing and pain filled me equally. I couldn't believe he was here, in front of me, after all these years. And damn, he grew up. I mean, of course he had, as did I, but I didn't expect to be faced with the most beautiful man I'd ever seen. That he was someone I once loved was hard to wrap my head around.

Florian's forced smile faltered. "What are you doing here?"

I reached out to touch his hand, but he pulled it back, making my heart twinge with pain. "Flor. Florian. I think someone might be trying to interfere with my coronation."

His eyes went wide. "Your coronation? What the fuck? When did that happen?"

"Well, it hasn't yet. But it was just announced...surely you've heard, it was all over the news yesterday."

"Ah. So that's what that was about. I, uh, stayed away from the news yesterday."

"Oh. Well, yes. My mother will be retiring, and I was announced officially as her successor, and the coronation ceremony will take place in a month."

Florian blew out a whistle as he folded his arms over his chest, his stance clearly guarded, reminding me that he may look like the boy I remembered, but I didn't know the man before me.

“And you think someone is after you? Isn’t that what you have your guard for?” His tone had an edge to it, one I didn't understand.

I shook my head and rubbed at the scar on my wrist. When we were seven, Flor and I had been climbing trees on palace grounds. A squirrel surprised me and I fell and broke my wrist. Flor stayed with me, his hand in my unbroken one, a source of comfort and strength, until I was whisked away by royal guards. I had to have surgery to mend the bones, and pins had been inserted to stabilize them.

Florian’s features softened slightly as I played over the bumps where the pins had been, the same as I had after I had healed from that incident.

I straightened and put my hands at my side. “Well, the thing is, I can't prove anything. There hasn't been an outright attack, but weird things keep happening, and I think someone must be doing it to me.”

One perfectly-shaped brow arched high on his beautiful face. “Weird how?”

I bit my lip, an action that had been trained out of me as ‘unbecoming for a prince,’ but standing in front of my former best friend had all my old habits coming back. Florian’s green eyes locked on to my mouth, making my body warm under the attention.

“This is going to sound ridiculous.”

Florian uncrossed his arms and waved a hand around the room. “I'm a witch, Mal...Malachi, Prince Malachi, I can handle ridiculous.”

“You're a witch? Really a witch?”

“Last I checked, yeah.”

“Crowns! So the rumors are true?” I’d heard his name associated with the word, but I thought it was just one of those names people attributed to others.

“Depends on the rumors.” Florian buffed his nails against his purple shirt in a nonchalant manner.

I blew out a breath. “Okay, then I came to the right person.”

Curiosity and concern filled his eyes, and for a moment I caught a glimpse of the boy I’d shared everything with. Even our first kiss, because who better to practice with than your best friend. Thinking back at how naive and clueless I was, and how that kiss meant a lot more than I expected it to, I couldn’t help the smile that stretched my lips.

Florian offered me a tentative smile in return. That simple action gave me a glimmer of hope. Maybe there was something that could be repaired or rebuilt, even if I didn’t know why he’d left me and never looked back.

He squinted and stared, his gaze on my mouth no longer held the same hint of longing that had been there before. “Um, sorry, but it looks like you have something in your teeth.”

I gasped and threw a hand up to cover my mouth. “Crowns! I, well, it’s parsley.”

The man across from me snorted with amusement. It was bad enough this had happened in front of dignitaries, but somehow even more mortifying with this beautiful man. “Do you need a toothpick?”

I sat on one of the wooden stools with a harrumph, still using my hand in front of my mouth. “No, it won’t help. It’s been weeks. Every time I smile...parsley. I don’t even remember eating parsley.”

Florian came around the bar and sat at the stool beside me. His nearness made my heart gallop in my chest. He looked like he wanted to touch me but folded his hands instead. “What are you saying, exactly?”

“I'm saying, I think someone did this to me somehow. It was a nuisance, at first, but now it's a real problem. Every public appearance, every meeting with an ambassador: parsley. How can I portray myself as a trustworthy leader if I'm always seen with flecks of green in my teeth? It's either that or never smile, but no one wants a leader who seems unaffected or above it all.”

Florian's lips pursed before a laugh popped out of him. He laughed so hard, he snorted.

I narrowed my gaze at him. “This is serious.”

“Well, I can see why you didn't go to your guard. I don't know if they've been trained to fight against garnishes.”

I couldn't help but chuckle at how ridiculous it sounded. “Stop, it's not funny.”

“Oh, come on, show me that royal smile.”

I shook my head but did as he asked, giving him a big, toothy grin, to which he responded with another loud burst of laughter.

“I'm sorry, but that is funny. You look so ridiculous.” Florian hooted.

Even if it was at my expense, I had to admit it felt good to laugh. Better still to hear Florian laugh. Beneath the deeper voice and richer sound was the same laugh I'd known as a kid. That and having someone who wasn't afraid to mock me.

Florian's laughter settled. "I gotta give them credit for creativity, at least."

"Well, it's a PR nightmare. The media has all had to be paid to do touch-ups on the photos before they could be released. But there's more to it than that."

That brow arched once more. "Like what?"

"I don't know. Just a feeling, I guess."

That made Florian sit up, his expression growing serious. "Feelings can be very telling and shouldn't be ignored."

"So...can you help me?"

He bobbed his head slowly. "It's possible. Give me your hands."

Florian held his hands out to me, and I placed mine on top of his. Static electricity sparked between us, visible arcs of light on our skin. Florian sucked in a sharp breath, and I resisted the urge to flinch back, letting my hands rest on his.

He closed his eyes in concentration, leaving me to stare at him, taking in every detail of his perfect face. Among the beauty of his pink lips and high cheekbones, there was a hint of pain etched into the corner of his eyes. Weariness, too. What had happened to him in all these years? What had his life been like? As hurt as I'd been that he left me, I hated the thought of him struggling.

"Relax your mind, Mal. I can feel your turmoil, and it's making it hard for me to focus."

I blew out a breath and closed my eyes, trying not to think about the man before me, which, with the acute awareness of his presence, was much harder than it should be.

When I inhaled through my nose, trying to calm myself, it was his scent that filled me. A woody scent mixed with something light and citrusy. It made me think of the sun shining through the forest, a light in the dark. It had been the same when we were kids. He was the light in my isolated world.

A buzz hummed beneath my skin, like something reaching into me. It should have been alarming, but what I felt was comforting and warm. Florian's hands squeezed mine for a moment, before he suddenly dropped them, breaking the connection.

My eyes flew open, and I saw him scooting as far back as he could on the stool, a confused, hurt expression on his face. Florian wiped his hands over his pants. My stomach sank at the change in him, already missing the light-hearted moment a few minutes ago, or the calm I felt at his touch.

"What's wrong?"

He shook his head and stood up, walking around the bar, as if he needed it to act as a barrier between us. "I, um, I think I found it."

"Found what, exactly?"

"I believe it's a charm, perhaps. It's definitely an outside influence."

My lips turned down at the thought. So I wasn't being paranoid. Someone was doing this to me. "Is there anything you can do?"

Florian drew in a long, slow breath, and I noticed the knuckles on his hands looked white as he braced himself on the counter. Was my presence really that upsetting to him? Or was it what he found?

"I did it."

“Wait. What?”

Florian turned away from me and straightened a few jars in the cabinet behind him. Not looking at me, he said, “I was able to undo the charm. You should be parsley-free.”

The tracker buzzed in my pocket, a reminder that my time would be up soon, and if I didn’t return to the palace immediately, every guard in the region would crash down on my location to ensure my safety. I couldn’t have them do that to Florian’s place.

“You’re sure?”

He glanced over his shoulder at me, a solemn look in his eyes. “Yes.”

“Okay, that’s great! Thank you. I don’t know how to show you how grateful I am.” I stood, putting my hands in my pockets, unsure of what to do, or where things went wrong.

Florian faced me once more, arms crossed over his chest, guarding himself once more. He offered me a rueful smile. “Just be careful. There’s something that remains, a tether that I can’t reach.”

“If anything else happens, can I contact you?” Hope and dread swirled around within me. I wanted to go to him and hug him, touch him, something, to feel the man who grew out of the boy I once loved. There had been a glimpse of the past between us, the laughing and teasing, but it had vanished all too quickly, just as he had. After twenty years, I finally stood before him again, and I hated to think it would be the last time.

He bobbed his head once, as though he didn’t want to speak.

Throwing my coat's hood back over my head, I looked at him from beneath it, trying to memorize every feature. "Thank you...friend. It was really good to see you again."

I wasn't sure if he was going to reply, but then he croaked out, "You, too, Mal."

My heart clenched tight as I hurried to return to the palace as quickly as possible. I didn't understand what just happened or why he grew distant once more. Was it something I did? Something I said? I replayed the entire encounter in my head, trying to pinpoint where it all went wrong. The last thing I felt with him was the warmth that seeped into me and the peace that came with it. Surely, he must have sensed it, too? It seemed too big for it to have affected only me. But then...I had a charm on me, maybe I couldn't trust my feelings. A charm. That should be the more concerning part of the evening, not the strangeness with Florian.

Someone had placed a charm on me, albeit a quirky one, but a charm nonetheless. Something that was beyond my control. If they could do that to me without me noticing, what else might happen?

These thoughts plagued me on my way home. I made it back through the gate as the tracker started buzzing wildly in my pocket. Oscar was at the gate, looking at his phone, when he glanced up and saw me. He tsked and shook his head when I approached.

"Cutting it close, aren't you?"

"More so than I meant to, but I'm back, and everything is fine." It wasn't, but fine enough.

"Did you get what you needed?" Oscar asked, assessing me for any damage.

"Mostly." I had gone without any expectations for Florian, but now I was left with

this ache at having left him. He said he'd been able to undo the parsley curse, but I hadn't checked yet. Pushing the weird feelings over my former friend down, I put on my prince mask and forced a smile. "How do I look?"

Oscar shrugged, not sure how to answer. "You look...handsome?"

"Anything in my teeth?" I stretched my lips as wide as they would go and leaned my head toward him.

"No, sir. Not that I can see."

Relief poured through me, well, at least that was one less thing to worry about. "Perfect. Thank you. And thanks for your help tonight, I know you went out on a limb for me."

"Not sure it will happen again, Your Royal Highness ." He emphasized my title to show me he was speaking to me as my position dictated, no longer as a friend. "The risk is too great, especially now."

I nodded, feeling the walls of the palace closing in on me once more. "Understood. I'll be retiring for the night. Thank you."

He dipped his head, but instead of leaving me, he escorted me to my room. The momentary freedom I felt tonight was gone. I was back, a prisoner in my own life. Surrounded but alone.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:54 am

As soon as he left, I slumped to the floor and leaned against the cabinet, my legs no longer able to hold me steady. In a short time, I had experienced a huge ebb and flow of emotions, pushing and pulling like the tide. It tossed me about like a crashing wave, leaving me unsure of how to reach the surface. Did I swim up or down or sideways or let it take me away?

I'd seen his face countless times since I left the palace. I had watched him grow and age in public view as did the rest of the nation, but it couldn't compare to seeing him in person. To seeing those rich golden eyes, to hearing his voice and his laugh. It sent me right back, back to the time when he was the person I could rely on above anyone else. The boy who had giggled against my lips when we first pressed them together.

He was here, before me, no longer the child of my past, but the man who would be king. Malachi was tall, much taller than I thought he would be. And handsome, devastatingly so. With a strong jaw, rich brown eyes, short trimmed curly hair, and rosy taupe lips. Lips that I focused on longer than I should have.

It would have been hard enough to see him again if that was all it had been. When I held his hands and my magic reached out to him, it was met with a sense of belonging that had been overwhelming. Something in Mal— Malachi —connected to me. It was the same, strange pull I felt when he'd been outside my door, only ten times stronger. So strong that it had been a challenge to seek out the charm that had caused his herbal affliction. It should have been a much simpler task.

Despite my distraction, there was another layer to the charm. A tether, as I'd told Malachi. If I hadn't felt so unsteady by the connection and the intense waves of nostalgia, I might have been able to trace it better, but my mind was a mess and not

just because of the hangover that returned with a vengeance after Malachi left.

I should hate him for coming here when he needed something from me, for waiting this long to seek me out, but I couldn't, not when I'd dreamt of seeing him and talking to him my entire adult life. All of the anger and sadness I fought on a daily basis faltered at the sound of his laugh and his smile, parsley and all.

His coronation . It had always been the path that was set out before him. Even as a small child, he was told that he would one day lead the nation. A concept that was as much fairytale as witches were when we were young. And yet, here we were.

It wouldn't do me any good to stay in a heap on the ground. I needed to shake all of this weirdness off. After a cup of tea, I returned to my inventory, doing everything I could not to think about the prince, but no matter the jars I cataloged or the aromatic herbs I smelled, I couldn't get him off my mind.

Having spent the night purposely avoiding the queen's announcement, I now knew the gist of it, and my curiosity was piqued. Searching on my phone, I found a clip of the press release. Before I could watch it, I went to my bedroom, unlaced the corset, and kicked off my boots, falling into bed with my phone.

Taking a deep breath, I braced myself and hit play, the queen's face filling the screen. Her hair was almost completely white now. She seemed to have aged quite a bit since the late king's passing ten years ago. In the video, Malachi stood just behind her on the right side, with his lips pressed into a thin line, looking far too serious for his beautiful face.

The queen announced her retirement, choosing to step aside while she was of sound mind and body to let her son take her place. Reporters started shouting questions as the crowd went wild. She regally and calmly hushed them with her hand and asked Malachi to step forward.

He was in full regalia. A sharp suit with green fringed epaulets, a golden sash across his chest, and a sword hanging at his side. With the advancement of weaponry and technology, the sword was more symbolic than anything, but I had to admit, he looked pretty hot with it. Malachi gave a very moving speech, one that would have had me cheering if I had any sense of patriotism. I was too hurt, too jaded, to loyally follow our leaders, especially since I had been personally betrayed by those I was closest to. If anyone could change things though, perhaps it could be Malachi...Mal. I remembered the idealism and bold concepts he'd had as a child. I had to wonder how much of that had been programmed out of him.

At the end of his speech, he smiled. A fleck of green visible for only a fraction of a second before it was filtered or blurred out. I'd only seen it because I knew it would be there. I couldn't help but laugh. It seemed so harmless, childish really, but public figures, and leaders in particular, were scrutinized over the smallest things. Any person who saw it might have chuckled or thought it ridiculous, but there was something deeper at work.

I turned off the video, once again hit with many conflicting emotions. The sound of his laughter echoed in my mind, bringing a smile to my face. Fuck, I'd really missed it.

Was it wrong of me to hope something else would happen? Something that would bring him to my door one more time? I didn't wish him any ill will, but how could I go back to not seeing him or hearing him again after twenty years without. Anticipation bubbled within me, giving me a sense that today wouldn't be the last time, but I didn't expect it to happen so soon.

The next morning, after a restless night of reaching for the friend whose bed I once shared only to find it emptier than it ever had been, my phone rang with a number I didn't recognize. Groggy but no longer nursing a hangover, I considered ignoring it, but an alertness crawled under my skin. I'd long ago learned to answer when my

magic was agitated.

“Ferns & Flora Apothecary.”

“Florian?” The whispered voice had me sitting straight up in bed, my mind and body fully waking in that instant.

Forgetting formalities, I bit out, “Mal? Are you okay?”

“I am, yes. I think so. Actually, I’m not sure.” He spoke in a hushed tone, making me wonder if he was hiding. What was he hiding from? Or who? Reporters often pondered on love interests for the most sought-after man in the nation. Did he have a lover that wasn’t publicly known? The thought of it soured in my belly. “What’s going on? Are you in danger?”

A long pause had my instincts flaring, and I jumped out of bed, getting dressed quickly while I kept the phone to my ear.

“No, not necessarily. But I’m having some difficulty, and I wonder if it is another... thing like yesterday or just some sort of cosmic mishap.”

Cryptic and not much to go on. “Can you give me a little more information?”

“Ah. Well, not...over the phone.”

“I’m home if you’d like to come back to my cottage.” I didn’t know what else to do, especially with how little I knew. Concern about the unknown swirled with eagerness to see him again. I wished I could remain stronger when it came to him, but I couldn’t deny that the small taste of his presence already had me longing for more.

“It was hard enough for me to leave the palace grounds last night. I’m under strict

guard, even more so since the announcement.” I could hear him take a deep breath, and when he spoke, there was a pained tone to his whisper. “I know you hate it here, but is there any chance you could come?”

The question sat like a boulder in my gut. “To the palace?”

“Please, Flor?”

Fuck ! My phone fell to the bed as I stood, placing my hands on my head. I’d spent a decade wishing to return and another wishing to never have to set eyes on the place again. Now I was stuck in the middle feeling both the pull and the repulsion to it. I would never even consider it if it weren’t for the fact that the prince had asked. Only, it wasn’t because he was royalty, it was because it was him . My curiosity and yearning outweighed the pain of the past. If this was my chance to see Malachi again, to help him, I had to take it.

I heard my name called from the phone when I picked it back up. Mal was whisper-shouting. “Florian!”

“Yes. I’m here. I’ll do it.”

I heard an uplift in his tone. “You’ll come?”

“I will.”

“Thank you, truly.” The relief in his hoarse voice was palpable. I didn’t know if it was because he wanted to see me , or simply because he needed my help. Either way, I couldn’t resist.

“What do you want me to do?”

I could hear Malachi clicking his tongue in thought, much as he had when we were kids. “Do you remember where the service entrance is?”

Even all these years later, I could practically see the blueprint of the grounds in my mind. “I do.”

“Great. Go there and ask for Oscar. He's a palace guard. I'll let him know to look for you.”

“Okay. I guess I'll see you in a little while.” The call ended, and I stood in shock for a moment, trying to wrap my head around what I'd been asked to do. And that I actually had agreed.

After a few minutes, I shook myself off and resolved to get ready, but as I stared at my closet, I faced another conundrum: what to wear. Most of my clothing was of a similar aesthetic as I'd worn the day before. I'd felt Malachi's obvious interest as he'd taken me in, but if we were to have a clandestine meeting, then perhaps I needed to tone it down. The thought made me grimace. I may have dressed the part for others, but I liked it, too. If I was going to be the odd one out, then I would fucking own it. Now, to try to pretend not to be me, at a time when I was already going to the last place I wanted to be, I felt like I was selling out.

I was doing this for Mal. That was it. I could handle a little discomfort to help someone who, despite how much I tried to deny it, still held a piece of my heart. Fuck it! I grabbed a pair of jeans I usually wore when I foraged the forest for ingredients and threw on a long-sleeve black henley. Not knowing what I was getting into, I brushed my hair up into a ponytail before wrapping it around like a bun. The person who gazed back at me in the mirror wasn't the local witch, or healer, or mysterious hermit. He was just an average guy. It might suit my purpose for tonight, but I didn't feel like myself.

Though my clothing wasn't the only reason for that. I felt off. I had since Malachi was here. And since hearing his voice on the phone. A tug pulled my insides, urging me to get closer to him.

I followed that pull through the Purlieu, and the outskirts of the city, and to the heart of the capitol. When the palace came into view, the equally strong forces that both compelled me closer and told me to stay away, made my stomach roil.

"Stop!" I barked at the cab driver, desperate to get out of the car.

"Alright, but I'm charging you the full fare." He looked at me in the rearview mirror. "And if you hurl, it'll be extra."

"Whatever, just pull over."

The driver merged around traffic and pulled to the side of the road. I paid him, and exited the cab as quickly as possible, drawing in deep gulps of air, trying to calm the churning in my stomach.

It looked like I would have to walk the rest of the way, which was fine. The cool breeze felt good on my face and helped steady me. I always felt uneasy in the capitol anyway, though I hadn't been this far into the city in a long time. The noise, the pollution, the traffic, it all pressed in on my magic, making it harder to sense it. It was there—it was always with me—but it was easier to tap into when I could concentrate better and with nature closer at hand.

Step after step took me closer. News stories ran on a ticker at the bottom of the billboards, and Malachi's stern face was on a carousel of images along with the queen's and the construction project that had been underway for longer than I'd been out of the palace. A highway that had become the brunt of ridicule both by residents and from people in neighboring regions, especially with the promise of easing traffic

though it did nothing but make it worse.

The heavily-guarded main gate stood before me. A large wall formed the perimeter of the palace grounds with guard towers at regular intervals. It was covered in pink bougainvillea vines, making it beautifully deceptive. It looked pretty but had long thorns and could cause a rash if you brushed against it. A natural defense system.

A large iron gate sat open at the driveway entrance. It was always open during the day, except during times of crisis. Open didn't mean accessible though. It was symbolic. The royal family loved symbolism. An open gate was like an open door in an office building. To show that they are approachable and available for the people under their care, but that didn't mean anyone could simply walk in.

I took a left and followed the wall, careful not to walk too close to it, knowing it was monitored. Signs were posted along the wall that warned against loitering. I kept my head down and my hands in my pockets, focusing on breathing, while my feet guided me by memory. When a break in the sidewalk appeared before my vision, I looked up and saw a manned guard shack in front of a closed, vine-covered gate. It was made to be less conspicuous, to blend in with the walls.

This was not the symbolic opening to the people. The service entrance was used for deliveries and workers but was also one of the few exits for the royal family or revered guests, allowing them to come and go with less attention.

I stopped long enough that it garnered the attention of the guard at the gate. He stepped out of the shack with a taser raised. Slowly withdrawing my hands from my pockets so he could see I wasn't pulling a weapon out, I lifted them above my head.

"Oi! No loitering. Please proceed away from the gate immediately." He took a few careful steps closer, watching my every move.

I really hoped Malachi's friend would come through. A small voice at the back of my mind wondered if I'd been set up. But with how Malachi had sounded on the phone, I believed him. "I'd like to speak to Oscar, please."

The guard's stance softened slightly, the taser lowering a few inches. "Come again?"

I kept my hands in the air, trying not to cause any alarm. I was second-guessing my apparel now, looking like a regular Joe, and wondering if my usual attire would be more or less suspicious than the serial killer look I currently donned.

"A guard named Oscar? I'm supposed to meet with him."

"Don't move. I'm going to call this in." He kept the taser pointed in my direction and his eyes locked on me while he reached for the radio at his shoulder. He was just about to call it in when a voice startled us both, and I could practically feel the twitch of the man's finger on the trigger. I closed my eyes, bracing for the inevitable shock that would come.

"Raul!" At the sound of his name, the guard relaxed slightly, as a man approached inside the gate. "It's okay. He's with me."

"What's going on, Oscar? This isn't protocol." Raul narrowed his eyes as they darted between the two of us.

"The order comes from Green Bird, and this is highly confidential. There will be no record, understood?"

Green Bird. I hadn't heard the codename since I was a kid. It was something I used to love teasing Malachi about. Not that he had any say in the matter, but it didn't make it any less fun. The name was used by security when trying to protect the royal family and other dignitaries, and not wanting to let their location or situation be known to

anyone that might be listening.

The taser was latched to the man's belt. "Understood."

With one more sidelong look at me, he walked back to the shack and pressed a buzzer that allowed a secret walk-through door to open in the wall next to the drive-thru gate. I heard the snick of the locks releasing and found the exact place where the hidden handle was beneath the pink flowers. Pushing my way in before Oscar could open it for me, shock at being inside the walls for the first time in twenty years had my feet freezing in place. It was...a lot.

Oscar shook me free from my paralysis with a firm squeeze on my shoulder. I could feel his assessing gaze roam over every inch of me. He led me toward the garden at the back of the palace, keeping us in the shadows as much as possible.

"I am sworn to protect His Highness at all costs, but it is not only duty that drives me. I care for him, too. If you do anything to hurt him or put him in harm's way, I will not hesitate to end you. Understood?" His words came out in a cold, clipped tone.

"Understood." It was the only response I needed and the only one I could manage as my feet stepped on earth they hadn't touched since I was a child. The smells and sounds hit me viscerally, nearly overwhelming me with sensory memories. I didn't realize I'd stopped walking until Oscar turned around and stepped into my face.

"This isn't a tour. I've already told the prince that I am not in favor of this meeting, but he insisted. If you want to see the palace, sign in through the front gate and pay for a tour guide."

"I don't need one. I've seen it." Lived within these very walls for a third of my life.

One of his brows arched high in curiosity, but he said nothing as he turned around

and led me at a quick pace to the private gardens. There were few places on the grounds that were safe from prying eyes, but the queen's garden wasn't somewhere anyone was granted access to, unless invited by one of the immediate family. It was also one area where palace guards didn't patrol. A small haven in a world filled with people watching everything you did.

Oscar showed me to the side entrance, but stepped aside indicating for me to pass. "Do not think that I am not near enough to respond if you even blink weirdly at the prince."

I dipped my head in understanding. It was comforting to know that he was well-protected, but it also served as a reminder of how stifling it was here. It was something I often thought about when I reflected back to my childhood. As a kid, I didn't notice as much. It was simply what I'd grown used to, and the games Mal and I would play to get around it. Through adult eyes, I saw it much differently.

Now, looking around the garden, it was strange to see it from a different perspective. I wasn't the tallest man, but much taller than I'd been when we played hide and seek here. The bushes seemed smaller, the statuary not so monumental.

The gazebo in the center of the garden had statues of former rulers on each side. Malachi's ancestors. His family had ruled the nation for two hundred years. I couldn't imagine a family history that went that far back. To have lived in the same house as the five generations that came before. But then I had no family history, at least none that I knew.

I walked into the gazebo and sat on the curved marble bench, unable to swing my legs as I had the last time I sat upon it. It was beyond surreal to be here again. For as long as I tried to hide from the image of the palace, being within its walls brought a sense of longing. Footsteps approached and that intense pull I felt yanked me from my reminiscing.

“Flor?” Malachi whispered behind me.

I turned in my seat to see him approaching cautiously. When he saw my face, he visibly relaxed, though his eyes drifted to the bun on top of my head for a moment before returning to my face. He offered me a sheepish smile.

“Your highness?” I dipped my head in a slight bow.

Malachi waved it off before rushing into the gazebo to sit beside me. His thigh was mere centimeters away from mine, and I could feel heat radiate from him. I fought the urge to move closer, needing to touch him as my magic reached for him.

“I told you already, you don’t need to be formal with me,” he said in a soft tone.

I indicated to the garden around us. “I kind of feel like I do. Look around us.”

Malachi pursed his lips, but continued speaking quietly. “There was a time when you didn’t care about the surroundings here.”

The statement made me put my guard up, and I slid sideways, putting a little more space between me and the prince. “Well, a lot has changed.”

His lips turned down, and he rubbed the scar on his wrist. I was torn between the need to comfort him and the reminder of how my time here had ended.

“Thanks for coming. I am no longer able to leave the palace without an escort, but I’m sorry if this is uncomfortable for you.”

“Why are you whispering? Are you worried about being overheard? Is this garden no longer private?” I sent my magic out to see if I could sense anyone’s presence or any cameras or equipment. All I felt in the vicinity was him. But he flooded all of my

senses, making it hard to focus beyond that.

Malachi opened his mouth to respond before sighing and lowering his voice. “No. We are safe. But I think this might be part of my...charm problem.”

I turned to face him, tucking one of my legs under the other. “What do you mean? Is your voice gone?”

He shook his head. “No, not gone, but...”

I sat in suspense waiting for him to finish. When it seemed he wasn’t going to, I softened. “I’m here, okay? I may not be thrilled about where we are, but I’m with you. Whatever it is, just tell me.”

Malachi coughed, as if trying to clear his throat, and when he spoke at a regular volume, it sounded loud in the quiet around us. “When I woke up this morning, I...” whatever he was about to say was cut off by a loud croaking sound. If I hadn’t been staring right at him, I would have looked around for a bullfrog.

The man across from me immediately closed his mouth and the sound stopped.

I stared at him with wide eyes. “What was that?”

He pressed his lips together and a slight pink color rose in his golden skin that enhanced his already warm undertones. His voice returned to a whisper when he spoke again. “When I woke up this morning, I felt like I couldn’t breathe, like something was stuck in my throat. I kept trying to clear it, but it didn’t help. And when I talked...that happened. It seems okay when I whisper, but any louder than this and it’s not good.”

“So you have...a f rog in your throat?” I asked carefully, trying to mask my

amusement.

He shrugged. “It seems so. Please tell me you can help with this. I can’t very well go on whispering forever, and I hate to think what might happen at the dinner party tonight.”

I snorted at the thought. “Sorry, but that sounds entertaining as hell. Probably far better than any normal dinner party. I would love to be a fly on the wall to see all the uppity-ups get croaked at.”

Malachi’s eyes twinkled with humor even as color deepened on his face. “There are a few I wouldn’t mind cutting off and leaving them speechless.”

“Tell me who and what you would say.”

He got to his feet and held the front of his shirt as if it were the lapel of a jacket. It was only then I took in his casual attire. The tee was probably some sort of luxurious material, but it was a simple white shirt and he wore gray sweatpants. Sweats that left nothing to the imagination. In all the clips I’d caught of him on social media or on the news over the years, I’d never seen him dressed down. Malachi always at least had a suit on for public appearance. Seeing him like this made that longing from so long ago build again, only with very adult interest added to it. Pushing attraction aside, it was nice to get to have those quiet moments with him that were only us. For an instant it felt like that again.

Malachi lifted his chin and spoke in full volume. “Excuse me, Mr. VanDerGelder, but I would have to disagree with your thoughts about the working wage. Burropp !”

I clapped a hand in front of my mouth, doing nothing to conceal the laugh that burst out of me at the loud inhuman croak that came from him. Malachi’s eyes flashed at the sound of my laughter, and a crooked smile appeared on his beautiful face. This

one felt more genuine than the smile he used for speeches.

“Lady Fairchild, you have made a serious miscalculation in siding with the burropp party, whose beliefs work against single women as yourself.”

A grin stretched my lips as I applauded. Malachi gave a full bow before sitting back down beside me. “Well done. I’m not sure it’s really that much of a concern.”

Malachi shot me a glance before chuckling. “It could prove useful.”

I faced him and wondered what it was like to talk to all of these powerful people. “Would you ever do that?”

Malachi twisted toward me and said, “Do what? Burropp .”

His mouth opened wide to let out the bellowing croak, making me laugh. I pushed against his arm playfully. “Stop it.”

He stared at me with wonder, as if he was captivated by me. His eyes drifted up to my hair again. When he spoke, he whispered, to hold back the croaking, but it made it feel more intimate, too. “I really liked it when you wore it down.”

I felt my magic hum beneath my skin at the comment, and my fingers itched to take the elastic band out and let it fall over my shoulders. Forcing my hands to stay in place, I gave him a soft smile. “I wasn’t sure how careful I needed to be, so I went for blending in as much as I could.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to drag you out here like this. Do you think you can help me again?”

“I can try. But I want to know something first.” I was certain I could help him, but I

wanted to see if any of the boy I once knew was still there, or if he was as much a stranger as he sometimes felt.

Malachi dipped his head. “Yes?”

“Those people at your party. Would you actually tell them those things? Would you stand up for what you believe in?”

Malchi’s lips pressed into a thin line. “It’s complicated. As prince, I am powerless, merely a representative of the crown. A pawn.”

“And when you’re king?”

He drew in a deep breath and turned away to look out at the garden. “I hope so. I want to be. I want to be the kind of leader who is passionate about his people and the matters that affect them. What good is a ruler who is only looking out for their own interests? I know my parents have had to make some difficult decisions during their time, and I haven’t agreed with many of them, but it’s hard to say what you’ll do when you’re not the one who had to make them.”

At the mention of his parents, I felt that pain that had been present for so long returning, pressing in on my chest. “There are difficult decisions, and then there are cruel ones.”

Malachi looked at me. “Cruel? I don’t ever want to be that. It’s a lot of pressure, though, a lot of influences, but I want to stay true to myself. I am going to try really hard to do so.”

I placed my hand on his leg, ignoring the way his muscular thigh felt beneath my touch. “You will. If you are anything like my best friend from childhood, you will. Let your heart guide you, Malachi. It’s a good one.”

His brows lifted and eyes shone with hope. “You think so?”

As much as I wanted to hate him—had spent years trying to—I couldn’t. “Yes. I do. I can feel it.”

We shared a soft smile, and his hand rested over mine. I let my magic reach out through our connection. Malachi’s eyes slid closed, and his smile grew. “That feels really good when you do that.”

I always wondered if people could sense it. Most didn’t react when I used my magic, too focused on whatever task I was doing to create a potion or balm for them. “What does it feel like to you?”

He hummed softly. “Like sunshine.” Malachi’s face tilted up as if he were soaking in the sun. His long neck stretched, looking so very lovely. Beautiful. The man was beautiful. While his head was back, I searched his body, guiding my magic to move through him for the source of the charm. At the base of his throat, beneath his Adam’s apple, I could sense a shape, magical in substance, not physical. It pushed back against me, and I realized I would have to work a little harder to undo it.

“Can I touch your throat?”

Malachi’s eyes opened, and he gave me a questioning look, but nodded slightly. “Yes.”

I climbed off the bench, needing a better angle, and knelt in front of him, trying to ignore the heat that stirred at the position. “This might be a little uncomfortable, but I need to focus my magic. If I hurt you, please let me know, and I’ll stop.”

Malachi whispered, “okay,” before leaning his head back to give me better access. With one hand on his leg for balance, I reached up and placed my hand at the base of

his throat, fingers wrapping around gently. I closed my eyes and pushed my magic out. It met resistance and I strained, my hand squeezing lightly, not enough to bruise him. I could feel the moment it started to give and the charm began to dislodge itself from Malachi.

He coughed, and I could feel his body tense, but he could no longer speak. Not with the mystical frog climbing up his throat.

“It’s okay. It’s almost over, I promise.” I kept pushing, urging it to move. It was then I heard a noise. A gate opened, but I couldn’t stop, not now. If I did, it might block his airways for how hard the charm was trying to latch on.

“Your highness? Are you alright?” The guard, Oscar, shouted.

Shit ! The timing could not have been worse. I had to keep going. I couldn’t let him break my concentration. I felt Malachi’s hand land on my shoulder, gripping it tight as panic started to rise in him.

“Hold on, Mal. It’s a little stronger than I thought, but I’ve almost got it.” I could feel it ascend, could feel Mal’s throat muscles trying to force it back down with the instinct to swallow. “I need you to relax, Mal.”

Footsteps pounded forward. “Oi! What are you doing?”

Fuck ! I knew this didn’t look good. With my hand around the prince’s neck, it probably looked like I was strangling him. “I’m...helping...him.” I breathed out slowly, not looking at the guard, trying not to lose my hold on the enchantment.

I could hear a weapon being drawn. “Unhand him and back away this instant, or I swear I will make sure no one ever sees you again.”

Malachi waved a frantic hand at him, trying to get the guard to back down, while I gave an extra push of my magic. The charm dislodged at last, expelling from his body. Malachi coughed and gasped, and I fell back from the exhaustion of the effort. He bent over, hacking.

The guard rushed toward me and grabbed me, pinning my hands behind my back. Weariness and dizziness swarmed me, and I was too disoriented to fight back.

“Wait!” Malachi rasped before coughing once more.

“Sir?”

Malachi stood up, and when he spoke, he had a stronger voice. A stronger, frogless voice. “Don’t hurt him!”

“He was choking you, sir.”

“No! No, he wasn’t. He was helping me, just like he said. Release him.”

The guard hesitated for a moment before letting my arms go, but he stayed close to me, showing he was ready to act if he thought I was a threat.

Malachi reached down and helped me to my feet. I wobbled slightly, and his arm wrapped around my waist to steady me. “Are you alright?”

I leaned against him, trusting him to keep me upright. “Yes. It just put up more of a fight than I expected.”

He stared down at me and swept a thumb across my cheek, uncaring that his guard was watching us. “Thank you.”

Feeling a little more steady on my feet, I stood upright. “My pleasure.”

“Can someone please explain what just happened?” Oscar looked between us, confusion and concern on his face.

I slid a glance to Malachi. It was up to him what he wanted to share. I knew the guard must have been a trusted one who seemed to care a great deal for Malachi, but I didn’t know how much he was comfortable telling him.

“Florian is an old friend, Oscar.”

“And you let all of your friends choke you? No offense if you are into that, but it seems something like that should be kept to the bedroom and not in the queen’s garden.”

I coughed out a laugh as color rose in Malachi’s cheeks. “Florian also happens to be a distinguished healer.”

“A healer? What’s wrong? Do I need to call for a doctor?” Oscar shifted, stepping closer to Malachi.

“Uh, well, Florian isn’t a typical healer. He has special talents.”

The guard quirked a brow. “What does that mean exactly?”

“The prince is being polite. He means I’m a witch,” I said with a wink.

Oscar’s jaw dropped for a moment before he regained his composure. “A witch?”

“Yup.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “Do you have a problem with that?”

Magic was one of those things that existed but was rare enough people didn't know what to do with it, though there tended to be a general consensus of unease. Being in the palace, I didn't know if it was still seen as forbidden or even talked about.

Oscar matched my stance, not backing down but not on the attack either. "Only if you mean to bring harm to any member of the royal family."

Malachi stepped between us. "I asked him here, Oscar. He came because I needed him."

"I'm not sure I understand."

Malachi reached over to me, and I couldn't help but take his hand as if it was the most natural thing in the world, and there was a time it had been. "I can't explain it fully, but I've had an affliction of sorts, and it's not something that doctors can help."

The guard shot me a pointed look. "And you can?"

"I have so far and will continue to do everything I can if it's needed."

"How serious is this...affliction?" Oscar looked between us.

Malachi waved it off. "It's been minor nuisances, playful pranks really, but ones that would undermine my standing in public."

He tilted his head and looked over to the prince at my side. "Does this have anything to do with the parsley in your teeth?"

"Yes, but I am very much parsley-free now." Malachi grinned widely to show off his non-herbal smile.

“Okay. I meant to say something about it, but I didn’t want to embarrass you.”

“In the future, please tell me if I’m going to look like a fool in front of the public, not that there was anything I could have done about it.”

“Will do. But the choking, was that a part of this?”

“I wasn’t choking him. There was a magical entity of sorts that had latched onto Mal’s... His Highness ’s throat. I coaxed it to leave.”

The guard’s brow popped again. “That...sounds serious. What do you think is the cause of this? Do we need to be on alert?”

Malachi clicked his tongue. “No. I don’t think so. In the meantime, however, Florian will be granted full access. You will pass along the message that he is allowed to move freely through the palace and may come and go as he pleases.”

Oscar lowered his head in a bow. “Yes, sir.”

“Please leave us, I wish to confer with my friend,” Malachi spoke in a more commanding tone, leaving no room for the guard to linger. He bowed and walked away, flashing me one more assessing look as he left.

“I’m sorry, Florian. I didn’t expect him to check in so soon.”

I gave him a shrug. “He seems to take his job seriously, and since that job is protecting you, I can respect that. Besides, I can’t imagine how alarming it was to find us like that.”

Malachi laughed. “We’d better save the choking for the bedroom then.” His mouth clamped shut and color burned through his face as he realized how that sounded.

“Why, Prince Malachi, I had no idea you were so kinky.” I laughed and walked away from him, perusing through the garden.

He hurried after me. “Wait. No, I’m not. I didn’t mean it like that. I was just... Crowns !”

A snort popped out of me, and I turned back toward him, leaning in to whisper against his ear. “Don’t worry, it’s not my thing. The only thing I like to choke on is cock.”

Malachi stood frozen with his jaw hanging, and I tapped his cheek lightly with my hand before walking away. He had been fun to fluster when we were younger. It was nice to see that hadn't changed.

The weariness that had settled into me after the struggle with the frog charm dissipated. I felt lighter now as I looked around the garden, knowing I had been given access and wouldn't have to sneak around anymore. Strange how I found it to be a relief to be allowed here after so many years of thinking of it with disdain. What would the queen think of her son reversing the decision that had cast me out? One command from Malachi. Was it really enough to undo all that had been done?

I stopped in front of the steps that led into the palace and stared up at the doors. What was it like inside? Was it as I remembered? Were there any familiar faces? What would they do if they saw me? Would they even recognize me?

Malachi’s presence drew near, making my tired magic hum with excitement. He stood behind me, and his spicy scent filled my nose. His chin rested on the top of my head, reminding me just how tall he'd grown.

“Do you want to go in?”

That was a loaded question, one that should have a simple answer, but nothing about being here was simple. “I don't know. Are you sure it would be allowed?”

“I’m sure I allow it. As future king, that's gotta count for something, right?”

“Okay.” The word came out before I could even think about it. Malachi extended his hand and I took it, letting him lead me up the stairs.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:54 am

Why did I feel nervous? It wasn't like Florian was a complete stranger I was inviting into my home. But then, he kind of was, even if he'd grown up here. I didn't know what happened or why he left, but he hadn't made any attempts to return in all of this time. I was nervous, though.

Perhaps it was how gorgeous he was, even with the casual look he currently wore. Or the fact that I could still hear him whispering the word cock in my ear. It was jarring in that I wasn't used to such crude language, but also that it was him. I couldn't shake the image of him on his knees before me in the garden, or the idea that he would enjoy such a position. It wasn't that I was unfamiliar with intimacy, but it was difficult to find legitimate partners that weren't after the crown or the power it brought. I always had to be careful of my reputation as well.

The prince, soon-to-be king, couldn't be seen with a revolving door of partners, no matter their gender. Casual dalliances weren't an interest to me anyway, not with as many strings as there were. So, here I was at thirty-three, and I had only had a couple of relationships that went as far as physical intimacy. If I was being honest with myself, a part of me longed for my first love. The one that got away and broke my heart.

Now he was back, and taking him into my home felt so much bigger than a simple tour. I tried to shake free from the weirdness I felt and put a smile on my face as I opened the door and gestured for him to enter.

"Welcome to my home, Florian." I wasn't entirely sure what to do with him or how to act.

He scoffed half-heartedly. “I’ve been here before.”

“Well, welcome back.”

Florian slid a glance to me and offered me a small smile before looking around the hall. I tried to picture it in his eyes. The tapestries on the walls I never noticed anymore. The chandeliers that hung from the ceiling. The long windows that let the sun’s beams flood the hall with natural light. The tapestries had to be rotated regularly so they wouldn’t fade from the sun. As far as I knew the vine and flower weavings had been around for generations.

“It hasn’t changed.” Florian’s voice held a mixture of wonder and something that sounded like pain.

I tried to play it off as casually as I could. “Yes. That’s pretty typical here. Traditions, you know. Which really means nothing changes.”

Florian met my stare, an all-too serious look on his face. “Just because nothing has changed doesn’t mean it can never change. Sometimes it just takes a catalyst and someone willing to take the first step.”

I felt one side of my lip tug up at the conviction in his words. A conviction I felt deep within me. It was what I hoped for, what I hoped to be: a catalyst, but it was hard to do it alone. Nearly impossible in the in-between position I was currently in. More say than civilians, but not enough pull to act on anything that hadn’t been approved.

As someone who was taught to carry conversation, I found myself unsure of what to say. Florian disrupted years of training.

It was him that spoke first when I couldn’t find words. “Do you still have the same room?”

“I do. For now. Once I am crowned, I will move to the king’s apartment.”

He let out a long, slow whistle. “Moving on up. I don’t know how it compares now, but I remember sneaking in there when we were kids and being blown away by the size and elaborate decorations.”

“It’s big even now. Too big for one person. I’ve stood on the threshold a few times, imagining it to be mine, but I can’t. It feels empty...hollow. It’s meant to act as a refuge for the king. A space to get away from it all, but it somehow feels suffocating at the same time.”

“Can we see your room then, before it’s not yours any longer? I...have really fond memories of it.” The sadness I saw in his eyes made my heart ache. I wished I knew the cause of it. I wished I could take it away. To use magic to render it from him as he had the enchanted frog from me.

“Yes, I’d be happy to show you my room.”

His hand stayed clutched in mine as I led him down the corridor. I knew he knew the way, but he seemed to cling tighter and tighter the deeper we went into the palace. When we came to the wing that housed the royal suites, he radiated with tension.

“Is the queen here?”

I cocked my head at the question, and the strange tone he used. “My mother?”

He gave a quick bob of his head as he glanced around furtively.

“I believe she had a brunch scheduled with a women’s group, but I imagine when it’s over she will be busy checking everything is ready for tonight’s dinner party. There’s a chance she may return to her room to change or to relax. Why?”

“I’d just rather not see her if it can be helped,” Florian muttered and looked away as though he wished not to speak of it.

“Come on, we’re almost to my room.” I squeezed his hand and pulled him toward my suite. A guard stood at the end of the hall, straightening as soon as he saw me...us.

“Your Highness.” His greeting was brief as his eyes wandered to Florian.

“Liam. This is Florian. He is a friend of mine. We will be in my room and wish not to be disturbed unless urgency requires it.”

Surprise flashed in his eyes, but he managed to regain control quickly. “Yes, sir.”

I knew him but wasn’t as close with him as I was to Oscar. It was a risk to take someone to my room—even guards were known to gossip—but I didn’t care. I wanted Florian alone. Perhaps if it were just the two of us, he could let the wall down that seemed to have been erected when we stepped inside the palace.

As soon as we were in my room and I closed my door, I could practically feel the bricks come down a little. Then he surprised me with a laugh, one that was genuine and made my heart leap.

“What?”

“The look on his face was priceless. It’s like he’s never seen you bring a man back to your room before.”

I shook my head. “He hasn’t.”

Florian popped an auburn brow. “Surely, you’ve had trysts and snuck men back here.”

“Not here. Aside from staff and my parents, you’re the only one that has been in my room.” And in my bed .

Florian wandered around my room in silence, his finger gliding across the credenza that housed my games and movies. On the top sat a chess set that was made of marble and onyx. My heart twinged when he picked up the black knight, remembering how it was his favorite piece when we were young.

Florian played with it in his hands, tracing the shape with his thumb, and he looked over his shoulder.

“Why is that?”

Because this space was sacred, that it belonged to the boy I knew, that having someone here meant something, and the men I’d dated...didn't. I didn't voice any of that, simply shrugged, and said, “It’s complicated.”

Something strange passed across his face, and he pursed his lips. “I should probably go.”

My gut dropped. He was finally here, finally where I’d dreamt of him being for so long, and he was already anxious to leave. I couldn’t...couldn’t let him leave. Not now.

“No.” It came out as more of an order than I meant it to.

“Excuse me?” Florian challenged.

I shook my head. “I’m sorry. I just...don’t leave. Not yet. Please .” If it were someone else, I would be embarrassed by the desperation in my voice, but I was desperate, and it was him.

“I’m not sure, Mal . Malachi . I don’t belong here.” The sadness in his voice made me ache. As did the thought of him leaving.

“I need your help. Will you stay for the party tonight? It’s important. My first one since the announcement of my upcoming coronation. What if another charm should come upon me? There wouldn’t be time to call for you.”

He let out a deep sigh before offering me a wary smile. “I think my presence will cause more harm than good.”

“It won’t, I swear. Come as my date, and no one will dare question you.”

A glint of hope sparkled in his green eyes. “Your date? You want to bring a witch as your date for your first party as a future king? Are you sure that’s wise?”

“I’d rather have a witch on my arm than anyone else. Besides, it’s like you said, change starts with someone willing to take the first step.” I purposely took a step toward him to emphasize my point. “Here I am.”

“You really want to do this? People will talk.”

“People always talk. It could have been about me croaking in the middle of a conversation. Having them talk about seeing me with a beautiful man at my side seems preferable.”

Florian’s lips twitched in amusement. “Those would have been interesting headlines. But you’re sure? Really?”

I took his hand and held it in mine, feeling stronger at his touch. I had only twice been seen with a date at official functions and both I regretted, because they had been self-serving, seeking my attention for their own purposes. With Florian, I knew he

had no agenda other than to be there for me. I may not have known the adult he'd grown to be, but I could see that much was true. He was only here because I asked. "I'm sure."

Florian tilted his head back to meet my eyes. "If I do this, I do it as myself. I won't hide who I am, not even for you, Mal. I've worked hard to embrace my true self, and I will not go back."

"I would never ask you to."

He breathed deep and let it out. "Okay. I'll be your date." His lips curved up on the last word.

I wanted to shout and pump my fist into the air, but I kept myself under control, mostly. I couldn't stop the grin that stretched across my face. "Thank you. Whatever you need, let me know. I can have someone fetch things from your home, or I can have something ordered or made."

He let out a huff of laughter, stepping away, and running a hand over the pulled back hair on top of his head. "Ha! Just like that. You make it sound so easy."

I shrugged. "Some things are."

Florian chuckled and shook his head. "For you, I suppose so. I have a few things I could piece together, but I'm not sure I'm too keen on having someone rifle through my things. It's not only my house but my place of business. I could run home and be back in a little while."

I bit my lip and rubbed the scar on my wrist. Something told me that if he left, he wouldn't return. That the uncertainty he felt within the palace would come back and make him second guess...everything. I couldn't let that happen.

“Let me do this. Please. You’re the one doing me a favor, so let me do something for you. Anything you want, whatever style you see fit.”

“My pride wants to say no, but I do like pretty things, and I’m not above taking you up on the offer, but I won’t be wearing a traditional suit. I think my soul would die a little if I did.”

“We can’t have that. I will be sure the tailor knows that you have full say on your outfit.”

“Alright. Let’s do this.” Florian smiled fully, looking completely radiant.

I met his smile, thrilled that he had actually agreed. With any luck the time we would spend together would soften the edges of the past and allow something new to grow. I knew so little of the man he was, but seeing him in my room once more, I hated the thought that it would be the last time.

“Let me just make a call.”

Florian chuckled and mumbled, “ I’ll just make a call ,” in a teasing tone as he continued to wander around the room.

The hardline phone in my room was on an internal system, so I didn’t need to call anyone in particular, I simply picked up the handset and someone would be on the other end. I could call out on it if I entered a code first, but all the lines were monitored for safety and security, so I never used it if I didn’t have to. Not that there were many people I talked to on the phone. The call to Florian was the first I’d made in longer than I could imagine.

“Good morning, Your Highness. How can I assist you today?” The calm voice of the steward rang through. The man had to be in his nineties by now, and had been old

when I was a kid, but he loved serving the royal family and had done it faithfully for probably fifty years at least.

“Good morning, Reginald. I would like to have a tailor sent to my room. Please have them bring a selection of fine fabrics to choose from. I have a friend who will be attending the party as my date tonight, and he will need something...enchanted to wear.”

Florian met my gaze with a questioning expression, and I gave him a wink.

“Yes, sir. I will send one up in a moment. Are there any dietary needs or preferences I should make the cook aware of?”

Good question. Something I hadn't even thought of. I didn't remember Florian having any allergic reactions as a child, but they could change over time. I held the phone's handset to my chest. “Florian? Do you have any food allergies or avoidances?”

He cocked his head as if trying to determine what that would have to do with clothing design. “I'm a pescatarian. I'm okay with seafood, cheese, and eggs, but I don't eat any meat aside from those. Oh, and no faces or tentacles, I just can't.”

I chuckled at the way his face squished up at the thought, looking adorable, and seeing a glimpse of that young boy from long ago.

After relaying the information, the steward replied, “Very good, sir. I will inform the kitchen at once.”

“Thank you, Reggie.”

“Anytime, Your Highness. I look forward to meeting your friend.”

I placed the handset on the base and turned to find Florian staring at me. “Reggie? Like the Reggie? The same one who used to yell at us for tracking dirt inside?”

I smiled at the memory. He was never mean about it, but he worked hard to ensure the palace was kept tidy, and he took a lot of pride in his work. “The very same.”

“Holy shit! I can’t believe it. The man has to be ancient now.” Florian sat on the edge of my bed as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I took the spot next to him, because it felt natural. Despite the lack of knowledge I had about his life, I had this sense of rightness at his side.

“He is, but he's still going strong and refuses to retire.”

Florian smirked. “Do you remember when we caught that rabbit and tried to sneak it into your room, convinced we could make it our pet?”

I fell back on the bed, my legs hanging off the edge, and wore a big grin. “Yes! But it got away from us. Reggie chased it with a broom all through the hall. I’d never seen the old man move so fast.”

“RIP Sir Fluffington. Though your time with us was short, you were a good bunny,” Florian said as he laid beside me.

“Sir Fluffington! I’d forgotten.” I let out a loud laugh, feeling full of light and joy at the ridiculous memory. We had gotten into trouble together more than a few times. Nothing malicious, but we were the only kids in a household not designed for kids, and we found ways to entertain ourselves. At least, until he left.

“I didn’t. I remember everything, Mal.” Florian gave me a sad smile before staring up at the ceiling.

The mood change had my gut tighten. We lay side by side, on my bed, and he suddenly felt miles away. I had so many questions. So many things I wanted to know, but I didn't know if asking them would ruin things. Though, with the sorrow now etched into his face, I couldn't stay silent.

“What happened, Flor? Why did you leave?” The words came out so quietly, I wasn't sure I'd spoken them aloud until he sat up and cut me a look full of hurt and confusion.

He stood quickly. “What! What do you mean, why did I leave?”

Shocked by the tone in his voice, my mouth fell open, trying to think of how to respond. I sat up and stared at him. Had I missed something? Or was it something I had done that pushed him away all those years ago? It was the thought that had plagued me the most. Had I been the reason he left?

Before either of us could say anything else, a knock sounded on my door. “Crowns!”

Standing, I looked between the door and Florian, but I couldn't leave things like this. So I closed the distance to the beautiful man and reached out for his hand, grateful when he didn't yank it back but rested it in mine.

“I don't know what I did, but give me another chance. Please, Flor. Let me try to make things right between us.”

“You...didn't?” His eyes looked misty even as he shook his head in confusion. Then I felt his hand squeeze mine, and he took a deep breath, steeling himself to respond.

Before he could say anything, I rushed to add, “Stay. I need you with me tonight, not just because of the charms, but because I want you at my side. I've missed you, Florian, more than I can possibly say.”

He stared up at me, those green eyes watery, but he gave me a sweet half-smile. “Okay.”

Relief flooded me. I lifted our joined hands and kissed the back of his. That sweet smile grew, and with it the warmth of him came back into me. I left him to open the door and found the tailor with a cart loaded full of material. They dipped their head in respect.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice, please come in.”

“Of course, Your Highness. Fashion emergencies are my very favorite sort. Nothing gets the blood pumping quite like a needle racing the clock.”

I pursed my lips with amusement. “Then I hope you’ll be pleased to know I have a big task for you. Mx. Ambrosia, this is Florian. He will be my date tonight, and I want him to shine.”

Ambrosia looked him over, likely already piecing together outfits in their head, and nodded in approval. “Oh, yes. I think we’ll have a lot of fun. Though he needs no help from me to shine, don’t you agree, Your Highness?”

They met my gaze with a playful smile. I looked over Florian. Even in the toned down, casual outfit he wore, and with his hair tightly wound at the top of his head, he glowed. That sunshine that radiated from him when he used his magic bloomed beneath the surface, lighting him from within.

“I completely agree.”

Florian’s eyes warmed with affection, and he squeezed my arm.

To the tailor, I said, “Whatever he says goes, Ambrosia.”

They gave another examination of Florian and grinned widely. “Yes, I believe we will work some magic together.”

Florian’s eyes sparkled with excitement. “That’s exactly what I was hoping for.”

“Great!” I clapped. “I think I’ll leave you two to scheme.” Leaning closer to Florian, I whispered, “Will you be okay here on your own? I don’t want to be in the way.”

He looked at the cart of fabric, unable to hide his interest. “I think I’ll be fine. But you’ll be coming back, right? You better not make me show up to the party by myself.”

“I would never. Besides, I want everyone to see us walk in together, for them to see that you are mine.”

His brows raised high, while his lips pursed in amusement. “Yours?”

Panic swept through me. I hadn’t meant to say that, not out loud. “Crowns! I didn’t mean that. You’re not mine . You are your own person. You don’t belong to anyone.”

“Good answer, prince-y.” Florian patted my chest.

I heard Ambrosia cough to cover a laugh. I pointed at the door. “Yeah, I think I’m going to go.”

I fled. I might be the next king of our nation, but I knew if I stayed I was bound to put my foot deeper in my mouth. My foot...wasn’t what I wanted in my mouth. I thought of Florian’s whispered words, and an ache was building in my groin. Crowns ! I was in trouble.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:54 am

Ambrosia was the perfect distraction to keep me from focusing on the fact that I was actually here in the palace. And my safety net was now gone. Malachi could easily order anyone to accept my presence, but I doubted it would be the same if I wandered around by myself. The thought of doing so made my chest ache, though. I was curious, sure, but I wouldn't be here if he hadn't begged me to stay.

He begged me to stay. Pleaded. I could see the depth of what he felt in his rich brown eyes, could sense it, causing my magic to stir within. It seemed to react to his nearness, more so than anyone else ever had.

To hear him ask me why I'd left...I couldn't comprehend it. Did he truly not know what happened? I'd had to live with it every day of my life, but was it kept hidden from him? It was too much to wrap my head around.

"Okay, mysterious friend of the prince, please tell me I get to make you something special." Ambrosia circled me, and before I knew it, they were undoing the bun in my hair, letting my auburn hair fall below my shoulders, and they let out an excited squeal. "Oooh, you have such lovely hair."

I felt my lips tip up. "Thank you. I don't usually wear it up like that. I like to feel it swish around me."

Their white hair was long on one side with a dramatic undercut. They gave a little shake of their head to let the long side flutter around them. "I completely understand. So, we will be styling your hair down for tonight, then, yes?"

"Yes. I would like that."

They clapped their hands together. “Good. Now, you’ve been granted total control, which is quite a blessing if you ask me. Not just anyone gets that privilege. But I have a good feeling about you. Do you have any areas you like to highlight or cover? What are your favorite colors? Any particular styles you like?”

“Well, I guess I’ll start with my favorite colors: green and purple. I’m pretty comfortable with my body and have no problem showing it off. I like fabric that hugs my form, and I don’t mind a feminine flair. I’m not quite sure what is appropriate for this type of crowd, though.”

“Let me worry about that part, darling.”

They went to their cart, which held the most beautiful fabrics in every color. They rifled through them, tossing some expensive-looking materials aside, making me wince. Before long they had four different bolts laid out on the sofa in Malachi’s room, each more luxurious than the last, but my eyes were immediately drawn to a luscious dark green fabric that felt soft as butter.

I rubbed it between my fingers, loving the sensation of it. “I like this one.”

Ambrosia smiled widely. “I thought you might. It just so happens I designed the prince’s outfit for tonight, and this will complement it beautifully.”

I liked the idea of matching him. Maybe it was strange to go from having not seen him or even spoken in twenty years to wearing complementary clothes, but my heart leapt in my chest at the thought.

“There’s a story here, I know it.” Ambrosia watched me, pulling me back from my wandering thoughts.

“Ah. Yes. It’s a complicated one.”

Ambrosia tapped my arm. “Aren’t they all, darling? But we’ll be spending some time together, and we can call it payment for these emergency services.”

“Hmm...that sounds fair, I suppose. It wasn’t my idea, by the way. Mal, sorry, Prince Malachi insisted.” I didn’t want them to think that I sought money or power.

“And right he was. Not that I have any doubt you would outshine anyone there simply by being yourself. But a few well-placed stitches and a little pizazz never hurt.” Ambrosia winked.

“I happen to buy into the idea of dressing for the part you want, so...yeah, I can absolutely appreciate pizazz .” I released the fabric I’d been absent-mindedly caressing.

“And what part are you hoping to dress for, friend of the prince?” They asked with an impish expression.

“I, well, that’s...”

“Complicated?” They supplied.

I let out a sigh. “Exactly.” What was I hoping for? Dinner parties with dignitaries wasn’t my thing, but I didn’t care about any of that. All I cared about was Malachi and the way he looked at me. There was the matter of the charms, of course. I wanted to help ensure he could make it through the ordeal without any new afflictions getting in the way.

Ambrosia positioned me and began measuring every inch of me. “I’m all ears, Florian, and it sounds like you need someone to talk to.”

I drew in a deep breath before releasing it. I wasn’t sure how much I could say, but

surely Malachi trusted this person to leave me with them in his room. “I knew him when we were kids.”

Ambrosia’s pointed brows arched high. “Oh? Do tell. What was the little prince like?”

I smiled as I thought of him, of being in his room, hiding under the covers with flashlights and whispering long into the night. “He was loyal and fun. We were two peas in a pod, always together. It didn’t matter that he was a prince. He was simply my best friend. Malachi was...my whole world.”

Ambrosia’s eyes rounded and they let out a long, “Awww.”

I cleared my throat as the memories threatened to choke me. “Yes, well, life happens, as it does. This is the first I’ve seen him in a long time.”

They smirked. “And he asked you to be his date for tonight?”

I shrugged. “Yup.” The word popped out casually as if it didn’t stir up a million feelings inside me.

“This is wonderful. He already can’t hide how he looks at you, even while you’re wearing such a drab outfit, no offense. But, darling, we are going to dress you up so good that he won’t ever want you out of his sight again.”

I pursed my lips at the thought, fighting the smile that wanted to break free. Stretching my arms out wide, I simply said, “I’m all yours.”

Whatever unease lingered from being in the palace and from preparing to attend an event filled with people who probably wouldn’t normally give me the time of day, all drifted away the instant Malachi laid eyes on me. He was speechless, and it wasn’t

because of a magical frog form in his throat.

We stood for a long moment, neither of us looking away. He looked drop-dead gorgeous in a formal black tuxedo with green accents that simulated the sash he wore for official functions, making him look every bit the king he would be. His dark brown hair was trimmed neat with his tight curls, making my fingers itch with the need to run through them. Malachi's high cheek bones seemed to have a slight glow to them, as if he had been kissed by the sun.

I dipped my head as I held the skirt of my outfit and gave a sort of half curtsy, feeling the need to recognize the regal figure before me. "Your Highness."

Malachi quickly crossed the room and took my hand in his. "Florian, you are truly radiant. I don't have the words to tell you how beautiful you look."

I offered him a soft smile. "I think that says it pretty well. And thank you. You are very handsome, Mal, very kingly. If I were at home, I would be really jealous of me."

"I guess it's good you're here then." His deep brown eyes gleamed as he looked at me.

"It is." I smiled.

Ambrosia clapped their hands together. "Looks like my job here is done."

I turned around and gave them a quick hug. "Thank you. I've never worn anything so lovely."

When I first saw myself in the mirror, I gasped. They had somehow perfectly captured my aesthetic, if my aesthetic had an unlimited budget and the eye for fashion that they did.

It was a dress-pants combo with a corset that sat just under my pecs, cinching in to give me an enticing shape. The sensual green material of the shirt covered my chest but rested off my shoulders. At the bottom of the corset, the top flared out in a peplum puff, revealing my legs beneath in pants that clung to my skin making them feel as if they weren't even there. As the puff went around to the back it lengthened into a train that just brushed against the floor. I looked like I belonged on a prince's arm, while still looking like myself.

Ambrosia tilted my chin up. "I only highlighted what was already there, darling." They gave my cheek a light kiss before turning toward Malachi. "Take good care of this one, Your Highness. I truly hope I get to make more outfits for him in the future."

"Thank you, Ambrosia, I will." He met my gaze over their head, letting me see the sincerity in his eyes.

After the tailor left, I put a hand on my hip. "You sure you want to do this?"

Malachi's head bobbed. "More so now than ever. It would be an honor to have you as my companion tonight."

"You don't even know that much about me. I could go in there and unleash havoc."

He reached up and lifted a few loose strands of my hair that hung down under the crown braid that circled the top of my head. The braid had a gold chain woven through it, making me feel even more elegant. "It would be worth it."

I couldn't stop the smile that stretched my lips or the warmth that filled me. Mal might not be the boy I once loved anymore, but he was all man, and having the kind of attention he gave me endeared me to him in an all new way. "Okay, let's do this."

What I thought was going to be a small dinner party with a group of influential people, turned out to be every politician and person of nobility from this nation and the neighboring ones.

I leaned into Malachi, whispering, “Holy shit! This is a big deal.”

He shrugged. “Yes, it is. My official introduction as the soon-to-be king. The next time everyone will gather together like this will be for my coronation. I’ve been...perhaps a little anxious about it. But I already feel so much better knowing you are here with me.”

“I’ll be sure to watch for any unusual behavior.”

Malachi grabbed my hands, ensuring I had his complete attention. “I appreciate it, but it’s more than that, too. It feels right, Flor. Like you came back into my life at exactly the right time.”

Maybe I wasn’t the only one who felt this pull between us. I blinked rapidly as I felt my eyes grow misty. I gave him a slight nudge on his shoulder. “Cut it out. I don’t want to look like a mess when I meet the entire new world.”

He gave me a crooked smile and offered his arm. Before walking down the steps into the ballroom, we paused at the top, and the room went quiet, giving me goosebumps. Malachi squeezed my arm reassuringly.

“Please welcome the Crown Prince, Malachi, son of Queen Adira and the late King Frederick, and his companion, Florian of the Purlieu.”

With heritage unknown, I was as much of the Purlieu as I was anywhere. I certainly couldn’t have been of the maid who had brought me into the palace after finding me outside its doors. In truth, I had been raised by many and none all at once, but the

palace had truly been my home before it wasn't. Now to be here again, and in this capacity, it was nearly overwhelming.

My feet stayed frozen in place, until Malachi gave me a gentle tug, guiding me forward. He leaned down and whispered in my ear. "I've got you, Florian." Where he had been nervous before, he seemed to gain confidence here, and now I was the one that needed it. Needed that strength and comfort from him, and he gave it. With each person I was introduced to, and each head that dipped before us, he gave it.

"Lord and Lord Greenley, I thank you both for your making the long trip, it's a pleasure to have you here. I would like to introduce you to Florian, a dear friend of mine."

I knew who the couple were, of course. Most of the names and faces in the room had been seen in many news stories, shows, or articles. I was the only unknown here, and it made people very curious.

The older of the husbands reached out and shook my hand, giving me a salacious grin. "It's lovely to meet you and quite a surprise. My husband and I are often the ones that turn heads at things like this, but all attention is on you tonight, dear. And if it's not too forward, I would just like to say you look stunning."

I caught the side-eye his husband gave him, though he shook my hand and offered a genuine smile. "From the Purlieu? Is that right?"

I knew it was coming. People like the Lords Greenley didn't typically venture out that far. "It is. The forest is mere steps away from my front steps, which I much prefer over the loud city."

"And what is it you do at the...edge of the forest? I hear it can have a rough sort of crowd." The older man shot his husband a look, which the younger Greenley

shrugged off with a coy expression.

“You know? I’ve often felt the same about noblemen,” I said with a wink.

The older Lord chuckled. “Yes, I suppose that is true. Forgive my husband, he forgets his manners sometimes.”

“Just a different perspective is all, but if you really want to know what I do, I’ll tell you.” I called them closer with my finger, and they complied, eager for a juicy bit of information. When they were both huddled in front of us, I whispered, “I’m a witch.”

I wasn’t sure if that was information Malachi wanted known, but I wasn’t going to be pitied as the poor boy from the wrong side of town. Whether they believed it or not didn’t matter, but I would rather be seen as a mysterious figure than a charity case.

Instead of shock or apprehension, they both laughed, and the older man clapped his hand on my bare shoulder before addressing Malachi. “Hold onto this one, Your Highness. I like him. He’s feisty.”

Malachi smiled down at me, with a hint of amusement in his eyes. “Thank you, I like him, too.”

My magic hummed with pleasure beneath my skin as a million thoughts and words fought to tumble out, but he turned back to the couple before any of them could.

“I hope I can count on you, sirs, for your support in the upcoming transition. I will be needing loyal friends at my side as we move forward.” Malachi spoke with such confidence, it was hard to believe he had been an anxious mess over the past few days.

To Malachi, the older Greenley said, “We are looking forward to your coronation and

hope that we will see your lovely Florian there as well. You have our loyalty, and we will be honored to serve however we are needed, Your Majesty .”

I might have been the only one to notice Malachi falter slightly at the use of the title that wasn't his yet. He recovered quickly, though. “Thank you, truly.”

They both bowed slightly, and we moved on to the next person or couple. With each one, Malachi seemed to have endeared himself to them, and they pledged their devotion to serve him and his leadership. It was remarkable, truly. Despite having discussed the enormity of what was coming in private, in public, he was smooth and bold, a glimpse of the king he would be. I was awe-struck by him. Even if I hadn't known him the way I did, or the way I used to , I probably would have been swayed easily by him. He was...charming.

When we were introduced to an older woman, whose back was hunched, I could feel pain radiate out of her. It was a natural symptom of her age and the wear on her body. It wasn't something I could heal permanently, but I could ease her pain temporarily.

“What a beautiful brooch you have,” I said and used it as an excuse to touch her shoulder. I didn't always need physical contact, but in a loud, crowded room, it helped me hone in on my magic when the clatter made it feel rather unfocused.

“Why, thank you. It's an heirloom piece and has been passed down from mother to daughter for generations.” As she continued to tell me about its history, I pushed my magic down my arm, through my hand and fingers, into her. Just a light push, but I could see the instant she felt some relief. Her eyes brightened, and she let out a soft sigh.

Stepping back until I was at Malachi's side again, he looked down at me, eyes shining with wonder. I offered the woman a smile. “It was very nice to meet you.”

“Thank you. You, as well.” She smiled wide, wrinkles crinkling the corners of her eyes.

As we walked away from her, Malachi asked in a hushed tone, “What did you do?”

“Do? I don’t know what you mean. I was merely being polite.”

“You used your magic on her.”

I stopped and tilted my head up to catch his gaze, before giving a slight nod. “I did. How did you know?”

“I felt it. Felt warmth transfer between you.”

It was surreal to me that he could sense it, even when I was using it for someone else. I’d never had anyone notice before. “I just softened the edges of her pain. It won’t last but will give her some relief for the evening.”

Malachi grinned, and he stepped closer, eyes dropping to my lips. He reached up, fingers sliding through the ends of my hair. I thought for a moment he was going to kiss me right then and there, but he seemed to remember himself and where we were. He lowered his hand to his side. “You are incredible.”

I returned his smile, feeling just as in wonder as he appeared to be. “Right back at ya.”

There were a few others we’d interacted with along the way that I helped as I could. A migraine, arthritis, allergies. Light touches and personal attention. It was all temporary with such brief encounters, but I hoped it would help them be able to enjoy the evening as much as I was.

“Please make your way to the dining area. Dinner is about to begin.” After this announcement was made, the guests began filing into the adjoining room where long tables were set up. Each place had a placard with the person’s name.

“Seating arrangements is a big undertaking. You have to be aware of any discourse or arguing parties and keep them separated to allow for a peaceful meal,” Malachi explained as he led me along the tables toward the end, toward where the queen stood behind her chair at the center of the table. At the sight of her, an ache punched into me. It was one thing to mingle with people of notoriety but an entirely different thing to see her .

My brain was screaming to back out and find somewhere else to sit so I could avoid her. But I couldn’t. Not with all eyes watching and waiting for the greeting of the royal mother and son.

He brought me around the table until we stood before her. After all these years, I was face to face with a woman I had once loved and seen as a maternal figure but who abandoned me.

“Mother, you remember Florian, don’t you?” Malachi asked. He didn’t have any bite to his words, but I could feel him stand a little taller, as if preparing to defend himself, or me, perhaps. I didn’t know if he could feel me tense, but I appreciated having him to lean on.

Her eyes swept over to me, and there was a sadness in them as she offered me a rueful smile. She hesitated in her response, so I couldn’t help but interject. “Surprised to see me?”

Her eyes darted between us before she lowered her head. “Yes.” The queen coughed and straightened once more. “It’s a pleasant surprise, though.”

That made my brows arch up. “Is it?”

That sad smile was back, but it stretched a little. “Yes, it is. We have much to talk about, but now is not the time or the place. It does make me happy to see you and to see how happy you seem to make my son. I welcome you, Florian of the Purlieu .”

The emphasis was a reminder that we were at an official event with all eyes watching. With a tidal wave of emotions competing for attention, I pushed them all down and kissed her hand, as I knew the situation demanded. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

At that, the queen sat, and everyone followed suit. Malachi was next to her, and I took my seat beside him, my name on a gold and green placard in front of me. It was bizarre, to be sat at the head of the table in a roomful of people who would likely pass me by if they saw me in the capitol. Not that I came to the city often enough to be seen by them.

Course after course of food was brought out, more than I had seen in a lifetime. Surprisingly, everything was either vegetarian or seafood. Not a single roasted pig with an apple in its mouth, or some evil hybrid fowl concoction.

“How are you enjoying the food?” Malachi asked as I popped a buttery, garlic shrimp into my mouth.

“It’s fantastic. I guess I was expecting to see a lot more meat dishes and that there wouldn’t be much for me to choose from.”

“I was informed that the menu was altered from the original plan.”

I looked at him in confusion. “It was. Why?”

He smiled sweetly, before lifting my hand to place a kiss on it. “For a special guest.”

“Who is it? Did I meet them?”

Malachi chuckled. “You are pretty well acquainted with them.”

Disbelief and awe filled me. Did he really mean... “Me?”

“Yes, Florian, you.”

“I don’t understand, why would they do that? I just showed up today.”

“They did it because the chef wanted to make my guest happy.” He said it as if he had asked for a fork instead of a spoon, like it was no big deal, not a meal for five hundred people that likely took weeks and weeks of planning.

I grimaced at the thought of the work that went into this meal. “I didn’t expect that to happen. I would have been fine picking around things if I needed to.”

His hand went to my thigh and gave me a light squeeze. “It’s fine, Florian. I believe they had a few different menus ready to go, just in case. And with this as my first official event since the announcement, I’m certain the kitchen team wanted to make a good impression. If it means you get to enjoy everything being served, then they have definitely made a good impression. And before you worry about the waste of it, anything that wasn’t used for tonight’s dinner will be donated to local organizations that support food-insecure families.”

I felt my jaw hang open, completely overwhelmed by the idea of an entire menu being catered to me. It was unreal. But also a good reminder that the man at my side wasn’t just anyone. He was about to be king . Actually king. At least some good came out of it though, if it fed others that might not know where their next meal was coming from.

“Well, shit.” I muttered in disbelief, causing him to purse his lips in amusement. “I mean, thank you. This is all very nice, but it’s also a lot.”

“It really means a lot that you are here. There’s no one else I’d rather have sitting in your seat.”

I bumped my shoulder against his. “Thanks, Mal.”

I caught the queen watching us with that sad smile of hers, but I couldn’t think about her. Aside from her presence, everything about the night felt like a fairytale, like I was living someone else’s life. With Malachi’s easy touch beside me, either light squeezes of my hand or arm or my leg beneath the table, the queen drifted away. I felt myself smiling through the rest of the very long dinner.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:54 am

By the end of the night, I was feeling a lot more confident about what was to come. Each interaction I'd had throughout the party had been fairly positive. Of course, it didn't hurt that Florian seemed to have enchanted his way through high society. He certainly enchanted me.

I'd felt him use his magic several times, and seeing the change in expression of those he'd touched was fascinating. I had a moment of wariness when it first happened. I wasn't entirely sure how it worked or what he could do, and I wondered if he was trying to manipulate people or influence their opinions. I didn't want that. I wanted to stand on my own accord, and prove that I was worthy of their trust and loyalty. But I was wrong. There was no influence, only healing, and it was a marvel to witness. Florian didn't call attention to it, and they likely didn't know why they felt better, but I could see them all stand a little taller and their eyes brighten.

It also served as a reminder that so many people dealt with struggles you couldn't see. There were many topics people were passionate about that I could discuss with them, but nothing would have touched them as personally as the moment of relief they felt within their bodies. Florian could see what they needed, though.

He'd managed to hold up conversation better than most civilians likely would. As educated as I was, Florian had a sense for what things were like for people during their everyday lives and had managed to insert himself and his ideas a few times. I found myself hanging on to his every word, and I wasn't the only one. Florian was a breath of fresh air in a typically stuffy crowd.

He stayed at my side as our guests left. Most bowed or dipped their heads to me, but with Florian, he had been on the receiving end of handshakes and even a few hugs. It

was impressive how he managed to handle himself at such a big ordeal, and incredibly endearing to see him received so well.

While some of the representatives that traveled from other nations would be housed in the guest wing of the palace, they were finally gone from sight. I threw my arms around Florian, picking him up and swinging him around. He let out a beautiful laugh at the sudden twirl.

“You were magnificent, Flor! Absolutely astounding. I couldn’t have imagined the night going better.” I set him back down on his feet but didn’t pull away from him, my hands resting on his lower back.

He stared up at me, alabaster skin flushed pink, and he rested his arms on my shoulders. “As were you, Mal. If anyone had any doubt about your ability to be king, you crushed it tonight. I can tell you that I didn’t sense any duplicity from those that offered you their support. It was genuine. You won them over. There is true excitement for the change in power. And you didn’t have any weird hiccups either.”

I thought about how smoothly it had gone, no animal noises or foreign herbs, no confused looks, or loss of respect. With Florian uncertain about the event, I felt a surge of confidence at the thought of protecting him, of being strong for him, that I didn’t even think about what might happen to me. “You’re right! I was so in the moment, I completely forgot to be aware of any strange issues.”

Florian squinted and tilted his head, as if he was assessing me. “Hmm... Curious.”

“What is it? Do you think it’s gone?” Was it that easy? Was it over already? The charms that had afflicted me had already left?

He shook his head. “I’m not sure. I don’t want to count anything out yet, but perhaps this is a piece of the puzzle, only I can’t see the full picture yet.”

“Well, even if I had made a fool of myself, it would have been worth it to see the way everyone reacted to you. They don’t even know what you did for them.” How many people had he touched and eased their pain in some way?

“They don’t need to. I didn’t do it for attention. Perhaps I enjoy a little intrigue, but I did it because I had the means to do something that could help, if only a little. I don’t know why I was given this power, but what good does it do if I keep it to myself? If much is given then much should be shared.”

It was the very ideal I had long fought for. To use the power I’d been granted by birthright to make a difference. And here was this person who lived it every day. I was so overcome with admiration of him, of his beauty, not just on the outside but in his heart as well, that I did something I’d thought about for twenty years.

Squeezing my arms tighter around his back, I bent down and kissed him. A soft gasp escaped him before his hands locked behind my neck, holding me in place. Warmth flowed from him, as his soft lips moved against mine. Light poured out of him, making me feel like a lizard soaking up the sun. His mouth on mine was a whiplash through time, past and present colliding together. That before me was the young boy who I once kissed tentatively, our teeth clinking together as we giggled through the awkwardness, and the sexy man who now expertly slid his tongue between my lips, making me groan.

Florian rose on his toes, deepening the kiss until it consumed me. The collision had become a black hole where time and space ceased to exist, and the entire universe revolved around the two of us as we melded together. I’d kissed a few men since him, but nothing had ever felt like this. Maybe it was his magic, or our past, or the years I’d spent longing for him, or maybe all of it all at once. Whatever it was, I didn’t want it to end. I wanted to live there with the taste of sunbeams dancing on my tongue as it tangled with his.

A cough sounded behind me, making me still as reality crashed back in. We weren't, in fact, floating through the universe, completely untethered from the earth. We were very much in a public area of the palace that only moments ago had been filled with guests. It was an oversight that never would have happened before. I was always careful to keep displays of affection to private areas. But I couldn't help myself, not with Florian. Not with how completely enraptured I was by him and the fact that he was very much not a young boy anymore. I was half hard already from his kiss alone. If it had lasted any longer, I wouldn't have been able to hide my reaction. Thankfully, my tuxedo jacket helped provide a little cover when I pulled away from him.

It was the head steward who had found us. He had his head lowered, as he said, "My apologies, Your Highness, but I believe you may wish to find a more private location to continue your... discussion."

Florian snorted beside me, making the man lift his gaze, and his eyes rounded with surprise when he took in the man beside me. "Young Florian? Is that you?"

"Not so young anymore."

The old man's mouth quirked, trying to contain a smile. He might have gotten flustered regularly by our antics when we were young, but he always seemed to have a soft spot for my friend. "No, I suppose not. It is good to have you back, sir."

"It's good to see you, Reggie. And please, no sirs, I'm still just me."

His eyes slid between us. "Maybe not for long, though, sir."

Was it so obvious how smitten I was? Was there any type of future between me and Florian? I wanted there to be. One day with him and I wanted ten thousand more. Reginald's eyes might be aged and slightly cloudy, but he still managed to see more than most. I didn't know how to respond without giving away how deeply the thought

affected me.

“So, Reggie, do you still have bunnies around here?”

He pointed a crooked finger at Florian. “Yes, outside, where they belong. Don’t you dare bring them in. You might be all grown up, but I have no qualms about putting you in the corner and telling the kitchen that you are not allowed any dessert.”

“That’s just cruel, old man. As an adult, I have the right to dessert any time I want it.” Florian crossed his arms over his chest, and let out a huff, looking ridiculously cute.

He’d spent a lot of time in the corner as a kid, nose to the wall. I had a few times, but more often than not Florian had covered for me and taken my punishment, defiantly proud, and I loved him for it.

“Not in this house, you don’t.” Reginald’s tone was serious, though I could see a twinkle in the man’s cloudy eyes. The banter between them made me smile. It felt so familiar and made it feel like Florian had come home.

Florian threw an arm over my shoulder and pecked a quick kiss on my cheek. He leaned his head on my shoulder and faced Reginald. “See, the thing is, Reggie, I happen to know the future king, and I don’t think he would deny me dessert.”

I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t deny him anything. Whatever he asked for, I would happily give him. I was completely, hopelessly, and willingly under his spell. I simply shrugged. “Sorry, Reginald.”

The steward coughed to cover a laugh. “You two are going to be trouble, I just know it. And I look forward to it, young Florian.”

He dipped his head before leaving us alone in the ballroom. As much as I wanted to

immediately dive back into kissing the beautiful witch at my side, Reginald had been right. This wasn't the best place for it. I wasn't ready for him to leave though.

“Would you want to stay the night?”

Florian's brow lifted, and he smirked. “Oh? Are you propositioning me, Your Highness ?”

Crowns! He was tempting, and I very nearly said yes. But as much as I wanted him physically, I wanted to treasure the fact that he was actually here. “No. Not like that. I would like to spend more time with you. It's been kind of a wild day, and we haven't gotten to talk much.”

That playful smirk stretched into a sweet smile. “I'd really like that, Mal.”

Hearing the old nickname made my heart flutter every time. I was never Mal to anyone else, only him. I loved that he had grown more comfortable with me throughout the day, and he had dropped the formalities.

Holding my arm out to him, Florian placed his in mine, and I led him back to my suite. The guards we passed simply nodded and wished us goodnight, as if having him with me was something that happened all the time.

Florian nudged me slightly. “You know I don't actually want to use you for your position or what you can do for me, right?”

“I never thought that. Not for one second.”

“Except for maybe kitchen privileges.”

I chuckled. “You always did have a sweet tooth, nice to see that hasn't changed. If it

makes you happy, then I'd like nothing more than to provide you with every dessert you could imagine."

"Right now, I could go for some whipped cream," he said with a tease, making heat rush through me at the idea of him using it on anything but a dish.

"Crowns!" He was going to make keeping my hands to myself a big challenge.

Florian laughed. "You used to say that all the time as a kid. I find it very cute that you still do."

"I was taught to control my language and not to say anything untoward in public. Habits are hard to change, so it was easier not to."

I opened my door and led him into my suite, locking it behind us. No one would dare enter my room without permission, and I wasn't planning on anything wild happening, but I still hated the idea of someone surprising us. Especially with Florian here. It felt scandalous having him in my room now. Now that I was about to be king, and we were two grown men, and I was extremely attracted to him.

"You are always so polite, aren't you?" Florian teased as he ran a finger down my cheek.

"I try to be."

"I wonder what it's like with the men you hook up with. I can just imagine... 'Would you be so kind as to kneel before me and suck my prick?'" He said it in an exaggerated accent that made me laugh and roll my eyes.

I gave him a playful shove. "Shut up."

“Oh! Not so polite then? Maybe it's more commanding. Do you give orders and expect to be obeyed?”

My cheeks burned at the thought. No, I wasn't much for making demands. It was hard enough to know if the people I dated wanted me or the power they associated with me. I certainly wouldn't want them to feel like they didn't have a choice in the bedroom. “That's not really the kind of conversation I was hoping to have.”

Florian let out a laugh, “Fine. I guess I'll just have to wait and find out for myself.”

“I...uh, what?” Words tumbled out of me as I thought of Florian's bold suggestion. One that made me want to forget about the talking thing all together. Did he really want me like that? I had never wanted anyone more than I did him, but I wasn't ready to take it there.

He wrapped his arms around my neck until our faces were mere inches apart. “You were always so fun to fluster, Mal. But somehow it's even better now, when I saw how perfectly poised and confident you were downstairs at the party, and here you can hardly complete a sentence.”

“Sorry, you just...surprise me, is all.”

“Oh, don't be sorry. I rather like it. It's sweet and makes me feel powerful. That I, a mere witch of the Purlieu, could so easily throw a prince off balance. It makes me wonder just what I could get you to do.” He pushed up on his toes and gave me a quick lick over my lips, pulling away and leaving me frozen in place, wishing for so much more from him.

Florian walked to the credenza and braced a hand on it to undo the laces of his heeled boots. I watched in wonder as he kicked them off as if he were as comfortable in this room as he once had been.

I was enthralled by every little thing that he did. A word slipped out on a breath as he undid the braid, unwinding the gold chain that had been woven into it. “Anything.”

He looked over his shoulder at me, auburn hair hanging down. “What’s that?”

I would do anything he wanted me to. It might have been a frightening thought if he were someone else, but I trusted him completely. It might seem fast to feel such an intense connection after having just reunited, but it was there, and it was real. “Oh, it was nothing. I’m just going to change and use the toilet. I’ll be out in a minute.”

I quickly grabbed a pair of sweatpants and a tee and hurried to make my escape. But before I could reach the door to my en suite, Florian stopped me. “Mal? Would you care to lend me a hand? Ambrosia laced me up pretty good, and I can’t seem to untie the corset.”

“Yes. Of course.” Unthinking, I simply dropped my clothes on the floor before reaching him. Florian snickered at my urgency to touch him. His bare shoulders had been teasing me all night. I never would have thought shoulders could be so sexy, but it was a peek that made me want to see the rest of his body.

I found the bow in the center of his back, loosened it, and began uncinching the back. Florian let out a sigh as it expanded. “I love the shape and the posture it gives me, but it always feels nice to take a corset off. It doesn’t hurt having a handsome man do the job either.”

My hands hesitated on his bare back above the edge of the corset. His skin was so creamy and smooth, I wanted to taste him. When I didn’t move away, Florian grabbed my hands and placed them on his waist.

“You can touch me, Mal, I don’t mind. In fact, I encourage it. I like being touched.”

I let out a heavy breath, trying to maintain some restraint, even if he openly offered. Pressing a kiss to the top of his head, I said, “I’m going to change. Help yourself to anything you need.”

Scooping up my clothes from the floor, I went to the washroom. After removing my tux and hanging it in the wardrobe inside, I stood in front of the mirror and stared at my reflection. What was I doing ? I should not have a man in my room. But Florian wasn’t just any man, and we had slept together numerous times. Though never when we were both adults, and with a very palpable attraction between us. Unless it was all a show on Florian’s end. No. He was sincere, if not a little...lascivious. I might not be used to hearing someone talk so bluntly about desires, but I had to admit I liked it. I just didn’t know what to do with it or how to respond.

Splashing water on my face, I tried to cool the heat that was blooming beneath my skin and got into my basic gray sweats and white t-shirt. It didn’t occur to me to announce myself before returning to my room. But the coolness of the water evaporated immediately when I opened the door to find Florian standing there completely nude except for a tight jockstrap that did nothing to hide his bulge or his luscious thighs, where I could see the hint of the straps on the side that curved down to hug his ass.

“Crowns!” I breathed out. I stared longer than I should have at his beautiful body on display before finally slapping a hand over my eyes. “Sorry. I thought you would be changed already.”

“It’s fine. I am. As much as I loved the outfit I was wearing, it feels good to have air on my skin again.”

I peeked between my fingers. “Oh. You’re going to stay like that?”

I could see him smirk as he sauntered toward me. “Unless you want me to put more

clothes on.”

“No!” I blurted out, unable to hide the desperation in my voice. I had no desire to cover up all of his skin that was wonderfully on display. “Sorry, not what I meant to say. Whatever makes you comfortable. Or I could lend you something.”

Florian jumped on the bed, his bubbly ass bouncing, calling to me like a siren trying to lure me to the cliffs, as he flashed me a grin before getting under the covers. “Nope. I’m good.”

I shook my head. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Maybe. Now get your ass in this bed, or I’m going to start rolling all over it to feel the silky sheets on my body.”

“That’s not much of a threat.” I murmured to myself, but he must have heard me, because he let out a snort. Still, I wanted to be near him more than I wanted to watch him mess around. I walked to the other side of the bed and laid down on top of the covers, not trusting myself to be next to him with so much skin available to touch and explore.

Florian wiggled around a bit until he was sitting up against the headboard, the blanket draped over his waist. My eyes lingered over him, taking in the lean torso on display, showing his smooth skin without a hint of chest hair. He had small, rosy nipples that seemed to perk up under my attention, but I forced my gaze away, staring at the ridges in the textured ceiling. I’d counted and memorized them in the years I’d spent looking up while trying to sleep.

We lay there in silence for a moment. It was slightly awkward but not uncomfortable. Not to me, at least. His presence beside me was calming in a way, the warmth of him radiating beside me.

“Can I feel it again?” I asked quietly.

“Feel what?”

“Your magic.”

“Sure.” Florian held his hand out, and I put mine in it, entwining our fingers.

Immediately, I could feel that surge of warmth that flowed from him to me, and I exhaled softly, as the corners of my mouth tipped up “Mmm.”

Florian’s thumb rubbed over mine in gentle circles. “You can really feel it?”

“Yes.” I felt my eyes close as the sunshine sensation spread beneath my skin.

“And it doesn't bother you?”

“No, it feels really nice. Is that unusual? Does it normally bother people?”

Florian pressed his lips as he stared at our joined hands. “Not that I know of. I’ve never had anyone seem to notice while I did it. I usually mix up balms or potpourri or some concoction while I do it. People tend to believe in tangible things more than what they can't see, so they believe I imbue the ingredients with power, rather than reaching right into them with my magic.”

“Incredible. So you don't even need to touch someone to make it work?” I squeezed his hand, loving the feel of it mine and not willing to let go.

“It’s not necessary, no. However, physical connection helps me focus and direct its path, especially if it’s loud or there are too many stimuli, like being in the capitol, or if something is particularly stubborn, like your frog. Sometimes, though, it's just nice

to touch or be touched, like now.”

I slid a glance over to him, and we shared a smile. “I understand. It's something I miss, too. Even the act of holding someone's hand is a rare occurrence for me. This is nice.”

“It is,” Florian said with a soft sigh.

“How come I never knew about your magic? When did it start?”

I felt him tense beside me and a part of me wanted to take it back, but there were too many unknowns about my past—our past—and I was long overdue for some answers.

Florian was quiet for a moment, but when he spoke it was with a sullen tone, though he held onto my hand. “I didn't know about my magic, either. I had no known heritage or anyone who knew about me. I showed up as an infant and was taken in by a household, raised by many, looked after by the king and queen who wanted their son to have a playmate. But no one knew where I came from. I was thirteen when my magic made itself known. Suddenly, I could sense more than others seemed to. It wasn't only pain or illness I could feel things in people: intent, wills, sensing the good or bad in them. It was all so confusing and everything grew louder, making it hard to focus on anything. I holed myself up in my room, trying to filter through all the noise.”

I sat up and turned toward him. “I remember that. I thought you were sick. Crowns , I sat outside your door for days, I was so worried. Wait, can you even get sick?”

“I can. My magic only works when directed outward, not inward. It doesn't work on me, believe me, I've tried. But I wasn't sick then, just inundated. It was all too much to process.”

An ache grew in my chest at the thought of him suffering by himself. “You should have come to me. I would have helped you. I don't know how, but you shouldn't have had to deal with that alone.”

“I didn't know if what was happening to me would harm you somehow.” His voice sounded young, like he'd been transported back twenty years and was reliving the ordeal all over again.

I sat up and turned toward him, not letting go of his hand. “I would have risked it.”

He shook his head. “No, Mal. I couldn't let you. I knew from day one that your life meant more than mine. You needed to be kept safe because it was your destiny to lead someday.”

“That's bull-loney.” I managed to hold back the curse that had nearly come out. “My life doesn't matter more than yours, Flor.”

Florian offered me a sad smile. “It does, but that's okay. That's just how the world works. We need leaders, and they must be protected.”

I wasn't naive enough to know there wasn't truth to what he was saying, but I'd never hated my position more than I did at that moment. Hearing that my friend felt he had to suffer alone for my sake made me feel both angry and hurt.

I couldn't keep the pain out of my voice when I spoke again. “And then what? You just left so I couldn't see you?”

Florian turned toward me, the blanket falling and his bare thigh revealed, not that I could focus on his body or his nakedness right now. I wished I could. “I didn't just leave . I never wanted to leave in the first place.”

“So what happened? My father told me you left in the middle of the night, and you didn’t want to be followed. I tried to escape several times, but the palace was tightened down, and I couldn’t.”

He looked at me with misty eyes before throwing his arms around me and planting his mouth on mine in a hard kiss. Surprised by the action, it took me a moment to respond, but his lips felt so warm and sweet, I couldn’t resist it. Florian slid a leg over my lap until he was straddling me, as his tongue dove into my mouth.

A loud moan rumbled in the back of my throat at the weight of his body on mine. My arms folded around his back, holding him to me. It was frenzied and desperate, as if we could make up for twenty years of lost time in this one moment together. That the pain and loss we both had experienced was being mended by our mouths working together.

I’d forgotten he was only wearing a jock strap until my hands slid down and found the waistband that led to the curves of his ass beneath. In spite of his hardness I could feel between our bodies, I quickly moved my hands away, not wanting to take things too far.

Florian pushed back and caught his breath. He wiped the corner of his eye. “I don’t want to think about the past any more. Can we just be here, in the present, together?”

There was so much I wanted to know, but with the beautiful man in my lap, and the way it felt with him sitting on my throbbing erection, I would be happy to stay in the present with him. I ran my hand over his thigh, my thumb barely brushing the outline of his strained jock, wishing I could touch all of him.

I gave a nod and looked into those forest green eyes of his. “I’m here with you, Flor.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:54 am

It was all the permission I needed. I leaned forward and kissed him again, but this time I rolled my hips, enjoying the hiss that came out of him as my ass rubbed over his cock. Fuck, he felt good.

When he said he'd tried to come look for me, it was what I'd been wanting to hear since I left. Just to know that someone tried, someone cared, but especially that it was him. He was the one who mattered the most. It was clear he was as in the dark as I had been at the time, but now I was back, and in his room again. I wasn't about to let this moment go by without exploring what it would be like to be with him.

I kissed those luscious rosy-taupe lips as if my life depended on it. The desperation and years of longing drove me into him, trying to climb so deep inside of him that we could never be separated again.

The sounds he made as I slid over his cock had me hungry for more. I nipped his lower lip and kissed my way over his square jaw. As I lowered down his throat, I mouthed over his Adam's apple, feeling it bob beneath my touch.

My hands slid under his shirt, feeling the defined muscles of his abs. Playing with the edge of his shirt, I looked into his darkened brown eyes. "Can I get this out of the way?"

He swallowed audibly. "Yes, please."

I couldn't help but smirk. "So polite, princey. I wonder what it would take to get you to say something naughty."

“I don’t know. I don’t normally...do that.”

I leaned into him and whispered in his ear, “Challenge accepted.” I bit his ear lobe, loving his quick inhale.

With his shirt gone, I stared at his chest. He had a smattering of dark curly hair on top of his lovely golden skin. “Fuck, Mal. You are so hot!”

His lips quirked into a smile, but his eyes roamed over me, pausing on my barely contained stiffy, whose head nearly peeked out of the top of the jockstrap. “As are you, Flor.” I ran my hands up his chest, loving the way his muscles contracted beneath my touch. He practically purred when my fingers played in his hair. Unable to sit back any longer, I bent over him and flicked one nipple with my tongue.

“Crowns!” Malachi exclaimed, making me chuckle.

“We’re getting closer. But I see I still have some work to do.” I closed my mouth over the peaked nipple, sucking it in, tugging it gently with my teeth, and his back arched up as he moaned. Mal’s hand found its way into my long hair, and he wrapped some of the strands around it, holding on, but not pulling.

“Mmm.” Mal mumbled.

I gave the same attention to the other nipple, loving the way his hand tightened in my hair and the sounds he made. If he was this reactive to his nipples, I could only imagine the sounds he would make with his cock buried deep in my throat. Or my ass. But we would get there another day. I hoped.

For now, I just wanted to savor him, to touch and taste every part of the man I’d dreamt of and imagined for so long. I kissed my way down his stomach, dark hair leading me on a path to glory. Malachi tensed when I flicked my tongue under the

waistband of his gray sweatpants. Did he even realize how hot those were? I might have been the one wearing practically nothing, but the way his hard cock was outlined in the light material was practically a beacon calling me home. I pulled the waistband down and kissed the spot right above his dark nest of curls.

“Wait! Flor!” Malachi rasped out.

I braced myself on my elbows and angled my head to look up at him. “Are you okay?”

He breathed hard, his eyes so dark with lust they were practically black. “Yes. I just...you don’t have to...um, I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Do you want me to stop?” As much as I longed to have him fill my mouth and block out the past, I didn’t want to push him into something he would regret.

“Crowns! I don’t know. Um...yes...or, well...no?” His tone went up at the end in a question, making me chuckle at his uncertainty.

I sat up, and he let out a breath at the change in position. But his eyes were locked onto my bulge, so I decided to help him with his decision. Pulling the pouch of the jock strap down, my cock popped out and slapped against my belly. I stroked it slowly, and his gaze was glued to my hand as it slid up and down.

“You know? As king, you’re going to have to be decisive, sometimes even in the hardest of situations.”

Malachi sucked in a sharp breath, unable to look anywhere but at my hand on my cock. “Yes, but as king, I don’t want to inflict my will against someone.”

“And what if it is my will, too?” I moaned loudly, louder than necessary, but loved

the way he licked his lips when I did.

“Is that what you really want, Flor?” He asked through a thick voice.

“Mmm. More than you know. Oh, wait. Maybe this will help.” I leaned into him, until we were chest to chest, and our faces mere inches away. “Your Highness, may I please suck your royal prick?” I batted my eyelashes for added effect.

Mal covered his eyes as he let out a laugh. His cheeks had a lovely red undertone. He kept his hand over his eyes when he let out a terse, “yes.”

I kissed his lips, flicking my tongue over them. As he opened his mouth to let me explore, I slid back down his body. He groaned in disappointment at the kiss cut short, but the groan soon changed when I didn’t hesitate to pull his sweatpants down.

His cock stood strong before me, thick and hard, his tip glistening with a bead I collected on my tongue. That first taste had my magic purring within me. I glanced up and saw Mal had his head back, but his hand was still over his eyes. Oh no, that wouldn’t do at all.

“Watch me, Mal. I want you to know it’s me. It’s us here, right now, together.”

He inhaled deeply and pulled his hand away. As soon as his eyes met mine, I opened my mouth and wrapped my lips around him, using my tongue to play along the rounded edge of the head.

A moan fell from his lips as I lowered myself, letting his cock slide over my tongue. I adjusted my angle, so I could take more of him in. I’d been with enough men and had enough practice that I’d learned to relax my throat. I worked up and down a few times, lowering myself more until I had him fully, and my nose nestled in the dark hair above his cock. I breathed shallow breaths through my nose, and when I

swallowed around him, Malachi bucked and spluttered sounds.

I began to move, taking him deep, sliding up, toying with his tip, before pressing back down until he was hitting the back of my throat. Malachi's hands were in my hair, fingers wrapped around the long strands, and he pushed into my mouth. It was nearly too much. Which made it exactly what I needed. So that every thought and memory of the past was pushed away and all I could focus on was the feel of him in my mouth, on breathing around him. The moans and slurps and erotic sounds were the balm I needed to quiet the noise in my head.

When I looked up at Mal, his lips were parted and his eyes heavy with lust. He met my gaze as his cock was buried deep in my throat, and I could feel him tighten. His fingers gripped my hair, and he let out a strangled, "Fuucckk!"

He came hard, and I barely managed to contain it, coughing slightly with surprise as his release flooded my throat. I stayed in place, though. Swallowing as much as I could, though I couldn't help but grin around him at the sound of him cursing. Feeling rather pleased with myself that I'd managed to make him break his habit, I slid off him, wiping my mouth and sitting on his spent cock.

"I knew I could do it."

Malachi wiped the sweat from his brow and let his head fall back. "Florian, that was... crowns! I don't have words for how good that felt."

I leaned an elbow on his shoulder and rested my head on it. "Funny. It seems you had a word a minute ago. What was it, again?"

He snorted. "Shut up! It just came out, I had no control, but I'm not likely to say it on purpose."

“Hmm. We’ll have to work on that.” I pecked a kiss on his lips, smiling against them. Mal’s arms wrapped around mine, and he kissed me deeper, moaning as his tongue played over mine, likely tasting himself on me.

I was achingly hard between us, my tip leaking on my belly. I’d nearly lost it when he came in my mouth, but I was too focused on him. Malachi reached between us, stroking me, making my body sing like a chorus hitting perfect harmonies at his touch.

I sat back to give him some room but grabbed his hand and made eye contact with him. Those brown eyes widened when I licked up his palm and placed his hand back on my cock. He began to pump me and his slickened hand felt amazing. I leaned back, bracing my hands on his thighs behind me.

“Feels so good, Mal. Keep going.”

Malachi sat up straighter and continued to work me with such determination, it would have been laughable if I wasn’t so close to the edge. He squeezed around my base, making me gasp, holding back my orgasm. I sat panting, at his complete mercy. When he started moving again, tension built up, and no amount of pressure would be able to hold it back. I let out a shout as the orgasm exploded out of me, coating Malachi’s hand and chest. I gripped his thighs hard enough I half-worried about leaving bruises, but I couldn’t bring myself to care as I panted and Mal worked the rest of my cum from my oversensitive dick.

When his hand left me, I whimpered. He tugged me gently forward until I collapsed against his chest, my release sticking between us. That was fine. It could glue us together for all I cared. Because stuck with him was exactly where I wanted to be.

Mal’s finger gently played in my hair and we both lay there, wordless and content for a while. I could feel his heartbeat start to slow beneath my ear as he relaxed under

me. After a few minutes, the conversation we'd had before snuck back in, and a mix of emotions rushed into my mind. But at the forefront was gratitude, and with it...something deeper that made my magic swirl around my heart.

“Thank you for trying to look for me. That means more than you can know.”

Malachi kissed the top of my head. “I’m sorry I didn’t find you, but I wanted to. I wanted you . I have every day of my life.”

“I wanted you too, Mal. Still do. And we’re here now. That’s what matters.”

His arms tightened around me as if he wanted to hold on and never let go. I would let him, too. I would happily stay right there in the comfort and strength of him. And we did. For a while. Malachi eventually got up and used the washroom, returning with a damp cloth to clean us up. We decided to forgo the rest of our clothing, and he climbed under the blanket with me this time. I fell asleep curled up beside him, with his body spooned against mine and his arm over my chest. I’d never felt more at peace or rested as easily as I did with him that night. That peace left as quickly as it came, though, when I was awakened before dawn.

Malachi

In the aftermath of the bliss I’d experienced with Florian, and the wonder of his mouth on me, and seeing him come undone by my hand, I woke in the middle of the night. As I held him, I couldn’t help but think back to what he’d told me. How much I didn’t understand about what happened. And how powerless it made me feel.

If I wasn’t able to help the person that mattered the most to me, how could I possibly make a difference for the lives of the people who would be entrusted into my care and leadership? What did I have to offer?

All of the confidence I'd felt during the party with Florian at my side suddenly abated as doubt and uncertainty crashed into me. What kind of king would I be? How could I possibly lead a nation? And who would follow me if they knew I'd been unable to help the boy I loved. The man I loved, because that was one thing I didn't have any doubt about.

That blooming curiosity and infatuation I'd had with him back then had only grown stronger. Especially now, having seen his beautiful heart and holding him in my arms. I loved him fully and completely. I might not know everything there was to know about him or his life, but I knew I wanted him with me and could learn more as we went along.

I held him, clutching him tight to me. Florian was the only thing that made sense. I tried to focus on him, but the weight of the upcoming transition of power pressed in on me, too strong to fight. The anxiety and stress that I'd felt since the announcement came back in full force. As I wrestled with my thoughts, I began to feel strange. It felt as if something was crawling under my skin and clawing at me from the inside.

It worked its way up my body until even my mind felt itchy, my thoughts unclear. While it was a relief not to be churning thoughts in my head over and over, I could no longer seem to hold onto anything in my mind. I felt like I was sinking deep into myself, unable to grasp onto anything. Sinking. Sinking. And the only thing I could connect to was the man beside me. I knew him, even if I didn't know myself.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:54 am

I felt a nudge against my thigh. It was enough to make my eyes blink open and try to remember where I was. It was still dark, but a soft light came from under the door, just enough to see the wainscoting that went around the room halfway up the textured walls with golden filigree ornaments evenly spaced near the ceiling. When I saw the same walls I'd grown up sleeping within, I relaxed. I yawned softly and stretched, trying not to disturb Malachi.

Except I no longer felt his body flushed up against mine. Another thump against my thigh had me chuckling. Apparently, Mal was already awake and ready for some attention. I wouldn't mind a repeat of the night before. Early morning sex was my favorite way to start the day.

That didn't seem to be in the plans, not when I turned over and saw Mal kneeling on the bed. He was still naked, but that wasn't the strange part. It was how he was sitting, leaning forward on his hands, staring down at me with eyes that seemed unnaturally wide.

"What's...going on?" I looked around quickly, trying to figure out if someone else was there, or if I could sense anything.

He bumped my leg with his hand, and he let out a soft whining sound. I sat up quickly, the suddenness of my movement caused him to flinch back. "Mal? Are you okay?"

He whimpered and lowered down, knees still bent, in a sort of yoga pose. His brown eyes stared up at me expectantly.

I stretched my magic out to see if I could feel what was happening with him, but when it reached him, I felt it hit resistance and bounce back. Similar to what happened with the frog, only this was so much stronger.

Concern had me fully awake now. I moved carefully, trying to close the distance between us. “Mal? It’s me, Florian.”

He tilted his head sideways, as if trying to understand me. Something about the motion felt strangely familiar, but not...human. I inched a little closer, and when he didn’t try to move away from me, I held my hand out to show that I wouldn’t hurt him.

Malachi sniffed my hand before licking it and pushing his head under it. My heart felt gripped in a vise, as I tentatively placed my hand on top of his head and patted. Mal smiled and gave a happy huff.

I smoothed my hand over his hair and he crawled closer to me. Shit! This was...not good. Since my touch seemed to sooth him, I continued petting over his hair and rubbing down his neck. Mal lay on his side and nuzzled his head against me, smiling up at me with his tongue hanging out one side.

He was acting like...a dog. “Mal?” He tilted his head. Okay, so he recognized his name. That was something. “Can you talk?”

A soft bark came from him. A bark . Malachi, the man who was about to be king, barked. Fuck, fuck, fuckity, fuck. What did that mean?

I continued to pet him, even as he rolled on to his back, staring up at me and showing me his belly. “You want a belly rub?” I asked, feeling foolish.

When he replied with a soft woof, I couldn’t help but chuckle. I ran my hand down

his stomach, being sure to stay far away from his dick. As much as I admired it and wanted to touch it more, it wouldn't be right if he wasn't aware of what was happening. Continuous rubs down his stomach had his tongue lolling. I took the opportunity of his relaxed position and seeming contentment to reach out again with my magic, focusing it as I touched him.

That resistance pushed back, but I was able to get a vision of what it was fighting against. It was much like the essence of the frog that had been in his throat, only this time, it filled his entire body. There was a presence that seemed to encompass him. An aura of a mystical dog. He was there, I could sense him, but he felt far away. This was too big, too much. I didn't know how to help him.

The thought made my chest ache and a restless feeling filled me. I needed to do some research. There had to be something I could do.

I climbed out of bed and paced. Malachi flopped down off the bed, landing on hands and knees, making me wince. His legs shook slightly when he stood, but he managed to walk awkwardly behind me.

I turned to face him, finding it strange to have to tilt my head back to look at him, considering I had just been giving him belly rubs. "I'm going to have to go."

At the last word, his lips turned down, and he let out a whine. I reached up and patted his head, trying to reassure him. "I'll come back, I promise. But I need to figure out how to help you."

I found my neatly folded clothes that I'd worn to the palace yesterday morning and started getting dressed. Malachi watched me with tilted head, curious to see what I was doing. When I fastened my pants, I looked him over. He was still naked. I couldn't leave him like that.

I collected his discarded sweats and tee shirt and tried to put them on him, but he didn't lift a foot, simply observed me.

"I need to get you dressed. It might feel funny to wear clothes right now, but I promise you'll appreciate it later on. Can you give me a little help here?"

Another head tilt. I ran a hand over my face. "Fuck me. Can you sit down on the bed and I can get these on you?"

Mal looked at the bed and looked back at me but didn't move. Maybe he was too far away to understand me fully. I was giving him too many words for him to comprehend. I needed to simplify. Forgive me, Mal, I mentally apologized for what I was about to do.

"Mal, sit."

He immediately sat on the edge of the bed and looked up at me expectantly.

"Good boy." I patted his head, and he panted happily. It might have been a little fucked up, but I found it endearing, in a strange way. To see his eagerness for my approval. It stirred up something within me, but I pushed it down. Now was not the time.

I knelt down on the floor before him, and when I touched his left foot and said lift, he did. I slid the pants leg up and repeated the action with the other leg until I maneuvered the sweats all the way up.

"Lay down, Mal." He obeyed easily, and when he laid back on the bed, I was able to scoot the pants under his ass and pull them up around his waist. I gave his belly a light pat.

I managed to get his shirt on him, too, which had been a little bit more difficult, especially since he tried to lick my hand every time it was in front of his face. I chuckled at the action, even if I knew this wasn't an amusing situation, but I was merely a man being licked by the man of my dreams. And...Mal made for a pretty cute pup.

"I'm going to be back as soon as I can. Don't go anywhere. You need to stay right here." When he tilted his head, I let out a sigh. I held my hand out in front of him and said in a more firm tone, "Stay."

He let out a soft woof but settled into the bed. I tucked the blanket in around him, and he watched me with sad eyes as I went to the door. "Be a good boy for me, okay?"

I opened and closed the door quickly, ensuring it latched properly. I didn't know how much awareness he had or how much canine instinct was in him, but I didn't want to risk him getting out. If anyone saw him like this, it would be devastating. Not just for him, personally, but for the country. He would be deemed incompetent, and it could ruin his entire future.

From the hallway, my forehead fell against his door. I sent my magic through it, trying to reach him with a plea that he would stay. I couldn't compel people to do anything, but I also knew that Malachi felt my magic in a way that no one else did. Maybe he would feel me. Somewhere in the depths of his mind, he would sense my urging. With my hand on the doorframe, I promised to return quickly.

At the end of the hall, Oscar was standing guard. I sighed with relief. If something happened, at least I knew this was someone Mal trusted. I had to hope he would help keep him concealed or keep it hushed if somehow he found out what was happening with the prince.

He dipped his head in acknowledgement when he saw me. "Mister Florian. I hope

you have a good day.”

“Uh, yes. Thank you, but I’m going to be back. Mal, uh, Prince Malachi isn’t...feeling like himself. I have to get to my cottage to find a few things that might help. I’ll need to get there and back as quickly as possible.”

Oscar straightened, and his eyes darted down the hallway. “So this has to do with his...afflictions?”

“Yes.”

His gaze returned to me, concern flashing behind his sharp eyes. “Is he alright? Is there anything I can do?”

“Stand guard. Don’t let anyone disturb him, including you. I know you care for him, but the best thing you can do for the prince is to leave him alone in his room until I get back. He would not wish for you to see him as he is now. And if you could arrange a ride for me, it would be greatly appreciated.”

Surely, it wasn’t too much of me to ask. I didn’t want to assume power, but it would take a lot longer to secure a cab to the Purlieu and back.

“Yes, sir. A car will be waiting for you at the front gate. I’ll instruct them to wait for you and bring you back when you’re ready.” I squeezed his arm. “Thank you very much. Keep him safe, Oscar.”

“Always. It is my duty, one I am honored to have.”

I hurried down the halls, following a path my feet knew by memory, leading me through several turns and corridors until I came to the front entrance. Flinging the heavy door open before I could be asked, I hurried down the steps where less than a

week ago, Malachi's upcoming coronation was announced.

I will get you to your coronation, Mal. I swear it.

A black town car pulled up to the walkway at the bottom of the staircase. The driver got out, walked around the car, and opened the door for me. I would have appreciated the irony after having been kicked out so long ago, but right now the only thing that mattered was helping Malachi.

I gave the driver my address, and we left. As soon as we were on the public street, the driver accelerated, swerving expertly around traffic and cutting through the capitol like a hot knife through butter.

No one stopped him, not even the police cars we passed. Either they knew the car, or it had special plates on it to signify it as belonging to the royal family. Whatever it was, I was grateful. He got me to my cottage in a third of the time it would have taken me to make that same trip.

Not bothering with niceties with the driver, I hurried inside and went to my bedroom, where I had a collection of old books about magic. After I had been thrown out of the palace, not only was I having to survive on my own, I was still dealing with this thing in me I didn't understand. The library became one of my favorite places. They didn't mind people hanging around all day as long as they weren't causing any trouble, and they had extensive archives. Books that were older than the country itself. Books that gave you a glimpse into the past.

Magic was once more prevalent in the land, or at least it was spoken of more in the past. Along with legends, myths, and lore. I began devouring whatever I could, whether fact or fiction. Though even in the books deemed fairytales, there were elements of familiarity within them. All stories came from somewhere.

Looking over my bookshelf, I found one of the few books I...r ehomed from the library. The section of books had been dust-covered and in a room in the basement of the historical building. They hadn't been touched in years. I had taken it upon myself to sneak a book or two out, knowing they would be more valuable if actually used instead of left to rot.

The oldest book I had was leather bound with lacing along the spine. The date written on the inside cover was from four hundred years ago. It had taken me a while to decipher much of it, since it was written in an older dialect, but I'd managed to piece good portions of it together.

After picking out several books, I threw them into a satchel and added some dried fruits and veggies I kept on hand to snack on when I was busy. Within ten minutes, I was back in the town car and driven to the palace, delivered to the front door.

No questions were asked as I rushed up the stairs. The door opened for me, and I hurried my way back through the labyrinth of corridors to the royal family's wing.

Oscar seemed relieved to find me back so soon. His gaze dropped to my satchel, and I knew he was battling his instincts to check my belongings to ensure I wouldn't be bringing anything that would harm the prince.

I lifted the flap, and he took a peek inside. "Books? You brought books?"

"Yup. The most powerful tools I have, and if you don't mind, I really do need to get back to the prince."

He stepped aside. "Yes, of course. I'm right here if you need anything."

"Thank you. Please don't let anyone disturb us until I tell you otherwise."

Oscar dipped his head and let me pass. I was thankful he didn't ask any further questions, because I didn't really know what else to tell him.

When I got to the prince's door, I opened it carefully, not wanting to hit him if he was in front of it, or risk him running out. Seeing it was clear, I slipped inside and shut the door quickly, making Mal bark.

“Shhh. It's okay. It's just me.”

Malachi was still on the bed, though he hopped up when he saw me and sat back on his heels, bracing himself on his hands.

I sat beside him and patted his head. “Good boy, Mal.”

He wiggled his ass happily, making me laugh at the action. Poor Malachi. I was sure he was going to hate knowing about this. I wondered how much he was aware. Could he see or feel what was happening but simply had no control over it? I didn't know, but I was going to find out. In the meantime, I would talk to him as if he could hear me.

“I'm going to figure out what happened. It may take a little time, but I promise I'm not going anywhere until I do.”

He gave a soft woof. I didn't know whether it was in response to hearing my voice, or the gentle tone I used, or if some part of him understood, but I took it as acknowledgement and had to go from there.

With my bag of books, I sat at his desk and spread them out. Mal crawled off the bed, getting tangled in the shirt he wore. His arms had come out of the sleeves, and it hung loose around him. I crossed the room to help him out of the shirt he seemed to have been wrestling with while I was gone.

“Is that better?”

He licked my hand. I pursed my lips together to stifle a laugh as I returned to the chair. Mal walked over on hind legs...no, on his legs, and sat on the floor beside me. I wasn't sure what to do with him, so I turned my attention to the books in front of me. A moment later, Mal's cheek rested on my thigh. I gently stroked my hand over his head, and he nuzzled closer.

He stayed there while I skimmed through the books. I continued to pet him absentmindedly. Mal seemed to melt against me. He shifted until he was sitting on his butt and leaning back against my leg. It was oddly comforting to have him so near, and I hoped my touch helped him, too.

In the leather-bound book, I found a section about deities and spiritual beings. I didn't know if the gods of the old world were real or not. I used to think it was completely out of the question, but then...magic was real. I knew people of the past often attributed things they didn't understand to powerful beings, but there had to be some basis it was founded on.

I hadn't paid too much attention to this section in the past, but I felt a pull to it. My magic was drawing me in, and I learned early on to listen to it. I read each page, each line, carefully trying to decipher the meaning. Sometimes I had to read a passage a few times to grasp it. But then something caught my eye.

“Trickster,” I said in a whisper, afraid I might invoke it by speaking it aloud. I read it over and over until it started to click. A trickster spirit could latch onto someone, particularly if they were left vulnerable through stress or anxiety. The spirits loved to do things that seemed innocuous at first, but could increasingly grow in power, feeding off the chaos and trouble that it caused.

That had to be it. Malachi had expressed his anxiousness about the role he would

soon have. Did a trickster somehow find him? Its magic had been strong already when I had forced the frog entity out of him. Now? I ran my hand over Mal's hair, letting my magic reach into him. The charm that had been placed on him was much more formidable than the last, and it reached too deep. I wouldn't be able to focus my magic and center it like I had on his throat.

"But how do I fix it?" I pondered out loud, flipping through the pages.

Mal let out a concerned whine at my exasperation. He turned his face up to me, eyes too round. I patted his head and kept my voice calm when I responded. "It's okay. I'm going to figure this out."

Now that I had a word to look for, I switched to more modern books hoping there would be answers. I traced through page after page until my stomach grumbled and my eyes went blurry. I pulled out some of the dried snacks I'd brought and realized Mal hadn't eaten anything either, and I didn't want to risk calling for food or having someone come to the door.

"Are you hungry?" I took a bite of dried sweet potato to show Mal it was edible before offering it to him. He opened his mouth and took it from my hand, making me chuckle. He chewed it for a bit, and then he smiled, and his tongue hung out as he eyed the pouch of food.

"Hmm, let's see. How about we try some apple chips?" I popped one in my mouth and handed him one, which he took eagerly. He let out a soft woof showing his approval. "Yeah, those are my favorite, too."

We continued like that—a bite for me, a bite for him—until I reached the bottom of the bag, having gone through everything I'd brought. I showed him and he let out a little whine. "Sorry, Mal. That's all for now. Hopefully, we can get you back to yourself in time for dinner."

Having been hunched over the desk for a while, and Mal sitting on the floor for longer than was probably comfortable, I decided it was time to change locations. I grabbed the leather-bound book, as well as a couple others, and went to the bed. I leaned a pillow against the backboard and sat against it. Malachi watched me, waiting for instructions.

I patted the bed beside me. “Come on.”

He leapt onto the bed, making me bounce with the weight of a full-grown man jostling the bed, and I let out a laugh. Mal snuggled up beside me, with his head on my stomach and his belly exposed. I rubbed my hand over those hard abs of his. “Good boy.”

I carefully balanced the big books on my lap, trying not to disturb Mal, and kept one hand on his hairy trail down the center of his stomach. It wasn’t sexual. I liked the feeling of his skin, but as turned on as I’d been touching him the night before, this wasn’t about that. It was different with him not fully present, and I think it was reassuring to both of us.

The newer books weren’t showing me anything about trickster spirits. I’d even looked for anything that felt similar, in case the language or name had changed, but got nothing. Some of the old magic still existed in the world, but it wasn’t preserved or passed on, ancestors choosing to ignore it in the hopes it would fade away. It lingered though. The shadows of the past had a way of coming back again. Only now, mysteries were explained away with science and technology. They weren’t always right, though.

Pulling out the leather book, I found the section I was reading earlier. It kept saying something about power. “One’s own power.”

The slanted letters and the old dialect that didn’t follow normal grammar or sentence

structure made it challenging. But the one thing I kept seeing was one's own power or power aplomb. Aplomb was mentioned a few times, though it had a few extra letters in it, so it didn't make sense right away. Self-confidence, calmness, and composure. What did that have to do with fighting off the trickster?

I sucked in a sharp breath when it finally dawned on me. Mal shifted, turning over, when he sensed my excitement. "I think I found it!"

He woofed in response and smiled. I grabbed his cheeks in both of my hands and pressed a kiss to the top of his head. "We're going to get you through this."

I wasn't quite sure how yet, but at least I had something to work with. From what I could understand, I couldn't fight this magic from the outside, not this time. It was latched on too deep. Malachi would have to do it. Except...Mal's mind was far away. How did I get him to fight the magic, to use his own confidence and strength to push it out, if he couldn't comprehend what he needed to do?

Mal nudged my hand, pushing it on top of his head, and I began to pet him once more. Stroking down the back of his neck and between his shoulder blades. He nuzzled in closer.

Torn about what to do, I kept petting him, as I tried to think it through. Perhaps if he didn't have his own words yet, he could borrow mine. "I think I'll tell you a story about a boy who was strong and brave and who made me feel special."

Mal let out a woof. So I began talking. He stared up at me through round, brown eyes, listening to every word I said, whether he heard them or not.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:54 am

“W hen we were old enough to start attending school, they were going to separate us, but you wouldn’t let them. You stood your ground and told them you wouldn’t go unless we could go together. Seeing as how the school you were to attend only served the children of dignitaries, it wasn’t an option. So they brought in tutors. You had some of your own lessons, lessons for a prince, but we got to learn the basics of academics together. You were only five, but you already had a strong sense of who you were and what you wanted.”

You. You were what I wanted . The thought formed through a heavy fog as though I had been sitting at the bottom of the ocean, and I was starting to make my way to the surface. There was light above me, warmth. I needed to push my way toward it.

“I was in awe of you then. As I am now. The way you moved through the dinner party with such poise and confidence. It was sexy as hell. But even more than that, it gave me a glimpse of the kind of leader you will be. You are the kind of leader who feels approachable and just, who is willing to hear from those he disagrees with to see if you can find common ground, and you have a heart for your people. I’m so proud of who you are, Mal. Beneath it all, I know the little boy who was so full of ideals and passion would be proud of you, too.”

I felt one corner of my lip tilt up at hearing him. Warmth radiated through me, filling every cell in my body, making them feel as if they were bursting back to life. I could smell Florian’s woodsy citrusy scent and felt his body next to mine. I draped my arm over him, squeezing tight.

“Mmm. That’s nice to hear.” My voice felt raspy and crackly, dried out as if I’d slept with my mouth wide open.

I heard a sharp inhale, before I was shaken. “Mal? Malachi?”

“Yes?” I blinked hard as harsh light burned my eyes. When they opened fully, I was staring up at Florian, his auburn hair hanging down. My cheek rested on his thigh and my arm was around his middle.

“You’re back! Thank the stars!” He bent over me and pressed a hard kiss on my mouth, before peppering kisses all over my face.

“We’re still in bed. Did I go somewhere?” The fog may have lifted, but I was feeling out of sorts. My body felt strange, pins and needles rippling through me. I tried to figure out the time, except it was too light out to be night still.

Florian pushed me to my back and covered my body with his own, pressing his cheek to my chest. “You did. You were so, so far away, but you made it back. How are you feeling?”

My arms wrapped around him, as if holding him was the only thing my body could remember how to do at the moment. “Fuzzy, tingly. I’m not really sure.” Florian wiggled, hitting my bladder and a strong urge pummeled me. “And like I desperately need to relieve myself.”

He popped off of me. “Oh, shit. Sorry. I wasn’t sure exactly how to handle that. At least you seemed to be housebroken.” He offered me an awkward half-smile.

I didn’t know what that meant, but I needed to get to the toilet as quickly as possible. Scooting toward the end of the bed, I swung my legs over the edge. When I went to stand, they gave way, as if I’d forgotten how to walk. Florian was there immediately, letting me lean on him, and he helped guide each careful step to the washroom.

Realizing I wasn’t steady enough to stay standing while I peed, I asked Florian to

help sit me down. It was strange to have to need help for such a private act, but he did it without hesitation. Once I was secure, he stepped outside and waited, giving me a moment to myself. After peeing like I'd been keeping it in for days, I tried to stand once more, feeling slightly more steady.

I managed to make it to the sink and held the edge of the counter as I fought through the dizziness that came over me. My reflection in the mirror looked disheveled. My eyes seemed sunken in, and my hair was flattened down the center. I filled the glass I'd left on the counter with water and drank it down, calming the sandpaper feeling in my mouth and throat. Running the water in the sink, I leaned down and splashed it onto my face and toweled off. I grabbed my hair pick and fluffed out the center of my hair, bringing the curls back to life.

"Everything okay in there?" Florian called through the door.

I coughed to clear my throat. "Yes. I'll be out in a minute."

The water helped, but my mouth still felt chalky, so I brushed my teeth. The brightness of the peppermint helped clear my mind and wake me more fully. How long had I been sleeping? Or... not sleeping? Florian said I'd gone far away. What did that mean?

I opened the door to find Florian right outside of it, his brows lifted as his green eyes scanned my face. "I ordered some food. I'm sure you're hungry. You haven't eaten much today."

"I don't understand. What happened? What time is it? And why aren't I wearing a shirt?" I usually did when I was in my room, in case I was needed for something, aside from sleeping naked beside Florian.

His cheeks turned pink, and he hurriedly picked up my white tee off the ground. "Ah,

well, you were having some trouble with your shirt, so it was easier to leave it off.”

My brows pinched when he handed me the shirt. It looked like it had been stretched and pulled and...bitten? “What kind of trouble, exactly?”

“It’s hard to explain. I will, I promise. I’ll tell you everything. I just want to give you a minute to feel sorted again.”

I trusted him, more than anyone else. I felt safe and loved in his presence. Something within me was connected deeply to him. I knew if he was withholding anything from me, it wasn’t out of cruelty or spite. It was kindness, because he was kind. And good. And mine. I knew the possession I felt wasn’t ideal, but it was real all the same. “Okay.”

“Oh, and it’s about five-thirty in the evening.” Florian brushed my bare arm, sending a shiver through me that had nothing to do with the pins and needles of waking flesh.

“Five-thirty? Really?”

His lips pressed together into a thin line. “Yes. In fact, I need to go speak with Oscar. He’s been worried about you.”

“Was it another charm?”

“Yes.”

“It was a bad one, then?”

“I’ll tell you soon, Mal. I’ll be right back.” He stretched up on his toes and kissed my cheek.

After he left, I deposited my worn shirt into my hamper, and my eyes caught the state of my room. Books covered my desk and my bed. I didn't remember those being there before. I picked up one and realized it was about magic. They must have been Florian's as I'd never seen them in the palace library. As much as I liked the idea of him bringing his things here and seeing them fill my space, it didn't look like light, casual reading. It looked like he'd been frantically searching for something.

The thought of him working hard to find an answer to whatever happened made me feel loved that he would go through all of that for me, but it also pained me to have caused him such worry. I thumbed through the one in my hand, but it was all quite complex. A quick skim wouldn't tell me anything I would understand. Which was a shame. I was educated in all subjects, but magic had never been available to learn, or even talk about.

Was that why Florian had left as a kid? Was he afraid of people finding out? I would have been there for him and helped him, had I known. Perhaps then I would have been able to study these books of his and glean something from them, too.

A light tap on my door sounded and it opened, not waiting for me to give permission. I was on guard for a moment, before I saw his long hair swish around the door as he came in. Florian carried a tray with a silver cloche covering it. When he lifted the lid, the scent of food wafted toward me, making my stomach growl.

"I hope you don't mind, but I asked for a burger and fries. I know you used to like them, and I figured you wouldn't want something you would have to cut into. Mine's a portobello mushroom sandwich."

"Crowns! That smells amazing. Thank you."

He brought it over to the small table I had in my room. There was one chair at the table, so I grabbed my desk chair and brought it over. We sat down across from each

other as if this was our tradition, and we always sat and ate together in the privacy of my room. I thought of the king's suite and how much more roomy it was. We could have a fully set table in there and enjoy our dinners together every night.

Suddenly, the suite held some appeal. My room might have been big enough for us when we were boys, but we weren't small anymore. And Florian had books and clothes, so he would need more space than my room could offer. The idea of him staying and living with me...maybe it was too soon to be planning for such things, but I could picture him here, at my side, as my partner.

Florian waited for me to take a bite of my burger, and I was already shoving a second bite in before I'd even finished the first. The meat was so juicy, it ran down my chin, but I didn't care. I was ravenous, and I'd never tasted anything so good in my life. In my years of learning to eat properly, I'd never scarfed down a burger like I did then. Florian was right. I wouldn't have wanted to have to wait through cutting up food.

He chuckled a little before taking a bite of his sandwich, letting out a soft moan of delight. "Fuck, that's good. I forgot how much I missed the food here."

My burger was gone in minutes, staving off that desperate hunger I felt. I'd skipped a meal or two before on long days, especially when doing PR events. There wasn't always time for a break. I'd never felt this hungry before though. Now that I could think properly, I slowed down to a more dignified rate of consumption.

"I thought you might have worked up an appetite," Florian said with a slight smirk.

"Doing what?"

"Well, there's no real easy way to tell you this, but before I do, I can swear that I was the only one with you. Nobody else saw you today, so I don't want you to worry about that." Florian picked up a fry and popped it into his mouth.

“I guess that’s good? Except now, I am worried. What happened today?”

“Well, the short version is that you were enchanted to act like a dog.”

A cough sputtered from me. “A dog?” “It was more like you became a dog. It wasn’t an act. You looked like yourself, you didn’t change physically, but you couldn’t speak or think like you. I knew you were there still... somewhere . I could feel you deep within.”

I braced my head in my hands, trying to take in the information. “I didn’t do anything embarrassing, did I?”

Florian quirked his lips to the side. “Well...you loved belly rubs.”

I glanced up at him and saw him trying to hide his amusement as he stared down at my now-shirted-chest. What would that have looked like? Not that I minded the idea of Florian’s hands on my stomach, they’d been there the night before, but I wished I could remember it. The thought made me go still.

“We didn’t do anything... anything , did we?”

“No.” He bit out firmly. “Absolutely not. I would never have taken advantage of you while you were not of sound mind or able to consent. The most I did was pet you and kissed the top of your head.”

“You pet me?”

His cheeks pinked slightly. “Well, yes. You were very affectionate, and physical touch seemed to soothe you. I liked the connection, too. It helped remind me that you were still there inside. I must say, though, you were actually a pretty adorable pup.”

“Crowns!” I shook my head and slumped in my seat. “Nobody else saw me?”

“Not a soul, I swear. I mean, I had to leave for a short time to collect some of my books, so I could figure out what was going on, but Oscar was stationed at the end of the hall, and I made him promise not to let anyone in. So, if you trust him to do his job, then I’m the only one who saw you.”

“I trust him.” That was a small relief at least. Though I wasn’t sure how to feel about Florian taking care of me as a dog. What a way to impress the man I hoped would stay forever. Although, he didn’t seem to look at me with disdain or pity.

I sucked in a deep breath and blew it out slowly, still trying to process everything. “This is too far. Who could have possibly done such a thing to me?”

Florian dabbed at his mouth with his napkin before setting it down. “Well, I have good news on that front.”

“I like the sound of good news. What did you find out?”

“I don’t think you have an enemy trying to sabotage you.”

“What? Surely, there must be someone.” How could that be? The timing of it all happening before my coronation had to mean something. I tried to think of who would stand to benefit from me being deemed unsuitable for duty. The next in line for the throne was a cousin who was still a teenager. Though with the prank feel of the charms, I supposed a teenager wasn’t out of the question, but the last time I’d seen Laurence, he was more interested in video games than running a country.

Florian reached across the table, and I placed my hand in his. He met my gaze with a serious expression. “Well, here’s the not-so-good news. The saboteur is not a person but a spirit. A trickster spirit. They seek out those who have left themselves open to

attack.”

“Open how?”

“Doubt and anxiety that leave you vulnerable. They swoop in and latch on, feeding from the turmoil both within and without.”

It took a moment for it to sink in. I rubbed the scar on my wrist. Doubt and anxiety. I’d been feeling both so much lately. “So I did this?”

Florian came around the table and sat on my leg. He held my face in his hands, capturing my full attention. “It’s not your fault, Mal. Anyone would feel such things when facing a major change like you are, that’s only natural. It was just unfortunate that a trickster seemed to find you at the worst time.”

“You were able to help me. You brought me back.”

“All I did was remind you of who you are. The rest was up to you.” Florian brushed his thumb over my cheek.

“So how do I fix this? What do I do?”

“How did you make it through the dinner party?”

I did make it through the party without any calamities or turning into a dog. I shuddered at the thought of that happening in public, grateful I’d been alone with Florian when it did. At the dinner, though, I felt the need to protect Florian, to be strong for him, knowing I was putting him in a situation he wasn’t comfortable with. That need helped bolster my own confidence. With him at my side, I knew without any doubt the kind of king I wanted to be...for him.

“You.” I answered simply.

He shook his head. “No, Mal. I didn’t do it. You did. You were magnificent. You had a commanding presence that made people stop and listen, but you did it in a way that made them feel seen and heard, too. You were you , Malachi. That was all you needed to be.”

“Yes, I was me, but having someone so courageous, so unapologetically himself, gave me strength, too.”

Florian smiled at me sweetly. “You’re going to be an amazing king. There’s no one more fit for the job. You have a good heart, a strong heart. You can do this, Mal.”

“There are days I know I can. I was brought up for this. I have studied and trained my entire life. I have a passion for our people, to do what is right for them. But then there are days it’s harder to see. I could be king. But I don’t know if I could do it alone.”

Florian stood up, re-situating himself so that he straddled my lap, and he draped his arms over my shoulders. I loved the ease in which he touched me. He didn’t ask, seeming to know I was his, that he could do pretty much anything to me and I would be happy for it. I’d never had anyone else that I let my guard down with, never had anyone I felt so comfortable with. Touching, closeness, intimacy...it all felt so natural with him.

“So, you keep being your amazing self, and I’ll be there to remind you who you are when it’s harder for you to see. If you want me there, that is.”

I squeezed my arms around his middle, pulling his chest tight against mine. “Yes. A million times, yes. I want you, Flor. I want you with me. I can’t imagine anyone else at my side.”

“Then you have me, Mal. In sickness, in health, as human or pup.”

I couldn't stop the wide grin that stretched across my face. “Crowns! I love you. I always have, Flor. Even before I knew what it was, I loved you. Even more now, now that you have grown into this incredible man whose beauty matches that of his heart. I would be honored to have you at my side. Always.”

He returned my smile with one just as wide. We both sat there grinning like fools. “I love you, too, Mal. I tried to fight it for a long time. It was hard to see your face everywhere, thinking I could never have you, but you're here. You're right here.”

“We're here, together. As it was always meant to be.” Unable to resist any longer, I pressed my lips to his. What started as a kiss full of promise, full of past and present, and longings and comfort, soon turned into a kiss of passion and need. With fervor, our tongues tangled together, Florian pushing in deeply, claiming every part of me.

My hands slid down his back, rounding over that perfect bubble butt of his, loving the way his cheeks felt in my hands. I gripped him and pulled him close, and he ground over my dick, making us both moan.

“I need you, Flor,” I breathed out. I'd never felt such a desperate ache for someone like I did him. I'd had sex a few times, but it was never something that every cell in my body screamed and demanded for. I needed him like I'd needed that burger. Ravenous. That was how he made me feel.

“Have me, Malachi. I'm yours.”

I kissed him hard and slid my hands under his ass, holding him tight as I stood, lifting him with me. His legs wrapped around me, and I felt his hardness press into my belly. Crowns, he was so sexy.

Just as I was about to place him on my bed, he leaned back slightly and gave me a mischievous look. “I have an idea.”

“As long as it ends with both of us naked, I’m listening.”

“Take me to the king’s suite. You said it feels too big and too empty in there, but it’s going to be yours, Mal. Ours. What better way to feel like a king than to fuck your future husband there?”

I felt my eyes widen, and heat burst through my skin at the thought. I could picture him...naked, in that large, ornate bed. It was a sight I never could have imagined, but now that he put the idea out there, it was a sight I needed as much as I needed him.

“Yeah, okay.”

I turned toward the door, still holding him, as he let out a laugh. I was about to fling the door wide open when he cleared his throat.

“Um, Mal, princey, are you sure you want to carry me the whole way there? People will see us.” Florian snickered.

I stood there for a moment, processing. A part of me wanted to say to hell with them, because I didn’t want to let go of Florian. I loved feeling his weight on me as his ass bounced against my hardened length. But he was right. Even if this wing of the palace was reserved for the royal family, I should still have some decorum.

I sighed heavily before gently setting him down. “I suppose you’re right.” Looking down at myself, there was no concealing how ready I was for him in my gray sweats. “But you have to walk in front of me.”

Florian wore jeans that hid his erection at least a little better. He tilted his head back

and laughed. He grabbed my hand and led me into the hallway. I stayed close behind him as we hurried our way through the corridor.

Anticipation made my dick ache even more. The way we tried to stay quiet, but failing to do so, both of us laughing at random times, made it feel as it had when we were kids. Slinking around the house, trying not to get caught. We'd done this before, sneaking into the king's suite. It was different now, but the nostalgia and desire met together in an explosion of anticipation and giddiness that had my need for Flor overflowing.

I pulled him to a stop and pressed him against the wall, pushing my knee between his, and kissed him hard. He groaned softly and thrust his cock against mine, swallowing the rumble that rolled up from my throat. Of the two of us, Florian was the one who seemed to remember where we were, because I was lost in him, completely. He put a hand on my chest and pushed me back.

“We’re almost there, Your Majesty . I will not have the king take me in the hall like some common mistress. You will fuck me in a bed all proper like. And after that, you can fuck me anywhere you want.”

I snorted. “Alright. Lead the way, Florian of the Purlieu.”

I stepped back to give him room to move. He adjusted himself before grabbing my hand once more and leading me forward. When we came to the very end of the corridor, a single door was all that stood between us and our future. Our future. Because it belonged to both of us.

“Are you sure about this?” It was a multifaceted question. Not only about sex, or sex in the suite, but about us, about what it would mean. A life with me wouldn’t be an easy one. He couldn’t simply disappear into the background if he needed to. Not that he could ever disappear, he was too enchanting for that.

Florian met my gaze, and in complete seriousness, he said, “I’ve never been more sure about anything.”

I bent down and kissed him softly, showing him how much it meant to me. How much he meant to me. Florian reached behind his back and opened the door, welcoming our future.

When we stepped inside of the apartment, I stood in silence, taking it in. I’d been in here a few times since my coronation, trying to wrap my head around it. It seemed impossible before, but now, with Florian in view, the room faded away behind him. It was no longer impossible, no longer hard to see, not when he filled my vision.

He pushed up and pecked a quick kiss on my cheek. “I’m going to freshen up, and you can take a moment and let it sink in. And when I get back, we are going to fill this room with cries of pleasure until we are woven into every inch of this apartment.”

I grinned at the idea but didn’t answer. I simply nodded. He disappeared into the washroom, and I stood there with my hands on my hips. Surveying the large space, it no longer felt hollow. A little daunting still, but it was going to be mine. A symbol of what I would be taking on. This would one day be my refuge where I would escape from my duties. Where it felt isolating to think about before, now I could picture it.

Lounging together on the couch, watching a movie with Florian. Sitting at the dining table, enjoying breakfast before a busy day. Making love, leaving the perfectly-pressed bedding rumpled. Discussing current events or issues with a partner who wasn’t afraid to speak his mind. A partner . Someone to share this lonely burden with. It was the piece that had been missing all along.

The door opened, and Florian strode out confidently and beautifully naked. I looked him over, admiring his smooth, fair skin, the way his long, auburn hair rested over his

shoulder. My eyes lowered to his perfect cock that seemed to thicken under my attention.

“I hope you don’t mind. I figured we’ve waited long enough, and this is one less step to worry about.” Florian waved a hand over his bare body.

“I don’t mind in the least. Seeing you naked is like a dream. Crowns, you are beautiful, Flor.”

He smiled sweetly and walked toward me, with one hand behind his back. As he stepped closer, he said with a tease, “And I found this.”

Florian pulled a fancy, crystal bottle from behind his back. It looked to be filled with oil. Hunger returned at the sight of it. That ravenous urge that had been temporarily set aside to dream. The dream would come, but right now, I needed him fiercely. I took it from him and snaked an arm around him, drawing him against me. I kissed him hard and walked him back toward the excessively large bed.

When the back of his legs hit the edge of the bed, I pushed him down gently. He fell back with a flop, his dick fully hard again, waving at me. Florian crawled backward on the bed and pushed the duvet out of the way. I walked around and set the bottle down on the bedside table, before removing my shirt.

I could feel the heat of his gaze as he watched me roll my sweatpants down, my cock springing free. Florian licked his lips as he took me in.

“Fuck, Mal. Your body is so sexy. I have to admit, I rather enjoyed giving you belly rubs.”

I snorted. “Maybe you can demonstrate for me later.” I climbed in on top of him. Florian spread his legs, giving me room to settle between them. I lowered myself

until our dicks rubbed against each other, making us both moan. A moan I swallowed when I kissed him deeply and rolled my hips over his.

Florian clung to me as I rocked against his body, teasing us both. It was as he said, though. We'd already waited long enough. I couldn't keep teasing us, or I wouldn't make it until I was inside of him, and that was where I needed to be.

I slid a hand down his waist until I reached his cock. I gripped it and stroked it once, loving the way his soft skin moved around the steel beneath. Remembering him licking my hand before I jerked him got me hot thinking about it and gave me an idea.

I sat back on my heels and pushed Florian's legs up and out. I ran one hand down the back of his thighs, and the other reached up to his mouth. I held a finger in front of his lips.

"Suck." It was all I could manage to say, because the view before me held my full focus.

His eyes gleamed, and he grinned. "Yes, Your Majesty." He opened his mouth wide and sucked my finger in, bobbing on it and moaning as if it were my cock he was enjoying. Crowns! His mouth was wicked, and I was going to lose it if he kept doing that.

"Okay, okay. Stop. I...whew, I need you to stop."

Florian let out a laugh as he opened to release my finger, now covered in saliva. He watched as I lowered my hand back down, and he arched his hips up to give me access. I teased his entrance with the wet finger, causing him to moan once more.

"Mmm...yes, Mal. Keep going."

I pushed inside, watching my digit disappear into his body. I carefully rolled my finger around, before pushing another in and working him open. There he was, my beautiful witch, looking so delicious and enticing. I pumped my fingers in and out of him, loving the sight of them in his hole and the sounds he was making. As beautiful and hot as this was, I couldn't wait much longer.

“Are you ready, Flor?”

“Fuck, yes! I need you inside me, Mal. I want you to fuck me like a king.”

Crowns! I wanted him, ached for him. I carefully pulled my finger out before grabbing the bottle of oil. Florian watched as I coated my dick. It felt so good when I stroked myself, but I had to grip the base, to hold back.

“Now, Mal. Please!”

“Whatever you want, Florian. Anything you ask of me, I will gladly give you.” I bent down to kiss him as I lined my cock and pressed the head against his hole. He drew in a breath and I could feel him bear down, inviting me in.

Pushing past the outer ring was almost too much, I had to breathe deep to keep from coming right there. Florian's hands roamed over my back before sliding over my ass, pulling me closer. I sunk deeper into him, deeper and deeper, until I bottomed out, making us both groan loudly.

“You feel amazing, Flor. So warm. Open yourself to me, I want to feel your magic, too.”

He let out a pleased hum, and I could feel the tendrils of his magic spread out, reaching around me and drawing me even deeper. Perhaps not physically, but emotionally and spiritually. It twined around us like vines wrapping us together, as if

there were no way for us to ever be separated again, and I was happy to sink into it, to give myself over to it, to him.

I felt it prod at me, as if seeking my permission, and whatever it wanted, I did, too. “Mmm. Yes, Flor. Yes!”

I began to move, pumping into him, all while his magic flowed between us. It was an incredible sensation. I’d never felt anything like it. Like the very depths of Florian were drawing me into him. And the warmth. He was so warm, inside and out. I felt his sunlight bloom from within, warming my cock with each glide into him.

I started moving more quickly, and Florian held his legs in place as I drove into him. The slap of our bodies together, the grunts and moans that tumbled from us both, were a musical wonder. We didn’t bother to keep quiet, we were claiming this space. It was ours. Our scents, our sounds, our cries, filling the room, just as Florian said we would.

“Tell me who’s going to be king.” Florian said between panting breaths.

I stared down at him, his long hair spilled out over the pillow, his cheeks flushed red, his green eyes dark with lust.

“I’m going to be king,” I responded.

“No, Mal. Tell me who’s going to be the fucking king!”

His piercing gaze reached deep into me, making the tension coil tight, ready to be expelled.

“I’m. Going. To. Be. The. Fucking . King!” I growled out as I lunged into him and exploded. My vision went blurry, and my toes tingled as my release pumped into

him.

Florian's head was tilted back, his throat exposed, and I couldn't help but sink my teeth into his long, smooth throat. When I bit him, he shouted, and I felt him burst between us, warm spurts coating our bellies.

I collapsed on top of him, and we both panted, trying to catch our breaths. Florian slowly lowered his legs, and my softening dick slid out of him, but I couldn't move. He felt too...perfect. I let out a long, contented sigh.

“Crowns.”

“Mmhmm. I second that motion.” Florian said and kissed the top of my head. “How are you feeling?”

“Like a king.” I kissed his chest, loving the way it rumbled beneath me when Florian chuckled.

Not wanting to dry sticky, I got up to head toward the washroom to get something to clean us up. Instead, Florian followed me and turned on the shower. As spent as I was after that intense love-making, I couldn't resist seeing him wet.

We showered together, carefully cleaning each other's bodies. I washed Florian's hair, loving the way it felt to run my fingers through the long, silky locks. It was far more tender and loving than the fiery passion we'd enjoyed in the bedroom, but I loved every moment of it. Kissing Florian under the stream of water was as wonderful as feeling his magic twine around me.

Brushing his hair behind his ear, I kissed him softly. “Your magic felt incredible, Flor.”

“Mmm. It did. I’ve always had to be careful to hold it in during intimacy, out of fear of alarming my partner. Letting it out was so freeing, but even more than that, it needed you, too. I’ve always felt a pull to you. Both in my heart, but also with my magic. I think it knew you were mine before I did, and it claimed you, too. We’re bound, you and I. There’s no getting rid of me now.”

“I would never. You’ve always owned my heart, Florian. It was meant to be yours.”

We kissed lazily, enjoying our naked bodies pressed together. Both of our dicks had perked back up, but I didn’t want this tender moment to be sexual, I simply wanted to treasure it with him. Each of us ignored our cocks and finished cleaning each other up.

When we got out and were toweling off, Florian tilted his head in the mirror, noting the bruise I’d left on his throat. I winced at the sight of it.

“Sorry about that. I don’t know what came over me. I had this strong urge to claim you.”

Florian met my gaze in the reflection and offered me a playful smile. “I don’t mind. I’ll proudly wear it like a badge of honor. Though, I must say, you were much more gentle as a pup.”

“That’s good, I suppose.”

He turned to face me and planted a hand on my chest. “It is. I prefer it that way. Sweet pups and bitey humans.”

I snorted a laugh, before kissing him again. I couldn’t get enough of him.

Florian covered his mouth as he yawned. “Take me to bed, Mal. It’s been a long

day.”

“Should we go back to my room?”

“This is your room. Or, it will be soon enough. Besides, I don't want to get dressed again, so unless you want to prance me around the palace naked, let's stay here.”

“Nope, that's not happening, and I don't want to get dressed either. So, here it is.”

He kissed my cheek, before leading me back to the bed that looked thoroughly rumpled. I grinned at the sight of it. The disturbance in the middle of the pristine room made it feel alive, no longer hollow.

“Feeling proud of yourself?” Florian asked over his shoulder.

“Maybe a little.” I grinned.

My eyes followed that perfect ass of his as he climbed into bed. He patted the spot beside him, and said, “Mal, come.”

A laugh popped out of me. “Are you giving me commands, now?”

“Yes. I'm trying to see if you obey as well as your pup did.”

I climbed into bed beside him and scooted down until my head rested on his stomach.

“Do I get belly rubs now?” I snickered.

“If you're a good boy.” I cuddled in closer to Florian, loving feeling him beside me. I was happy. Ridiculously happy. I had my best friend back. My best friend, turned lover and future husband. When we married, he would be a king, too. And I couldn't imagine a better person for the role.

We didn't sleep right away, simply stayed snuggled close, being present with each other. At one point, Florian ran his hand down my stomach, stopping before he reached my dick. He did it again, it was a soft but firm pet, and though it made my dick harden with excitement at nearly being touched, it was incredibly soothing.

I sighed and closed my eyes, imagining Florian spending hours doing this, caring for me when I couldn't. I wished I could have seen him, could have known what happened, but it was comforting to know that he stayed at my side even then.

"I don't hate it," I whispered.

"Yeah? You like belly rubs, Malachi?"

"Well...yes. It's calming, but it's also kind of nice thinking of how you took care of me. Being king, well it's going to take a toll sometimes, but knowing I can let my guard down, trusting you to care for me when I do, it's rather appealing."

Florian shifted so he was face to face with me. "Whatever you need, Mal, I'll be there for you. Whether you need a partner to support you and stand behind you, or if you need to let go for a while—in any capacity you need—and let me take charge, I will."

I held him close and nuzzled my cheek against his. "I love you, Flor."

"I love you, too."

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:54 am

We'd held each other all night, and this time when I woke, it wasn't because of a scared pup trying to get my attention. The sun broke through the golden curtains, making light twinkle and dance around the room.

Mal's eyes blinked open, and when he saw me, he gave me a wide smile. "Good morning."

I kissed his nose. "Good morning. How are you feeling?"

He stretched and yawned. "Fantastic. You?"

"Like my ass got a pounding, so...same." I smirked. I was deliciously sore in all the best ways, loving the way my body hummed with pleasure, both from my magic sparking at his nearness, and the incredible sex.

"As much as I would like to do that again, I haven't been seen since the party, and it's probably about time I do. How do you feel about breakfast in the dining room?"

A part of me wanted to stay in our little bubble, but I knew he was right. We couldn't stay holed away, not with the coronation approaching and everyone on high alert. Besides, we were a unit now, he and I, and everyone here was going to have to get used to seeing us together. Only, I didn't have any of my own stuff, and I didn't want to wear the same clothes I'd worn for two days. I'd been in such a panic over getting books to figure out what was happening with Malachi, I didn't even think to grab clothes when I'd gone home.

"Breakfast sounds good, but I don't have anything to wear."

“Right. Let me make a call.” Malachi kissed me once before getting out of bed. He strode over to the phone, offering me a view of his beautiful, muscled ass.

A few minutes later, he ended the call and gave me a sheepish look, “I kind of forgot where we were. Reginald had some thoughts about us being in the king’s suite.”

I snickered. “I’m pretty sure Reggie has thoughts about a lot of things. But, so what, it will be our room soon enough, so everyone can just deal with it.”

Malachi put on his abandoned sweats and shirt, not wanting to be naked when someone came to the suite. Not me. I refused to put on the same clothes and was perfectly content staying nude. I had a blanket over me, that was good enough.

It didn't take long before a knock sounded at the door. Malachi answered it and a pile of garments were passed through the open door before it closed again without anyone stepping foot inside. He sorted them into two stacks, because apparently he was ready for different clothes too.

Malachi donned boxer briefs, tan slacks, and a light blue dress shirt. I grimaced at the thought of what was picked out for me, except when I pulled out a velvety purple shirt that had flared sleeves and lacing on the front, I sighed and hugged it to my chest. This was precisely something I would wear.

“Will it work?” Mal asked, nodding toward the clothing.

“Yes, it’s perfect. I think my soul would have cried if I had what you are wearing. Don’t get me wrong, it looks sexy as hell on you, but this body isn't made for khaki.”

Mal pulled me to him and pressed a kiss to my lips. “I believe Ambrosia had a hand in selecting your clothes. I'm pleased they make you happy. And khakis will never touch your skin.”

“Okay, but right now, I don’t mind, as long as you are the one wearing them.” I pressed my naked groin against his clothed one, loving the sensation against my dick.

“If you don't stop, we aren't going to make it to breakfast,” Malachi growled.

“You make it sound like that's a bad thing.”

He pursed his lips and shook his head. “You are really something.”

I winked before getting dressed. A jockstrap was in my pile, and I felt Mal’s gaze follow my every move as I stepped into it. The shirt fit perfectly and the leggings that went with it hugged me just right, making my ass pop.

“Crowns, I don't think I'll ever get over how beautiful you are.”

“Right back at ya, Your Highness.”

We held hands as we walked to the dining room, and I loved that he did it so easily, despite everyone being able to see us. Malachi was showing me off, and I loved it. It felt like a big fuck-you to the walls that I'd been forced to leave.

As we approached the threshold of the dining room, I felt my magic warning me at the same time I heard a voice that made me go still. The queen's voice. It wasn't that I had been avoiding her since the party. I'd simply been too wrapped up in sexy fun and pup panic to think of her. I knew I would encounter her at some point, but the suddenness of it was a shock.

When Malachi felt me pause, he peered around the door to see this mother at the table. “Is this about what she said at the party, that she had some things to discuss with you?”

“Yes.” It was a simple answer, but I wasn’t prepared to say anything more.

“Now is as good a time as any, right? Besides, I’m certain news of us sleeping together will spread through the palace quickly, if it hasn’t already, so I think we should tell her about us.”

Drawing in a deep breath, I nodded. “Yes, I suppose so.”

“Whatever happens, I’m with you, Flor.” He squeezed my hand and we walked into the room.

“Good morning, Malachi, how are you feeling, son? I was told you were ill yesterday.”

“Much better, Mother. Florian tended to me.”

Her eyes rounded at the sound of my name, and they slid past her son and locked on me. Her eyes drifted down to see our hands clutched together. The queen’s mouth turned down. “Oh. I see.”

This time it was Mal who tensed. “What do you have against Florian?”

“I...don't have anything against him.”

I scoffed, couldn't help it.

“Can I have a word in private with your friend, son?”

Malachi straightened his shoulders and lifted his chin. “The thing is, he isn't just my friend. I love him. I always have and always will. He's going to be at my side as my husband, so whatever you need to say to him, you can say in front of me.”

A mixture of emotions flashed across her face, and she offered a sad smile. “Come and join me for breakfast then.”

Mal slid a glance to me, and I gave a slight nod. It was time to get everything out in the open. He led me in and he sat in the seat nearest to his mother, who was at the head of the table, and I took the chair next to him.

No one spoke until after our orders had been placed, and his mother asked the room to be vacated. Once we were alone, she let out a long exhale before lifting her chin, much the same way Mal had. He resembled her in many ways. They had the same eyes, same curly hair, though hers had turned white, and some of the same mannerisms.

“Young Florian, I know it isn’t enough, but I would like to extend a sincere and deep apology. There are few regrets I have and what happened with you is my biggest.”

I didn't know what to say. It was nice to hear an apology, but too much time had passed. All the anger and sadness that had followed me for twenty years came bubbling up to the surface, but I couldn't pick where to start.

Mal jumped in instead. There was an edge in his voice, one I'd never heard before. It came out in defense of me. In all this time alone, I'd never had anyone defend me, and it felt really nice to know I had someone who would stand by my side. “What happened with Florian? What do you regret, Mother?”

Her eyes shifted over to me, showing me the remorse in them. “We were told magic was real. It was a story that had been passed down through generations, but it hadn't been seen in a long time. When it was, it was often associated with danger and threats to the throne. When we learned that Florian was developing magic, your father, the king, was scared he had been planted in our house to uproot it.”

Mal stood, pushing his chair back. “You knew? You knew about his magic, and no one helped him?”

“You have to understand, son, it was the first anyone had heard of such a thing in decades, and we didn't know where Florian came from. Was there a reason he was found at the palace door? How did he get there? Had we taken in the enemy and raised him as our own, giving him access to every part of our lives?”

I felt my eyes grow hot with tears, as that awful night all came back to me, and yet, hearing it now, I kind of understood their actions. It didn't excuse it, but I didn't know my past. What if there had been a nefarious plan at play, and I was a mere pawn?

“He wasn't a threat. He was a fucking child.” My eyes rounded at hearing him let loose a word I'd had to work hard to coax out of him. But then, while I was reliving it, this was new to him. He hadn't known what happened. “He was scared and confused and...what did you do?”

The queen's head fell, and her voice was small when she spoke. “We sent him away.”

I could feel his emotion roiling off him. I stood at his side and held his hand, letting my magic flow into him. Mal closed his eyes and took in a deep breath, calming himself. He squeezed my hand.

When he opened his eyes, he looked straight at his mother and said in a quiet tone that resonated with strength behind it. “You are unfit for the crown you wear. You were tasked to serve the people in this country, and yet you couldn't even help one individual under your care when he needed it the most. When it is time, and that will come sooner than originally planned, I will happily and proudly receive the crown, and be a greater ruler than you or my father ever were.”

One large tear rolled down her cheek. She dabbed it with her napkin before standing.

“You will, son. You will be a great king. I've lived with this for too long, and it's worn on me. I'm ready to step down whenever you see fit. For what it's worth, I really am happy to see you again, Florian. It broke my heart to send you away, but seeing you two together again has mended a tiny piece of that.”

She walked out with a sniffle, leaving us behind. It was a lot. I hadn't managed a single word. I didn't know what I could have said anyway. Suddenly, Mal's arms were around me and he pulled me into a tight hug, burying his head into my neck.

“I'm so sorry, Flor. I didn't know. If I had, I would have left with you.” I could feel pain radiating out of him. Pain I spent too much of my life in, and pain I now tried to comfort. My magic flowed out of me, wrapping around us.

At that, the words I'd lost finally came. “No, Mal. You needed to be here. You were meant to be king. If you'd have left, who knows who would lead next, and this country needs you. We need that catalyst for change, and you are it.”

Mal lifted his head and met my gaze. “You are, too. Flor. The country needs you. They may not know it, but they do. And we'll ensure something like this never happens again.”

“Together, then?” I offered a half-smile.

“Together, always.” He sealed that promise with a kiss, one that spoke to the boys we once were who were torn apart, to the men we were now who found each other again, and to the future that we would build together.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:54 am

Coronation day had been moved forward, only two weeks after I'd learned what my parents did to Florian. In that time, my mother had done everything she could to make it as smooth a transition as possible. I wasn't ready to forgive her yet—the hurt ran too deep—but I appreciated the effort she was trying to make. She knew it was time for her to be done, and now I realized she had been waiting for this day for a long time.

I was ready. Something shifted in me that day. Well, in truth, it had been the night before with Florian. He helped me find myself when I was lost. He reminded me who I was and what I wanted. I was afraid of taking on this burden before, but I came to understand the weight of not stepping up was far greater than the weight of the crown. With Florian at my side, I knew I could face whatever this duty might bring. He'd seen me at my worst and didn't blink or budge.

During this shift in my mind and in my confidence, it forced the trickster out. Florian's magic often searched me. I could feel its warm tendrils fluttering through me, seeking out any evidence of it, but there was no trace left. No lingering tether, no charms, no risk of unintentionally changing into a pup, though...I still enjoyed the occasional belly rub.

Florian had moved into the palace, bringing his collection of magic books that I had started reading. It bothered me deeply to hear they had been hidden away, covered in cobwebs. How could we learn as a people if we didn't have access to the past?

While we had been busy in preparation for the coronation, Florian stayed at the palace full time, but I knew he had a need to continue his work as a healer. He wouldn't be the man I loved if he didn't. Once things settled down, he would continue

to use his cottage to meet his clients.

I'd offered to find him a shop in the capitol so he wouldn't have to travel as far, but he told me it was easier for him to connect to his magic near nature, and though he was happy with me in the palace, he needed that space to ground himself. Who was I to stand in the way? Whatever he needed to make him happy, I would do, and where he spent his days was no matter, because at night he would return to bed with me, where he was meant to be.

Reporters and cameras filled the back of the church, where special events like this occurred according to tradition. Though tradition said that Florian wouldn't walk with me as I approached the altar, but I refused to do this without him. We weren't married yet, but we would be, and I wanted to show the entire world that he was as important as I was in this new leadership.

I wore a white suit with the green and gold sash that represented our country's colors, and a robe hung from my shoulders, trailing down to the floor behind me. Ambrosia had designed a special suit just for Florian. It was another dress-pant combo that was opposite in color to mine. Green and gold, but with white highlights. My man looked really good in green. It complemented his auburn hair and green eyes so beautifully. He was absolutely stunning.

His arm was in mine, and I inhaled deeply when the music changed. Florian leaned in and whispered, "This is your moment, Mal. I am so proud of you, and I love you so much."

"Thank you, Flor. It means the world to me that you are here with me. I love you beyond words."

We proceeded forward, feeling every eye on us, and I was proud, too. Proud to be here, proud to show off Florian, proud to take on this role and serve my country. Everyone stood and dipped their heads as we passed, showing us reverence, and it

made goosebumps coat my skin as the reality of it sunk in. At the end of this aisle, everything would change. It was incomprehensibly big, but I wasn't afraid or filled with doubt. I was ready.

At the altar, Queen Adira stood beside a priest and bowed her head when we arrived before her. She wore a smile, one that felt genuine, not simply for show. She was happy to pass her responsibility on to me, and I was happy to take it from her. I returned her smile, feeling a tiny piece of the anger slip away.

“Your Royal Highness, Prince Malachi, please kneel,” she announced loud and strong.

I knelt, as did Florian at my side, giving my hand a light squeeze. Crowns, I loved him.

“Are you willing to take the coronation oath?” the priest asked.

Without any hesitation, I responded, “I am.”

“Do you swear to use your power to uphold law and justice, in mercy, and to serve and govern your people righteously?”

“I do so swear.”

I lowered my head as the priest offered a prayer, one that allowed room for multiple beliefs as I wished it, because traditions of the past might have played a big role in the ceremony, but the way forward was inclusion.

My mother removed the crown from her head and stood before me. “It is my honor and my pleasure to pass this crown to you, and I will humbly serve my king.”

I met her gaze. “Thank you, Queen Adira, for your faithful service to this country. I

accept the crown and the responsibility that comes with it and dedicate my life to servant leadership.”

She placed the crown on my head. Its physical weight was nothing compared to what it represented, but I wore it with pride.

The priest placed a scepter in my hand. “Please rise, Your Majesty, King Malachi.”

I stood with my shoulders back, and my head held high, and the building erupted in thunderous applause. My mother stepped aside and curtsied as I walked up to the podium. Florian came beside me, and I handed him the scepter so I could address my people.

“Thank you for entrusting me with this honor.” I paused for applause. Once it settled down, I continued. “As king, I refuse to let action be dictated by fear. The unknown isn’t inherently bad. It simply requires learning and listening. For my first action, I will be funding the research and study of magic. Education and resources will be made available to any who seek it. No one should have to feel isolated simply for who they are. I vow to serve my people, all of my people.”

I held my hand out to Florian and slid a glance to him. He grabbed my hand and stepped closer to me. I turned my attention back to the people watching. “We are stronger together than we are apart.”